EXEGESIS

Transcending Boundaries

Fiction by South Asian–Australian authors published in Australia

Part I of Thesis

Doctorate of Creative Arts Thesis

SHARON RUNDLE

Doctoral Candidate
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Technology, Sydney
Supervisor, Dr Devleena Ghosh
Co-Supervisor, Dr Debra Adelaide

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

Where is contemporary fiction by South Asian–Australian authors situated in the Australian fiction publishing industry? The exegesis or critical component of my thesis examines the local cultural production of novels in Australia from 1990, in order to separate facts from fiction. This thesis builds on a foundation of rigorously checked and accurate data from previous studies – the Australian Bureau of Statistic and the AustLit database into the Australian Book Publishing industry – from 1990 until 2004. It presents new data from 2004 until 2014, as well as an examination of the development of the cultural production of novels by South Asian–Australian authors published in Australia from 1990.

The theoretical framework of Ashcroft's Transnational literature and his concept of Transnation provides a contemporary lens through which to view the development of novels by South Asian–Australian authors.

Ashcroft's theoretical framework of Transnation is used to underpin the creative component of my thesis. *Change and Changeability* comprises eighteen short stories that explore the lives of characters with deep roots and loyalty to their local landscape and country (vertical axis of Transnation), and those who are restless and constantly on the move (horizontal axis of Transnation). Structured in three sections, the interlinking narratives explore the effects of changes in society and attitudes on each of three women protagonists. These stories demonstrate the tension between the vertical and horizontal axes of Ashcroft's Transnation theory.

Transcending Boundaries: Fiction narratives by South Asian–Australian authors published in Australia

1. Introduction

> ***Boundary and border-crossing mark our times***
>
> If all cultures are hybrid all along, then the problem is not hybridity but boundaries: how is it that boundaries are historically and socially so significant? How come that while boundaries continuously change shape in the currents and tides of history, boundary fetishism remains, even among social scientists? If hybridity is real but boundaries are prominent, how can hybridity be a self-identification: in a world of boundaries, what room and legitimacy are there for boundary-crossing identities, politically, culturally? … Hybridity is a terminology and sensibility of our time in that boundary and border-crossing mark our times. (Pieterse, Jan Nederveen. 'Hybridity, So What?: The Anti-Hybridity Backlash and the Riddles of Recognition', 2001, pp. 230, 238)

My exegesis centres on the local production of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors published in Australia. It discusses the lacunae in research in this field, the scope for more research, the purpose of the research and why it is significant. It discusses fiction by South Asian–Australian writers in Australia published during the past decade through the lens of postcolonial, Transnational and Transnation literary theory, formulated in particular by Bill Ashcroft and Paul Sharrad.

My research question is concerned with forming a more accurate picture of where fiction by South Asian–Australian writers fits into the overall Australian publishing scene, as well as how the output of published fiction by South Asian–Australian authors in Australia was affected by changes in the Australian fiction publishing industry. What were the impacts of changes in government policies, funding bodies, and the Australian book market over the past two decades? Has the increasing number of South Asians living in Australia and their socioeconomic diversity of status and lifestyle influenced

the book market here? Where was contemporary fiction by South Asian–Australian authors situated in the Australian fiction publishing industry in 2015?

A growing body exists of textual analysis of the content of narrative fiction by South Asian–Australian authors (Tamara Mabbott Athique, 2006; Paul Sharrad, 2011; Amit Sarwal, 2009) but few researchers focus on the experience of publishing fiction by South Asian–Australian authors. Recent studies and research into contemporary Transnational fiction by South Asian–Australian writers in Australia by Athique (2006), Alison Broinowski (2003 and 2011), Simone Lazaroo (2008), Sarwal (2009 and 2015), Sharrad (2006, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011) – combined with studies into the Australian publishing industry by Richard Nile and Jason Ensor (2009), Peter Pierce (2009), David Carter (2007), Anne Galligan (2007), Mark Davis (2007) and Katherine Bode (2012) – provide a foundation on which to build a study of local cultural production of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors.

> The study of Indian-Australian literature and its context is still in its infancy. The number of novels, short prose and poetry appears to be easily manageable and the research on critical texts dealing with Indian-Australian artefacts is as yet not too time consuming. (Sissy Helff, 2009, Introduction)[i]

I ask significant questions about what has happened since publication in 1991 of the first notable novel by a South Asian–Australian author, Yasmine Gooneratne, and the 2012 publication of *Questions of Travel* by Michelle de Kretser, winner of the prestigious Australian 2013 Miles Franklin Award.[1] The Miles Franklin Award 'reaffirms the novel as Australia's most important literary form' (Richard Nile and Jason Ensor, 2009, p. 531). The Australian book publishing industry is significant because of its economic and cultural importance; it produces substantial income, employs a large number of people and is involved with exports and imports (Nile and Ensor 2009, p. 523). Carter (in Pierce, 2009, p. 387) asserts that 'fiction remains significant' in Australian literary publishing, 'being one-third of locally released general books and stronger than ever is genre publishing' (p. 390).

I chose the form of the novel for my study because it is the most successful with regard to titles published, book sales and quantity of readers. Novels contribute

[1] See Case Studies, Chapter 4.

significantly to the Australian economy and are a 'major sector within Australia's cultural infrastructure' (Nile and Ensor, in Peter Pierce, 2009, pp. 323 and 347). Diversity of voices in literature is important in the contemporary public sphere in Australia, 'yet despite the centrality of the novel to Australian literature and more broadly Australian creative cultures, little work has been done on the genre besides textual and author studies' (Nile and Ensor, 2009, p. 527). In this Exegesis I address omissions in Australian literary fiction discourse by focusing on the local cultural production of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors published in Australia, within the context of the wider Australian fiction book publishing industry.

Postcolonial literary theory provides a framework for discussing early diasporic and migrant fiction. Postcolonial literatures are defined as writings by people formerly colonised by Britain, according to Bill Ashcroft (2002). Transnational literary theory as an extension of postcolonial theory is pertinent when examining cosmopolitan, contemporary fiction by South Asian–Australian authors because it looks 'beneath and beyond the level of the nation' (Michael Jacklin, 2009, p. 2).

It is important to acknowledge and take on board critical responses to postcolonialism and to be aware of the limitations in any theoretical discourse. For example, to gain the perspective of a South Asian–Australian author to these categorisations of literature from migrants, it is worth repeating the words of Gooneratne in an interview with Ranga Chandrarathne for the *Sunday Observer* (2011):

> This may surprise you, coming from a former Director of a Centre for Postcolonial Studies, but I've never been able to take 'post-colonialism' (with or without the hyphen!) seriously. Remember that once, very long ago, it was known as 'Commonwealth Literature'. Then the academics tired of that and re-christened it 'The New Literatures in English'. But that didn't suit everyone, and another switch brought the title 'Postcolonial'.

For the reasons described and discussed in this thesis, postcolonial literary theory in combination with Transnational and Transnation literary theory and discourse offer an effective and solid framework for my research into 'local conditions'. Contemporary Transnational fiction by South Asian–Australian authors reflects and reacts to the demands of the Australian publishing industry within which it is situated. My exegesis discusses how it has developed over the past decade in particular, including who

controls the means and method of communication (Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin, 2002) in publishing and reviewing contemporary Transnational South Asian–Australian fiction in Australia. In other words, who influences these decisions – who are the 'gatekeepers'?

Writer and diplomat Broinowski (2003) in *About Face: Asian Accounts of Australia* (pp. 273–76) stated that: 'Australian Asian fiction is narrative prose by Australians that involves Asian countries and people. Asian Australians are writers of Asian background with a significant Australian connection, by residence or education'. For the purpose of my research, South Asian–Australian authors who are included have already been identified as South Asian–Australians in their biographical notes, profiles, book blurbs, interviews and other publicity and promotional material. The geographical definition of 'South Asian' is the Indian subcontinent, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka.

My research provides new original analysis of publishing data collected from the AustLit data base for the years 2010–14, as well as re-examining the published results of studies into the Australian fiction publishing industry covering 1990–2009, to verify the number of works of fiction published in Australia and the subset of works published by South Asian–Australian authors. My exegesis touches only briefly on electronic digital publishing as this is another area of study in itself; see pp. 14, 27, 38-41 and 49-50.

My exegesis dispels some of the myths that have formed the narrative of the Australian fiction publishing industry by re-examining quantitative data from previous studies, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the AustLit database and by adding the latest statistics. Case Study methodology was used to gather qualitative data. New qualitative data and evidence was drawn from documents and from my semi-structured interviews, online surveys, published interviews and papers, and case studies with participants in the publishing industry, including seven authors: Anu, Chantal, Grace, Jay, Ruby, Sally and Selina; three publishers: Ben, Laura and Karin; and two reviewers: Larissa and Noel.[2] This range of data has been triangulated to produce more accurate results and avoid bias (AK Shenton, 2004). I also had responses to my online survey from three authors and one reviewer. Some of the participants in my study are happy to

[2] Please see Appendix 1 for interview dates and places.

be named, while others have requested confidentiality. Each of the participants was given a code name. Interviews took place on various dates, times and venues of convenience to participants. In addition, to form an argument that considers various conflicting reports, I draw on studies of the Australian fiction publishing industry by Katherine Bode (2012), David Carter (2007), Mark Davis (2007), Sophie Masson (2014) and Nile and Ensor (2009). I am aware of the need to separate my professional views and perspectives from my independent academic scholarly work; to achieve this I have gathered data from a broad range of sources and a contrasting, if relatively small, selection of volunteer participants from various sections of the publishing industry.

Popular and accepted narratives of the fiction publishing industry in Australia turned out to be distorted. This was due to diverse methods of data collection and analysis, such as whether data excluded or included certain publishers, self-publishing, pulp or mass market fiction, and, indeed, the ways of identifying and separating literary fiction from other fiction genres. Katherine Bode, who also queried data collection methods in previous studies, provided an entry point for my data collection.[3] Bode recalibrated fiction publishing data and published her findings in her book *Reading by Numbers* (2012). She mounted a persuasive argument for revisiting the statistics as well as the generally accepted narrative of the demise of the fiction publishing industry in Australia (Mark Davis, 2007). Bode generously shared her method of collecting and analysing her data, as well as permission to publish and build on her latest research (Bode, 2012). Thus, Bode's statistics for the years 1990–2010 were available for comparison and her data collection method could be replicated to collect new data for the years 2004–14. This data could then be compared with data published in studies by David Carter (2007), Mark Davis (2007), Sophie Masson (2014), Nile and Ensor (2009) and others who have researched the fiction publishing industry in Australia.

To see where fiction by South Asian–Australian authors fits into academic studies, I reviewed studies, theses and papers by Athique (2006), Broinowski (2003 and 2011), Mridula Chakraborty (2012), Richard Dixon (2007), Sneja Gunew (1994), Lazaroo (2008), Lolo Houbein (1984), Wenche Ommundsen (2011), Sarwal (2009 and 2015) and Sharrad (2006, 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011). The various manifestations of categories of writing by migrants include Commonwealth writing, New Literature,

[3] See p. 16.

(Wenche Ommundsen, 2011) migrant writing (Houbein, 1984; Van Teesling, 2011); and ethnic writing and multicultural writing (Gunew, 1994). Here, again, my examination of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors became problematic. Indian-Australian fiction published in Australia did not fit neatly into categories of migrant, ethnic or multicultural writing, which was perceived as literature by migrants of non-English-speaking background. Furthermore, migrant, ethnic and multicultural writing was subcategorised as ethnography, stories of dislocation, essays and poetry.

Broinowski (2011, pp. 1, 2) states that:

> Many Australians must have given up trying to write or publish their novels, including fiction of Asia. The difficulties authors face are multiplied if they are 'ordinary' Australians writing fiction about Asia, and Asian Australians writing fiction. … The reasons can only be guessed at, but the outpouring of fiction about the diasporic experience in the 1990s, by new, 'authentic' writers of Asia must be one of them. Several of these writers have published nothing more.[4]

Broinowski (2011) goes on to claim that 'Some writers who migrated from abroad appear to have had "just the one story" to tell and quickly disappeared from the literary scene in Australia.' On the other hand, publisher Ben says that '"exotic" writers are sometimes only given one go so their subsequent novels may be unpublished, published abroad, self-published or across small publishers. The important thing is that our South Asian writers are nurtured and are given the chance to move beyond the semi-autobiographical work that is often their first or only book.' This comment was echoed by publisher Laura, who warned that it might take three or four novels to be published before an author experiences commercial success. So, although some authors might well only have 'just the one story to tell', others might have found subsequent novels difficult to publish. The 'second novel syndrome' is a well-known epithet in the publishing industry reflecting the difficulty of publishing a second novel, particularly if the first novel is not a bestseller. A first novel for an author might be an acceptable risk, but unless it performs well and has satisfactory sales then the chance of the second novel being accepted decreases. Another problem, as Lazaroo (2009) states, is that the variety of nuance in reviewing does not exist. 'Asia is a very big place. The NSW Premier's Community Relations Prize is great but indicative of the closed off or

[4] Broinowski's statistics are taken from AustLit Database.

specialised arena in which "multicultural" writing is often appreciated.' My data shows that the number of fiction titles published in Australia by South Asian–Australian authors is increasing. Cosmopolitan Transnational literature is important in the contemporary public sphere in Australia because it can teach readers so much about other cultures, communities and histories. A case in point is *The Sweet and Simple Kind* by Yasmine Gooneratne – a sweeping saga, in which Gooneratne's inimitable acerbic wit and satire is aimed at those in power. As well, there is a gentler humour brought out in interaction between 'ordinary' families and individuals. It is unsettling but elucidating to read how in a mostly peaceful tolerant Sri Lankan society, the rise of nationalism steadily created a divide that resulted in a bloody thirty-year civil war.

Research about South Asian–Australian fiction published in Australia would contribute towards addressing elisions in contemporary Australian memory.

David Carter reiterates Robert Dixon's (2007) point that 'the cultural nationalism of the 1970s and 1980s no longer seems adequate to understanding Australian literature, which has emerged into something transnational and transdisciplinary' (p. 114). Carter concedes that postcolonial studies, which gained a hold in literary criticism in the 1990s, 'provided new perspectives and played a role' alongside feminism and 'multiculturalism' in shifting Australian literary studies beyond the national frame' (p. 115). Yet literary postcolonialism, Carter maintains, has been limited in its contribution to Australian literary studies, especially now as the discipline moves into new forms of research. Carter is less interested in literary readings of transgressive texts and more attracted to forms of cultural history and print culture studies that draw on empirical research, similar in ways to the distant reading approach of Franco Moretti's work. Carter points to recent studies, such as those on colonial drama, the book trade and colonial newspapers in Australia, which exemplify this trend. These new research approaches, he argues, will follow 'the life of books into the marketplace and the public domain' and redirect attention to 'the circulation of cultures beneath and beyond the level of the nation' (p. 119).[5]

Bill Ashcroft's theory of Transnation (2014) further extends the concept of Transnational theory that studies the movement which begins within a nation but then extends beyond a nation's borders. At the Sydney University's Scenes of Reading:

[5] Michael Jacklin (2009, p. 1).

World Literature symposium 2012, Ashcroft argued that 'Transnation is not simply diasporic'. Transnation enables a discussion of the 'nation' as a separate 'horizontal reality' of cultural memory that differs from the concept of 'state' as an authoritative, vertical hierarchy. Transnation is particularly pertinent to literature and works of fiction because it is concerned with the 'many different stories' of individuals rather than an overarching 'grand' narrative of the state or nation. Ashcroft describes this as 'horizonality', where the movement of individuals forms a horizontal axis against the vertical axis of the nation state, evoking structural tension. As Ashcroft, Gareth Griffins and Helen Tiffin (2007, p. ix) explain:

> The increasing flow of populations, the mobility of individuals, the increased crossing of borders and the blurring of the concept of 'home' have produced a range of Transnational literatures and other forms of cultural production that extend the field of the post-colonial in productive ways.

Postcolonial discourse and Transnational fiction studies show that culture and nation, in the sense of belonging (or not belonging) to a particular time and space, can be problematic, highly nuanced, controversial and conflicting in both a general sense and in the specific embodiment of individuals. 'The existence of these shared themes and recurrent structural and formal patterns is no accident. They speak for the shared psychic and historical conditions across the differences distinguishing one post-colonial society from another' (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 2002, p. 17). Ashcroft examines 'post-colonial theoretical conceptual border-crossing' in 'Beyond the Nation: Post-Colonial Hope' (2009) in which he, like Bhabha (1994), claims the term 'nation' is contested in postcolonial theory. Thus, postcolonial literature studies in combination with Transnational literary theory and discourse on Transnation provide a framework, discourse and context for contemporary South Asian–Australian fiction published in Australia.

The word 'Transnational' is defined as extending or going beyond national boundaries. In contemporary South Asian–Australian fiction it can be interpreted as 'transcending boundaries', in which Transnational voices, perspectives, characters, dialogue and landscapes can form layers of complexity in fictional narratives. Lydia Gomes (2001, p. 3) claims that 'Transnational issues were core to the process of migration and of migrants, who still maintained and missed their connections to India;

who sought out India as the anchor that formed their identity.' The concept of home or 'Indias of the Mind' appear to be a constant and significant theme of South Asian–Australian Transnational fiction, particularly in first published novels, in much the same way as the spatial and temporal themes of place and displacement, belonging and location of culture are considered significant in postcolonial literary theory. A common thread connecting many authors of fiction who participated in my study is that, no matter where South Asian–Australian authors live or have lived, India appears to remain the landscape of the imagination (Manisha Jolie Amin, 2012), (Sarwal, introduction to *Labels and Locations*, 2015). In *Imaginary Homelands* (1991, p. 19), Rushdie expands on how Indians with dual (or multiple) nationality can create their own sense of self and reality. In this way, I argue that so too can South Asian–Australian authors create their own distinct Transnational fiction.

Novelist Manisha Amin (2012) explains:

> As a child of immigrants I grew up on stories of India. India was a place for holidays, rather than a home to return to, yet it has always been my point of reference. When I started to write, my stories wouldn't leave a fabled village in India. It's not the India of my parents, or the India of the present; rather a construct, a lace of story and song bound together by memories that are in truth, shadows, and half-truths built through a childhood in Australia.'

Internationally, the South Asian diaspora has been examined and discussed by academics including Edward Said (1979, 1994), Homi Bhabha (1994, 1998), Salman Rushdie (1991), Bill Ashcroft (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2002), Vijay Mishra (2007), Makarand Paranjape (2009), Paul Sharrad (2011), Devleena Ghosh (2009), Amit Sarwal (2006, 2015). My reason for choosing Ashcroft's theoretical frameworks is that his published papers on Transnation in relation to fiction, memory and storytelling are more recent. They directly refer to metaphor, fiction, stories, oral storytelling and memories of individuals and communities, in relation to Transnation. I found his exposition clear and that I could connect his approach to the theory of Transnation with my own research more readily than that of other academics such as Appadurai (who focuses mainly on popular culture - cinema, film, television and performance, even cricket, rather than literary fiction). Nonetheless, his views on transnational culture and modernity in India have informed my perspective.

The term 'Indian Diaspora' (Devleena Ghosh, 2009, p. 181; Sarwal, 2015, p. 14) is commonly used in discourse of postcolonial literary studies to refer to the millions of displaced Indians around the world, whether indentured labourers, refugees, migrants or descendants of those who have made their homes outside of India. It is outside the scope of this essay, but the long history of migration of people from the Indian subcontinent has been studied in depth in international studies[6] and sources are available to study the Indian diaspora. Tropes of the insider/outsider binary – here and there/then and now, orientalism or the representation of Asians by Western authors and academics where Asians are written about rather than writing their own stories, identity, labels, location and dislocation – are regularly explored, deconstructed, examined and discussed in postcolonial and Transnational literary discourse, including discourse on literary fiction from the South Asian diaspora. Gerster (2009, p. 322), however, claims that 'Hybridity has replaced' this concept of binaries, due to contemporary South Asian–Australians 'creating new fertile spaces between East and West', or as Tseen Khoo sees it, Asian-Australian literature is 'broadening' the scope for 'different styles and histories of literature in Australia' (Khoo in Gerster, 2009, p. 322).

The creative component of my thesis is comprised of short stories which experiment with Transnation fiction themes: Horizonality, Heimat, Anticipatory Illumination, Alternate Modernities, magical realism and transcendental subjectivity. Transnation[7] is 'the fluid, migrating outside of the state that begins within the nation', a way of portraying 'ordinary lives' of subjects who 'live in-between'. The literature of Transnation is concerned with 'a vision of the future grounded in memories that exist outside the "memory" ... of history', often a kind of utopianism that Ernst Bloch refers to as 'anticipatory illumination' (Ashcroft, 'The horizon of the future', *Southerly*, p. 14). Edmund Husserl (1969), arguably one of the most influential philosophers of the last century, particularly in phenomenology or the science of consciousness, focused on 'transcendental subjectivity, experiential rather than factual data'. Ashcroft (*Southerly*, p. 14) explains that in Husserl's phenomenonology the horizon is perceived 'as the principle by which both meaning and its open possibilities appear to us. Crucially, the horizon itself is created in language'. Husserl argued that transcendental-phenomenological idealism accepted the existence of a physical and material world, but

[6] See also AS Saha (ed.) 2009.
[7] See p. 8

'sought instead to clarify the *sense* of this world (which everyone accepts) *as actually existing*' (Marianne Sawicki, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Husserl's idea of horizons as 'perceptions that we *could* have, if we *actively directed* the course of perception otherwise' allows for other possibilities of perception (Husserl 1960, sec. 19, in Sawicki).

As Ashcroft elaborates in *Southerly* (Literary Journal of the English Association):

> Literary works written in the nation not only elude the categorizations of literary history, but tap into memories and project visions of a future that continually cut across simple ideas of a national literature. Because these representations flow in and around the striated space of the nation state we could call them 'transnational', not because they necessarily cut across national borders but because they so manifestly ignore them. The transnation, then, is not an object in space, but a way of understanding the actual excess of a nation's ways of being. While the nation is grounded on homeland, on the soil, its story written by History, the transnation's many different stories may be handed down orally from generation to generation, but in perhaps a more evocative way they are told in literature, the medium of the anticipatory consciousness. The transnation draws on the archive of cultural memory to imagine Heimat but very often, perhaps because that archive is so tangled with the narrative of History, discards memory to transform the present. (Ashcroft, 2014, p. 39)

This idea of multiple perceptions and tense cross-currents creates a kind of energy, while the words 'flow (representations)' and 'grounded (nation)' bring in a sense of an earth/water dichotomy. The flow of ideas and representations, oral histories and personal narratives compared to the 'solid' ground of nation, fixed in time and space, with 'official' factual versions of history are concepts that can be seen as meeting fixity with fluidity. In a similar sense, fiction narratives can show how migrants can hold fixed 'fossilised' memories (Le Hunte, 2013) of their ancestral homes and cherished traditions as they were when they departed. In the meantime, however, these homelands have moved on, altered, 'gone with the flow' of technology, internet communications and new modern infrastructure and have accepted changes to long-held traditions. Thus, the discourse of Transnation theory is crucial to analysing the fiction of South Asian–Australian authors.

Background and context of project

I have been collaborating with writers in India since 1998. *Fear Factor Terror Incognito: stories from Australia and the Indian subcontinent*, which I co-edited, was published by PanMacmillan Picador Australia (2010) and PanMacmillan Picador India (2009). It was included in Professor Elizabeth Webby's essay 'The year's work in fiction', published in *Westerly*, 55:1, July 2010 and cited by Sharrad in *Antipodes special issue: Australia and Asia* (2011). I co-edited *Alien Shores,* another volume of Indo-Australian stories, published by Brass Monkey Books in May 2012 and cited in *Transnational Review* 2012, followed by *Only Connect,* an anthology of stories from Australia and the Indian subcontinent published by Brass Monkey Books, Australia and Rupa Publications, India in 2014. It was reviewed by Sharrad in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (2014) and by Punyashree Panda in *Transnational Journal* (2013).

I am a Writing Fellow of the Fellowship of Australian Writers; a registered professional member of the NSW Society of Editors; a professional member of the Institute of Professional Editors (IPEd) and the Australian Society of Authors (ASA). I am a founding member of the Asia-Pacific Writing Partnership (APWP) and a life member of the Indian Association for the Study of Australia (IASA), as well as a member of the Overseas Committee.

I found few published studies in the field of local cultural production of South Asian–Australian fiction. For this reason, I chose this area of research, feeling I could contribute original fresh data and a new perspective.

This chapter has established my research question, my methodology and the theoretical frameworks that I have used. The following chapters attempt to answer some of the questions that have arisen during my research into the local production of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors, first published in Australia.

2. Perceptions in Publishing: Australian fiction publishing industry 1990–2014

In this chapter, I am going to look at the history of publication of fiction and the place of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors within that fiction. As mentioned in the introduction, Yasmine Gooneratne's first novel *A Change of Skies* was published in 1991. After that came a steady flow of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors published in Australia. I wanted to find out what had encouraged novel writing by South Asian–Australian authors. I examined the fiction book publishing industry in Australia during the past two decades, in order to understand the position of fiction by South Asian–Australian writers within that sphere. The book publishing industry enables novels to be mass produced and distributed to booksellers in order to reach a maximum number of readers. Book reviewers influence the profiles of authors and the book choices of readers. The support of literary grants can make a difference to who and what is published in Australia (David Carter, 2007, 2009; Nile and Ensor, 2009).

The story of Australian literary fiction publishing with its mythical 'golden age' and a frequently gloomy outlook for the future is often misleading. The term 'golden age' is used in many studies of the Australian fiction publishing industry (and by Laura, one of the publishers interviewed for my research in 2013) to refer to a time that coincides with the 'Cultural nationalism, funded by progressive governments (in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s), the product of a nation shaking off a malaise as publishers sought to break away from a British-dominated publishing of the post-war era', according to Hilary McPhee (in Davis, 2007). Author Kate Grenville wrote:

> During the 1960s and 1970s, things began to change—part of the global revolt against all kinds of colonialism. An author could now sell separate territorial licences to a book, and have different editions in the UK and the USA. Australian publishers were beginning to buy and sell around the world. New Australian publishers began to appear, and some international publishers set up

> branches here and didn't just sell books but also published them. Books about us began to appear in greater numbers and in more variety than ever before. (2016)

McPhee added that this was a 'creative phase which led to the construction of a local canon of literary authors' which was 'strongly supported after 1975' when the Whitlam Labor Government founded the Australia Council for the Arts. The late McPhee was in the publishing industry for decades and co-founded the very successful Carlton-based McPhee Gribble publishing house.

The perception that the literary fiction publishing industry is struggling or in demise is an accepted trope that keeps being repeated and discussed in literary circles, literary journals and texts about the book publishing industry in Australia. Mark Davis titles his chapter in *Making Books* (2007) 'The Demise of the Literary Paradigm', offering reasons for this common perception including: a general downturn in book sales; the imposition of the goods and services tax (GST) in July 2000; economic downturns, the Asian crash in 1997 and the global financial crisis which peaked in 2008; mergers of publishing companies particularly by multinational publishers and media/entertainment conglomerates such as News Corporation, Bertelsmann SE & Co. and KGaA, according to Simone Murray, Mark Davis, David Carter and Anne Galligan (2007). Laura, a publisher from one of the 'big five' Australian publishers, who participated in an interview for my research[8], acknowledges the impact of the GST in Australia on the publishing and bookselling industries: 'It wasn't just literary fiction, it was all book sales and it took about two years to recover.' In February 2011, when Angus & Robertson and Borders folded, 25% of the book market 'was gone—and some of it came back, some other retailers picked up those sales but that percentage has never really recovered'. The advent of digital publishing and ebooks meant another challenge for publishing houses because it was a new media that posed a level of risk as well as a possibility of returns.

According to Sophie Masson (2014):

> Book sales were sluggish in the early 2000s … from 2003 onwards, however, the value of book sales grew at a stronger rate—with 2007 recording a 7.5 per cent increase in book sales over the previous year. In all, the total value of book sales in nominal prices increased by an annual average of 4.1 per cent from 2001

[8] See appendix 1

> to 2010' (p 9, 10). *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction* states that 'the field of contemporary Australian fiction over the last 18 years has been remarkably productive. (John Wiley & Sons, 2010, p. 17)

The conflation of literary, popular and genre fiction in the statistics for Australian novel titles published and sold (Bode, 2012; Masson 2014) was one of the ways in which analysis of previous data became problematic. Genre in the book publishing industry refers to literary text and the novel as a literary genre. In contemporary novels, myriad subgenres of the novel have emerged, such as crime, romance, chick-lit, fantasy, science fiction, speculative fiction, historical and adventure. Categorising books by genre is a way of distinguishing one type of narrative from another (Gelder, Ken and Salzman, Paul, 2009, p. 16).

> Literary fiction and popular fiction are distinctly distinct categories of writing that each encompass a range of different genres. Popular fiction is overtly generic, announcing its generic identities loud and clear in all sorts of visible ways: cover design, blurbs, the way it is advertised and marketed, its position in a bookshop, the kind of bookshops it goes into and so on. Literary fiction, on the other hand, is much less vocal about its generic identities—but this doesn't mean that it cannot be generically identified. (Gelder, Ken, Paul Salzman. 2009, pp. 16–17)

Marion Rankine writes in *Overland* (2010):

> First we need a means of distinguishing the original from the 'popular'. Following Knox, I'll appropriate David Foster Wallace's definition: the popular tells us what we (think we) already know, whereas the original aims to transform what we know. Popular writing is formulaic and clichéd: it acknowledges audience expectations and faithfully meets them. It bears no relation to the real world, Knox writes, because it is writing that apes other writing, rather than reality. Original writing, on the other hand, confronts our expectations head-on. It describes the world in ways we have never heard it described before, and thus transforms our understanding. Knox is at pains to stress that the two can happily coexist. Original writing may be found in books that, for all intents and purposes, would otherwise be viewed as popular, and vice versa. But above all,

> Knox concludes, the world needs original thinkers: artists rather than 'content suppliers'.

So, genre fiction, in publishing terms usually refers to popular, fast-paced, commercial fiction. In contrast, literary fiction is expected to be character-driven, less concerned with a fast-paced plot than genre fiction. A work of literary fiction with its slower pace allows more room for development of characters. It often has a subtext with a more philosophical outlook or insight and ideas. Literary fiction can also be exploratory and break genre rules. Novels may encompass more than one of these elements. In my experience, however, publishers expect authors to identify the principal genre for their narrative.

Joshua Rothman, who is archive editor at the *New Yorker* and publishes a blog about books and writing, asks, when writing in the *New Yorker* (2014): 'What is it, exactly, about genre that is unliterary—and what is it in "the literary" that resists genre? The debate goes round and round, magnetic and circular—a lovers' quarrel among literati.'

Certainly, the boundaries are breaking down or being transcended between literary and genre fiction with the support of contemporary authors in Australia. An example is Peter Temple's crime novel *Truth,* which won a Miles Franklin Award in 2010. Rothman (2014) adds: 'The distinction between "literary fiction" and "genre fiction" accurately captured the modernists' literary reality. But, for better and for worse, it doesn't capture ours.'

The numerous studies which contradict each other, combined with the various methods of data collection, means that analysing the statistics is complex.[9] Calibrating statistics meant searching manually through the AustLit database to compile statistics for the number of sole works of fiction published for each year. The statistics presented to support my argument for the number of novels published in Australia were collated and analysed by Katherine Bode (2012) and David Carter (2007), and include fiction publishing data until 2009. Bode's method of data collection, which included both literary fiction and genre fiction, was replicated to obtain my original data from the AustLit database for 2010–14. Statistics for the subset of fiction by South Asian–Australian writers are from my analysis of data collected from the AustLit database.

[9] See Introduction, p. 5.

These statistics add new original data to previous studies into fiction publishing in Australia generally and fiction publishing in Australia by South Asian–Australian writers.[ii]

Since data collection has been privatised, the number of fiction book titles published in Australia and sold domestically or exported since 2009 is difficult to ascertain (Bode, 2012; Masson, 2014). Statistics for the numbers of Australian novels published in print form, formerly available through the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and AustLit database and published in the *Australian Book Review,* are now collected by Nielsen BookScan, originally BookTrack, which since 2000 has become the main provider of book sales figures. Davis (2007) explains that 'Nielsen tracks book sales by barcode from around 90 per cent of all retail outlets selling books in Australia' using point-of-sale technology. Nielsen BookScan includes popular and genre fiction titles that were rarely included in the statistics prior to 2000. The BookScan Australian Panel webpage states that the 'Australian panel covers over 90% of retail sales in the territory and in a typical mid-year week over 90,000 different titles are sold generating approximately AU$20 million and selling 1m units.'

Participants in the Australian Panel (AP3), December 2009

ABC
ACBA (trade sales)
Angus & Robertson (corporate and franchise; now closed)
AWPL (Runway News/ News Travels)**
Big W
Book City*
Borders (now closed)
Coles****
Collins
David Jones
Dymocks
Kmart
Kinokuniya*
Myer
Newslink***
Retail Adventures*
Selected Internet
Target
Toys R Us***
Uni Co-op (trade sales)
Woolworths*

Plus, sales from a weighted sample of general independents including Gleebooks, Readings and Shearers.

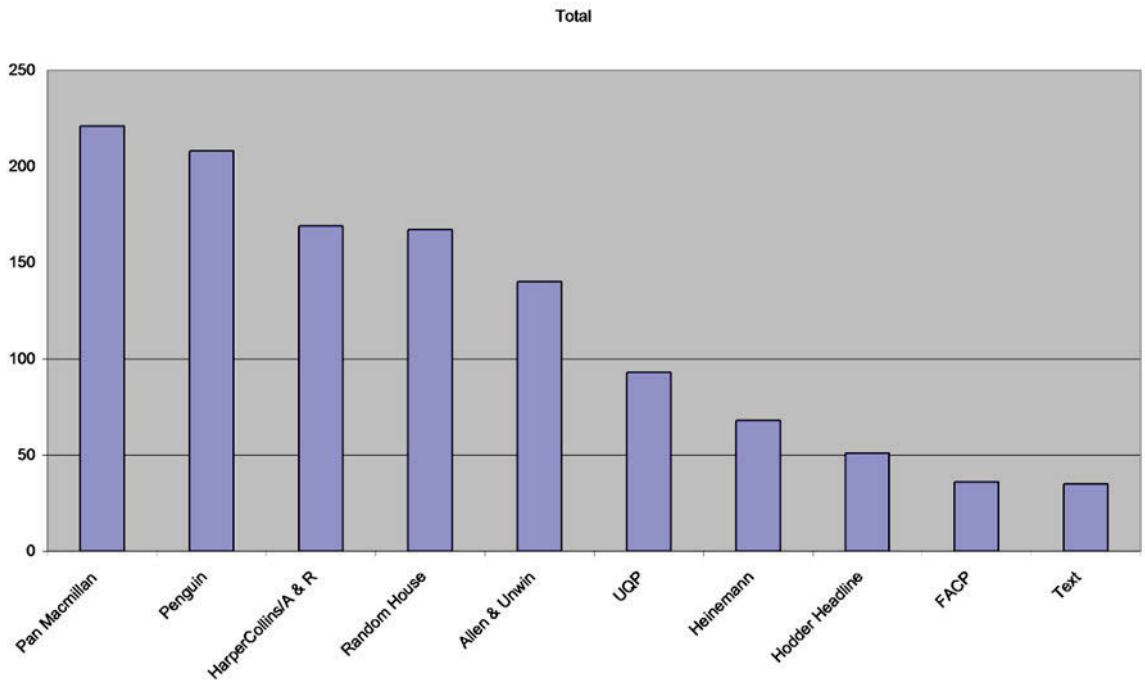
* added Dec 2005
** added Dec 2006
*** added Apr 2007
**** added Dec 2009

Source:

http://www.nielsenbookscan.com.au/uploads/BookScan_AustralianPanel_Feb11.pdf

It has been suggested that the remaining 10% of book sales that are unaccounted for by BookScan include sales in gift shops and post offices (research interviews with publishers, 2013) and this seems a plausible explanation since they are not strictly 'booksellers'. Carter points out that 'more than 90 per cent' of mass-market paperbacks were published by larger publishers with only '13.5 per cent' of fiction new titles published by small publishing companies; see Figure 15.4, p. 240, Carter 2007. Penguin and Random House, however, merged in 2013.

Figure 1. Top ten publishers of Australian literary fiction 1990–2006



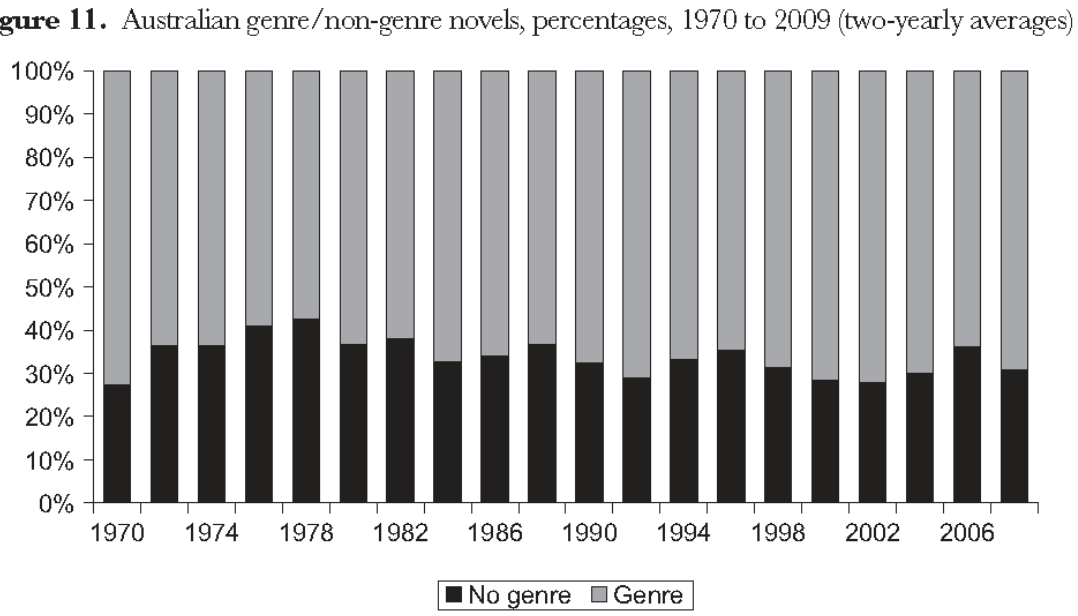
Carter in Figure 15.4 (above) has analysed data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Australian Book Publishers Association (ABPA) for the years 1990–2006. Appendix B in 'Boom, Bust or Business as usual? Literary Fiction Publishing' in

Making Books: Contemporary Australian Publishing, shows the statistics for these larger publishers as well as the midrange publishers, some of which have since vanished or given up publishing literary fiction titles. According to Carter the figures, while 'not strictly applicable' due to previous surveys using 'different categories', also pointed out by Davis (2007, p. 117) seem to 'indicate a steady increase in new fiction titles and in the proportion of fiction titles in the overall 'general' title mix.' Carter's analysis of his data shows the statistics for the larger publishers, as well as the midrange publishers, some of which have since vanished or given up publishing literary fiction titles (Australian Bureau of Statistics; the Australian Book Publishers Association; Appendix B Carter and Galligan in *Making Books: Contemporary Australian Publishing*, 2007). According to Carter the figures, while 'not strictly applicable' because previous surveys used 'different categories', also pointed out by Davis (2007, p. 117) and Bode (2012), seem to 'indicate a steady increase in new fiction titles and in the proportion of fiction titles in the overall "general" title mix.' Carter's results show that in 2003–04 fiction sales 'represented … 10 per cent of all Australian printed books sold'; and 'accounted for approx. 17 per cent of domestic sales of general Australian titles' (table 15.2, p. 235, Carter and Galligan, 2007). The process of separating literary fiction from genre or general fiction is achieved by 'subtracting titles assigned to genre categories from the total number of novels published' (Carter and Galligan, 2007), which means eliminating novels in the crime, romance, adventure, fantasy, thriller, young adult, chick-lit, popular fiction titles and so on.

Bode's (2012) conclusion from her results from 'data-rich "distant" reading of the field', however, indicates that the 'more pronounced trend is the increased output of Australian literary fiction publishers', which seems to be borne out by my own data for 2010–14. It should be noted that Bode's statistics show data for fiction book titles published, but not statistics for book sales. This result supports the statement of Laura, a publisher from a major Australian publishing house who said that she had published literary fiction that has outsold most of the mass-market genre books that she had published: 'An average first print run for a mass market book is not much different to literary fiction. It always depends on the book.' Bode's comparison between literary and genre fiction in Figure 2 (Bode's Figure 11) shows the proportion of genre novels compared to the total number of novels published between 1970 and 2009. Literary novels represent the majority of 'no genre' novels. Bode emphasises that while the 'top'

or biggest publishing companies may be moving away from Australian literary fiction, 'these companies do not represent the entire industry' (Bode, Table 7, 2012, p. 82).

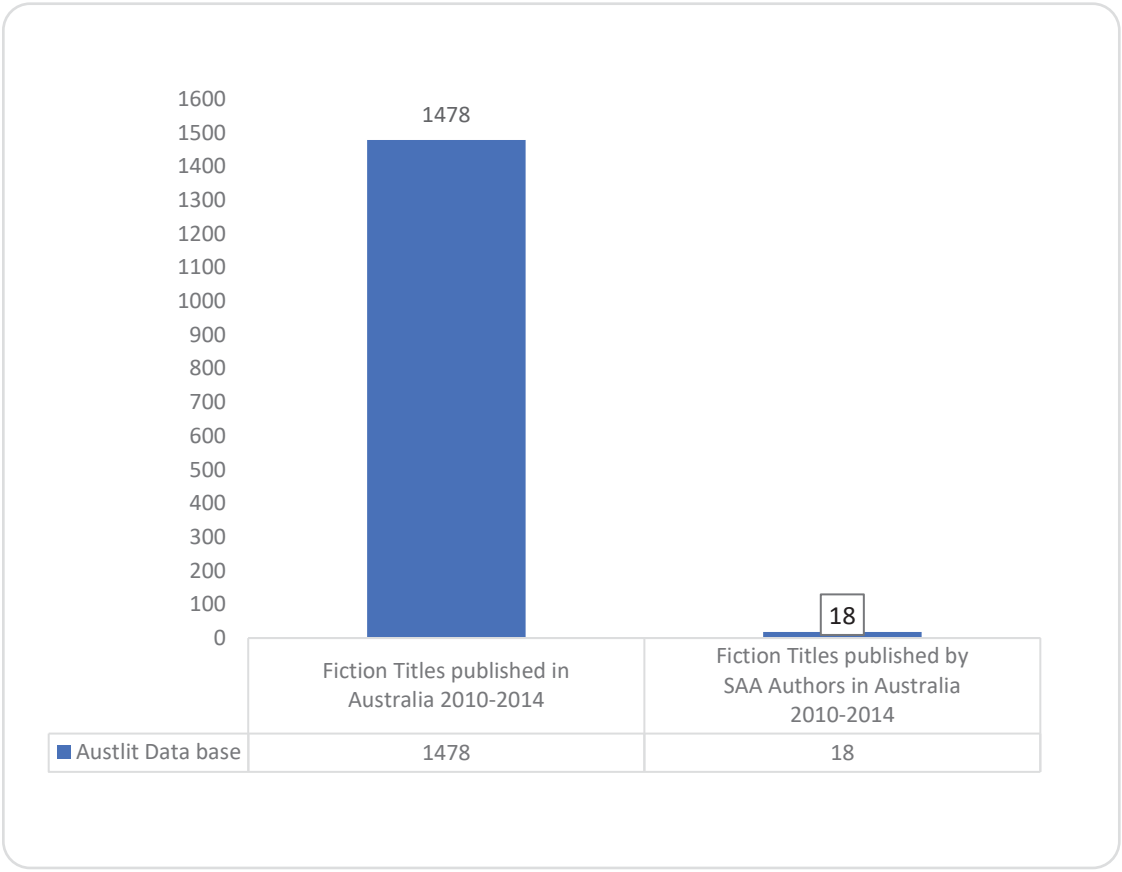
Figure 2. Australian genre/non-genre novels, percentages, 1970–2009 (two-yearly averages) – Bode's Figure 11.



Bode used the same AustLit database, but with a longitudinal approach to her analysis. Her findings appear to support Carter's prediction that Australian literary fiction publishing is increasingly becoming the province of Australian independent publishers (which may publish only one or two titles per year), while challenging the view that multinational corporations and media/entertainment conglomerates are of growing concern or pose a problem for Australian literary fiction. Masson's (2014) findings agreed that 'there are fewer big publishers but more small presses'. According to Masson (2014), 'there were approximately 4000 book publishers in Australia during 2008' and 'over seventy per cent of these publishers only published one ISBN-tagged publication in 2008; 295 (eight per cent) published more than five titles in 2008; 23 (one per cent) published more than one hundred titles in 2008.' As Carter (2009, p. 387) highlights, half of the last ten books to win Miles Franklin Awards were produced by Australian independent publishers. He maintains that 'fiction remains significant' in Australian literary publishing, 'being one-third of locally released general books and stronger than ever is genre publishing'. Another crucial factor is distribution of books to

booksellers. Many booksellers will deal only with distributors because they do not want to set up individual accounts for each publisher, particularly the smaller publishers. Wise publishers subscribe to a distributor with a proven track record of distribution to major booksellers, including the department stores. Without a distributor, it is almost impossible to put books into all bookseller stores, with the exception of some independent booksellers. It is against this backdrop of the industry that I will measure the success of fiction publishing in Australia by South Asian–Australian writers.

Figure 3. Fiction titles published in Australia 2010–14



Data collected from AustLit Database (Rundle 2014)

During 2010–14 a total of 1478 single works of fiction (novels of all genres) were published in Australia and listed on the AustLit data base. Eighteen novels were written by South Asian–Australian authors, which represents 1.15% of the total works of fiction published. (Figure 3).[10]

[10] See also p. 56

Figure 4. Data collected from AustLit Database (Rundle, 2014). The majority of novels published in 2014 were self-published (more than 50 books), followed by the top five Australian publishers, and partnership publishing (20 to 40 books), and then ebook publishers (less than 20 books).

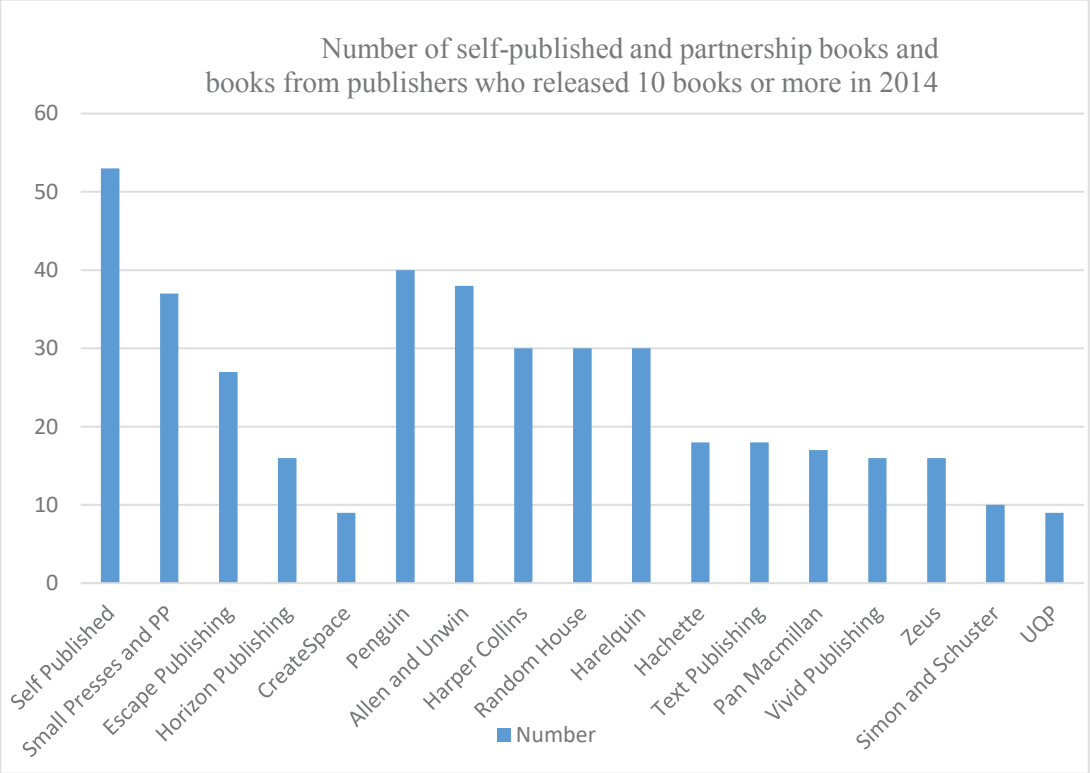


Fig. 4 shows which Australian publishers released more than ten novels from the beginning of 2014 until September 2014.

Figure 5. Data collected from AustLit Database (Rundle 2014) shows the number of fiction titles published by South Asian–Australian authors from 2010–14.

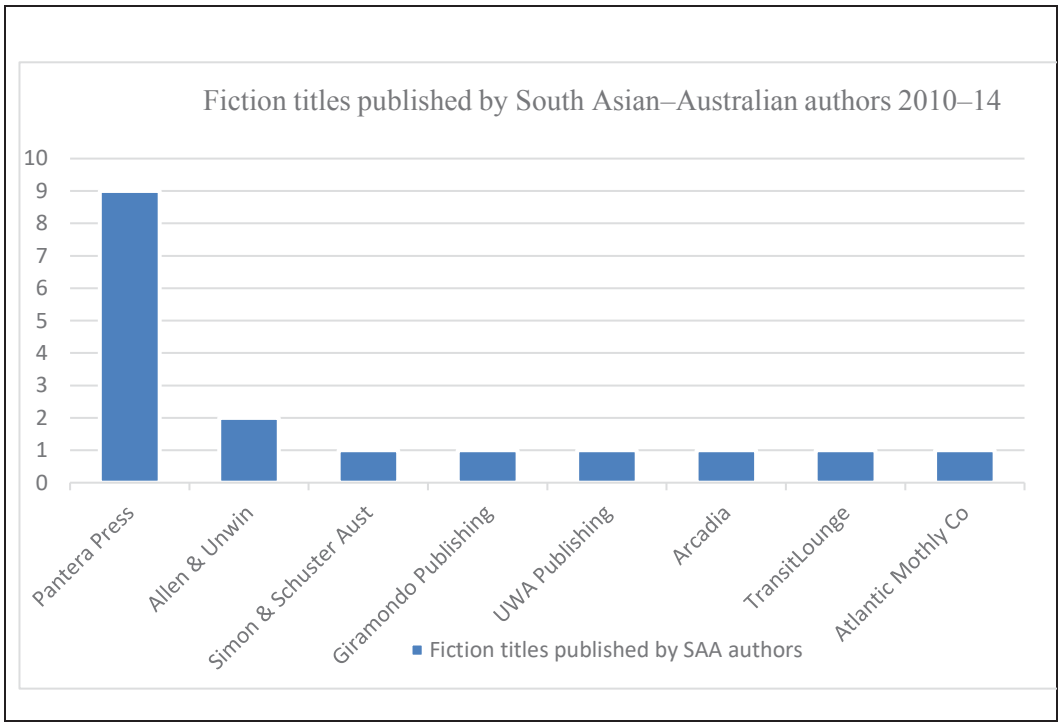
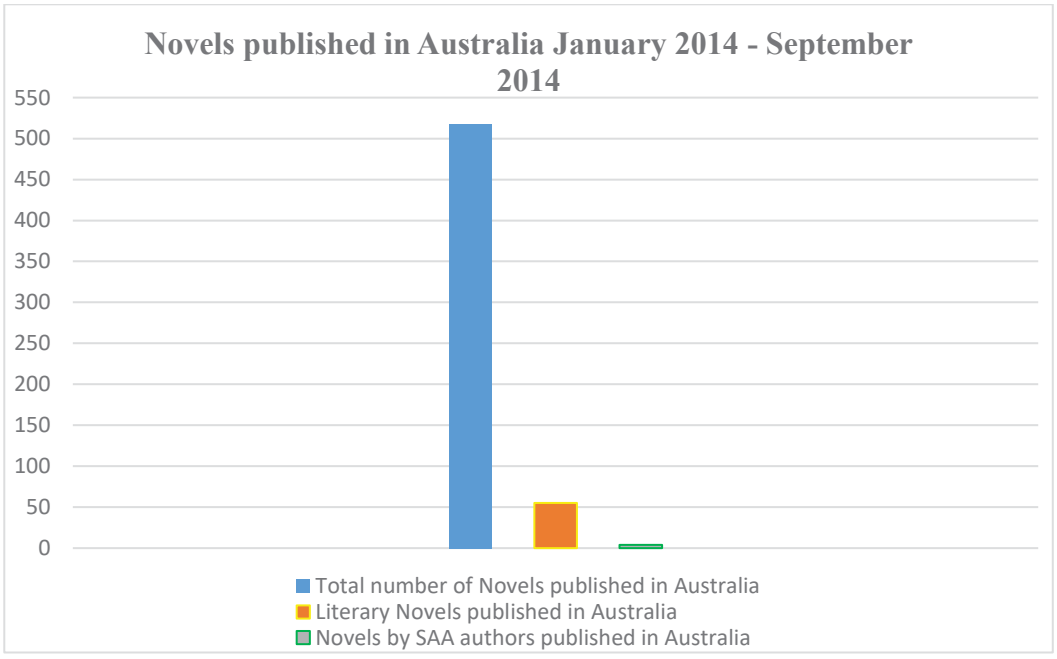


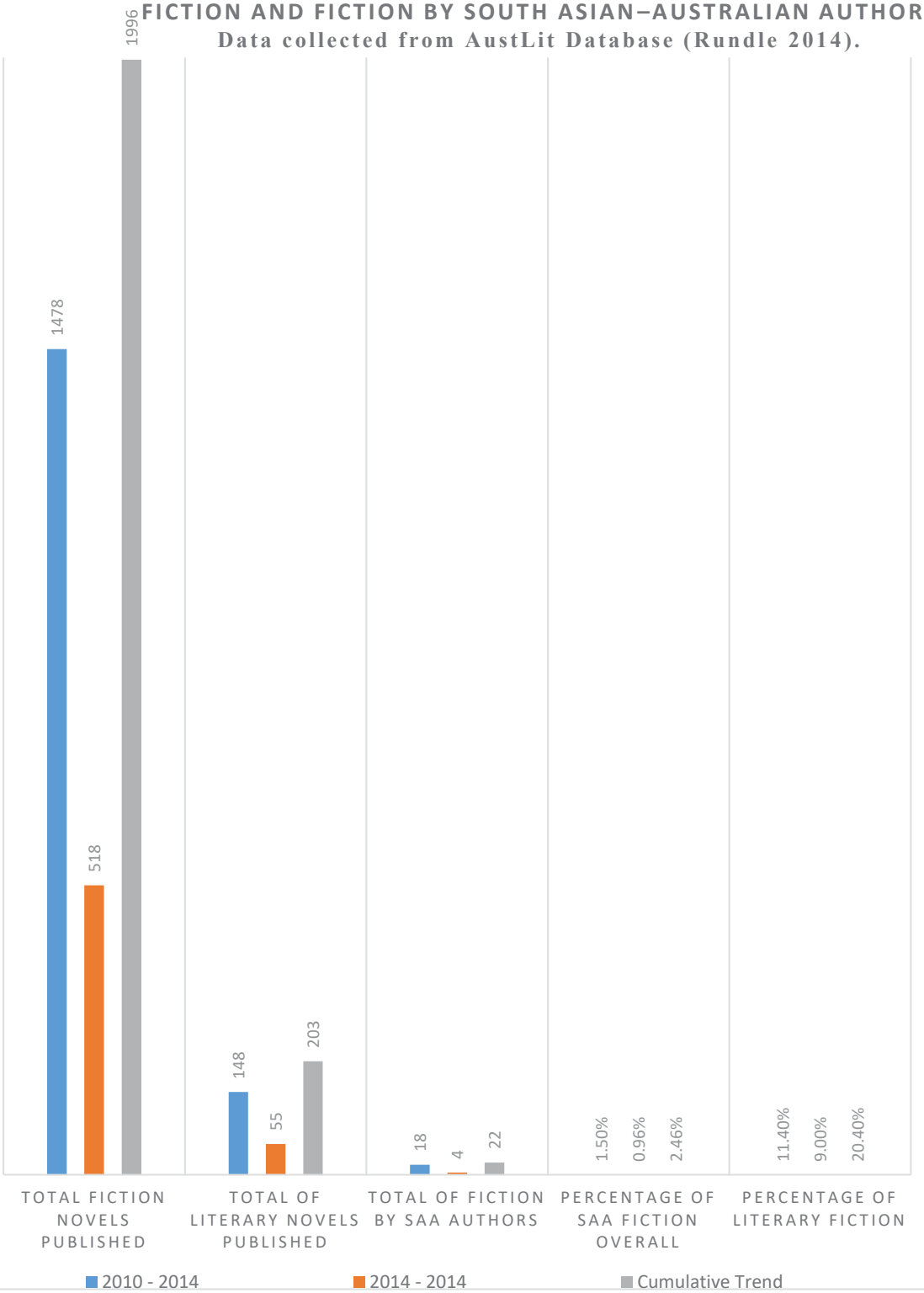
Figure 6. Data collected from AustLit Database (Rundle 2014), indicates the number of novels published in Australia in 2010 and the subset of novels by South Asian–Australian authors.



Five hundred and eighteen novels were published in Australia during 2014, including titles for all genres for adults, young adults and children; self-published, and partnership publishing. The total number of literary fiction titles was fifty-five, or 10.6%. Four fiction titles were published by South Asian–Australian authors: *Saree,* was published by South Asian–Australian author Su Dharmapala; *A Murder Unmentioned* by Sulari Gentill; *Springtime* by Michelle de Kretser (2014); *Asylum* by Channa Wickremesekera (Palaver). These titles represent 0.96% of all novels and 9.0% of literary novels published in Australia during 2014. *The Burning Elephant* by Christopher Raja was published by Giramondo Press in 2015. The cumulative trend (Figure 8, following page) shows a slowly growing and developing subgenre of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors in the range of 2.46%. [11]

[11] Part of this chapter was presented at the Indian Association for the Study of Australia (IASA) 2014 Biennial Conference in Kerala, India; and published in a book of essays from the conference by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2015, to be launched at the IASA 2016 Conference in Delhi, India. Please see Appendix 3: Published works. Some statistics have since been updated.

Figure 7. CUMULATIVE TREND FOR FICTION, LITERARY FICTION AND FICTION BY SOUTH ASIAN–AUSTRALIAN AUTHORS
Data collected from AustLit Database (Rundle 2014).



Interventions in literary fiction publishing in Australia

Literary fiction is considered to be part of the nation's cultural production, but rarely makes much profit for publishers. In addition, the income from writing books of literary fiction, for most authors, does not provide a sustainable income. I would argue, therefore, that intervention at a policy level is important, if not crucial, to support authors of literary fiction in Australia. Surveys of authors by David Throsby and Nathan Hollier (2007), Throsby and Hollister (2003), and Throsby and Zednik (2010) pointed to a mean income from writing of $23,200 in 2000–01.

'The mean creative income earned by writers in 2007–08, however, was $11,100 (in 2007 dollars) – a drop of 52 per cent' (Throsby and Zednik, 2010). The primary income from writing for professional authors has remained constant or declined, even though the pool of funding has increased. One suggested reason for what may appear to be a contradiction in these statistics is that the number of authors receiving funding has increased, 'diluting the pool of funding' (Throsby and Zednik, 2010). It is perceptible that a decrease in income for authors appears to be occurring in other parts of the globe, such as the UK, as well. Since these book markets are all connected, this affects South Asian–Australian writers who are writing fiction for publication in Australia.

Intervention at a policy level is deemed crucial for the continued production of literary fiction. 'Relations between Australian governments and the nation's book publishing sector are complex and productive', according to Glenn D'Cruz (2007). Support for Australian literature and publishing since World War II has included 'expansion of existing policy instruments, such as copyright, book import regulation and the Commonwealth Literary Fund' as well as 'new instruments' such as the Literature Board of the Australia Council, established in 1973 by the Whitlam Labor Government (David Carter in Pierce 2009, p. 177). The Book Bounty scheme was established in 1969 to subsidise the Australian printing industry; the Australian Society of Authors (ASA) was formed in 1963 and achieved government support for a Public Lending Right (PLR) scheme in 1974 and Educational Lending Rights (ELR) in 2000. In 1974, Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) began to collect payments on behalf of authors for photocopying of their work. (See also Nile and Ensor, 2009, p. 528.) 'A complex range of policies' from the three tiers of government have supported Australian literature since 1990; the 'most fundamental and longest established interventions' are

copyright, defamation and obscenity legislation; Stuart Glover (2007, pp. 82, 83) states that when 'uncoordinated and sometimes ineffective' interventions are put together they then 'constitute a comprehensive regulatory framework for the production, distribution and consumption of books' resulting in a 'mixed domain of market, cultural and governmental forces'. The 'cultural' forces can include strategies to encourage migrant, Transnational and diasporic writing, such as from South Asian–Australian authors, including works of fiction. These tiers of government, on the other hand, are also responsible for deregulating the market, dismantling the Book Bounty in 1996 and, in 2000, imposing a Goods and Services Tax (GST) on books, which had previously been exempt from sales tax.

In late 2010 the Federal Government formed the Book Industry Strategy Group (BISG) to 'develop viable strategies to assist the book industry to adjust to the digital environment and to improve efficiency within the book supply chain … It is unclear how an electronic lending rights scheme might operate given the varying licensing and purchasing models for ebooks' (Schools Catalogue Information Service, <http://www.nsla.org.au/news/book-industry-collaborative-council-look-e-lending-copyright>). These lending rights are regularly reviewed for the purpose of cutting costs and are therefore constantly under threat. Australian copyright laws are also being reviewed in relation to 'fair dealing' exceptions, which authors fear may infringe copyright.

Governments intervene both directly, as mentioned, and indirectly in the sphere of Australian literature through 'libraries, universities, schools, and agencies' which 'fund, advocate, administer and deliver services', as well as through the expansion of publishing by state libraries and universities, according to Glover (2007, p. 83); and through support for writers' centres, festivals, publishers and writers. 'The most visible growth has been in writers' festivals and book prizes', according to Carter (in Pierce 2009, p. 379). All of the South Asian–Australian authors I interviewed received support to write their works of fiction, in the form of grants, awards and/or prizes from federal and state bodies (mostly grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council, as well as from private philanthropic institutions). Total government funding in Australia for literature and print media in 2009–10 was 34.8 million or 0.5% of the total arts budget, according to the ABS Report (2011).

In 2013, the Literature Assessment Panel of the Australia Council allocated a total of $2,603,000 including $280,376 of 'excellence funding' (Australia Council, 2013). Total expenditure funded by all levels of government for cultural activities increased 5% in 2011–12, following a rise of less than 1% in 2010–11 (ABS, 2012). In 2015, however, the Federal Minister for the Arts, George Brandis, altered the funding to the Australia Council and its Literature Board. The Parliament of Australia website states:

> Redirection of funding from the Australia Council: The Government announced that $110.0 million over four years would be redirected from the Australia Council (which in 2014–15 received $211.8 million and in 2015–16 will receive $184.5 million) to the Ministry for the Arts in the Attorney-General's Department ($27.7 million in each of the next two financial years, $28.0 million in 2017–18 and $26.6 million in 2018–19). The Ministry for the Arts will also take control of the Major Festivals Initiative and the Festivals of Australia program.

This prompted Stuart Glover to argue that this redirection of funding from the Australia council to the National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA) means that:

> Brandis' raid on its budget is the most audacious change to a four-decade bipartisan consensus about the best way to fund non-government arts activity…Maybe, under Brandis, we are to witness the Australia Council being eaten bit by bit ... The bottom line for literature is that, even if the sector maintains its modest share of the Australia Council funding (around 3%), it will receive a smaller overall serving of government funding. ('Writers and publishers are all at sea under Brandis and the NPEA', in *The Conversation* (July, 2015) and *Australian Arts Review* (July, 2015).)

This is a salutary warning considering that the Parliament of Australia website also states that:

> Efficiency savings: The Budget also provides for further savings from the Australia Council of $7.3m over four years, to be met through reduced funding to the ArtStart, Capacity Building and Artists in Residence programmes. It also provides for collecting agencies (such as the National Gallery of Australia,

> National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, the National Museum and the National Portrait Gallery) to continue to be subject to the efficiency dividend and the 'consolidation of back office functions' measures announced in 2014.

Moreover, Matthew Knott reports in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that*:*

> The Australia Council will also swallow $7.2 million in efficiency savings over four years to 2018–19. These combined cuts represent an annual funding reduction of around 13 per cent for the nation's principal arts and funding body, which has an annual budget of $230 million.[12]

As a result of a media and arts bodies making a public protest, the government gave back $32 million over four years ($8 million a year in funding). On 22 March 2016 an article in *The Age* by Linda Morris, 'It's not too late: ArtsPeak pens open letter to Malcolm Turnbull', reported that:

> The body representing the nation's artists, actors, directors and writers via its member organisations has appealed to Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to personally intervene and reverse funding cutbacks and an efficiency drive which threaten to impoverish the sector. As the Turnbull government plays a game of brinkmanship with the Senate, ArtsPeak co-convenors Tamara Winikoff and Nicole Beyer have signed an open letter warning of the imminent loss of vital arts and cultural infrastructure.

The letter states that: 'unless there is a sudden change of heart the Australia Council would need to distribute from a funding pool cut by $12 million a year.'

Glover's (2007, p. 81) conclusion is that while funding for Australian literature is 'a productive mess', this 'tangle of policy action' rather than 'direct regulation' while 'generally positive' nonetheless does little to develop the book 'for its own sake'; in other words it is more market-driven. Moreover, Glover asserts that 'most policy settings have had biases as to the types of books that are subsidised' and that this has resulted in varying degrees of 'visibility, purpose and effect' of policies which are tied to a 'range of social, economic and cultural policy imperatives from all three levels of Government'. Literary and cultural grants *are* tagged with specific aims and criteria,

[12] Please also see: National Program for Excellence in the Arts Media Release (http://arts.gov.au/nationalexcellenceprogram).

which may change from time to time and which may focus on particular cultures or regions; for example, in 2012, India was the focus for DFAT funding through the Australia India Council, the Australia India Institute and AsiaLink. Thus, writers who produce the books may be 'restricted' to 'narrowly defined works of literature', according to Lee (2006). This argument is also raised by Makarand Paranjape and Monica Fludernik (in Athique, 2006).

The tying of funding to policy may be the genesis of claims of a hegemony by Pradip Kumar Patra (2006) and Shohat (2002), with regard to which works and authors are funded, published and reviewed. Despite the claims of hegemony or bias of the kind claimed by Patra, apart from any influence that may be brought to bear by tagged funding and government subsidisation of books and writers, and market forces, I have not been able to identify concrete evidence of hegemony being practised in the Australian book publishing industry. As would be expected, South Asian–Australian authors whom I interviewed[3] disagreed with the statement that a hegemony existed that adversely affected or may adversely affect their prospect of publishing works of fiction in Australia. They were confident that their fiction was chosen on its merit, reflecting the cultural diversity of the culture it represents, and that their background had no effect on the process of selection of their books for publication. Similarly, Australian publishers and reviewers whom I interviewed were unaware of any hegemony operating in the Australian book publishing industry and denied that their professional judgement in commissioning or reviewing works of fiction was biased towards or against any particular cultural identity. Publishers whom I interviewed said that they would not exclude a book or author on the basis that it is 'Asian'. As I expected, there appears to be little factual evidence to support claims of 'Anglo-Celtic hegemony' as Chakraborty claims (2012, p. 2), that affects the prospect of publishing fiction by South Asian–Australian authors. Moreover, Laura made the comment that although Australian publishing is:

> Mono-cultural and mono-gender to a certain extent, it is always about the book. During my time in publishing, I wouldn't say it was a bias towards the exotic but there was a very successful track record there with books set in other cultures – there was a good track record of readers in Australia buying and enjoying stories set in other cultures – including Asian cultures. I saw very few

> manuscripts from South Asian–Australian fiction authors crossing my desk. I would have welcomed more, simply because we should be promoting the diversity of the country that we live in but there weren't a lot coming through. Does that mean that of the Asian population here, few are interested in writing? Of the Asian population here, are there those who are interested in writing? Are they not getting to the standard that they need? We all know what's required – you've got to put in a lot of time, you've got to be patient. Are there other interests, other priorities beyond that?'

Nonetheless, a subtle form of hegemony is apparent in the way in which authors are given a platform and marketed. Authors and publishers, in particular, have mentioned the term or description 'exotic' as a selling point for books and authors. Ruby sums it up by stating that she had always been treated as 'the other' or 'exotic' and though it may have been upsetting when she was a child, as an adult she enjoyed her 'exotic' status. Authors brought up the problem of representation in the media in Australia in general, giving the example that they had never seen 'someone like me' in TV adverts or on billboards. For example, Gentill said:

> I was always aware that I had chosen to be an Australian or my father had chosen for me to be an Australian. I was a lot more interested in what that meant. I was a teenager in the eighties, certainly back then the image of the Australian was the blonde bronzed Caucasian.

When asked by Scott (2004, p. 101) about 'exoticising Sri Lanka?' de Kretser responded:

> Rather sadly I read the books, not just of foreign and expatriate writers, but also writers who live in Asian countries, and they are all sort of frangipani and maidens and temple bells. I have this feeling that this is written as something that is going to appeal. Like incense, it is so beautiful and different from the West. It comes out in *The Hamilton Case* in Shivanathan's book. As a writer he feels, in retrospect, that he has done that quite cynically: I want to sell books so why not give them what they want?

Chakraborty (2012, p. 3) expands on this concept of the perception of authentic Australian.

> What is brought into being as distinctively Australian is not a set of cultural practices, a landscape, or a different set of histories, but a single figure, the typical Australian, whose accents and attitudes stand in for the population at large (p. 151). Therefore, Australian literature, despite its myriad creative answers to the question of 'who has the right to belong' to this canon, continues to be animated by it (Huggan vii).

One manifestation of the racial/spatial anxiety about the authentic Australian is the endless obsession with hoaxes and fakes in the Australian literary imaginary, as evidenced by the high-profile controversy over the Demidenko affair in the 1980s. This is not to suggest that entry by Asian writers in the literary scenes of Europe and Anglo-North America were seamless, untroubled affairs. To the contrary, canonical wars have been fought tooth and nail in the annals of postcolonial and diasporic literature globally. However, the central place that such an obsession occupies in the Australian audience is testimony, as Maria Takolander and David McCooey argue, to its continued privileging of 'real authors and literature' (pp. 57, 59). Thus, while an Ern Malley hoax might represent 'a nationalist suspicion of European modernism through the character of a working class man, the Demidenko[13] affair was decidedly '90s in its use of multicultural ideology' (p. 60).

Perhaps the question to ask is whether hegemony is unacknowledged rather than has ceased to exist? For example, Chakraborty (2012, p. 2) contends:

> The establishment in hegemonic Australian literature operates in the same way, gatekeeping its boundaries and tracing its genealogy to the same 'meta-geographical imagination' from which the European 'idea of "continents" had sprung'. (Lewis and Wigen, quoted in Ang p. 112)

Few South Asian-Australians seem to be working in the publishing industry or in the arts funding industry, especially in positions of power or authority. Anupama Pilbrow (2016) contends:

> It's more complicated. Western writing overpowers other writings because it takes great effort to step outside the Western literary paradigm—even for writers and readers in a continent like Australia, which is geographically and

[13] See pp. 42, 43.

> intellectually close to Asia. Shifting this paradigm takes conscious work—work like asking Australian writers to name their Asian literary influences. Work like obsessively talking about Asian authors. Change is coming; Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is being added to VCE English reading lists as, among other things, a reflection of the 'cultural diversity of the Victorian community. This is a powerful first step because it ensures that South Asian literature is being read not just by those with a South Asian background.

South Asian–Australian novelists mention the White Australia policy. Gooneratne wrote, 'The colour of one's skin remained the underlying criterion for immigration, and hence for images of Asians in Australia until the late 1960s' (2009).

Gooneratne comments on the White Australia Policy through two remarkable devices in her novel *A Change of Skies* (1991*).*

> The first is a diary ostensibly kept by Barry's grandfather aboard a ship in 1882 that brought the first Sri Lankan migrants into the country, along with stowaway mynah birds, that then go on to assume pestilential numbers in Australia. The second is Jean's comedy of manners exchange with a right-wing talkback radio show host, where every Oz stereotype is brought up and uproariously subverted. (Chakraborty, 2012, p. 7)

De Kretser mentioned in an interview that she was among a lot of Sri Lankans who came to Australia 'as the White Australia policy had just been abolished' (Scott, 2004).[14] This presented an alternative choice to Canada or the United Kingdom.

External influences on Australia were the Vietnam War, which had the effect of raising curiosity about Asia and a new understanding of our Asian neighbours. Grester (2009) calls it the 'one great unifier' that brought together various protest movements and 'provided a focus' for Australians. The Vietnam War also marks the beginning of 'patterns of travel and imaginative engagement' for the Australian public, and a time when Australians looked beyond the immediate horizon. Robert Hughes remarked that it was the time when 'Australia stopped thinking about Asia as the Far East' and instead 'realised that it was the Near North' (Grester, 2009).

[14] See p. 71

The 'exotic' aspect of being South Asian can be seen as an unwelcome tag by some novelists; for others, it can be a way of making a point of difference and getting published. As would be expected, the authors I interviewed and researched had mixed opinions about the way in which their books are promoted and publicised, which revealed fascinating differences. Some are happy to actively promote their cultural background, particularly when relevant to elements of the novel, while others, for example Adib Khan, prefer to minimise their links to the Indian subcontinent, according to his publisher. Khan prefers to discuss his work and not his South Asian connections when he is invited to speak at events. His publisher, Laura, explains that Khan

> became frustrated; for example, at literary festivals, he was always invited to talk about identity. His books do discuss other things but he wouldn't be asked about other things or they'd be reluctant to. It does seem particularly frustrating for people like Adib when people demand that 'you're now going to explain your culture'. To a degree that has been the experience of the Asian writers. To explain to people not of that background.

The fact that some authors and publishers consider using or used pen-names or pseudonyms is telling. For example, Sulari Gentill's Sri Lankan family name is Goonetilleke. The name Gentill was created as a pen-name by contracting her family name.

> I haven't changed my name from Goonetilleke but I write under a pen-name and part of the reason was because I was going into genre fiction with Australian history and the decision was made at the publishing point that they didn't want people to stop – and what normally happens if you see a name like Goonetilleke, the buyers think of literary fiction or immigrant fiction. That could be the point at which they pass over it and take the book next to it. So, my name was intentionally anglicised by simply eliminating letters until we ended up with Gentill. Yet I was also told by others when writing literary fiction to publish under the name Goonetilleke because that will make a difference because Sri Lankan writers have a name in literary fiction. It is interesting that this makes a difference with the market.

Carter, when assessing the role of the Australia Council, defends any criticisms of bias, elitism or alternatively, its 'politically correct' privileging of women or Indigenous, ethnic and other minority groups:

> But none of the criticisms have stuck, and the board's juggling of merit, diversity and equity claims and artistic, 'national' and 'industry' imperatives however impure, seems entirely appropriate to an instrument of state cultural policy. (2009, p. 377)

If author biographical notes and book back-cover summaries or blurbs include the author's ethnicity, how much should these highlight the 'exotic' or South Asian aspect of the authors and/or their fiction narratives? The authors' connections to the Indian subcontinent are clearly evident in, for example, the cases of Yasmine Gooneratne 1991, Lokugé 2000 and 2003, Manisha Amin 2012, Aravind Adiga 2011, Le Hunte 2000 and 2005. In the market-driven commercial publishing industry, it is not unusual for identity to be commoditised as a point of difference for marketing purposes. 'Arguably, emphasising a book's foreignness or exoticness might be a deliberate marketing strategy', according to Lazaroo (2008). Nonetheless, Lazaroo claims that

> some Australian publishers have tended, perhaps inadvertently, to emphasise Asian-Australian novels' foreignness in their back-cover blurbs, to the exclusion of more topical or familiar issues that readers might engage or even identify with.

Book cover design can reinforce stereotypes.[15] As Chantal said:

> I think Simone, and two others writing about this [reviewing fiction], were presenting at a conference that had a theme of Asian-Australian writing—and its future, its past and the present contemporary. Very uncomfortable to be slotted into an ethnic group. So, we have the Sri Lankan–Australians, we have Simone Lazaroo, a Singaporean-Australian, Chinese-Australians, Australian this, Australian that, so if you try to put everyone into a tiny little box and close them up with their particularities, I think it's quite limiting. It's good that each of our books would have those particularities. It's up to readers to get those

[15] See also p. 52.

> particularities but then those particularities also at some point transcend into humanity. And that also is quite important.

On other hand, the publishing industry is not so sensitive; their goal is to market a product, in this case a book. Every author is categorised, labelled – whether it is a woman writer, sports writer, or Sri Lankan writer – publishers and publicists label and categorise people in that way because they are looking for that point of difference. So how does that sit with authors when publishers want to label writers? Lokugé has not had that experience.

> If they highlighted the Sri Lankan, I was quite happy actually, I had no problem with it. As long as you are not only that, as Simone herself says very rightly. As long as you're not just slotted, but then other issues are there, if your lyricism is there. Being Sri Lankan or being Singaporean is just one aspect of what you write, and to pigeonhole you on just one aspect and say you're nothing else is just very limiting, that's what I think she is saying. So publishers, reviewers, everyone has to get out of that possibly and say, Yes, of course, we're Sri Lankan, so the Sri Lankan experience is there, then this other experience is there. It's one of myriad issues. My first novel *If the Moon Smiled* brought out the exotic, in the cover, in the blurb, you know – it's a Sri Lankan–Australian experience.

Lokugé spoke about migration being a very hot topic – the exotic of diasporic writing. 'That was picked up by most of the media, a culture that was a little outside the Australian mainstream: Even more than immigrant, I would call myself diasporic because I have claims to the country. I have not uprooted myself and settled here, it's a constant to-ing and fro-ing. I think it's the way I came. I came professionally, not as a kind of exile – or refugee. So, I go back all the time. My family – half my family is there. I think I love Australia as much as I love Sri Lanka.'

Studies by Broinowski (2011), Sharrad (2011), Athique (2006), Patra (2006) and others acknowledge that not all Indian-Australian or South Asian–Australian authors are happy to be labelled with these tags. My data shows a mixed response to the tags 'South Asian–Australian' and 'Indian-Australian'. Sunil Badami is Australian born and when asked 'where do you come from?' answers 'Graystanes', which is a suburb of Sydney. Inevitably the next question is 'But where are you *really* from?' In his story 'Sticks and

Stones and Such-like', Badami (2008) tells of how eventually he settles for 'the awkwardly knotted hyphen to make me Indian-Australian or Australian-Indian, depending on the day', even if he 'still found it hard to tie my Indian appearance to my Australian feeling'. As mentioned earlier, a 'pan-Indian' or South Asian label can be problematic because these labels encompass a multiplicity of identities, such as Bengali-Australian, Tamil-Australian, Punjabi-Australian, Goan-Australian, Sri Lankan–Australian, Fijian-Indian-Australian, Kenyan-Indian-Australian, West Indian–Indian-Australian, and so on; as well as their descendants (Ghosh, 2009, p. 184). Contemporary South Asian–Australian fiction writers have been further labelled or categorised as 'second-generation' (Ghosh, 2009; Sharrad, 2011) and, according to Broinowski (2003, p. 1):

> Not only has the face of Australian fiction about Asia changed in the 1990s, so have the faces of those writing it. The new faces are predominantly Asian Australian, and female. These new novels suggest what has brought about the change, and what further change is on the way; or labelled the 'Third generation expat and their hyphenated existence as Asian-Australians'. (Majumdar, 2006, p. 172)

As Nicholas Jose (2012) points out,

> Where Asian-Australian writing, hyphenated, might be a category determined by background, Australian Asian writing could suggest an experiential and imaginative alternative, allowing a looser set of permutations and interactions. This need not mean that the politics of writing is thrown overboard. The politics returns in the writer's insistence on imaginative scope and capacity.

Jose argues that 'No one likes to be labelled' and suggests that whether a literary work should stand on its own terms rather than as an extension of the author's ethnic identity 'requires consideration of how that authorial position is represented in the text—whether it's relevant or not, whether different meanings are generated by reading that way'. This seems to contrast with the imperative to create a platform or brand, creating tension between competing imperatives. On the other hand, the South Asian–Australian author and academic, Amin ('Indias of the Mind' unpublished, 2008), contends that: 'As a writer living in Australia, writing a novel set exclusively in India, it is my contention that narrative cannot necessarily stand on the merit of the writing alone, that

the author, and the reader's view of the author, will always impact on our reading of her work'. According to Rushdie (1991, p. 19) this 'Binary of Insider/Outsider' (Majumdar, 2006) of South Asian Transnational authors can also enable a 'double-perspective' (perhaps a multiple-perspective) in which they can view the two (or more) environments.[16]

It appears to me that the globalisation of information technology, mobile communications and more accessible travel, for example, have altered the perception of migration as a dislocating and isolating experience. Social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, Skype, Facetime, WhatsApp, SMS and other chat apps enable real-time connection with others around the world. The current generation of migrants, generally speaking, have access to the kind of connection and communication which were not even dreamed of by earlier migrants. Modern technologies mean fewer migrants are now completely cut off from their family, friends and culture. Liu (*The Independent,* 28 June 2015), in reviewing de Kretser's novel *Questions of Travel,* describes how

> the internet impacts on both protagonists as their employer scrabbles to adapt to the digital age. Neat metaphors contrast real and virtual travel: 'Laura goes from one hyperlink to another while Ravi scrolls down a continuous story.' Travel confirms our solitude and technology compounds it.

On the other side of the coin, information and communications technologies, film and television, as well as a more mobile population in Australia, also influence and have an effect on Australian's perceptions of South Asia.

The interest in South Asia and South Asian writers also occurred because contemporary Australians are comfortable with travel and interacting with people in other places. 'There is indeed a confident sense of writing in the framework of 'a home-grown literature' among contemporary Australian novelists. But there is also a sense—simultaneously registered in Coetzee's novel – that departure and travel and a dialogue with other places is just as important' (Gelder, Ken and Salzman, Paul, 2009, p7, Introduction).

Writers have the option to publish on blogs, websites and in ebook form; and to self-promote and distribute their work using the internet and social media (see also p. 37

[16] See also Chapter 4, Case Study, Yasmine Gooneratne.

and Chapter 3, pp. 43, 45). It is becoming possible for authors to exert greater personal control over how their identity and narratives are portrayed. Arjun Appadurai ('Moving targets', iii in Steven Vertovec, 1999, pp. 20, 21) comments that 'complex Transnational flows of media images and messages perhaps create the greatest disjunctures for diasporic populations, since in the electronic media in particular, the politics of desire and imagination are always in contest with the politics of heritage and nostalgia.'

How is the dynamic of writing and publishing South Asian–Australian fiction affected by globalism and digital media? Fiction by South Asian–Australian authors published in Australia has changed from diasporic writing with themes of liminality, nostalgia and impermanence – in the sense of a yearning to return to the homeland – to writing cosmopolitan or global narratives that include wider themes with expanded temporal and spatial horizons, as described by Susheila Nasta (2004, pp. 92–101), and as is evident in the novels: *After Love* (Jaireth, 2012); *There, Where the Pepper Grows* (Le Hunte, 2005); *Questions of Travel* (de Kretser, 2012) and others. Le Hunte, at the Australian Indian Literatures International Forum, warned about the danger of fossilised memories of 'home' resulting from nostalgia for India. Paranjape (in Amit Shankar Saha, 2009) notes that:

> Instead of worshipping the leftovers and relics of a now inaccessible homeland as the old diaspora of indentured labourers did, the new diaspora of international Indian English writers live close to their market, in the comforts of the suburbia of advanced capital but draw their raw material from the inexhaustible imaginative resources of that messy and disorderly subcontinent that is India.

The third book in the series of Indo-Australian story collections which Dr Meenakshi Bharat and I co-edited and published in Australia and in India, *Only Connect* (Rundle and Bharat 2014), has the timely theme of 'technology and us'. The stories reveal the way in which digital technology and communications have altered our world for better or worse. Some of the stories – such as 'Sneha 24' by Janhavi Acharekar and 'No Man No Woman No Cry' by Devika Brendon – involve false identities created in cyberspace for the purpose of deception. They reflect on how the internet and Web 2.0 technology has opened up another opportunity to explore, create and manipulate identity. Do new modern technologies offer alternatives to traditional means of publishing? Digital and

mobile technology have had an impact on the publishing scene with the arrival of Amazon, Kindle, Kobi, iBooks and others involved in digital publishing. Digital technology also provides the means for more independent and self-publishing to occur. Despite this new digital publishing technology and the risk it presents as a nascent industry, authors are beginning to take ownership of publishing and exploring alternatives to traditional print-based publishing. Authors are exploring 'author portals', as explained below, and publishing with partners such as CreateSpace, Amazon, Apple iBooks, and other emerging electronic and digital publishers, where they pay for the services needed and publish online. Two instances where digital publishing has been taken further by innovative authors are described here.

Author portals are opening up such as The Author People set up by Lou Johnson, former managing director at Simon & Schuster, and the Wuthering Ink initiative. Le Hunte has teamed up with Australian author Sue Woolfe to create a web portal for authors called Wuthering Ink, which claims to be the 'first author-designed, author-run portal that only sells the books of established authors' at <http://www.wutheringink.com/BookStore/pagedisplay.do?pub=authors>.

Le Hunte said in our interview[17] that:

> Besides, the two novels, I've published using the digital publishing route. That's very exciting. A couple of years ago a group of us got together [to discuss how to make the] digital revolution work for writers because the publishers don't seem to be on top of what's happening; all the writers are losing their advances so it's become less feasible to go through a publisher, publishers now want all their rights forever because they can print on demand one book at a time. You used to have your rights returned if they didn't do a print run of minimum .... so the stakes are very high for writers at this time – and the opportunities as well are high. so we got together and a group of us called ourselves the 'royalties' because we were all about collecting more royalties. We've got a big company in India that's doing all the back-end development for us. Writers can upload their own work, such as to Amazon, covers can be designed by us or if they need editors, lots of authors need editors.

[17] Please see Appendix 1 for interview dates and places.

As publisher Laura commented, 'There's some really interesting experimentation going on in the digital sphere – the world has changed – so it's an interesting moment for you to be doing this because if you're looking at the last ten years – you've got sort of five years that were relatively stable and then the beginning of this very significant change in the whole way the industry operates.'

Susan Wyndham (2016), Literary Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald***,** said, 'Not all new publishing ventures survive, of course. Pan Macmillan Australia has cut back its digital-only publishing arm. Momentum began in 2011 as a self-contained imprint with a staff of three who published up to 100 new titles a year. But digital publishing has become standard practice and also plateaued in growth, with print books back in fashion. Momentum publisher Joel Naoum has left the company and Macmillan fiction editor Haylee Nash will manage "a significantly small list" of digital books.'

In August 2015, I was invited to join a new 'literary Party Initiative' by Gooneratne. This initiative is designed to circumvent publishers by using technology to distribute books in PDF form, by an invitation from the author which gives a password for access. It will be interesting to follow the progress of these new literary publishing initiatives. Comments from those sent this novel so far range from 'a very generous act' to 'it is more difficult for emerging writers to share their work without payment of any kind.' So, digital publishing is enabling authors to exert more control over their image, as well as design, production and distribution of their novels and their platform as an author. From the responses from my participants, most would prefer to publish their novels in print form with a recognised Australian publisher.

In this chapter, I have looked at the history of publication of fiction and the place of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors within that fiction. I have briefly touched on the possibilities of digital publishing and author portals for authors writing novels. I have discussed the impact of government policies and interventions on the field of literature generally and, specifically, fiction by Australian authors and South Asian–Australian authors. I have shown that despite the challenges involved in publishing novels in Australia, the outlook is optimistic and the number of novels written by South Asian-Australia authors that are published in Australia are increasing.

3. South Asian–Australian authors published in Australia

Background to cultural production of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors,1990–2009

In this chapter, I provide evidence of South Asian–Australian novelists publishing in Australia, the background to local cultural production of such novels and the current situation of South Asian–Australian authors published in Australia. This chapter is followed by a chapter with case studies of four Sri Lankan–Australian authors.

Nineteen ninety-one marks the beginning of recorded novels published in Australia by South Asian–Australian authors, interestingly just after the inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora* was published. That year, Yasmine Gooneratne published *A Change of Skies* (Pan Macmillan, Australia) which was short-listed for the 1991 Commonwealth Writers Prize and won the 1992 Marjorie Barnard Literary Award for Fiction. Sharrad (2010) points to Gooneratne as 'the first notable South Asian to be accorded hyphenated Australian identity'.[18]

According to Sunil Govinnage, Gooneratne is the pathfinder of writing about the Sri Lankan diaspora in Australia[19]:

> When Yasmine Gooneratne published *A Change of Skies* in 1991, she also established a tradition of representing the Sri Lankan diaspora in the Australian literary scene. This is a key issue that many of the critics who have evaluated Gooneratne's work have tended to overlook. (Chandrarathne, 2011)

This appears to be true according to the data and the available literature I have studied. Following the success of Gooneratne's novel *A Change of Skies* in 1991, Christopher Cyrill's *Hymns for the Drowning* was published by Allen & Unwin in 1993. Publication of this novel coincided with the Australia Council (formerly the Commonwealth Literary Fund) and Office for Multicultural Affairs succeeding, in 1993, with a Plan for

[18] ['with the exception of Mena Abdullah' – who co-wrote a book of autobiographical short stories with Ray Mathews which was published in 1965 but has not written a novel, See Appendix 2].
[19] See Chapter 4, Case Study for biographical details.

Cultural Heritage Institutions to Reflect Australia's Cultural Diversity, and a set of NAMA Guidelines endorsed by the Cultural Ministers Council (Gunew, 2004).

A year later, in 1994, the illuminating 'Demidenko Affair' unfolded, when Helen Darville or Dale convinced the literary establishment that her book *The Hand that Signed the Paper* was written from personal family experience by an author named Helen Demidenko who was supposedly the daughter of a Ukrainian taxi driver, but was in fact the daughter of English migrants. Darville's hoax on literary experts – the book was awarded the 1994 Miles Franklin Award – reignited heated debate about multicultural literature (Raschke 2005, p. 128; Nile and Ensor, pp. 528, 531). Ommundsen claims that 'The debate was silenced, and it became difficult to argue for multiculturalism and ethnic or racial difference as distinct qualities enhancing the literary experience'. The impact of Darville's hoax affected government lexicography: according to Broinowski (2011) the word 'multicultural' virtually disappeared during the years of the Howard government. 'Boucher and Sharpe have shown how under Howard multiculturalism became officially unmentionable in Australia, and his approved national code permeated historical, literary and cultural studies' (Broinowski, 2011). No doubt other elements were involved in the debate about the use of the word multicultural but literature studies point to the 'Demidenko Affair' as the catalyst (Raschke, Ommundsen, Nile and Ensor, Broinowski). Nonetheless, the scandal and its effect started debates in literary circles about 'ethnic authenticity' and 'cultural appropriation' which continue to this day. According to Broinowski (2011), 'Asian studies were downgraded and Australian fiction of Asia withered. Asian names virtually disappeared from the lists of literary prize-winners and festival speakers' lists.'

The following books, in loosely chronological order, by South Asian–Australian novelists demonstrate a continual output of novels published in Australia from 1994 onwards. That year marked the first of five published novels by Adib Khan. His first *Seasonal Adjustment,* won the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction; the 1994 Book of the Year award in the NSW Premier′s Literary Awards; the 1995 Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best First Book award; and was short-listed for the 1994 *Age* Book of the Year award. It was judged a success in literary circles. Khan's second novel, *Solitude of Illusions,* was short-listed for the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction and the 1997 Ethnic Affairs Commission Award in the NSW Premier′s Literary Awards; and won the 1997 Tilly Aston Braille Book of the Year Award.

Peres da Costa authored the bestselling novel *Homework*, which was first published by Bloomsbury in 1999 (Broinowski 2002, p. 27) and distributed in Australia by Allen & Unwin.

During the same year, Cyrill's *The Ganges and its Tributaries* (1999) was released by Allen & Unwin.

Michelle de Kretser published her first novel in Australia, *The Rose Grower* (1999), written during unpaid leave as an editor with Lonely Planet. Her second novel, *The Hamilton Case* (2003), was a notable success published by Random House in Australia, Chatto and Windus in the UK and Little, Brown in the USA – and was included in the *New York Times Book Review*'s list of Notable Books for 2004 (Gelder, Ken and Salzman, Paul, 2009, p. 4). It won the Tasmania Pacific Prize, the Encore Award (UK) and the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Southeast Asia and Pacific). Her third novel, *The Lost Dog* (2008), performed even more strongly. It was one of thirteen books on the 2008 Man Booker Prize for fiction long list and won the Christina Stead Prize for fiction 2008.

Bem Le Hunte is author of two novels published by HarperCollins Australia: *The Seduction of Silence* (2000) also published in the US by Harper San Francisco in 2004, which was short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2001, and *There where the Pepper Grows (*2006). Le Hunte's novels were widely reviewed in Australia.

Chandani Lokugé published two of her three novels at this time, *If the Moon Smiled* (Penguin Australia 2000, Penguin India 2000, Greek translation, Konidaris, 2001), which was short-listed for New South Wales Premier's Prize for Best Book in 2001; *Turtle Nest* (Penguin Australia, 2003/Penguin India).

Shalini Akhil is a Melbourne writer whose first novel, *The Bollywood Beauty*, was published by Penguin (2005), and she is currently working on her second. The unpublished manuscript of *The Bollywood Beauty* was short-listed for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards.

Azhar Abidi's first novel *Passarola Rising* (Viking Penguin, 2006), was followed by *Twilight* (Text Publishing, 2008).

Adib Khan's latest novel is *Spiral Road* HarperCollins Australia (2007).[20]

[20] See also Appendix 2 for Adib Khan biographical details.

Having established the authors and novels published, it is time to look at the publishers who are involved. Small-press niche publishers, such as Ginninderra Press and Giramondo Press, have published fiction by Australian–South Asian writers.

Brass Monkey Books is based in Melbourne and run by publisher Kabita Dhara. Dhara has given several interviews to the press about her venture into publishing (predominantly) South Asian fiction. Before starting her own publishing company, Dhara worked with 'multinational publisher Macmillan learning how they assess the suitability of titles from overseas markets for the Indian market and the channels of distribution available to international publishers' (2009). She worked on English translations from the many and varied regional languages in India with the aim of 'understanding the processes behind choosing a title for translation and assessing markets for it' (2009). She has also worked for Melbourne University Press and Readings Books.

Dhara was in India when the reports of violence against Indians in Melbourne and other parts of Australia appeared in the media and she had a difficult time answering questions about it.

> As an Australian of Indian heritage, this divide saddens me, and I think that trying to forge a better relationship through words and stories (directly, and not through a third country like the UK or the US) is my way of fighting what I see as a current weakening in the Australia-India relationship. (2009)

Dhara believes that more direct access between Indian and Australian writers, publishers and readers is 'deserved' and would make a difference. Even so, it was a risky venture. The first years for Brass Monkey Books were a struggle, financially. It was not eligible for grant money until it had released five publications. Also, it would only be eligible for grant money if a publication had Australian content as well as Indian content, so publishing individual works by Indian writers was difficult.

It is not only Australian attitudes that affect the Australian book market. It is influenced to an extent by the overseas book market. Books published overseas which strike a chord, or hit a nerve or catch the zeitgeist, whatever the catchy public relations term is in vogue, undoubtedly influence readers, booksellers and publishers. Cases in point are *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie (1980); *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry (1996); and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (Harper Collins London

1997). Ruby, one of the authors I interviewed, explained how the sensation caused by publication of *The God of Small Things* helped to change attitudes to South Asian writers here. HarperCollins in Australia, for example, started an 'Asian section in their list' around that time. Publishers became interested in writers from the Indian subcontinent.

> They gave me some promotion material, including a flyer that they'd done for *God of Small Things* and for another book for Rory Pilgrim who had published a book called *Fish of the Seto Inland Sea*. I was so amazed that Rory had written the book and that Harper Collins had published it and they were promoting it as part of their Asian section of their list, and I think they were really interested in that time.

On the other hand, the acclaimed novel *Homework* by Peres de Costa, which has elements of magical realism and surrealism reminiscent of Rushdie and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, was first published in the USA. Broinowski (2002, p. 27) highlights the novel as: 'A widely-noticed novel, [which] combines some of the surrealism of other Asian Australian fiction with a refreshing capacity for satire, both of a Catholic migrant family from Goa and of the Australian scene'. *Homework* was heavily promoted by Bloomsbury, with a mass-media campaign spruiking this 'coming of age story about the middle daughter in a Portuguese Goan family relocated to Australia', according to an interview with Waldren (2011) in *Literary Liaisons*. Peres da Costa's Fulbright Scholarship may have put her in a viable position for publication in the US, but one is left to wonder why she was not first published in Australia? Further into the Waldren interview, she is quoted as saying that she called Tifanny Richards at literary agency Janklow and Nesbitt: 'We had lunch, I gave her my manuscript and she called the next week when I was back in Sydney to say she loved it and wanted to represent me. Which she did, and the Bloomsbury deal is the result.' Which is doubly fortunate because it dovetailed with her determination 'that it not be published here in Australia. Even though it is set in a Sydney suburb, its coordinates and being are international and "expatriated". And I desperately wanted to avoid being ghettoised as a local migrant author. I felt having a publishing contract that began overseas might help that.' This comment from Peres da Costa is illuminating because it offers an insight into the drawbacks of publishing first in Australia.

The experience of writing and publishing novels by three South Asian–Australian authors is further discussed in Chapter 4: Three case studies.

The significance of contemporary South Asian–Australian fiction

The significance of novels in the Australian publishing industry has been discussed in the introduction to this exegesis; see p. 3. Fiction by South Asian–Australian writers is published in literary journals such as *Southerly India India* issue 70:3[21]; anthologies such as *Of Sadhus and Spinners: Australian Encounters with India*, 2009, Bennett, Bruce; Cowan, Susan and Sareen, Santosh K. (eds.); and by Sharon Rundle and Meenakshi Bharat (eds.; 2010, 2012 and 2014), cited in Sharrad (2011, p. 32).

Gooneratne argues in her essay, 'Fabricated Stereotypes: Asian in the Australian Imagination' (Sarwal and Sarwal, 2009), that 'the prospects for growth in Australian literature arising out of an improved knowledge of Asia and an understanding of Asian literary traditions, are better now than they were in earlier years, and are improving every day'. According to Sharrad (2009) in Sarwal and Sarwal, *Reading Down Under*, 'Connections have been steadily building towards a new component of Australian literary multiculturalism that is re-defining the 'Asian' in our hyphenated 'Asian-Australian' label away from East and Southeast Asian'. Sharrad (2011) encourages us to 'move beyond the nation-bound framework' to compare how the 'Indian connection' in Australia is 'matched by an Australian connection in India'. Athique (2006), who has researched the content of South Asian–Australian fiction published in Australia in her thesis *Textual Migrations*, recommends more research into the local cultural production of South Asian–Australian fiction: 'Given the prominence of South Asian diasporic fiction overseas, the study of South Asian–Australian fiction is now overdue. Given the growing recognition of multicultural and Asian-Australian literatures, the study of South Asian–Australian cultural production now requires attention.'

As Sukhmani Khorana said[22], 'we have started creating the conditions for such talent to emerge, and for it to be nurtured'. Gooneratne has been favourably compared

[21] See p56
[22] See p. 51.

to Lahiri and to Maxim Gorky.[23] Le Hunte, too, caused a 'literary sensation', according to her publisher, with the release of *The Seduction of Solitude* (2000), short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2001, and *There where the Pepper Grows (*2006), both published by HarperCollins Australia. Le Hunte's novels have been widely reviewed in Australia. A sample of her book reviews is on her website. *The Seduction of Silence* was also published in the US by Harper San Francisco in 2004. Now, as mentioned, de Kretser has won the most prestigious Australia literary accolade, the Miles Franklin Award, in 2013, in addition to several other literary awards including the NSW Premier's Best Book Prize and the Prime Minister's Award.

As Broinowski (2011, p. 9) argues, 'It is now quite common for Asian Australian writers of fiction also to be academics, with PhDs, teaching creative writing or other disciplines. So, they have opportunities to inject their values into academic scholarship, alongside their fiction which can itself become the subject of teaching and research.'

The question remains of where fiction by South Asian–Australian authors fits into the overall contemporary Australian literary scene. Broinowski (2011) produced fiction publishing statistics from the AustLit database to show that fifty-five Australian-Asian fiction titles were published between 2000 and 2009, of which thirty were by Asian-Australians. Titles published and recorded on the AustLit database between 1999 and 2009 show that at least twenty-four novels were written by South Asian–Australian authors.

Tseenster blog[24] lists women of 'Asian descent who are based in Australia' who have published books, mostly novels. This list was set up in response to a request by Elizabeth Lhuede for names of 'Australian women writers of diverse backgrounds for the Australian Women Writers 2012 challenge'. At the time of writing, the list is incomplete and ongoing. Khoo encourages additions to the list. Australian–South Asian women writers included are Michelle de Kretser, Yasmine Gooneratne, Chandani Lokugé, Shalini Akhil and Suneeta Peres Da Costa. The first two of these authors provide case studies for my exegesis (see Chapter 4).

[23] See p. 66.

[24] Tseenster blog (March 2012) was started by Dr Tseen Khoo, 'research fellow and developer at RMIT's College of Business (Melbourne, Australia); founder of national research network (AASRN); convenor for the Asian Australian Studies Research Network, and recently on organising committees for the 4th Biennial AASRN conference; University of Melbourne and the Asian Australian Film Forum, Melbourne; creator and contributor with colleague, Jonathan O'Donnell of *The Research Whisperer'*.

As well as market forces in play in Australia and abroad, funding programs and literary awards have a role in supporting both established and emerging authors.[25] All of the South Asian–Australian authors who participated in my research had received support to write their works of fiction, during these years, in the form of grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council (Australia Council, 2013), State Arts funding bodies and from private philanthropic institutions, such as Arts Victoria, Ian Potter and Myer Foundations. Many South Asian–Australian authors received literary awards including, between them all, the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards; NSW Premier's Prize; Commonwealth Writers Prize Southeast Asia and Pacific region; The Encore Award; Australian Writers Guild Award; Australian Vogel Literary Awards; Christina Stead Prize for fiction; *Age* Book of the Year award; Man Booker Prize; Prime Minister's Award; and The Miles Franklin Award.

Allen & Unwin, HarperCollins Australia Limited, Brass Monkey Books, Giramondo Publishing, Pantera Press and Penguin Australia have been the main players in publishing fiction by South Asian–Australian writers. Small press niche publishers, such as Transit Lounge and Ginninderra Press, have published fiction by Australian–South Asian writers. Brass Monkey Books specialises in South Asian fiction.[26]

The main indicator for publishers and booksellers is sales figures. For a first book, sales figures usually impact on whether writers are able to go on to publish a second and third book, and beyond that. The prospects for fiction by South Asian–Australian authors in Australia depend on a number of market-driven factors as well as policies in the overall book publishing industry. It is a competitive industry, particularly in the area of fiction. The major publishers tend to stick to known authors and celebrities who already have a high profile – though they are always alert for 'new talent'. Choosing an independent publisher can be an effective way to make a start in the Australian publishing industry.

Self-publishing, while giving more control over the publishing process, comes with its own problems such as finding a distributor, without whom it is very difficult to sell the book, and to get the titles into the catalogues for booksellers. Booksellers are wary of taking books except through established distributors. Self-publishing electronically can mean giving over control and copyright of your work to some of the

[25] See Interventions in Chapter 2, p. 26.
[26] See Chapter 2, Figure 5, p. 23.

major e-publishers, which can be one of the pitfalls – copyright and territorial rights should be checked very carefully. However, this can be a way of publishing a book if the author is skilled at promotion of their work, has a platform and has strategies for marketing. While there are always the exceptions that strongly connect with readers and prove viable, it is more likely that the book is simply competing with thousands of other self-published ebooks. (See also Figure 5, p. 23 and p. 36.)

From my research, an encouraging picture emerged of novels written by South Asian–Australian authors and published in Australia, as can be seen from the graphs in Chapter 2 and the novels listed earlier in this chapter. Some authors might resist being tagged with what they perceive as a simplistic label, what Badami (2008) calls the 'Professional Indian' tag; nonetheless, highlighting identity as a point of difference *as well as* promoting the 'topical and familiar issues' in the narratives that appeal to and engage readers, as Lazaroo suggests, is a persuasive combination and an asset to authors in a highly competitive industry. If authors establish early in their careers a 'platform' or 'point of difference' that will lift their profile in the publishing industry, they may find they have more control of how their identity is portrayed. So, their decisions to identify themselves as 'ethnic' and 'global' and where they locate themselves in relation to Australia indicate the increasing complexity of the genre.

Establishing a 'platform' or point of difference that raises the author's profile and book above others submitting manuscripts is one of the keys to success in publishing fiction in Australia, whether it is e-publishing or print form. Publishers want to know a) why people will want to read the book; b) what makes this book stand out from all the other book manuscripts submitted; c) what makes the author stand out from the crowd; d) what is it about the profile of the author that will generate the public's interest in author and book. A platform for an author means creating a community of readers by responding to readers' questions and comments; it is about being generous with their time. According to Jane Friedman, who teaches digital media and publishing at the University of Virginia, building a platform as an author: is not about bringing attention to yourself, or by screaming to everyone you can find online or offline, "Look at me! Look at me!" Platform isn't about who yells the loudest or who markets the best'. It means:

- Visibility. Who knows you? Who is aware of your work? Where does your work regularly appear? How many people see it? How does it spread? Where

does it spread? What communities are you a part of? Who do you influence? Where do you make waves?

- Authority. What's your credibility? What are your credentials?
- Proven reach. Show where you make an impact and give proof of engagement.
- Target audience. You should be visible to the most receptive or appropriate audience for the work you're trying to sell.

Valerie Khoo, a former UTS student and now owner/operator of the Australian Writers Centre, spoke on a panel in Sydney run by the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators in September 2016. Her paper was about the importance of building your author platform and creating a brand for yourself as an author. Khoo said she had received

> calls from people looking for a mentor to help them build their own author platform. Clearly, this is a hot topic right now. Whether you're a fiction or non-fiction author, having an author platform is now an essential part of your career. After all, you might write like an angel, but that won't matter if people don't know about you**.** In fact, anyone who tells you that they don't bother building their own platform probably already has some kind of profile!

The Australian Writers Centre has a step-by-step blueprint on exactly how to go about it, with a link on its website.

Creating a platform means becoming a 'known quantity', someone who has an established readership (i.e. a blog) or a following that is likely to turn into a readership. This allows publishers to assess the risk in publishing a book: will the sales outweigh the costs? One recent example is radio and television presenter Andy Lee, who published a children's storybook, *Do Not Open This Book,* and sold 40,000 copies overnight. Meanwhile his sister Alex Miles, writing as children's book author H I Larry, has not had this experience. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald* Report on September 9, 2016, *Do Not Open This Book* has been sold into Iceland, China, USA, Germany, Croatia and Britain and will be taken to the Frankfurt Book Fair next month. Booktopia's chief book buyer John Purcell said, 'Having a high-profile author was an added bonus.' If an author has a profile that makes them a known quantity, then that translates into book sales.

Le Hunte, for example, writes very strong family stories with a lot of action. One of the things she does extremely well is straddle both cultures. Her publisher sees her as 'a real East meets West writer, who can introduce someone from a Western background to Indian spirituality – in a generous and easy way. Without devaluing the spirituality'. That has become her platform; it is part of her appeal to publishers and readers. 'Every writer is straitjacketed to a certain extent. We promoted Adib Khan as an "exotic" writer,' his publisher, Laura, said.[27] According to publisher Ben:

> The emphasis should be on the quality of writing as well as cultural background and I hope we would always strive to do both. South East Asian and South Asian Australian writers are often expected to write about their homeland in a way that Anglo-Australian writers are not.

Malcolm Knox (2005) claims that:

> What it means for the book is that it must be hyped, it must have some 'platform' …, to shunt it above the crowd. The author must have a saleable persona. A good Australian example is Greg, author of Shantaram (2003), who guaranteed his own publicity by being an escaped prisoner who smuggled arms and worked in Bollywood and based his novel on his life. The fiction was marketed, unashamedly, as if it were non-fiction. But that's what it takes.

Shantaram (2003) has been described as the imposition of 'Western sensibility on Asia' and 'an arena for white male questing and self-fulfilment' (Robin Gerster, 2009, p. 320). Nonetheless, due to the publicity and promotion it reached 'blockbuster' status, according to the media. Consistently ranking in bestselling and popular book lists, '*Shantaram* is a publishing enigma, and so is its author Gregory David Roberts – who took the extraordinary step of insisting his new book cover should have a symbol instead of his name and the title, *The Mountain Shadow,*' John Purcell (*Booktopia Newsletter*, September 2015). This appears to be an extension of his marketing platform, a way of making himself and his books distinct from others in the market. This is not suggesting that authors should take to a life of crime or notoriety to establish that point of difference that publishers and readers seek; nonetheless there are strategies that might make a difference for authors. Pitching fiction manuscripts to prestige

[27] See p. 33.

imprints, niche sections of midsize publishers and independent literary publishers may increase the chances of publication (Carter and Galligan, 2007). As publisher Laura revealed: 'There weren't many manuscripts coming on the desk by authors of Indian background, it was as simple as that. It may well be to do with the percentage of Indian writers in the population here.'[28]

Sukhmani Khorana, in her address at the Gondwanalandings Conference (2013) in Melbourne in September, 2013, said:

> On the surface, the Indian diaspora looms large in the imagination of not just persons of Indian origin, but also of non-Indians who have been exposed to the 'soft power' of India-based or Indian-inspired literature, film, and other creative arts. You have only to scan the short lists of the English-speaking world's major literary prizes, or the programs of renowned international film festivals to get a sense of the cultural capital of India and its diaspora. However, Indians living in Australia are only beginning to gain critical mass and have a significant cultural and political voice in the wider community.

Writing genre or popular fiction may be an advantageous path (Bode, 2012), keeping in mind that it would mean carving a niche in an already crowded field of established authors. Laura stated that: 'With popular genre you have mark out your territory and the bar is set for you'. Gentill, as mentioned, is one South Asian–Australian author who has produced a series of seven crime novels and has recently been appointed an Eminent Writer in Residence Fellowship at the Museum of Australian Democracy.

The 'pitch' to publishers is crucial. Publishers and readers seek that 'point of difference' that makes an author stand out from the crowd. The way in which authors are portrayed in the promotion of their books, however, should be a matter of choice for the author. It is therefore important for an author to establish their professional platform early on in their writing career. This may need self-awareness, individuation and identification of personal idiom and voice. Publishers, naturally, have a significant impact in the decision process about what is published in Australia and these days it is often the marketing team who make the final decisions about what will be published, estimated on the potential sales and profit. If as, Broinowski (2011 pp.1–2) posits, publishers are 'now wary of publishing any book that won't sell at least 7500 copies,

[28] See p. 30.

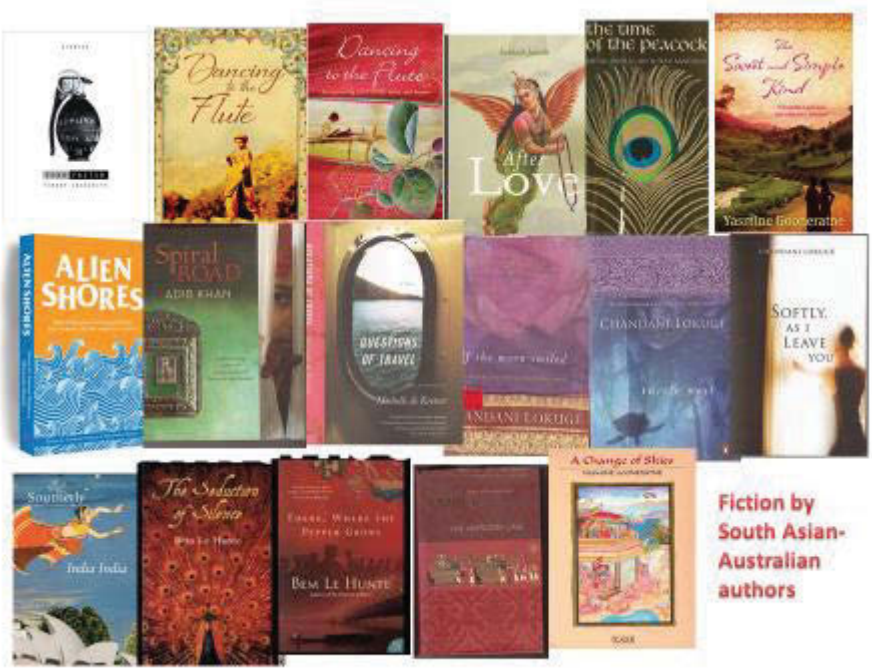
and that usually means finding an overseas market, which eliminates most Australian fiction', that will have wide implications for the fiction market for books in general, and may affect the categories that are published. When publishers refer to 'an overseas market' they usually mean the US, Europe and the UK because of their book-buying capacity.

Judging a book by its cover

At the Australia-India Literature Internationals Forum held at the NSW State Library in 2012, Kabita Dhara, publisher at Brass Monkey Books, said that she avoids 'peacocks, henna patterns, sepia tints and paisley borders that look like the edge of a sari' on the covers for novels. Another author, Ruby, on the other hand, remarked that she has no problem with Indian motifs and artwork on the covers of her novels because she has great appreciation for Indian art. 'I'm a real fan of design intensity, I love vibrant colours. They always go for reds because they know I love reds, my house is red, my upstairs room is red and so I don't mind I am Indian by design.' While Lokugé remarked that:

> the first and second one had the 'sari border'. The last one, *Softly, as I Leave You,* is a very mainstream cover. It's white and brown, with a woman just looking out into the light. So, the style of cover has changed, even for myself. I had a say in all three covers so the first one I was very happy with the sari border because I was ethnic, at that time, I think. But now, it's a mix of experiences, so to go with the exotic is not, for me, the most important thing. It depends on the readers, as well.[29]

[29] See also Chapter 4, Case Study.



A selection of book covers for fiction by South Asian–Australian authors.

Publisher Laura remarked that choosing a book cover means that 'while we want to present something fresh, it means putting yourself in the mind of a book buyer' looking at a row of titles in a bookshop, for example. 'What's going to communicate with them in that nano-second of attention? A peacock might be cliché but it sends a signal. That's the pragmatic side of it.' Books rise or sink based on sales, which are generated by marketing and publicity; and are therefore categorised and labelled or 'branded'.

Publisher Ben responded: 'Each book is treated differently and with sensitivity to the content but 'place' can be a big selling point with interest in China and India, in particular, at an all-time high. For example, *After Love* by Subhash Jaireth is set in Russia and Europe as well as India but the latter is emphasised in the cover art.'

Gooneratne was especially happy with both publishers' attitude to cover design. Jane Palfreyman at PanMacmillan was particularly imaginative in obtaining a cover design from the Australian artist Bill Wood for *A Change of Skies* that was inspired by an Indian miniature painting at the V & A Museum in London, which echoed the themes of the book. Gentill 'had a lot of input' into her covers. 'I had a lot of input into things that writers aren't usually consulted about. That, to me, was attractive.'

De Kretser discussed her experience with the book cover for *The Hamilton Case* with Barry Scott (2004, p. 106):

> With the Australian edition, Random House wanted it to be a beautiful object in itself and didn't want to go for a naturalistic look. They were so patient and went through many attempts to get it right. They tried the image of a house for instance. I think one of the things is that Australian designers have difficulty in envisaging something that is grand but crumbling, old and decrepit. The designers would either come up with things that looked like they should be in Vogue interiors, all sort of gloomy stucco and marble, or else it was like a sort of beach shack. I am so pleased with what they came up with in the end.

From the research into this area, we can see how the publication of novels by South Asian–Australian authors has developed over the past two decades. We have looked at the novels which have been published, and the way in which fiction by South Asian–Australian authors is produced, marketed and promoted; as well as the importance of an author platform to market novels. This chapter has explored how novels by South Asian–Australian authors fit into the overall publishing industry that was discussed in Chapter 2.

Contemporary fiction by South Asian–Australian authors, 2010–14[30]

Where does a category of South Asian–Australian fiction fit into the contemporary Australian literary scene? How is it perceived and who is the intended audience? As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Australian book market is influenced by the wider global publishing industry with its massive marketing machines. It is influenced by global fashion in literature in much the same way as fashion in other areas. According to author Ruby and publisher Laura, the international release of Roy's bestselling novel in 1997 was a pivotal time in publishing fiction by South Asian

[30] N.b.: Text drawn from this chapter formed part of my presentation at Gondwanalandings: Voices of the Emerging Indian Diaspora in Australia, Australia India Institute Flagship Event, 2013, University of Melbourne and State Library of Victoria. September 26–27, 2013.] Other parts of this chapter formed an essay for the Indian Association for the Study of Australia (IASA) 2016 Biennial Conference in Delhi, India.

diasporic authors. *The God of Small Things* was surrounded by a great deal of hype, media interviews, literary and academic discussion.

From the small sample of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors represented in my study, the main players in publishing fiction by South Asian–Australian writers seem to be Allen & Unwin, HarperCollins Australia Limited, Penguin Australia and Pantera Press.[31] Novels by South Asian–Australian authors are not categorised as 'South Asian–Australian' as such, but are usually listed in the 'Australian Literature' or 'Australian Fiction' category.

Eighteen novels by South Asian–Australian authors were released by Australian publishers between 2010 and 2015[32]:

- 2010. *The Sweet and Simple Kind,* subtitled *A Novel of Sri Lanka*, Yasmine Gooneratne (Hachette Australia); short-listed for the 2007 Commonwealth Writers Prize
- 2011. *Softly, As I Leave You*, Lokugé, (Australian Scholarly)[33]
- 2011. *Last Man in Tower,* Adiga (Atlantic/Allen & Unwin)
- 2011. *A Few Right Thinking Men,* Sulari Gentill (Pantera Press); the first in a series of seven detective crime novels titled *The Rowland Sinclair Mystery Series*, set in Australia in the 1930s. Short-listed for the 2011 Commonwealth Prize for a first book. Gentill has also published three fantasy genre novels, *Chasing Odysseus* (2011), *Trying War* (2012), and *The Blood of Wolves* (2012)
- 2012. *After Love* by Subhash Jaireth (TransitLounge)
- 2012. *Dancing to the Flute*, Manisha Amin (Allen & Unwin)
- 2012. *Questions of Travel,* Michelle de Kretser (Allen & Unwin); much acclaimed
- 2014. *Springtime*, Michelle de Kretser (Allen & Unwin)
- 2014. *Saree*, Su Dharmapala (Simon and Schuster)
- 2014. *Asylum*, Wickremesekera (Palaver)
- 2015. *Give the Devil his Due,* Sulari Gentill (Pantera Press); Gentill's seventh novel

[31] Figure 3, p. 21.
[32] See p. 22.
[33] See also Appendix 2.

- 2015. *The Burning Elephant*, Christopher Raja (Giramondo)

Each of the participating authors whom I interviewed is working on their next novel.

South Asian–Australian authors with ties to the many regions of the Indian subcontinent continue to be published by mainstream publishers in Australia, a feat in itself these days when publishers claim to receive hundreds of manuscript submissions and there is intense competition. South Asian–Australian authors are winning major literary awards, as well as receiving competitive literary grants and fellowships to support their writing from the Literature Board of the Australia Council and other government and philanthropic institutions. As the South Asian–Australian population continues to grow (Citizenship, AGDIBP, 2013; ADIBP, 2013), it is probable that the market for South Asian–Australian fiction will grow with it. As established South Asian–Australian authors continue to have their books published, favourably reviewed and critically acclaimed, more aspiring writers will be encouraged to pitch their books to publishers. As Ben explained:

> Success will really depend on the quality of the work. The unique perspectives on both Asian and Australian cultures, original perspectives and creative writing that ultimately rises above novelty value or 'standard' immigrant stories. Does the author have something new to say? The positive is that as Australians travel more to Asia they will want compelling books that relate to places other than Western cultures, and give a true (not just exotic) sense of culture and history in those places we increasingly begin to love and know.

While it is too early to confirm a trend or trajectory, publication of a novel in Australia is not an easy or a simple task even for the most talented writers, as Broinowski's (2011, pp. 1, 2) statistics show. The state of publishing in Australia is having an impact on emerging and newly established writers, according to Broinowski (2011, pp. 1, 2).[34] Carter (2009) is more optimistic when he writes that 'Almost certainly there are greater opportunities for a greater number of Australian writers than 20 or even 10 years ago', though he then qualifies his statement by adding that 'none of this guarantees careers, secure incomes, publication, reviews or a place in the bookstore' (p. 390).

[34] See also pp. 48, 53.

Authors such as Manisha Jolie Amin, Subhash Jaireth, Michelle Cahill, Christopher Raja, Rajith Savanadasa and Roanna Gonsalves are among those who are establishing themselves and their fiction in the Australian literary scene. The fiction works and reviews of contemporary South Asian–Australian writers are now regularly appearing in literary journals such as *Australian Book Review*, *Southerly, Meanjin, Mascara Literary Review* and others. In May 2011, the longest established literary journal, *Southerly,* published an *India* edition (7.3) which attracted so many contributions that it was not only much larger than the usual printed volumes, but also included a greater number of contributions published in the *Southerly 'Long Paddock'*, which has online content in addition to the printed issue.

As pointed out on pp. 16 and 17, statistics for sales of books published in Australia after the year 2000 are difficult to obtain, since the Australian Publishers Association passed the task to BookScan. David Walter from BookScan told me that they deal:

> … primarily with data on book sales rather than how many books are published in a particular genre or by a particular type of author. We do have a large bibliographic database (called BookData Online) which is searchable by country of publication and by the various BIC codes – however, I'm not sure that there are specific BIC codes to represent Australian Asian fiction, and I'm certain that there is no information held about the ethnicity of authors. I therefore think it would be very difficult to identify the set of titles that you would need to look at.

For the most part then, mainstream Australian publishers put Australian–South Asian fiction in the general 'Australian fiction' or 'Australian literary fiction' category, which is possibly as it should be in that there is no discrimination there in terms of 'being identity-boxed and ethnically-labelled' *(*Broinowski 2011, pp. 4, 5)*;* or is it possibly because the small number of works of fiction being published by South Asian–Australian fiction writers does not yet warrant a category of its own? The intended audience is the reading population in general and fiction in particular. If anything, it seems that any labelling is mostly aimed at the writer's identity rather than their work. Academic studies, though, do appear to have a category for fiction by South Asian–Australian authors, as evidenced by the work of Broinowski, Sharrad, Ommundsen, Athique, Khoo and others.

Market-driven factors as well as policies that affect the book publishing industry, however, will influence the number of books by South Asian–Australian authors that end up on book shop shelves. It will take time for fiction by South Asian–Australian authors to become prominent in Australia as it has in multicultural countries such as Canada with a much longer history of publishing fiction by migrant and minority writers, the USA and the UK – and for more South Asian–Australian authors of fiction to be recognised and published on the Indian subcontinent.

Now that the number of South Asians in Australia is beginning to gain what is often described as critical mass, as more migrate or come to Australia to study or on fellowships, so it follows that their influence is increasing. Greens MLC Dr Mehreen Faruqi (2014) is the first Pakistani-born Muslim woman and migrant to enter the Upper House of NSW State Parliament. The Hon Lisa Singh was elected to the Tasmanian House of Assembly. Indian media is prolific here, particularly in print journalism such as the *Indian Herald, Indian Link, South Asia Times* and the *Indian Telegraph* but also at SBS radio and television. The many Indian and South Asian associations, institutes and councils in Australia – such as the Australia-India Institute (AII), the Indian Association for the Study of Australia (IASA), the Australia-India Council (AIC) and AsiaLink – are listed on the Australian High Commission India website (http://india.highcommission.gov.au) and the Federation of Australian Indian Associations website. Indian writers and academics are proactive in organising conferences and seminars including the 2012 Australian Indian Literatures International Forum, organised by Mridula Nath Chakraborty and the University of Western Sydney, held at the NSW State Library; and the aforementioned Gondwanalandings: Voices of the Emerging Indian Diaspora in Australia (2013 Australia India Institute Flagship Event) held at the State Library of Victoria. Other thriving networks include the South Asian Studies Association of Australia; the South Asian Australian Writers Network; and Asia-Pacific Writers.

Lazaroo (2008) calls for ‘more publishers with reasonable marketing budgets and cultural sensitivity to give Asian-Australian literary writers of merit a go, but we also need more critics knowledgeable of the great diversity of Asian-Australian cultures to review those writers’ work in “mainstream” newspapers and magazines’. As Lokugé said,

> The themes are still timely and topical. Migration, relationships, difficult relationships, where are we all going? What's happening now with migration, the diaspora, this inability for people to settle with one culture, or with one person for that matter? A kind of restless mood, not always negative but certainly on the move. As against traditional cultures where you are rooted, which in itself … is a strength and support.

These short stories or narratives from the South Asian diaspora in Australia thus play an important role in promoting the Australian and South Asian connections by acting as a gathering of colourful perceptions, experiences and reflections. There is a continuous need to re-enter these narratives, not just for the purpose of making analyses, but also to provide the diaspora discourse with new continuities, visions, and issues in terms of transnationalism, multiculturalism, biculturalism, based on questions related to social, political, cultural and economic vis-à-vis a new issue, as proposed here, in terms of commercial-cultural benefits that are reaped by the immigrants both at homeland and hostland (Sarwal, 2015, p. 18).

Information and communications technology – the internet and World Wide Web – has had an impact.

External influences in literature, according to South Asian–Australian authors of fiction, came from global success of other diasporic Indian fiction in English: Salman Rushdie being awarded the Booker of Bookers in 1998; the publicity surrounding the release of Rohinton Mistry's book *A Fine Balance*; and Arundhati Roy's sensational novel *The God of Small Things*.[35] These events coincided with new interest and appreciation of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors in Australia. A contemporary version of *The God of Small Things* with all the surrounding publicity may again raise the profile of Indian literature, with a subsequent interest by Australian publishers in fiction by South Asian–Australian authors here; however, it is critical that Australia creates 'the conditions for such talent to emerge, and for it to be nurtured' (Khorana, 2013). This could be achieved by a mix of government policies that allow for strategies to encourage contemporary Transnational and Cosmopolitan fiction writing as mentioned on p. 27; specific or targeted grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council for authors and publishers of South Asian–Australian literary and

[35] See p. 45.

genre fiction; as well as continued support from philanthropic institutions. Publishers and Australian media could give wider promotion to the novels of South Asian–Australian authors to assist in creating a 'platform' that brings their novels into the spotlight.

Few South Asian–Australians are working in the publishing industry or in the Arts funding bureaucracy, especially in positions of power or authority. This situation is not confined to the Arts. According to Melissa Davey (2016):

> a landmark report [called *Capitalising on Culture: A study of cultural diversity amongst Australian senior executives and their immediate pipeline*] on cultural diversity in leadership authored by the race discrimination commissioner, Dr Tim Soutphommasane, in partnership with the University of Sydney Business School, Westpac, PwC and Telstra identified the cultural background of senior leaders within the public service, the federal parliament, the ASX 200 and universities, and then categorised them as Indigenous, Anglo-Celtic (those of British or Irish background), European (non Anglo-Celtic) or non-European ... Soutphommasane said: 'We still have a cultural and ethnic default in leadership in Australia and it's Anglo-Celtic.'

From our parliament to our public servants the culture is predominantly Anglo-Celtic. This means that the attitudes that influence and shape policy in the Arts do not reflect the diversity required for change, for other voices and stories to be heard.

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) has also released a report on Media Diversity (8 June 2016) that shows 'corporate and quasi-government cultural agencies may suddenly have woken up to the fact that Australia's media are, well, white' (UTS Communication and Cultural Diversity Research Colloquium: Jakubowicz, Ghosh, et al, 2016). The PwC report showed 82.7% of the Australians who work in the media are monolingual English speakers at home, and 'a lack of diversity is stunting the industry's growth and future'. This monocultural workforce is 'a problem across all areas of the entertainment industry'.

Another strategy to be seriously considered is increasing the number of South Asian–Australians in the Australian fiction industry, including training and internships for the roles of publishers, commissioning editors and literary agents. Some publishers,

however, admitted that the remuneration is not great and that the reason for choosing the book industry as a career was a love of literature. Karin said,

> I chose publishing because I wanted to work with books and writers. I freelanced and worked in bookstores for about six years before breaking into inhouse publishing. I wanted to be involved in the making of books, and I was very interested in editing in particular. I don't have the personality for academia, and my experience of an undergraduate and two postgraduate degrees made me feel that the environment just wasn't for me. The short answer is: a love of books and words made me go into publishing, but the poor pay does make me wonder, these days, if it is sustainable to stay in the business. If I had stayed working inhouse somewhere, and worked my way up to Publisher there, it wouldn't pay as well as academia, or be as secure (but is it really that secure these days?), but it would be enough.'[36]

There is a certain amount of prestige associated with being a publisher. Though I was told that there is not much power attached to working in publishing. For anyone working as an editor in a publishing house, there is hardly any sense of power until you make it to the top, and even then you don't influence what gets published, but that does differ from publisher to publisher. Decisions about which books are published are made by a publisher in consultation with the people in the marketing and accounting sector of a publishing house. So, I guess you must take into account what type of publishing job you are talking about – editorial or marketing, small publisher or big publisher or university publisher etc.'

If the role of publisher and editor are not highly paid, spare a thought for novelists who earn an average of $11,000 per annum. This, too, could affect an author's decision to write novels. Most authors supplement their income with teaching, speaking engagements, literary festival appearances, as well as journalism and reviewing books. The number of novels published by South Asian–Australian writers may yet be relatively few, however the books are receiving recognition and having an impact, and are winning literary awards.

According to Pilbrow (2016):

[36] See Appendix 1 for interview dates and places.

> Prescriptive reading lists that account for cultural diversity necessarily perforate insular and exclusive reading habits. I can only hope that students exposed to Adiga's novel will be more willing to bring up his influence in their subsequent reading. Recognition and consumption of diverse literary paradigms shouldn't be left to chance, or the coincidence of one's birth and heritage. I am still waiting for it to happen that writers are asked also to bow to the Orient, the East, the literary 'outcasts' and the 'so-far-unnamed'. Representation of diversity is a goal worth pursuing, in any and all fields. As elsewhere, it is vital also in the context of literary genealogies. In Australia, and elsewhere, a good first step is to answer the question, 'Which Asian and South Asian writers do you like?

In this chapter, I have discussed South Asian–Australian authors in the Australian literary scene, including the background to local cultural production of novels and the current situation of South Asian–Australian authors published in Australia. This chapter is followed by a chapter with case studies of three Sri Lankan-Australian authors.

4. Case Studies

The Transnation fiction of three Sri Lankan-Australian authors

Yasmine Gooneratne

Michelle de Kretser

Sulari Gentill

I chose these three authors because they have each published at least four books of fiction recently and have won awards for their novels. Between them, the authors have published nineteen novels in Australia between 1990 and 2015. Sri Lankan-Australian authors appear to be at the forefront of South Asian–Australian authors publishing novels in Australia. Besides the three chosen for these case studies, Sri Lankan-Australian authors include Chandani Lokugé.[37] Devika Brendon Gooneratne and Channa Wickremesekera. It is pertinent to look at the backgrounds of Gooneratne, Kretser and Gentill, as well as their work and achievements, to try to identify what makes these three authors so successful in Australian publishing.

[37] My 5000-word essay 'Transnation and Feminine Fluidity: New Horizon in the Fiction of Chandani Lokugé' has been peer-reviewed, accepted and published in a book titled *Claiming Space: Australian Women's Writing*, with foreword by Bill Ashcroft, edited by Devaleena Das and Sanjukta Dasgupta, published by Palgrave Macmillan (2017). Due to copyright restrictions, I am not able to include it in my exegesis. The book (and my chapter) in e-book form are available from UTS Library.

Yasmine Gooneratne

Gooneratne has published sixteen books, four of which are novels. Born Yasmine Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) in 1935; her highly regarded Sinhalese family, includes Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the first woman prime minister in the world. Gooneratne graduated from Bishop's College, the University of Ceylon with BA (Hons), and a PhD from Cambridge University, both in English Literature. For her doctoral thesis she selected Sri Lankan Writing in English. Her doctoral thesis was described as a pioneering work of Postcolonial criticism. Gooneratne first published fiction in Sri Lanka using a male pseudonym, Tilak Gunawardena. She immigrated to Sydney, Australia, in 1972 and joined the School of English and Linguistics at Macquarie University (MU), Sydney. In 1981, MU conferred their first higher doctoral degree, a Doctor of Letters (DLitt) on Gooneratne; and she was given a personal Chair at the university. She was the founding Director of Post-Colonial Literatures and Language Research Centre at MU (1989-1993). In 1990, Gooneratne became an Officer of the Order of Australia *for distinguished service to literature and education*. She was also invited to become the Patron of the Jane Austen Society of Australia. In 1991, she was awarded the Writer's Fellowship by the NSW Ministry for the Arts. Gooneratne has published sixteen books: four novels, several volumes of poetry and a collection of stories. Her novel, *The Pleasures of Conquest* (Penguin, India 1995; Vintage Australia, 1996), was short-listed for the 1995 Commonwealth Writers Prize. (AustLit Database and National Library of Australia).

From 1994 to 1995, she served on a committee appointed by the Federal Government to review the Australian system of Honours and Awards. Since 1995, she has had positions on both the Australia Abroad Council and the Visiting Committee of the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong. In 1998, she became a member of AsiaLink. She has been a visiting professor or specialist at many different places around the world including the following: Edith Cowan University (Western Australia), University of Michigan (USA), Jawaharlal Nehru University (India), and the University of the South Pacific (Fiji). Gooneratne has been awarded the Samvad India Foundation's 2001 Raja Rao Award, and the 2008 Sahithya Ratna Lifetime Achievement Award. (Every year since 1954, the Sahitya Akademi Award prizes to the

most outstanding books of literary merit published in any of the major Indian languages recognised by the Akademi. It is India's highest literary honour.)

Gooneratne lives currently in Colombo; is a Trustee of the Pemberley International Study Centre, the research institution established in 1999 by her husband Dr Brendon Gooneratne in Haputale, Sri Lanka; is Patron of the Galle Literary Festival; and directs The Guardian Angels, a literary editing service she set up in Sri Lanka and Australia to assist new writers. Gooneratne's record is impressive and she has provided a successful role model for Sri Lankan-Australian authors. So, we can see why Sunil Govinnage identifies her as pathfinder of writing about the Sri Lankan diaspora in Australia[38].

When Yasmine Gooneratne published *A Change of Skies* in 1991, she also established a tradition of representing the Sri Lankan diaspora in the Australian literary scene. This is an important issue that many of the critics who have evaluated Gooneratne's work have tended to overlook (Chandrarathne, 2011).

As its title indicates, *A Change of Skies* (1991) explores themes relating to change: examining in particular the transformations that take place in personality and attitude when people move from one homeland to another. The characters move between Sri Lanka and Australia, and the settings move with them. Evident in the novel, is a determination by the characters to make a success of their lives in Australia. She uses humour, powerful satire and irony in her depiction of migrants in Australia. An example of tackling this problem with the duality of self and sense of identity is conveyed with dark comic humour. Gooneratne said that 'humour (especially in the form of irony) is crucial to my approach to life, and consequently to my writing'.

In *A Change of Skies,* the experiences of Edward, Barry, Jean and even a minor character such as Maud Crabbe are rendered from the point of view of each of these personalities, which involves frequent switching from one character's 'voice' to that of another. Dual narratives explore the past and present of the novel's time frames. *A Change of Skies* uses contrast and comparison between two periods or historical eras a hundred years apart: Edward's travels taking place in the 1860s, Bharat and Navaranjini going to Australia in the 1960s. In this novel, professional couple Bharat and Navaranjini Mangala-Davasinha have migrated to Australia from Sri Lanka despite

[38] See p. 42.

warnings from their friends and family about it being a 'cultural desert'. Their personalities change and develop as a result of this move. During the course of the narrative, 'Bharat' becomes 'Barry' while 'Navaranjini' becomes 'Jean' because they want to fit into their new milieu and their South Asian names prove too difficult for Australians. In one telling passage, 'Jean' confronts Professor Blackstone, who is anti-Asian immigration and has coined the word 'Vietnamatta'. Using her slim grasp of Australian vernacular, she makes it clear to him how damaging his words and outlook are to Asians. When Blackstone offers her a sausage roll from a tray of refreshments as a distraction, 'Jean' is outraged at his lack of cultural sensitivity. (pp. 127–29). Majumdar posits that 'dwelling in a larger reality of time with an interchangeable sense of space becomes the goal of all diaspora narratives', (2006, p. 180). Majumdar (2006) discusses 'The existential question of the belonging and non-belonging of the displaced soul' and the 'Binary of Insider/Outsider', in relation to Gooneratne's novel (pp. 171, 172) which explores diasporic themes of dislocation[39] and relocation, temporal and spatial links, liminality and belonging. In their desire to be productive 'good' Australians, Barry decides to write a travel guide, while Jean turns to writing books about food and cooking. The preparation, offering and consuming of food plays an important part as both a symbolic representation of an act of generosity and friendship and as a way of forming a bridge between cultures. The importance of food and ceremony, food as a way of sharing and telling stories, and food as a point of difference.

Christopher Raja said at a panel at the Darwin Literary Festival 2016 that, they would decode 'how exactly food helps us write about family, in all its intricacy of ingredients and flavours … Food is after all the 'fabric of family'…food lends itself perfectly to writing. The vocabulary of food arouses all the senses and works more on a subconscious level. Writing underlines the importance of sensory experiences in conjuring memories. We are what we eat. It is a cliché but it's true. Every cell in our body was formed by the food we ate and the water we drink.'

Khoo (in Gerster, 2009) cites Khan, Abidi, Gooneratne, Kretser and Lokugé as examples of novelists who 'refuse to lend themselves to a facile, self-congratulatory view of multicultural Australia'. Gooneratne has been favourably compared to Lahiri[40]:

[39] See p. 9.
[35] p. 48.

'Yasmine Gooneratne's portrayal of the immigrant experience is as funny and poignantly ironic as Jhumpa Lahiri's work on a similar topic is earnest. That is not necessarily a criticism of Lahiri's work, but it demonstrates that not everything about the meeting and clashing of cultures need be deadly serious*',* according to Elen Turner[41] in *South Asian Book Blog* (2012). In 2012, Gooneratne has also been compared to Maxim Gorky (Sunil Gonnivage in *Chandrarathne*, 2011). Gooneratne said she appreciated Gonnivage's evaluation and his kind comparison to 'the great Maxim Gorky' (Chandrarathne, 2011). I can agree with the comparison to a certain extent, in that Gooneratne's novels generate empathy for those at the bottom of social order. They also generate hope in times of turbulence, which was one of the main purposes of Social Realism in Soviet literature. However, Gooneratne's novels are notably different, for example, in her use of irony, humour and satire when depicting the upper strata of society and politics.

Gooneratne's second novel, *The Pleasures of Conquest* (Penguin, India 1995; Vintage Australia, 1996), is a witty, wry, postcolonial novel with a mystery at the centre and a powerful ending, in which she pokes fun at cultural imperialism. Gooneratne said that, 'The Pleasures of Conquest (1995) is centred on historical and contemporary relationships between East and West. If I were to ask myself whether there has been some single idea I (must have) wanted to convey to an audience through these different works, I would say that it is a belief in the worth of human beings as individuals, irrespective of all attempts to stereotype or categorize them in terms of class, race, caste, color, intellectual ability, gender, or religious belief.' (Shelly Kaushal, 1998.)

The *Pleasures of Conquest* is set in the fictional country of Amnesia which is undergoing a transformation from a colonial entity under British rule to the Sovereign Republic of Amnesia. The five-star New Imperial Hotel (based on the 150-year-old Galle Face Hotel?), which boasts a history, colonial architecture and atmosphere combined with the latest technology, is at the heart of the novel, 'it symbolises the 'new' cultural imperialism thriving in Amnesia' (Christian Mair, 2003). Amnesia fits into the Transnation framework as a 'nation that has forgotten its history (except when there is some profit in remembering it)' (Author's note, p. 319). This novel 'skilfully

[41] Turner completed a PhD at the Australian National University on contemporary Indian feminist publishing. She is an academic editor, and editor with Kathmandu-based magazine *Himal Southasian.*

manipulates the representation of interpersonal relationships to generate a powerful and surprising ending' according to Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer (2007)**.** In *The Pleasures of Conquest*, whole sections are delivered in the voices of four major characters, one of whom (Mallika) 'speaks' in a language that is not English to tell of her place in the narratives from Sri Lanka's history. One section (narrated by Professor Philip Destry) is set in a plane flying between Dallas and New York and focuses on two characters who are meeting after a long separation. These two have a history but the power balance has changed between them. Another section (related by Angela) is set partly in London, partly in Sri Lanka; while the first part (a third person narrative, about Stella Mallinson) begins in the New Imperial Hotel and ends in a plane returning to the USA. Again, Gooneratne's biting satire and wit comes to the fore in describing Stella who is planning to compile an anthology of Sri Lankan stories to share with the world. Stella's desire to bring 'third world' Sri Lankan writers into the limelight has more to do with raising her own profile than any empathy with other writers, third world or otherwise. Her self-absorption which is evident throughout the story culminates in the virtual kidnapping of a Sri Lankan youth with whom she is smitten. Although the exploitation could be said to be mutual, the balance of power is in Stella's favour. He accompanies her on the plane to Australia for a 'better life'. This novel reveals how the cycles of history are repeated in different guises, through stories of the Moghuls, The British Raj, Independence and Neo-colonialism (or a new form of Imperialism and Capitalism). The trappings differ but human nature remains constant with the same, or similar, needs, desires, flaws and strengths.

In 2002, Gooneratne published *Masterpiece and Other Stories*, Indialog Publications, New Delhi, India. Then in 2010, came *The Sweet and Simple Kind,* subtitled *A Novel of Sri Lanka*, published by Hachette Australia. This novel was short-listed for the 2007 Commonwealth Writers Prize. It is set during the period 1935 to 1964 before and after Independence in 1948, in Colombo, Kandy, Lucas Falls and Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. *The Sweet and Simple Kind* abandons complicated structures and is written as a straightforward narrative. The book is divided into four parts which narrate the story of two different branches of the Wijesinha family through the characters of Latha and Tsunami. These two cousins of the same age grow from childhood to maturity in a society that is moving from being a British colony/dominion to becoming an independent nation. '1948 is the year marking Independence, the year of

the Citizenship Act that disenfranchises Indian Tamils working on the tea estates, and the year which marks the fracturing of the family, as Gooneratne begins to portray the privately devastating oscillations caused by seismic- shifts in public life.' (Sharanya Jayawickrama, 2007). In a biting critique, Gooneratne skilfully portrays how power corrupts and erodes human values. Latha is the so-called 'sweet and simple kind' of the title. As Gooneratne explained in her radio interview with Peter Mares (2009):

> If you weren't naturally a sweet and simple person you put up a very good pretence because there were so many mothers and prospective mothers-in-law and aunts inspecting you if you were a young woman. So my two characters have to learn how to cope with that. So I thought it would be a good title… we were brought up with great expectations on the part of our families that we would deliver good marriages, lovely children, et cetera. And education was something which was...you were marking time until you married. Well, that's not quite what happens with my two characters…I think maybe the two girls represent different aspects of my own interests and my own feelings about life growing up here. I think my book probably reflects the feelings of many people of my generation who want to know what went wrong? Why it is that we are in this situation now? It doesn't offer solutions, Peter, because I don't think a novelist can very often come up with solutions, I am not a political analyst, but I can see what went wrong in my time, and that's really why I focus the book in that period, the '40s and the '50s, before the Prabhakaran and the 1983 and all of that started.

Although most of the novel is set in the Sinhalese community, another family, the Rajaratnams, are Tamils of note who are aghast at the proposed marriage between their son Daniel and Sinhalese Tsunami. At the same time, Rowland Wijesinha is determined to break up the relationship because he fears it will affect his political ambition.

> [Rowland] ended up by telling me that Tamils are the Jews of Ceylon, that they're here entirely on sufferance, and that if they continue to demand equal rights with the Sinhalese, they would someday be taught a lesson they would never forget … (557).

I learned a great deal about Sri Lanka and its history from Gooneratne's novels – and about power and greed in general. I have also learned a lot about compassion and the

need for optimism. Her novels carry that element of anticipatory illumination or Heimat – the possibility of a new and better horizon ahead. The narrative is absorbing, enlightening and riveting. For me, as a reader, the characters became real people – people I knew and cared about. So, it was with great pleasure that I could meet them again in her sequel *Rannygazoo*.

Both *The Pleasures of Conquest* and *The Sweet and Simple Kind* are set during times of political turbulence. Aspects of Ashcroft's Transnation can be seen in the vertical axis of an over-arching story of a nation and the co-existing individual stories that flow horizontally. These novels show the process of forgetting of the past and re-creating it in a more palatable way, and of looking forward to new horizons of utopianism and renewal[42] of the kind that Ernst Bloch refers to as 'anticipatory illumination', as explained on p. 11 of my Introduction.

Gooneratne's most recent novel *Rannygazoo; or the case of the missing manuscript* (2015) is a sequel to *The Sweet and Simple Kind*. In the Introduction, Gooneratne explains that her 'main purpose in writing *Rannygazoo* was to say thank you posthumously to the late P G Wodehouse, an author whose writing has helped me and countless others to cope with illness and disability. This book makes no attempt to imitate that master of English prose, but it does adopt as a major theme the Wodehousean belief in the importance of humour to human health and happiness*'*. In August 2015, I was invited to join a new 'literary Party Initiative' by Gooneratne and to read this latest novel. This initiative is designed to circumvent publishers by using technology to distribute books in PDF form, by an invitation from the author which gives a password for access. It will be interesting to follow the progress of these new literary publishing initiatives. Comments so far range from 'a very generous act' to 'it is more difficult for emerging writers to share their work without payment of any kind.' It does seem a generous act by a well-established author and in some ways courageous but this form of publishing can give an author ultimate control.

[42] See p. 10.

Michelle de Kretser

Kretser was born in Sri Lanka and is of Dutch descent. She grew up in suburban Colombo and emigrated to Melbourne, Australia in 1972 at the age of fourteen. Barry Scott (2004) prefaces his interview with Kretser with the statement that: 'The Dutch Burgher community had always been a very small but highly regarded component of the cultural and social makeup of Sri Lanka—or Ceylon as it was then known—but the dewesternisation that followed the birth of Sinhalese nationalism in the 1950s resulted in an exodus of Burghers to the Western world. Kretser was part of a large diaspora that left for Australia, Canada and the US because of the political situation in Sri Lanka. 'A lot to Australia, as the White Australia policy[43] had just been abolished,' Kretser said to Scott (2004, p99). She was educated in Melbourne before leaving again to study for her MA at the Sorbonne. Kretser has worked as an editor, book reviewer and university tutor and is the founding editor of the *Australian Women's Book Review* (1989-1992). Kretser won the most prestigious Australia literary accolade, The Miles Franklin Award, in 2013 for her novel *Questions of Travel,* in addition to her several other literary awards including the NSW Premier's Best Book Prize, the Commonwealth Writers Prize, the Christina Stead Prize and the Prime Minister's Award[44].

The Rose Grower (1999) was written during unpaid leave as editor of the *Lonely Planet.* Kretser told Scott (2010) that *The Rose Grower* began with 'an image of a man walking on a beach' and my walking holidays in the French countryside were 'the genesis of *The Rose Grower,* although an interest in France has always been there'. Kretser had an interest in the French Revolution and begins novel thus:

> On a cloudless summer afternoon in 1789, labourers working in the fields around Mont Signac, a village in Gascony, saw a man fall out of the sky. The balloon had drifted over a wooded ridge and into their valley. The farm-workers, straightening up one by one, shaded their eyes against the dazzle of sun on crimson and blue silk. The thing hung in the sky – sumptuous, menacing – like a

[43] See pp. 32, 33.
[44] See p. 47.

> sign from God or the devil. Then there was thunder and fire, and a man plummeting earthwards. It was the 14th of July. The world was about to change.

The man who fell out of the sky is Stephen Fletcher who is taken to the grand house of Jean-Baptiste de Sainte-Pierre who welcomes him to Mont Signac. Stephen is at first attracted to Clare. Later, he has a romance with her sister Sophie who wants to create a repeat-flowering crimson rose which has never been done before in Europe. Their romance revolves around growing roses during the turbulent time of the French Revolution which threatens to change the lives of the Saint-Pierre family forever. The well-researched detail in the lives of the characters and the growing of roses, as well as the rich detail in which the French Revolution is depicted as it unfolds, shows rigour and attention to history. Kretser imaginatively creates the characters' interior lives and emotions. This first novel was published by Random House in Australia.

The Hamilton Case takes place in the tea plantations of colonial Ceylon in the 1930s. The titular case is a murder mystery with both tragedy and comedy. The protagonist, Sam Obeysekere is a Ceylonese lawyer who becomes involved in the case, to his detriment. It's a novel of paradoxes and what might-have-beens. Good intentions are not necessarily rewarded in this case. This novel was included in the *New York Times Book Review*'s list of Notable Books for 2004 (Gelder, Ken and Salzman, Paul, 2009, p. 4). It won the Tasmania Pacific Prize, the Encore Award (UK) and the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Southeast Asia and Pacific). It was also published by Random House (2003), as well as Chatto and Windus in the UK and Little, Brown in the USA.

The Lost Dog published by Allen & Unwin in 2008, was one of thirteen books on the 2008 Man Booker Prize for fiction long list and won the Christina Stead Prize for fiction 2008.[45] Michelle de Kretser discussed her writing, in particular her new novel *The Lost Dog*, with Gail Jones at the Sydney Writers' Festival on May 2008. Gail Jones described *The Lost Dog* as one of the most beautifully crafted books she had ever read' with exquisite prose. The novel is a mystery which has a layering of fictional and temporal techniques. Complexly rendered is the life and the haunting past of Tom Loxley, an Anglo-Indian, who moved to Australia at the age of ten. He is a divorced college professor who is attracted to Nellie, an artist with a sensational past. He is trying

[45] See p. 44.

to understand Nellie and her art when his dog goes missing. During the week spent searching for the dog, he revisits his past, and realises its effect on his present life. Gail Jones (2008) observed that, 'Something greater is lost than a dog'. What has been lost is Tom's connection with his past and his childhood. This loss is both real and metaphysical, it manifests in his resentment of the deteriorating condition of his mother who suffers from chronic arthritis. His mother represents death and decay, and further loss of connection and links to the past.

De Kretser said to Jones (2008):

> Coming to Australia is like coming to wonderland – beguiling, beautiful objects present themselves to Tom. Wonderland is a place of wonder but also dread – strange things happen there – you don't know how to orient yourself. On the one hand a wonderful adventure but on the other hand also like being somewhere where you don't have a map and don't know how to get around, it's puzzling. The portrayal of material objects that don't make sense is powerfully realised. Tom sees a headline on a billboard. 'Pies murder Swans!' What does that mean! He has a complete moment of bewilderment –'I can't even use words to navigate this place.

In an ABC interview with Caroline Baum (2012), de Kretser said that travel had played an important part in own life; she had 'lived on three different continents, migrated to Australia, moved cities, a small part of a large social phenomenon'. De Kretser moved to Sydney from Melbourne five years before writing *Questions of Travel* (2012). Susan Wyndham, writing about de Kretser in the *Sydney Morning Herald,* said there were two 'geographical leaps' she took in her life, first from Sri Lanka to Melbourne and then to Sydney. They 'both gave de Kretser new perspectives on the world and both underpin her new novel, *Questions of Travel'*. De Kretser agrees in an interview with Fiona Gruber for the *Guardian* (2013): 'A recent trip to Sri Lanka reminded her of what a society ruled by fear felt like, and the move from Melbourne to Sydney gave her fresh eyes to see her adopted country, its wastefulness and beauty, an experience she gives to Ravi in *Questions of Travel*. Despite its problems, Australia is a successfully multicultural and cosmopolitan country, she argues. Our attention is grabbed by racist attacks or race riots in Cronulla, but for the most part we get along and accommodate each other.'

Questions of Travel, which was published by Allen & Unwin, poses new-world questions about assumptions regarding the difference between tourism and travel; between sensitive appreciation and exploitation; between the perspective of the traveller and the 'travelee', [46] for example, or 'transcending tourism'; as well as travel in the virtual world. This novel explores a comparison between the situations of people who travel by choice and for pleasure with those who are forced to travel or flee from danger. This binary is shown through the characters of Laura from Sydney who uses an inheritance to travel the world and Ravi who is Sinhalese (p 221) from Sri Lanka. After his wife and son are murdered, Ravi is stalked. He is rescued and given sanctuary by Freda Hobson who arranges for him to flee to Australia. Once there, he is looked after by lawyer Angie Segal. His future depends on whether or not he is granted asylum in Australia. Angie tells him that: 'Most asylum-seekers from Sri Lanka are young Tamil men. The department understands that. I'm not saying they're sympathetic. I'm saying their imagination's limited. A Sinhalese like you, it's not an everyday scenario.' (p221)

The central character of the intertwining narrative, Laura is the kind of tourist that Ravi can only dream of being. She has an inheritance, she can work when she chooses overseas, she can come back to Australia to live as a citizen and she is free to express herself and use free will. Revolving around these two central characters in parallel narratives, are myriad characters with their own stories. These include Ravi's family in Sri Lanka (and occasionally his sister in Tanzania). Communications from his family provide an effective literary device to let the reader know what is happening in Ravi's homeland. Eventually Laura and Ravi are brought together when each is hired to work at Ramsay, which produces travel guidebooks. Laura decides that Ramsay represents the opposite of travel. 'It was the unseen that turned tourism into travel.' (p458). 'The true guide book would advise: 'Pay attention, be kind, think twice, shut up.'' Laura asks herself what else she is fitted for besides writing for a travel guide? 'And what would change? What could she do that wouldn't stun with busyness, lull with routine, infect with compromise like a slow, fatal blight? ... But tourism existed to postpone such

[46] 'This clumsy term is coined on analogy with the term 'addressee'. As the latter means the person addressed by a speaker, 'travelee' means persons travelled to (or on) by a traveller, receptors of travel. A few years ago literary theorists began speaking of 'narratees', figures corresponding to narrators on the reception end of narration. Obviously, travel is studied overwhelmingly from the perspective of the traveller, but it is perfectly possible, and extremely interesting to study it from the perspective of those who participate on the receiving end.' (Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 253) in *Travel and Ethics: Theory and Practice*, Edited Corinne Fowler, Charles Forsdick and Ludmilla Kostova, Routledge, 13 December 2013.

questions…The magic land existed. It had to – hadn't Laura always known it? She would find it yet: in the depths of a wardrobe, at the top of a faraway tree.' (p. 458). This 'magic land' symbolises the concept of Heimat and transnation, that there is always something better over the horizon.

There are no real resolutions to the narratives. Ravi enjoys some aspects of living in Australia but does not feel at home there. He chooses to return to Sri Lanka's West Coast, despite having been granted asylum and the chance of residency in Australia. ''I don't want to be a tourist in my own country.' It was all that mattered and made crystal sense to him.' (p. 423). Laura decides it is time she visited Sri Lanka, now that the war is over. Ravi advises Laura to leave Colombo as soon as possible. In transit, she receives an invitation from Ravi to join him and his family on New Year's Day. Due to a delayed flight, Laura bypasses Colombo and heads for the South Coast. There the book ends abruptly. Both characters are on the Sri Lankan coast at nine-twenty in the morning of 26 December 2004, when the tsunami struck. This tsunami killed tens of thousands of people and many others were injured, missing and displaced. The reader is left to decide the fate of Laura and Ravi. This brings another of the questions of travel – the risk factor, which all travellers and tourists must take into account. The end of the war in Sri Lanka leads Laura to suppose that Sri Lanka is now a safe place to visit. Ravi, too, decides it is now safe for him to return home. Travel, though, is unpredictable as the sudden tsunami shows.

Kretser's novel fits the description of the Transnation in literature.[47] AS Byatt in her review in *The Guardian* (2013) said that '*Questions of Travel* is about uprootedness and travel, about tourism and flight from terror, about the trivial and the terrible' and called Kretser 'a master storyteller'. An example of Transnation is when Laura stays with Bea Morley and notes her family's persistence 'in that one place' (their roots go back at least until Elizabethan times) whereas Laura's 'own people' are more like a 'vigorous shallow-rooted plant still adapting itself to alien soil … What was the modern age if not movement, travel, change?' (p. 110). Kretser gives an example of Heimat or anticipatory illumination, when she writes: 'It was the old human dream of the *good place*: one where horizons were wider, or at least less tightly jammed between sky and sea.' (pp. 62, 63). Later Laura muses another question of travel: 'Was that why people

[47] See p. 9 for more on Transnation literature theory.

went on leaving home to struggle with luggage and exchange rates? Not for the shot at novelty or adventure, profit or escape, but in the hope that their lives would be lifted into art?' (p. 55).

De Kretser's prose, like Loguké's and Gooneratne's, is poetic prose generously interlaced with metaphor and imagery, which lifts her narratives into art. She, too, is conscious of the rhythm of her prose and, as a 'lover of poetry, she reads her sentences aloud for rhythm'. She mixes 'high and low register, tragedy and humour' and doesn't flinch from 'the stench of life' because 'novels which are only beautiful or only exquisite are a bit removed.' When *Questions of Travel* won the 2013 Miles Franklin judges called it a 'mesmerising literary novel'. Richard Neville commented that 'Michelle de Kretser's wonderful novel, *Questions of Travel,* centres on two characters, with two stories, each describing a different journey'. Kretser's novel went on to win the Book of the Year at the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards, where the judges praised its 'mastery of language, imagery and detail, along with the resonance and power of the story'; the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction; the Prime Minister's Award for Fiction; and shared the Multicultural Award. Kretser is clearly an outstanding author of literary fiction in Australia and internationally.

Kretser believes that her book *Questions of Travel* engaged with readers because 'Australians are big travellers: travelling as a tourist, which many Australians are very familiar with; migration as travel, again that applies to a huge number of people in the community; and of course the travel of asylum seekers, which is such a vital political issue' (Deborah Rice, 2014). She told Caroline Baum in an ABC interview (2012):

> Tourism has reached 1 billion which means 1 billion people travelling the world for pleasure and for work, as well as those migrating and those fleeing persecution, it's the age of travel. Does travel take us closer to other people or not?

This question is at the heart of this novel. It is another question to ask with regard to Ashcroft's theory of Transnation. Certainly, travel brings us closer in a physical and geographical sense. Whether that translates into bringing us closer in other aspects, such as understanding, empathy and shared experiences, depends on so many factors. The distinction between being a tourist or traveller a is just one of the discussions around this question—do we travel with a sense of superiority and a wish to be entertained in a

variety of sanitised environments constructed for tourists? Or do we travel to learn and have 'authentic' experiences? Ravi tells Laura to bypass Colombo not because it is dangerous but because 'Colombo is typical and ordinary' – 'He realised that seeing how local people lived was a myth that lurked like a piece of garden statuary, vaguely ennobling, in the tangle of motives that led to travel.' Even if we consider ourselves travellers, how much can we understand the 'other' from the perspective of our own experience?

It may ask the 'big questions', but Kretser's novel is full of humour and irony.

> I always like a book that doesn't take itself too seriously. I think irony itself is a distancing mode. I find it useful as a writer to give me distance from my material and enable me to shape it better. It also immediately sets up a complicity between the author and the reader. (Scott, 2004, p. 105)

Kretser's latest novella *Springtime (*2014*),* published by Allen & Unwin in Australia, is a curious narrative with a mystery at its heart. Kretser describes it as a ghost story and certainly it is a story about altered perceptions. It's an interesting exploration of the supernatural. Dogs appear often in Kretser's fiction and, in *Springtime*, Frances who has moved from Melbourne to Sydney with her new lover, Charlie, walks her dog each evening around nearby streets. She glimpses a woman wearing old-fashioned clothes in a backyard. She keeps catching fleeting glimpses of this curious woman, which coupled with mysterious phone calls put Frances on edge. There is no real resolution to the narrative – just a strange ending where imagination and real life resonate.

Like Gooneratne's novels, the narratives of Kretser reverberate with the Transnation idea of new horizons and new beginnings that are overshadowed by loss and the ghosts and memories of the past.

Sulari Gentill

Interview by telephone on Monday November 30, 9–11 a.m.

Sulari Gentill (Goonetilleke) was born in Sri Lanka, learned to speak English when she was in Zambia and grew up in Brisbane. She likes to paint, and grows French black truffles on her farm outside Batlow, in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains of NSW, which she shares with her young family and several animals.

Sulari Gentill is an interesting case study because her experience as an author is atypical compared with other authors I have interviewed. She does not use Sri Lanka in any of her novels and says she is likely to do so, which is a crucial point of difference. Gentill migrated with her family to Australia in the early 1980s because her father wanted his daughters to have a better education. Living in rural Australia, nobody took much notice of her Sri Lankan heritage so she felt Australian. It was only when she went to America with a debating team, that she realised Australians were perceived as blond-haired-bronzed Aussies or similar to Paul Hogan.

However, an effect of being a migrant to Australia at a young age (8 years), was an awareness of what it meant to be Australian and gratitude for being here. She was aware of being an immigrant, and that her parents still considered themselves to be Sri Lankan. 'Particularly my mother who has gone back and who never really became Australian – which my father did, on the other hand. So I was aware that there was a choice about nationality. I was always aware that I had chosen to be an Australian or my father had chosen for me to be an Australian. I was a lot more interested in what that meant. I was a teenager in the eighties, certainly back then the image of the Australian was the blonde bronzed Caucasian.[48]'

After studying astrophysics and then law, and practising corporate contract law for nearly fifteen years, Gentill decided she would try her hand at writing a novel. At the time of our interview in November, 2015, Gentill had been writing fiction for six years. She has been recently appointed to the Eminent Writer in Residence Fellowship at the Museum of Australian Democracy. According to Gentill, she simply sat down and over a few weeks wrote the first Rowland Sinclair mystery novel. Gentill explains, 'What the law teaches that is good for writing crime fiction is to make a case. Every book is the

[48] See p. 31.

author making a case – main theme, crime, or case – sometimes with subtlety but you're making a case. My cases tended to be more political and investigating political movements and drawing subtle allusions to what is happening today.'

Her Sri Lankan family name is Goonetilleke. The name Gentill was created as a pen-name by contracting her family name.

> I haven't changed my name from Goonetilleke. I write under a pen-name and part of the reason was because I was going into genre fiction with Australian history and the decision was made at the publishing point that they didn't want people to stop – and what normally happens if you see a name like Goonetilleke, the buyers think of literary fiction or immigrant fiction. That could be the point at which they pass over it and take the book next to it. So, my name was intentionally anglicised by eliminating letters until we ended up with Gentill. Yet I was also told by others when writing literary fiction to publish under the name Goonetilleke because that will make a difference because Sri Lankan writers have a name in literary fiction. It is interesting that this makes a difference with the market.

Her first crime novel, *A Few Right Thinking Men* – in the series of seven books titled *The Rowland Sinclair Mystery Series*, set in Australia in the 1930s – was published by Pantera in 2010 and was short-listed for the 2011 Commonwealth Prize for a first book. *A Decline in Prophets* (2011), the second in the series, won the Davitt Award for Best Adult Crime Fiction; *Paving the New Road* (2012) was short-listed for the Davitt Award for best crime fiction 2013.

When *A Few Right-thinking Men* was published it was considered literary and short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize which added to the sense of the book being of a literary genre. The reviews commented on the political and social aspects of the novel, what it was saying about Australian history and Australia now.

> They took it all seriously, what has happened is that since then I have won a couple of crime fiction awards, including the Davitt Award, my books are only being read as crime fiction. That does frustrate me because my novels are also a political and social commentary. Then after I won the crime fiction awards I noticed that I was being categorised much more as a commercial fiction author. Reviews, while they are lovely, tend to say 'a romp through history' kind of

> stuff. All great reviews but sometimes they miss the point when promoting it as a 'light' read.

Gentill's novels are not formulaic crime writing but resonate with real characters, drawn from actual people, and real events from that period in our history, such as the Depression, the threat of Communism, the rise of Hitler and unrest in Europe. Gentill says it is more about, 'Holding up mirrors to society, and looking at different aspects of society' which 'this generation of crime writers are particularly interested in [doing]'. For example, Angela Savage, Pam Newton and others all write traditional crime fiction but set political milieus or times of social turmoil.' The period and detail in Gentill's novels are well-researched and authentic. There are sophisticated gaps for intelligent readers, so that the plot, characterisation and motivation are not spelled out the way that they are in many popular fiction genre novels[49]. Instead, the reader interacts with the narrative, filling in the gaps, working out the psychology of the characters, and possible solutions to the mystery.

In his review 'Crime novelist Sulari Gentill sees the present in our right-wing past' (2015), Marc McEvoy said:

> …like Kerry Greenwood's Phryne Fisher mysteries, Gentill's stories are part of a growing interest in Australian historical crime fiction. Sinclair even has a touch of the eccentric chivalry found in Arthur Conan Doyle's bohemian detective Sherlock Holmes.' This eccentric chivalry is demonstrated in the behaviour and speech of the central character, Rowland Sinclair who is an amateur detective. It is a technique used to set Rowland apart from the working class and criminal characters that appear in the narratives.

Sleuth Rowland Sinclair, the protagonist in the series, lives in a mansion in Woollahra, which he shares with sculptress Edna, poet Milton and painter Clyde. He has a dog named Lenin. Sinclair is the youngest son in an important family with connections and position, yet he mixes with the bohemian Sydney of the 1930s, as an artist, critic and patron of the arts. This literary device allows Sinclair access to almost all strata of Australian society of the 1930s, where he comes across crimes to be solved. The novels are set in various places around Australia (Yass, the Blue Mountains) and abroad

[49] See pp. 15 & 16.

(Germany and England). *A Decline in Prophets* (2011) is set on board a ship at sea. Gentill's seventh novel *Give the Devil his Due* is set in Kings Cross, Darlinghurst as well as other Eastern suburb and inner-city settings. The characters, as always, are a mix of imaginary and real, so fictional Rowland Sinclair mixes with witch and artist Rosaleen Norton, communist Eric Campbell and Arthur Stace who was responsible for writing the word 'Eternity' in chalk on the streets of Sydney. Gentill likes to think that her characters and the events that she creates 'may have happened' whether they actually did or not. The blending of fact and fiction gives the narratives a strong historical underpinning.

> Telling a story through the lens of history allows you to stand back and look at people. Similarly, the ability to look at 'heroes' honestly and debate whether they actually were heroes or not. There comes a certain point at which you are allowed to look at people more honestly without people getting upset.
>
> I wrote a novel set in the 1930s era in Australia at a time when it had become acceptable to look at it honestly and to write about it. The 1930s was during the depression, it was a tough era when people discovered and learned what people are made of. Australia was a young nation but a courageous nation – almost like adolescents – as a result, you know, courage is a precursor to compassion. Australians were against the idea of shooting other Australians. We had a kind of 'pack' mentality. We were frontier people, courage was expected. Even Eric Campbell would issue instructions to his followers to use pick-axe handles if they could before shooting anyone because he didn't want to shoot other Australians. I wonder if that is going to be the case now, because we have as a nation become a lot less courageous. It just seems to me that things have changed. Xenophobia and racism are manifestations of fear and you see now that hysteria. So I find all this intriguing and I am particularly interested in the Australian identity. I stumbled on the story of Rosaleen Norton in a way, when reading a book on interesting places in Sydney where she was described as the 'Witch of Kings Cross'.

This stirred Gentill's imagination. She felt that if a topic interested her sufficiently, then it would interest other people. While digging through information about Norton, Gentill came across some really macabre short stories written when Norton was only fifteen

years old. 'That's the other thing that interests me about the 1930s, the complete juxtaposition of people's roles in life and their public versus private face. As well as the ability to look at them from different angles.' Gentill looks beneath the surface of polite society to the deeper issues, the undercurrents created by ideologues and politics, as well as the criminal elements that create fear in the minds of the public. Sinclair, her character, likewise has cause to look beyond the facades presented by people and places to uncover the truth and solve the mysteries.

Gentill said that she found writing her first book so satisfying that she decided to give up law and become an author. She had no idea how to approach a publisher but Googled told her she needed an agent. She duly sent off her manuscript to agents and wondered why there was no immediate response and that the responses, when they came, were disappointing. 'I sent it out to every agent in the country and was rejected by every agent in the country.' Gentill decided that there was no need to go to a 'middle-man' because she felt she could represent herself to publishers and negotiate her own contracts. She sent off her manuscript directly to publishers herself. Part of legal training, she said, 'is to look at different ways of doing things.' She had heard of the 'slush' pile (of manuscripts that are sent to publishers unsolicited) but had not really understood that manuscripts sometimes lie in limbo for months until some junior or sub editor has time and energy to work through all the manuscripts in the pile. 'So I sent my manuscript out and it must have been the right manuscript at the right time. There is a lot of luck involved. I had a number of offers for it. Publishers were interested.'

> I chose Pantera Press because, one: John Green really engaged with my novel; and two: they had a corporate view of things and they responded very quickly. Generally, you send off something and six months' later you might have a reply. Pantera responded within a week – within another week they had a contract ready. I signed with Pantera because I thought that for the kind of person I am they are the right publishers. Since then, it's all been terrific for the Rowland Sinclair Mystery Series. As the publisher gets bigger, they have a lot more writers, they're part of Bloomsbury – things change. One concept that's difficult to pitch is to produce more than one book in a year because marketing-wise that's a headache to try and market two different books in one year – but this applies to the industry as a whole.

Gentill thinks authors can write across genres but that they need different publishers for each fiction stream. One of the problems that she identifies is pitching for literary festivals. For example, do her publishers and publicists pitch Gentill as a crime fiction writer of the Rowland Sinclair Series, or as a writer of mythical fiction, her Hero series for young adults? 'But my grumbles are minor because I am treated well,' she added.

Gentill once asked a question on a panel: why, as a Sri Lankan born author, did she feel she had the right to write Australian historical novels?

> It was an interesting question, it wasn't meant nastily.' Gentill said. 'It's a question that occurs to people. I do remember once, listening to another immigrant talking about Australian history and they had a really broad Australian accent, and it unsettled me. So it is something that occurs to people. You know, what qualifies an immigrant to write about Australian history? It may be a recognition that you have to understand the Australian sense of humour and the Australian sensibilities to really understand Australian history. Maybe it's just a recognition of that. It may even be a test of that – does an immigrant necessarily understand that? The answer may be 'yes' in some cases but in other cases they don't. In some cases, people who were born here don't understand their history.

As Ommundsen, 2011, pointed out, perhaps it is a more complex response to our times, such as the constant questioning of historical record and national/cultural identity, and a strong sense of the ambiguous interplay of memory and forgetting which informs the present and our construction of the past. In the context of other debates surrounding Australian history and literature, one might argue that Asian Australian writers carry their own version of the 'history wars' into their works, where their personal and cultural histories emerge shrouded in complexity, contradiction, and doubt, deconstructed to reveal fault lines in received and coherent narratives of self, past, and nation. South Asian–Australian authors may be well-placed to hold up a new mirror to Australian society, one that reflects a different complexity and complexion.

What are the common factors linking these three Sri Lankan-Australian authors? Gooneratne and Kretser migrated to Australia in the 1970s, and Gentill a decade later. Each speaks of the importance of rhythm in writing, the importance of poetry, imagery, and the metaphorical and the metaphysical aspects of writing. They each acknowledge

their gratitude for an education with strong literary influences from the Western canon, which takes us back to the postcolonial influences[50]. 'The existence of these shared themes and recurrent structural and formal patterns is no accident. They speak for the shared psychic and historical conditions across the differences distinguishing one post-colonial society from another.'[51]

It should be noted that each author has a privileged background and each is well educated in the Western literary canon, some are also well versed and educated in Sinhala language and literature. As Gentill explains:

> I have noticed that there are a lot of Sri Lankan writers coming up, all of a sudden emerging. I have wondered why that is. It's been kind of recent this rise in books from Sri Lankan-Australian authors. Michelle de Kretser was probably in the vanguard. A lot of Sri Lankan writers have that literary feel for writing and even writers like me who write genre fiction, write in that semi-literary style. I wonder whether it's because we grew up with parents who were educated in a colonial system? My parents were both educated when English was the language taught at school. They studied Keats and the great romantic bards and English literature. Even though I didn't study that, I gained or inherited a rhythm and cadence from my parents because that's the way they speak. On top of that, while my mother came from a prominent family, my father was a commoner who relied on Sri Lankan libraries, which had shelves of books that had come from Britain because British libraries didn't want them. They were predominantly the classics. So my father, for example, had read Odysseus and The Iliad. So I wonder whether all those rhythms of language are coming from our parents who were educated in that colonial Sri Lankan education system? Also Sri Lanka has had a high literacy rate. I seem to remember it being ninety-two percent or something of that sort. The vast majority could speak English as well as Sinhalese, so when we went back to Sri Lanka we didn't have to learn the language or we didn't have to re-learn Sinhalese because most people spoke English. When my parents who are Sinhalese spoke English, they spoke it well and with a sort of archaic inflection. That's why it's easy for me to write

[50] See p. 3.
[51] See p. 9.

> Rowland Sinclair's dialogue because that way of speaking is not foreign to me. Even the traditions are English, it was very colonial back then but I haven't been there for many years. Back then it was a very British Raj sort of set up. It makes Rowland Sinclair fun to write because of that British influence.

Gooneratne said,

> The biggest influence on my writing as regards to subject matter has inevitably been the fact that I had the good fortune to have been born in Sri Lanka, and to grow up and be educated there at a 'golden' period in the island's cultural life. The biggest influence on my writing regarding style is probably a lifelong admiration for the writings of certain English authors of the 18th and 19th centuries, including Alexander Pope, Dr Samuel Johnson, and Jane Austen. There are several authors I deeply admire. Among them are V.S. Naipaul, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, R.K. Narayan, and the authors I have previously mentioned. My favourite author is Jane Austen, partly because her ideas about love and life (as expressed in her novels and letters) have shaped my own, and partly because her disciplined and ironic style provides an exemplary model for any writer who feels (as she did) deeply about the conditions under which life must be lived.' (Shelly Kaushal, 1998)

The scholarship that underpins Gooneratne's novel *The Pleasures of Conquest* is extensive and the bibliography is listed in her author's note (pp. 391–422). These influences have undoubtedly had an effect on these successful Sri Lankan-Australian novelists. Another, who asked not to be identified, mentioned ambition was a factor among Sri Lankans and that played a part, too.

Lokugé said her success as a novelist was not exclusively due to the Western literary tradition, although she did study at a highly Westernised elitist private school – St Bridget's Convent, Colombo – and went on to take English, French and Western Classics for her first degree.

> Of course everything Western plays a major part in my life. But I'd say rather that I'm positioned at the cross-roads of Sri Lankan/Indian and Western literary traditions, and draw equally from them. Buddhism and Indian mysticism as well as Sinhala language literature, film and song have always inspired me even if they are not particularly visible in my fiction.

Lokugé's mother was a Westernised Sinhalese from the west of Sri Lanka, her father a proudly nationalist Buddhist Sinhalese from the hill country. Lokugé said he had lots of foresight. He knew she would get a good dose of the West from school and her mother, and insisted on private tuition in Sinhala language and literature right through her secondary education. She is 'a Sinhala-English bilingual, and proud to be one!'

As Lokugé said, 'How a book remains on the shelves, how it wins prizes, how it circulates, is not just because of the theme but of the way we look at the world'. The authors in my case studies, like many successful authors, have a unique way of looking at the world and transforming that view into a fictional world that strikes a chord with readers. They create memorable characters with whom readers identify in some way.

Authors of fiction, such as Manisha Jolie Amin, Subhash Jaireth, Michelle Cahill, Christopher Raja and Roanna Gonsalves are among those who are establishing themselves and their fiction in the Australian literary scene. The fiction and reviews of contemporary South Asian–Australian writers regularly appear in literary journals, such as *Southerly, Meanjin, Mascara Literary Review* and others.

Conclusion

When I began my research, my aim was to explore and investigate aspects of the cultural production of novels by South Asian–Australian authors published in Australia. I had noted a number of such novels appearing in book shops in Australia. I was keen to discover when the production of novels by South Asian–Australians was established and how it had fared over the decades. I wanted to discover the current situation of South Asian–Australian novelists publishing in Australia and take a look at the possible future.

To ascertain where novels by South Asian–Australian authors published in Australia were situated within the Australian publishing industry, I looked at the development of the cultural production of novels and the process of publishing novels in Australia since 1990. Evidence was provided by authors, publishers and reviewers whom I interviewed, documentary evidence from other studies and statistics from AustLit (The Australian National Library) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics, as well as other sources. Data collected was triangulated to produce more accurate results and avoid bias, as described on p. 5.

What I found was that there were few studies of the production of novels by South Asian–Australian authors in Australia. Very little was recorded of early publications by South Asian–Australian fiction writers. The beginning of a pattern of regular publishing emerged in 1991 with the publication of a novel *A Change of Skies* by Yasmine Gooneratne. A succession of novels by South Asian–Australian authors have been published annually from 1991[52].If the Australian book industry, the Arts funding bodies, publishers and authors are supported, there is a strong possibility that the number of novels by South Asian–Australian novelists will flourish and grow. However, there is the constant threat of change, including withdrawal of funding and support for Australian literature. For example, the recent changes to funding of the Australian Council for the Arts[53] and the proposed abolition of Parallel Importation Rules for books (PIRs), endorsed by the Turnbull Government. These PIRs protect the Australian book industry by preventing bulk importation of books published overseas, if

[52] See p. 13.
[53] See p. 28.

an Australian edition is produced within fourteen days of the overseas publication date. An unsuccessful recommendation by the Productivity Commission of the Australian Government was to reduce author copyright from seventy years to fifteen or twenty-five years, which would reduce an author's income from their back-list, subsidiary rights and public lending right. The book industry and the Australian Society of Authors have launched campaigns to raise awareness and condemn these recommendations from the Productivity Commission. The influences and vagaries that affect the Australian book publishing industry will, in turn, affect authors, including South Asian–Australian authors and their prospects for publication.

Australia has critically acclaimed, successful established transnational South Asian–Australian authors of calibre such as Yasmine Gooneratne, Michelle de Kretser, Sulari Gentill, Chandani Lokugé, Bem Le Hunte and Adib Khan. One aspect of my research that came as a surprise was that over the past ten years, Sri Lankan–Australian novelists are at the forefront.

More aspiring and emerging South Asian–Australian authors mentioned in Chapter 3 are busy creating their own stories of Transnation. As I conclude my research, *Ruins*, a novel by Rajith Savanadasa[54], a Sri Lankan–Australian, has been released by Hachette (2016) and four collections of short stories by South Asian–Australian authors have been published: Roanna Gonsalves, *The Permanent Resident* (UWAP, 2016), Michelle Cahill, *Letter to Pessoa* (Giramondo 2016) Subhash Jaireth, *Incantations* (Recent Works Press, 2016), and Avijit Sarkar, *A Turn of Events* (Ginninderra Press, Adelaide, 2016). These five books of fiction show that the production of fiction by South Asian–Australian authors is continuing rather than an anomaly. Sulari Gentill's first American review of *A Decline in Prophets* will be published in *Suspense Magazine* to coincide with the release of her novel there in December.

As novels by South Asian–Australian authors become more cosmopolitan with wider geographical settings and global concerns, and as Australia continues to strengthen ties with South Asia, it seems an ideal time to explore these issues. Imagination knows no borders and fiction can transcend boundaries to open up understanding of 'the other', as Lokugé and others have argued.

[54] See Appendix 2, p. 98.

Australia is becoming a more diverse and pluralistic society in this Asian Century and global era. Greater numbers of Indian migrants and students are coming to Australia. Despite a dip in South Asian migrant numbers in 2012-13, 'India has emerged as the most common country of origin for immigrants to Australia in recent years, statistics from the Department of Immigration and Border Protection show.'[55] According to Department of Immigration and Border Protection statistics on Australia's migration program, Australia received 189,097 immigrants in the 2014-15 year; 34874 from India and 27872 from China. Indian immigrants include people who were accepted under the family, skill and special eligibility streams. The migration program does not include refugees.

More Australians are travelling to South Asia. Air India has recently begun an air service direct from Sydney to Delhi. Diversity is becoming a catch-word as a more pluralistic Australian society demands a more pluralistic media[56] as well as cultural diversity in leadership[57].

Chakraborty (2012, p. 9) poses the following questions:

> There is the opportunity in the here and the now to map out a field, to engage in productive contention around the portable label of Asian Australian that might actually revitalise the entire field of Australian literature itself. Race, hybridity, ethnicity, authenticity, the history of American imperialism, these are the politics that animate American conversations around Asianness. We might have to think whether these are the same questions in play in Australia. How may we open them up in a site-specific manner? And if Asian Australian is a category that offers completely new, perhaps contrary, ways of configuring Asianness in the Pacific Rim, what might they be?

I don't have the answers to these questions of literature as applied to the Indian subcontinent, but I am glad to see they are becoming topics for discussion and study. I have observed that narrative fiction by South Asian–Australian authors offers an entry point to such discussions. Though the questions may be the same or similar in America, Australia's response to Asia is unique. We need novels by Asian-Australians to be part

[55] SBS report on Australian immigration with chart, 16 December 2015, *India the major source of immigrants to Australia.*
[56] See pp. 31 and 61.
[57] See p. 60.

of mainstream Australian literature and the narrative of Australia. Transnation novels created from ideas and experiences of South Asian–Australians should play a part in this. Their narratives and characters provide alternative histories, mythologies and ways of seeing the world. As Knox (2016)[58] writes, 'Above all, the world needs original thinkers: artists rather than "content suppliers".'

Despite the challenges ahead with yet more proposed government regulation, the Australian book publishing industry and the Australian Society of Authors are lobbying the government and remaining optimistic about the future. We may yet experience a period of greater diversity in leadership in business and the Arts, if recommendations in recent reports are acted upon. For the past twenty-five years, Novels have been produced consistently by South Asian–Australian authors and published in Australia, as I have shown. As greater numbers 'land on the desks'[59] of Australian publishers, there is a probability that this will become an expanding section of the book fiction market. If that turns out to be true, then we can look forward to reading more Australian published fiction from our South Asian–Australian authors that explores horizonality, Heimat and how the world is shaped by alternate modernities.

[58] See p. 15.
[59] See pp. 30, 52.

APPENDIX 1

Interviews with Participants

[1] From transcripts of interviews with participants' code names: Anu, Ben, Chandani/Chantal, Grace, Jay, Karin, Laura, Larissa, Noel, Ruby, Sulari/Sally, Selina and during 2013 at various public spaces and in two instances using email and telephone. These interviews form part of my current research into fiction published by South Asian–Australian authors in Australia; for the purpose of research I have conducted a series of interviews with authors, publishers and reviewers in Australia.

Authors

Anu, interviewed: 5/9/2013 in Sydney, NSW

Chantal (permission to name), interviewed: 29 September 2013 at Monash University, Victoria

Grace, interviewed: Email and other documentation

Jay, interviewed: 28/9/2013 at State Library of Victoria

Ruby, interviewed: 20/8/2013 at private residence, Sydney, NSW

Selina, interviewed: Survey response and email 16 August 2013

Sulari Gentill (Sally) (permission to name): Recorded telephone interview: 25 November 2015

Christopher Raja, Survey response 31 August 2013

Michelle de Kretser: Not able to interview: Secondary sources include other documented interviews, podcasts, video casts and reviews

Publishers

Laura, interviewed: NSW State Library, Sydney NSW

Ben, interviewed: Email

Karin, interviewed: Email and other documentation

Reviewers

Larissa, interviewed: 28/9/2013 Ibis Hotel, Swanston Street, Melbourne, Victoria.

Noel, interviewed: Survey response and email. Monday, 7 October 2013

APPENDIX 2

South Asian–Australian Author Biographical Notes

Abdullah, Mena was born in 1930 at Bundarra in northern NSW and spent her early years on her parents' sheep property before she attended Sydney Girls High. Of Punjabi background, she was Muslim born and raised in Australia. She has travelled widely in Europe and the South Pacific, and has worked for the CSIRO. Her writing has been published variously in the *Bulletin, Coast to Coast* and *Quadrant*. Abdullah's stories have been described as 'examples of the craft of short fiction at its traditional best and are identifiable precursors to later publications in Australia by writers of Moslem faith.' (AustLit, National Library of Australia; Oxfordreference.com*)*

> The 1965 stories *The Time of the Peacock* by Mena Abdullah (co-written with Ray Mathews) also have moments of humour; they are 'realist narratives', drawn from Abdullah's own life as a Muslim of Punjabi background born and raised in Australia. (See also Appendix 1 for biographical details.)
>
> [Abdullah] was among the first in the country to write of ethnic difference at a time when the White Australia Policy was still active. Her elliptical short stories are vivid with landscape and tradition and tell of the quest for identity and enchantment in an unfamiliar land. 'What was to be done with a dark-faced Indian child who was a second-generation Australian?' asks 'Grandfather Tiger' (1956). Although all but three of her stories collected in The Time of the Peacock (1965) were 'in collaboration with' the poet, Ray Mathew, it is generally thought that he was more an influence than a co-author. (Lorna Sage, 1999, p. 1)
>
> Her writing has been published variously in the *Bulletin, Coast to Coast and Quadrant.* Abdullah's stories have been described as 'examples of the craft of short fiction at its traditional best and are identifiable precursors to later publications in Australia by writers of Moslem faith.' (AustLit, National Library of Australia; Oxfordreference.com).

Abidi, Azhar, author and translator, was born and educated in Pakistan, Imperial College London and University of Melbourne. He migrated to Australia in 1994 and lives in Melbourne. His work has been published in *Meanjin* and *The Best Australian Essays 2004*. His first novel was *Passarola Rising* (Viking Penguin, 2006), followed by *Twilight* (Text Publishing, 2008).

Adiga, Aravind has rather tenuous links with Australia but he lived for a time in Australia and attended Australian schools. While Adiga continued his education at Colombia University in the United States, his father remained in Sydney. Adiga holds dual Indian and Australian citizenship. Aravind Adiga published *Last Man in Tower* in 2011.

Akhil, Shalini is a Melbourne writer, whose first novel, *The Bollywood Beauty*, was published by Penguin (2005), and she is currently working on her second. The unpublished manuscript of *The Bollywood Beauty* was short-listed for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards. She describes

herself as 'an Indo-Fijian scribbler based in Melbourne'. Her novel has been described as belonging to the 'chick-lit' genre (Sharrad, 2010, p. 14).

Cahill, Michelle identifies as Anglo-Goan-Indian in her biographical notes; she has published her poetry extensively in literary journals and anthologies, as well as three poetry collections in book form in Australia, which draw on her experiences and thoughts of India and of Australia. She has published short stories and essays, and is currently working on a novel set in India and Australia. She is on the editorial team for *Mascara Literary Review*. Cahill received a Varuna Manuscript Award to develop her manuscript at Varuna, The Writers' House, in Katoomba, NSW.

Cyrill, Christopher of Indian parentage, was born and educated in Melbourne. Cyrill was fiction editor for *HEAT* magazine and fiction advisor to Giramondo Publishing.

de Kretser, Michelle – see Case Study, p. 73.

Fernando, Chitra moved to Australia in 1961. She graduated in 1964, with a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) degree in English Literature and a Master of Arts (Hons) degree in Linguistics from the University of Sydney. By 1982, Fernando was conferred a Doctor of Philosophy in Linguistics from Macquarie University (AustLit database, 2015 and John Arnold, 2001, pp. 28, 29*).*

Gentill, Sulari – see Case Study p. 80.

Gonsalves, Roanna has had her work performed/published across various media in India and Australia, including ABC Radio National and The Drum/Unleashed; she and her colleagues won an Australian Writers Guild Award 2011 for a play *Yet to Ascertain the Nature of the Crime;* she was involved in creating a version of *The Merchant of Venice* for Bell Shakespeare's Mind's Eye Initiative with director Susanna Dowling; as well as writing an unpublished novel *Salvation Apartments,* which was long-listed for the Australian Vogel Literary Awards in 2009. Gonsalves received the Varuna Manuscript Award to develop her novel at Varuna, The Writers' House, in Katoomba, NSW. Her collection of short stories will be published by UWAP in November, 2016.

Gooneratne, Yasmine – see Case Study p. 66.

Le Hunte, Bem (2012) describes herself 'as cross-cultural as her novel'. Le Hunte was born in Calcutta to 'an Indian mother and English father' before moving to Orissa. Her family then moved to London, England. Educated in London, she attended Cambridge University, graduating with a Master of Arts. She arrived in Australia in 1989 and is 'now an Australian by choice'. Author of two novels published by HarperCollins Australia – *The Seduction of Silence* (2000), short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2001, and *There Where the Pepper Grows (*2006) – Le Hunte's novels have been widely reviewed in Australia. A sample of her book reviews is on her website. *The Seduction of Silence* was also published in the US by Harper San Francisco in 2004. Le Hunte is Course Director, Creative Intelligence and Innovation, at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Hyde, Samantha Sirimanne is Sri-Lankan born and migrated to Australia in 1990. Ginninderra Press published *The Villawood Express and other stories* in 2007. Hyde's anthology of twelve short

stories revolving around themes of love, loss, displacement and fate seems to have been mainly reviewed in Sri Lanka, apart from a review in *Australian Women's Book Review*.

Jaireth, Subhash was born in Khanna, a small town in the Punjab. Between 1969 and 1978 he lived in Moscow studying geology before returning to India in 1978 to teach geology at the University of Roorkee. He migrated to Australia in 1986. He speaks and publishes in three languages: Hindi, Russian and English. *To Silence: Three Autobiographies* by Subhash Jaireth, which are fictional autobiographies, was released by Puncher and Wattmann (2011) and reviewed in *Australian Book Review*. His novel *After Love,* which is located in Australia, Russia and India, was published in 2013 by Transit Lounge.

Khan, Adib arrived in Australia from Dhaka, Bangladesh in 1973. He taught creative writing at Ballarat University before moving on to Monash. He has published five novels. *Seasonal Adjustment* was published in 1994 and won the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction, the 1994 Book of the Year award in the NSW Premier′s Literary Awards and the 1995 Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best First Book award. It was short-listed for the 1994 *Age* Book of the Year award. Khan's second novel *Solitude of Illusions* was short-listed for the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction and the 1997 Ethnic Affairs Commission Award in the NSW Premier′s Literary Awards; and won the 1997 Tilly Aston Braille Book of the Year Award. His latest novel is *Spiral Road*, HarperCollins Australia (2007).

Lokugé, Chandani's short fiction has been anthologised in Australia, Sri Lanka, India, UK and France including in *Gas and Air* (Bloomsbury), *Penguin Anthology of Sri Lankan Short Stories* (India), *Penguin Summer Stories*, *Kunapipi* (Denmark), *Meanjin* (Australia), and *Century 21* (France). She contributed to *The Penguin Book of Modern Sri Lankan Stories*. Lokugé's *Moth and Other Stories* is a collection of short fiction (Dangaroo Aarhus Press Denmark, 1992, Sydney, 1994). Lokugé's short stories have been read on ABC Radio National in Australia. She is invited to major Australian writers' events and represented Australia at the Kolkata Book Fair. She has received grants from the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts (*Turtle Nest* 2003), Arts Victoria, Ian Potter and Myer Foundations. Lokugé published three novels: *If The Moon Smiled* (Penguin Australia 2000, Penguin India 2000, Greek translation, Konidaris, 2001), which was short-listed for New South Wales Premier's Prize for Best Book in 2001; *Turtle Nest* (Penguin Australia, 2003/Penguin India); and *Softly, as I Leave You* (Australian Scholarly, 2011).

Peres da Costa, Suneeta is of Goan heritage and living in Sydney, She is a first-class honours graduate UTS Communications and winner of the 1998 University Alumni Undergraduate Achievement Award. She is currently fiction editor at *Mascara Literary Review*.

Raja, Christopher migrated from Calcutta to Melbourne in 1986, and almost twenty years later he moved again, further inland, living and working in Alice Springs since 2004. Chris was co-guest consultant editor of *Meanjin*'s Australasian issue in 2004 and since then has been a regular contributor to *Meanjin*, *Quadrant*, *Southerly* and *Art Monthly Australia*. His short story *After the Wreck* was adapted for radio and broadcast on ABC Radio National's Short Story Program in 2007. His play *Drew's Seizure* was performed at Araluen Arts Centre, Alice Springs in 2009.

Chris worked as the NT Correspondent for *Art Monthly Australia* from 2010 to 2011 and he is currently a history and English teacher at St Philip's College, Alice Springs. He and his actor wife Natasha co-wrote *The First Garden*, with the assistance of a grant from Arts NT, which premiered in September 2011 and played over six nights at the Olive Pink Botanic Garden. Chris co-curated *Art of the Nomads* at the Chan Contemporary Art Space in Darwin in April 2012. He was selected for the Australian Society of Authors 2011/2012 mentorship program. His novel *The Burning Elephant* was published by Giramondo in 2015.

Sarkar, Avijit has completed around two thousand live concerts around the world in a music career spanning more than thirty-five years. He has composed music for Australian documentary films, radio and theatre in Sydney. He has been recognised and endorsed by APRA (Australian Performing Rights Association) as a music writer and composer. Avijit holds a master's degree in mathematics. His essays, short stories and poetry have been published and widely read. Sarkar's passion for teaching has been the driving force behind the establishment of Natraj Academy in Sydney and *The Mind Creative* magazine.

Savanadasa, Rajith migrated from Colombo, Sri Lanka to Melbourne Australia in 2001 to study engineering at RMIT. He is 34 years old. According to an SBS TV report: 'Following his graduation Savanadasa completed RMIT's Professional Writing and Editing Course, was short-listed for the Asia-Europe Foundation short story prize in 2013, the Fish Publishing short story prize in 2013 and in 2014 received a Wheeler Centre Hotdesk Fellowship. *Ruins* [2016, *Ruins,* Hachette Australia] is set in Colombo at the end of Sri Lanka's civil war in 2009 and follows a family going through a significant change. Savanadasa believes the physical distance of being in Australia during this time gave him a new perspective of this time in Sri Lanka's history, and used the political change as a backdrop for the story'. <http://www.sbs.com.au/topics/life/culture/article/2016/07/06/storytelling-trumps-being-doctor-rajith-savanadasa>.

APPENDIX 3

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[i] See Bruce Bennett, *Glimpses of India,* Homing In: Essays on Australian Literature and Selfhood (Perth: API Network, 2006) 101–10.

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Transcending Boundaries

Change and Changeability

Part II of Thesis

Doctorate of Creative Arts Thesis

Sharon Rundle

Doctoral Candidate

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

University of Technology, Sydney

Supervisor, Dr Devleena Ghosh

Co-supervisor, Dr Debra Adelaide

May, 2017

Transcending Boundaries Part 2

Change and Changeability

Contents

Introduction

The creative component of my thesis, eighteen short stories, reflects the tension between the vertical and horizontal axes of Ashcroft's Transnation theory, which I've used as a lens to view fiction by South Asian–Australian authors in my critical component.

My stories fit with Ashcroft's Transnation theory, with one strand of narrative representing the vertical axis (fixed, static and rooted) and the other representing the horizontal axis (moving, flowing, travelling, seeking new horizons). These stories demonstrate horizonality and Bloch's 'anticipatory illumination' with a sense of Heimat or anticipatory illumination, the concept of new horizons.

The short stories relate the tales of three women who are connected through the storylines. Audrey's narrative represents the vertical axis of a constant, rooted, almost immoveable entity, while the narratives of Alice and Ivy represent the horizontal axis, constantly on the move, both within the nation and further afield, not only geographically but physically, emotionally and psychologically.

Audrey has lived all of her life on a family rural property established in the 1850s. She is firmly rooted in family history and tradition. Even after her marriage Audrey does not leave; it is her husband who moves to her family farm. Eventually, as the last in line and with the family property too much for her to maintain alone, Audrey is forced to subdivide the land. She keeps a small portion, an acreage on which her home stands, and which she names 'Lasthope'.

In contrast, Alice is one of many British child migrants sent to Australia during World War II. After Sussex is bombed, Alice is left homeless and supposedly an orphan. She arrives in Australia at the age of eleven years, where she spends a short time in an orphanage before being sent to work as domestic labour on a farm. Alice's life is not what it seems. She is a person adrift who can't seem to settle for one place or one person or even to be one person. One of Alice's secrets is 'Jane', another is Ivy who turns up one day on her doorstep. Ivy is also restless, always on the move, within Australia and further afield to India. Alice and Ivy eventually settle in an idyllic Australian rural village, but is it to last? Or will they be forced by choice or circumstance to move again? Audrey, meanwhile, finds an erstwhile 'son' and heir for what's left of the property when she is confronted by a secret from her husband's past. Audrey's legacy is finally assured. The farm will stay in hands that are at least a form of family.

Alice and Ivy, for all the trappings of settlement, are capable of moving on if circumstances demand it. By the end of the narrative they are as grounded as they will ever be; nonetheless there is a sense of impermanency about them. Alice will never again know her childhood home and family in the same way as she did as a child before the world collapsed under her feet. Ivy will never know what it would have been like to have been brought up by her natural mother and father, or even to know the identity of her natural father. Each is adrift in her own way.

Alice and Ivy continue to go with the flow of life, notwithstanding the occasional buffeting and currents carrying them along, rather than stick rigidly to what they know.

These dual narratives and stories within stories show the power of the tension between the fixed, rooted vertical axis and the fluid, moving horizontal axis that represent Ashcroft's Transnation literary theory. The elements of earth, air, fire and water feature strongly in these eighteen stories. They are an example of Transnational literature that includes stories from Australia, the UK and the Indian subcontinent and which 'not so much crosses boundaries but manifestly ignores them'. They are stories that show anticipatory illumination and Heimat (Bloch), horizonality (Ashcroft), Husserl's theory and concept of transcendental subjectivity of consciousness. To use a cliché, 'anticipatory illumination' is a form of the concept of the grass being greener elsewhere, of finding a perfect place to live which will then make everything else perfect too. Utopia.

The nexus of multicultural themes explored: conflict and tension between families, resistance to or acceptance of different ways of being, a sense of belonging or not-belonging, making connections, imaginary or utopian homelands

So it is not only about movement from one place to another, but also about drawing on the 'archive of cultural memory to imagine Heimat' while at the same time 'discarding memory to transform the present', or using selective memory to discard unpleasant or difficult memories in favour of a more pleasant and palatable past to present to themselves and to others (Ashcroft, 2014, p. 39).

These stories, as a collective whole, aim to explore and illuminate these aspects of Transnation and literature.

AUDREY

A Family Christmas

When Audrey goes back to the house she pours herself a glass of iced water and then a glass of Christmas cheer. After her break from the routine of chores and checking her crops and equipment in the paddocks, she decides there is still plenty to do outside; no need to waste a day. She rinses the glass and wipes her hands over her rump. Inside her jeans, the sweat trickles and prickles. She adds ice to her dog's water bowl.

When the sun is almost overhead, Audrey remembers her lunch invitation and dreads the thought of dressing suitably for a Christmas visit with the Dwyers and their offspring. Henry, her dog, is sensibly lying in the shade of the veranda.

She chooses loose cotton pants and an aqua-coloured silk tunic, found at the back of her wardrobe. She checks her appearance in front of a full-length mirror, then runs a comb through her hair and slips her feet into sandals. She takes from her fridge the plate of White Christmas she made yesterday, then a bottle of red wine from the cupboard. She scoops up the gifts she bought for the Dwyer grandchildren. She's running late. She fixes the long dog chain to Henry's collar so that he can run up and down the veranda and out into the yard, though he's still flopped out on his bed for now.

Her ute bounces over the unsealed road, leaving a mini dust storm in its wake. She turns left and follows a long strip of blue metal that marks the neighbours' driveway.

The Dwyers have built a long, low bungalow of yellow brick veneer, described as ranch style. Inside their home, the air is remarkably cool. Audrey feels the sweat dry on her skin. She takes several deep breaths to slow her agitated pulse. She hands her gaily wrapped gifts to Lucy Dwyer to put under the tree.

'I'm so glad you felt you could come, dear,' Lucy is saying to her as she clasps Audrey's hand and steers her through the festively decorated house to the sliding glass doors at the back. 'Everyone's on the veranda. Lunch is almost ready. We'll be coming inside to eat, of course, we have an air conditioner in here. I had to, I'm afraid. As soon as the electricity was connected and turned on, I said to Bert, if I'm to survive out here in this valley without melting right away I need an air conditioner—not a water cooler, mind—a proper refrigerated electric air conditioner.' Her expression is rapturous. 'He bought two,' she says with a note of bliss. 'Well—a split system that's as good as two.

He's that good to me! He said, you can consider them a Christmas present, isn't he a dear? And it means we can keep the flies outside. Bert will pour you a drink.' She takes the wine and the plate of White Christmas then hurries off to the kitchen.

Audrey hesitates; this is the moment she always finds difficult. She takes a deep breath, opens the sliding door and steps out onto the veranda. It, too, is festooned with tinsel and baubles.

'I'm sure I wasn't out,' Bert Dwyer is arguing. 'I'll bet you quids I was there before that ball was caught.'

'You were out, Dad, admit it. Jerry's too good for you. Beaten by a six-year-old, eh?' A larger, meatier version of Bert is baiting him. It must be the son, Audrey guesses.

'Not a bee's dick in it, if you ask me,' Bert says petulantly.

'Not a nit on a gnat's nuts, Dad. But there's no need to get shitty, it's only a game,' his son says, laughing.

'You gotta humour the kids, mate, it's Christmas…' Another unfamiliar male voice. Audrey stops in her tracks. It is, of course, impossible to slip out onto the veranda and join them unnoticed.

'Audrey!' Bert has spotted her. 'Come over here and take a load off—as the saying is—meet my son Eamonn and his better half, Janice; and our new neighbour, Dan.'

'Hello.' Audrey nods in the direction of unfamiliar faces.

Eamonn pours a middy of cold beer and hands it to Audrey. The conversation seems to lull. Janice comforts her grizzling child.

'Up with the cicadas, she's worn herself out,' Janice says.

'Give her a drop of brandy,' Bert advises. 'Always worked with Eamonn.'

Dan walks over to Audrey and offers his hand, which is firm but smooth, no calluses. 'Daniel Winter, though I'm usually called Dan. Lucy found out I had no family to spend Christmas with, at least not within cooee, and insisted I stay for lunch.'

Lucy appears to check that her guests are being looked after. 'The more the merrier, we say. We can't have people stuck on their own at Christmas,' she says.

'Whether they want to be, or not,' Bert chimes in.

'I'm very glad to be here,' Dan says in Lucy's defence.

‘Audrey Beaufort, It’s a pleasure to meet you. So, you’ve bought one of the properties here in Rockbeare Gully, have you?’ Audrey asks Dan.

‘Yeah, the one opposite with the old barn. So you’re Audrey. I heard that you owned this whole valley before it was subdivided.’

‘Yes, my family settled here in 1832—but it just became too much for me on my own. I couldn’t bear to leave the place altogether, so subdividing seemed the best solution. Where are your family?’ Audrey says.

‘Scattered all about,’ Dan replies, but does not elaborate.

‘Are you making a permanent move out here?’ Audrey asks.

‘Weekends, mostly, for the time being. I’ll be coming and going—I’ve made a start on the place.’ He stands at ease, giving her his full attention. ‘I intended to spend today in the barn with a cold tinnie or two but, as I said, Lucy insisted I join you all for lunch.’

‘What made you buy a place all the way out here?’ Curiosity has got the better of Audrey, though she usually keeps her inquisitiveness under control.

‘I have my reasons. Why do you live out here?’

‘I couldn’t live anywhere else. This is my home.’

‘Dan is a solicitor in Sydney, for some swanky law firm, so he tells us,’ Bert interrupts, as a bell tinkles inside the house. ‘Looking for a bit of peace and quiet, I shouldn’t wonder.’

At the lunch table, Bert sits at the head of the table with Lucy at his right hand. Audrey is squeezed between Eamonn Dwyer and Dan. She tries to follow what passes for conversation above the noise of the children—Jerry and Jemima, she believes they are called—and the rumble of the air conditioner. Bert uncorks a reasonable claret.

‘This is simply marvellous, Lucy,’ Audrey says—and it is. The full traditional European Christmas dinner with roasted stuffed bird, ham, roast pork and a variety of vegetables, including brussels sprouts. Tablecloth, napkins, plates, place names and centrepiece are all decorated with Xmas motifs.

‘And a very acceptable bottle of red, Audrey,’ Eamonn says as he raises his glass to her.

Bonbons are snapped, their contents flying all over the table, and the company call out corny jokes as they pop lurid paper hats onto their heads. Audrey feels goose

bumps on her flesh, despite the crush of bodies either side of her. Garish streamers and glittering decorations begin to swim before her eyes.

'Turn down the air conditioning, poor woman's frozen,' Eamonn calls out.

'No, really, I'm all right.' Audrey's protests are ignored as Bert stands up and points the remote control.

When Bert sends his cutlery clattering across his plate and Eamonn leans back in his chair to tackle his teeth with a toothpick, Lucy's daughter-in-law stops fussing over her children for long enough to collect the dinner plates.

'Thank you, dear.' Lucy sounds weary, as she clears away cutlery, condiments and debris from the bonbons onto a festive tray.

The food she has tucked away sits uncomfortably in Audrey's belly. She is marshalling her thoughts for an excuse to leave when Lucy reappears bearing a large flaming plum pudding. Jemima begins to cry, quite spoiling the effect.

Bert fixes a gimlet eye on the child. 'Another game of cricket after dinner goes down,' he roars again. 'Even you, child, can field if you be a good girl.' He glares at the snivelling infant. 'If you stop that noise.'

'I'm afraid I'll have to be going quite soon,' Audrey apologises, feeling badly about being one to eat and run. She feels she is being unforgivably rude today.

'Nonsense. Haven't got a bus to catch, have you? We need you to umpire. Lucy's no good—gets so excited she forgets to score and doesn't like to upset anyone by telling them they're out.' He fixes his glare on Lucy. 'Except when it comes to me, of course.'

'You were out, Dad, we all agreed,' Eamonn reminds him.

'And Dan, we need you too.' Bert is not about to let anyone get away.

Audrey decides to make the best of it and stay.

They rest for a time in the cool living room, which is draped with shiny gold and silver streamers, interspersed with foil faux lanterns. A Christmas tree stands in front of the window, flashing lights that synchronise with tinny-sounding carols. The children unwrap their gifts as their mother oohs and aahs. Audrey feels the herald of a headache. The plum pudding sits like a musket ball in her stomach. Janice takes the tired children away for a nap. The conversation lapses, but no-one attempts to make much of an effort. Audrey notices Bert nodding off once or twice. Her thoughts drift to the old drop-log slab hut her great-great-grandfather had built from a single turpentine tree in the early

1800s, in the paddock across the road from her present house. There is no air conditioning in the slab hut, just a natural flow-through ventilation to catch any breeze. She can't imagine the two young women who now inhabit the slab hut firing up the slow-combustion stove to cook a dinner of the proportions that Lucy had produced. Perhaps they are lazing on the veranda listening to their music. And what might they be eating? Some simple but delicious fare, Audrey imagines. Seafood brought from Sydney, served with a fresh salad and strawberries—maybe even a glass of champagne or those fussy cocktails that young women favour these days. She can't help wishing she'd been invited to spend Christmas with them instead, but no doubt they would not think of asking an old fogey like herself to join them.

Jeremy and Jemima bounce back into the living room, re-energised and ready for action. Audrey checks her watch and discovers that an hour has passed since lunch.

Bert stirs, stretches and rouses the others. They trundle outside to the wicket marked out earlier. At least it's shaded by the house now. Dan is first in to bat. He scores run after run until it becomes a matter of honour to catch him out, which Eamonn pursues with particular determination and vigour. Bert is in next and is out within minutes.

'I'm sure that wasn't out,' he complains to Audrey, his face a deep shade of crimson. 'Didn't have the sun in your eyes, did you?'

She looks over at Dan. There's something about him that bothers her. It is inexplicable, but there it is.

Audrey leaves the Dwyers' place for 'Lasthope' as soon as she can decently escape. She follows the road that snakes through the gully with the original twists and turns made by the tracks of the bullock wagons that carried off the coachwood and red cedar. Though the bullocks and the loggers have long since disappeared, the track has been used by wallabies and kangaroos, cattle, horses and then the many different vehicles they'd acquired for the farm. Now the road is divided up and leads to strangers. She calls in to see the young women in the slab hut, but the door is padlocked, the place deserted.

Back at home, she gives Henry his festive lamb shank. His tail wags furiously as he carries it off. Her thoughts drift to Christmases past; from as far back as she could remember, when Christmas morning arrived she had helped catch the plumpest chook.

Her grandmother hadn't the stomach for the axe, so she would sit in the outside dunny with a piece of stout string. Audrey's task was to shepherd the chosen fowl into the dunny and shut the door. Usually it was a young rooster just finding its voice. Grandma would slip the string around its neck and garrotte the unfortunate bird. There would be raucous clucking followed by silence. Grandma would emerge, dangling her victim. She chopped off its head and feet only when the bird was still.

The carcass was hung before being dunked in boiling water and then plucked. The giblets and neck were removed and saved for stock. Once the chook was prepared for cooking, Audrey would pick the vegetables from the garden and bring them in and wash them. A plum pudding made some weeks earlier, soaked in medicinal brandy and wrapped in unbleached calico, hung from the ceiling. Audrey knew that Grandad wouldn't knowingly allow brandy anywhere near the pudding. 'Not a drop of liquor has ever passed my lips,' Grandad would boast, as Grandma passed him trifle she had laced with sherry. The same few Christmas decorations and a nativity scene were brought out year after year to signal the occasion.

Grandad would fire the old Kookaburra stove, then fiddle with and fuel it until it was hot enough for Grandma's liking. Then he, her father and brother went off to work until the signal came for lunch because, Christmas or not, there was always work to be done. For this one special day, she was assigned as Grandma's assistant. Though the temperature in the steamy kitchen soared as the oven and hobs on the Kookaburra fuel stove kept the pans baking and pots simmering, it was still more exciting to do something different from the usual routine on the property. The traditional lunch would be served on a starched snow-white damask cloth with matching napkins, embroidered by Audrey's mother who had not survived Audrey's brother's birth. They were brought out only on that one day of the year as a mark of respect and then carefully laundered, wrapped in tissue and stored away. Audrey only remembered her mother from photographs and anecdotes.

Despite fatigue, Audrey fusses about instead of going straight to bed. She is puzzled by her dreams lately. She's not given to vivid fantasy, as a rule. She'd had a few sleepless nights and the odd haunting dream around the time Mathew had died and again when she'd agreed to subdivide and sell most of Rockbeare, but each time her restlessness had settled as life went on. Her current dreams seem much more real—and

unnerving—and their frequency is beginning to alarm her. She can't put her finger on a particular causative reason. What is a dream anyway? Like most largely unexplained phenomena it depends on one's point of view. A Freudian psychiatrist, a Jungian psychotherapist, a neurologist—all have differing opinions. Then, of course, there is the plethora of uninformed but strong opinion, the charlatans, the prophets, the fortune-tellers and the well-meaning amateurs. She finds it difficult to believe in universal symbols—why would symbols be universal? Surely each individual has a personal interpretation of the symbols they dream up? She wishes she knew what hers meant. They began just before Christmas and are now almost a regular occurrence. What does it mean? she wonders. An important message from her subconscious mind or a neurological meltdown?

She has heard listeners calling dream experts on late-night radio programs and has sometimes speculated about the caller's imagination and storytelling skills; some of their dreams are beyond bizarre. Thankfully her own dreams, while worrying, are not in that league. Yet, still, she can't shake off a sense of unease.

On impulse, she removes the cloth covering her gramophone, a fine piece of furniture. She hunts out a 78 r.p.m. record and winds the gramophone handle. Winifred Atwell caresses and flirts with the piano keys as the strains of 'Black and white rag' fill the room. There is an overlay of scratchiness, an occasional hiccup where the scratches run deep. She has been to see Winifred—live, in person, as they say these days without a trace of embarrassment—in Sydney. Her mother's brother, Uncle Ellett, was a fan and had taken Audrey with him to a performance. She'd been young, perhaps eleven or twelve, maybe a bit older or younger. Uncle Ellett had been trying to persuade her to learn a musical instrument. Her mother, he had told her, had played the church organ with skill and just the right amount of emotion and she could turn her hand to the pianoforte. It had been bittersweet to hear these fragments of her mother's life. She could not imagine her mother playing music at Rockbeare. It must have been a different place then. Her grandmother had once sung hymns in full-bodied voice, Uncle Ellett had added, but that had ceased from the day she had received the news of the death of her second son.

How this place has changed over the years, she thinks. So slowly, so seductively, so insidiously. It's worse than selfish, it's futile to want her corner of the world to stay

the same. If she can spend what is left of her life here in Rockbeare, with her wits about her, she really can't ask for anything more, she decides, but then realises that the Rockbeare she means is the old Rockbeare, where she could be at peace. Perhaps life is merely a dream, she muses. In which case death might mean waking up—now wouldn't that be a surprise?

The only light is shed by a small lamp on her study desk. The air is like warm treacle. She stretches and fetches a small enamel basin and half-fills it with cold spring water pumped from the creek, adding ice from the freezer. She pours a glass of iced tea from a jug in the fridge.

You mustn't think about it, her father had always barked, as they worked out in the relentless heat, in open paddocks and along fence lines, you mustn't let the heat get to you. The year her brother was killed in Vietnam they had not celebrated Christmas at all. Her resolution the following New Year was to make it point of honour not to give in, no matter how far the mercury rose. Even when Alice, her best friend and helper, returned to lend a hand, Audrey refused to concede. She was consumed with guilt for being female.

What would her father say to her now if he could see her standing in the kitchen with her feet in a tub of ice-cold water and an iced tea in her hand? Even at eighty he had trudged off in his work boots and flannelette shirt and overalls, every day in all weathers and never saw a doctor until the pneumonia killed him at eighty-two. Just like his father, he never smoked, never drank alcohol, except when tricked by Grandma, and ate with gusto. She remembered his paddies after she met Mathew Beaufort at the Royal Easter Show in Sydney. Mathew had encouraged her to drink spirits and beer after they were married. He was passionate about everything, her father, behind his dour facade. Her father eventually warmed to her husband when he realised that Mathew was happy to live on the property and even pitch in to help when required. It meant that he wouldn't lose Audrey, after all. Mathew's salary as a surveyor for the Lands Department helped them through the lean times, too. Though she had lost her best friend, Alice. They had stayed in touch for a time but then life took over and slowly they'd drifted in different directions. Alice might not even be in the country. She could

be anywhere—England, Spain, Sydney—because in some people's lives new horizons opened up unexpectedly while other lives, like hers, narrowed.

What would her father think of her now? Alone, childless—most of the farm sold off. 'I'm the end of the line, Dad,' she murmurs. All that wishing and a-hoping has come to nothing.

Henry sounds the alarm and the ghosts flee. She hears a four-wheel-drive vehicle coast up the driveway. She looks out the window and sees that it is Dan's battered red Landcruiser. She wipes her feet dry with a small towel, then calls out to quieten Henry.

'Dan—whatever brings you here?' she asks as his lean, lanky frame appears in the doorway. And thinks, not for the first time, that he looks as if he could do with a good feed.

'Glad you're still up—have you got a minute?' He is carrying a bunch of bright Christmas bush, which he thrusts at her.

She lets him in, relieved that she is still properly dressed, even if the cuffs of her pants are still rolled up.

'Do you need any work done on the property?' he wants to know. 'I'm thinking now of staying up here for a month or so.'

Audrey looks again at his well-kept hands. 'You're going to stay in the barn?'

'It's in pretty good nick now, inside anyway. I'll fix up the outside as I go, though it would almost be worth leaving it as it is, if only to enjoy the cat's-bum mouth that Lucy Dwyer makes every time she sees the place.'

'Didn't Bert say you already have a job?'

'Yes, I already have paid work. I'm offering to give a hand, if needed. You know, good neighbours and all that…' Dan strolls over and picks up a photograph on the sideboard. 'You have family?' he asks.

'My late husband. I'm a widow.'

He holds the photograph under a light. She waits while he studies it, wondering what it is that he finds so fascinating.

'I'm sorry,' he says. He seems reluctant to put it back.

She holds out her hand and he takes one last look at the framed print before giving it to her.

'I suppose you must miss him out here on your own?'

‘Why do you ask?’ Once again she finds him intrusive. ‘No. I’ll tell you why. You pity the poor old dear out here all on her own. Well, don’t waste your time.’ She puts the photograph back on the sideboard and finds a vase for his offering.

‘Why would I pity you? You look like you’ve everything you need.’

‘Why would you indeed?’ Audrey snaps at him, as she brings the vase to the kitchen table. ‘I’m perfectly capable of spending Christmas and any other day in my own company. Just because my husband died—’ Her fury seems to erupt from nowhere. ‘Died and left me. Died right here. Right here on Christmas Day.’ She thumps her hand on the table. ‘Just because Mathew died doesn’t mean I can’t spend the day—’ inexplicably she is silently sobbing. She tries to pull herself together.

‘How did it happen? Your husband’s death—if you don’t mind me asking.’ He glances over at the photo on the sideboard.

For some reason she isn’t able to fathom she finds herself telling him. ‘Collapsed. Heart. I got him going again, for a bit, heart massage, you know the drill.’

Dan nods, his body still as stone, eyes intent.

‘But it was Christmas—I don’t know—accidents elsewhere—not enough staff rostered—It all came out at the inquest—I called and waited—called again—waited again—it seemed forever I sat with him trying to keep him alive—I remember worrying about the joint of pork roasting in the oven—trying not to panic—I even made deals in case there was a God. Naturally there was no response.’ She looks up at Dan. ‘In the end there was no response from Mathew, either. When an ambulance finally arrived, the paramedics pronounced him dead. I called the local undertaker—he was one of Mathew’s friends. I said I wanted him left here for a bit.’

‘You sat here on Christmas Day with his body?’

‘There was a fuss, of course. Nobody wanted to be responsible for *that* decision—what with the heat and the flies and whatnot. All sorts of people had to be called, of course, but the single staffed police station had just closed and the nearest town police were otherwise occupied. The doctor, too, was unavailable. The understaffed hospital didn’t want to take him. The undertaker, or funeral director as he prefers to be called, owed Mathew a favour or two—so he helped me out. We kept Mathew here for as long as possible. Then there had to be a post-mortem and an inquest—the undertaker made

quite a respectable job of Mathew for his funeral—I saw him before they closed the lid—Would you like a beer? I don't know why I'm rambling on like this.'

The Christmas bush is trembling in her hands as she tries to fit it into the vase.

Dan wants to ask: didn't you even have a friend to sit with you? Instead he says, 'I can see this isn't the most convenient time. I won't hold you up any longer.' He stands near the door, slouching slightly as if he might bump his head on the architrave. His eyes take in everything, Audrey notes and the phrase 'casing the joint' pops into her mind for no good reason. She is glad of Henry's presence.

'Night, Audrey. Sorry to have disturbed you.'

She stretches tight, tired muscles. It unsettles her to find she is aware of Dan's presence long after he has gone.

Art Works

Dan decides to take a walk down to the creek and see if he can find the opening to the cave he so nearly found last week. He fills a couple of bottles with water, wraps them in a towel and throws them into his backpack. The sun is climbing in the sky by the time he reaches the creek. He takes a dip in the water to cool off and then tries to find his bearings. The shadows are falling at the wrong angle and the gully refuses to give up its secrets. He decides to hang around and wait and watch.

The longer he spends there the more he's convinced that he's not alone. Whose presence can he sense? He keeps his eyes peeled but doesn't glimpse any movement in the vicinity. Even the wallabies usually grazing near the creek are absent. The grass must be too dry to give them nourishment, he guesses. He stands stock-still in silence. It's as if he's the only person on Earth. He notices a small bronze lizard glinting in the sun like a sculpture on a rock. It's as if time has stopped down in this gully. His skin tingles and the hairs on his arm stand up. All of a sudden, the heat and silence seem oppressive. Though a hot sun is blazing directly overhead there's an eeriness permeating the landscape. He tries to shake off the feeling but it persists. He feels alone and vulnerable though he has walked here by himself before. He senses tension in the atmosphere. He can't put his finger on a reason for his unease today, it's simply one of those sensory perceptions that people refer to as uncanny. He is undecided whether to go back or whether to stay. He decides superstition is silly and he'll go on to find his cave. He wishes he'd brought some snacks. Rather than wait in hope that the sun will reveal

the cave entrance again, he returns to where he last saw it, wades across the creek and begins the steep climb upward.

He moves in a pattern, methodically covering the rock face horizontally as well as vertically. He has been climbing and scrambling for over two hours when he sits on a boulder to drink some water. As he lifts the bottle to his lips and tips his head back, he sees what he has been searching for. He gulps the water and screws the lid back on the bottle. 'Eureka!' He yells.

He hoists himself up over the rocks until he is standing at the entrance to a cave. He can see the floor of the cave is covered with a deep layer of sand showing the tracks of native wildlife. He moves in cautiously in case the cave is inhabited. Inside, he is disappointed. The cave is shallow and bare of any decoration bar the animal prints in the sand. His shoulders sag. He sits on the floor of the cave, which at least is cooler than outside, drinks some more water, then breathes deeply and tries to quiet his thumping pulse. His adrenalin is running rampant today. He tries a few minutes of meditation to refocus.

After a rest, he leaves the cave to explore some more of the steep slope. The late afternoon sun is throwing long shadows over the gully, he turns back for home. He is sliding and slipping down the slope when he almost falls head over turkey down an overhanging rock. He grabs a sapling to slow his slide and manages to drop down to the ground safely. As he looks up he sees he has tumbled over the opening to another cave. Inside the cave it is dim. He wishes he'd brought a torch. He makes a mental note for next time: tucker and torch. The cave is large and deep behind the deceptively slim entrance. As he stands there on the sandy floor he feels some sort of faint vibration. His scalp prickles. He pulls himself

together, takes another swig from his water bottle and explores the cave. As his eyes adjust to the lights, he sees faint outlines on the walls. The longer he looks the more evident they become. He can see thick red ochre lines running along the base of the wall, as he stares the lines turn into a snake. Now, he can see its head and can follow it back to the tapering tail. A large kangaroo appears and some smaller versions – maybe wallabies? He can see hand prints on the roof of the cave. 'Awesome!' he whispers. 'Mate, this is awesome!' He spends some time in the cave examining the rock art. His very own gallery—maybe the work of the artist who left his ochres and grinding tools in another cave near the creek. He realises with a start that the sun has almost sunk to the horizon. It's time to take his leave. He scrabbles around outside the cave for charcoal to mark the rocks so he can find the cave again. He spots a coiled death adder and retreats cautiously to a safe distance.

Feeling like Hansel in the fairy story, he marks his passage back to the creek, working up a sweat by the time he wades across the creek to head for home. The fading daylight still has a sting to it and he is drenched in sweat by the time he reaches his barn. He's shaking with excitement by his day's discoveries of treasures beyond his wildest dreams. The thrill of his find chasing away all memory of his earlier sense of menace and misgivings. He wants to tell the world of his awesome discovery and keep it all to himself at the same time. His instinct tells him to wait until he has calmed down before doing anything rash.

Shelter from the Storm

In the morning, Audrey's curiosity gets the better of her again and she decides to pay Dan a visit. She takes Henry in the ute with her.

Dan has almost finished unpacking his belongings and arranging them inside his barn when she arrives. The building is airy with a high ceiling. He is standing with his hands on his hips, surveying his domain. He can hardly believe it all belongs to him, he tells Audrey. There is a partition of pine boards at one end with room enough to set up a trestle table and put his primus stove, gas lamp, plastic bowl and water containers on top, for a makeshift kitchen. At the other end of the barn he has unfolded his futon and director's chairs and stacked his books. Along the walls are boxes and bags still waiting for a home. Here, Dan feels he has found his home at last, he says. The house he share-rents in Newtown is mainly for convenience. He unpacks a couple of soft drinks from a mini-fridge in the back of his Landcruiser, offers one to Audrey. He raises his shiny cold can to his new abode.

'No decorations, I'm afraid. It's modest and sparse but it's all mine, well mine and the bank's, and I'm looking forward to staying here as often as possible,' Dan says as he looks around. 'Buying this property is only the first step of my journey.' He mutters, 'I've no idea where the journey will take me or what I might find out along the way.'

'The water tanks are full and once you've connected the electricity from the power pole, you should be all set.' Audrey is keeping to practical matters.

'It must have been strange when your family first arrived here in the valley, completely isolated and without any services.'

'One can be isolated even with services', Audrey says. 'Though I agree, it must have been a challenge. We had no electricity but we did have a phone when I was young – a party line shared by all the local residents through a telephone exchange. It was quite entertaining but impossible to have a private conversation – and no calls after

eight p.m. when the exchange operator went off duty. So in one sense there was isolation, but it was also the case that everyone knew everyone else's business – and what they didn't know they invented.'

'The world may have changed, but people haven't.' Dan says.

'I imagine in your profession you see the full spectrum of human behaviour.'

'Too true— and it never ceases to amaze me.'

'Is there anyone special in your life?' Audrey asks.

'Not right now, no. Another reason for making some changes.' He grins. 'I've been told that I'm in a rut. It made me think about what I want in life.'

'And that is…?'

'In one word: connection.'

'To?'

'At the moment—this block of land.' He sees Audrey's quizzical expression. 'It's a start, isn't it?'

'It is,' Audrey agrees, suddenly understanding what he means. 'I've always had a strong connection to this land, that's why I've never left. Not for any great length of time.'

Dan nods. 'That's something I've yet to experience. I'm intrigued by what you told me earlier about those magic places, Audrey. I think I've found one of them, not far from the creek, you know. It's like an artist's workshop. And further up, cave art, too.'

'You have to search, it's the only way to find those special caves. Even when you've found them and been inside, it can be almost impossible to find them again. They're obviously meant to remain hidden. Some have cave art, how ancient I couldn't say. Others, though, look empty until you sit in them for a while. Slowly shadows appear and then shapes become noticeable. It takes some time for the shapes to become defined and then you find that a seemingly empty cave has gradually turned into an art gallery.'

'You're joking?'

'I found them first as a child but I've experienced these things as an adult, too. It's a strange phenomenon but it's real enough. Just as real as the menacing and malevolent atmosphere I've found in one or two other particular places.'

'You really do know this place backwards, don't you?'

‘When I was young, children were allowed to wander and amuse themselves. We were allowed to discover things for ourselves.’

‘It sounds pretty dangerous.’

‘Only for someone who doesn’t know the lie of the land. I’d already tramped every inch with my grandfather and father so I knew my way around. Those caves are the only bit of terrain that ever had me baffled. I don’t believe in God or religion but I certainly am willing to believe in spirits of some kind after my strange experiences out there.’

‘I think I’ll take a look around tomorrow, you know. The side of the mountain that rises up from the gully where we found the artist’s cave is still thick bush and undergrowth.’

‘I’ll let you get on with things.’ Audrey says, not wanting to outstay her welcome. She calls Henry, who is busy sniffing around, then heads home.

‘What exactly do you think Dan does?’ Lucy asks when she drops in on Audrey unexpectedly. ‘He seems to just turn up at any old time … and what is he doing over there, I’d like to know?’

‘As far as I know, he’s fixing up the barn. It has white ants, according to Dan. So he’s probably treating the timber and shoring it all up. I would keep away if I were you.’

‘For Pete’s sake, whatever for? Anyone can see that shed needs pulling down.’

‘Only someone from the city would consider a barn a blot on the landscape.’

‘You don’t have to pass it every day coming and going.’ Lucy purses her lips.

‘I remember when Dad built the barn that’s now Dan’s—I was only a child. The old barn was destroyed in a bushfire. I can still see Dad up on the top nailing the roof on. My heart not exactly in my mouth but stuck somewhere in my throat as I watched in awe. It’s about twenty feet from the ground to the roofline—and, of course, I was small. I was tremendously impressed and not a little bit scared—Dad seemed to walk on thin air—he wasn’t, obviously, he was standing on bearers and joists. Funny how things come back after all this time.’ Audrey is surprised at her own sentimentality and even more by the rush of such strong feelings. She hopes she isn’t becoming senile.

‘And that dreadful tumbledown excuse for a building on the plot of land across from Dan.’

‘That’s a magnificent example of an early drop-log slab hut, Lucy. Built from turpentine. You won’t find any white ants in that.’

‘It looks as if a big puff of wind will blow it clean away. If you ask me…and certainly those young women didn’t last long there.’

‘That slab hut has stood there for nearly two hundred years. Great-great-great-grandfather built that for his bride; it was their first house. The barn didn’t go up until the nineteen-fifties but both have withstood their share of the elements.’ But it’s obvious to Audrey that Lucy has no understanding and certainly no affection for the crafts of history and will never comprehend how anyone could prefer a two-hundred-year-old turpentine-slab hut to a brand-new yellow-brick-veneer bungalow, and Audrey feels she has wasted time enough. ‘Each to their own, then, Lucy.’

‘Tell me, do you ever hear music?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Every now and then I’m sure I can hear music.’

‘Perhaps it’s the wind.’

The Dwyers have bought the worst parcel of land on offer, in Audrey’s opinion and she knows the land as well as anybody. Nothing but old cattle paddocks, featureless, except for a dam in the lower paddock surrounded by a few hardy trees. The Dwyers have built their yellow-brick-veneer edifice in the middle of an open paddock, and there it sits like an exposed chancre. No wonder they had to buy air conditioners. Audrey remembers Christmas lunch. ‘It won’t be so bad once you plant a stand of shady trees,’ Dan had said. Lucy was horrified. ‘Oh, no,’ she had said. ‘We don’t want trees—they’re such work, always dropping leaves and sticks. Don’t you find it hard work picking up all that leaf litter?’ Audrey had nearly choked on her baked potato. Now, as she remembers the exchange, her mood rankles. She feels distinctly out of sorts.

Audrey cannot seem to settle to anything, neither can she relax. She has tried working off her irritability, but after several hours she is still edgy. She feels electricity in the air, a storm on the horizon. She puts on her walking shoes, takes a small flask of iced tea from the fridge, checks that Henry is securely attached to his long chain on the veranda, refills his water bowl, tops up his biscuit supply and heads off down the track from the house.

She bypasses the old barn, now Dan's barn, and roams the property to the base of the steep rise. Clouds begin to drift together, but do nothing to relieve the heat. She keeps going until she comes to the creek. Downstream, she uses a tree that has fallen across as a bridge. She stops midway to dangle her feet in the water that flows from a spring and bubbles over rocks. She cups the cool liquid over her head, face and neck. She takes a long draught from her flask and walks confidently along the log, just as she did when a child. Once across, she begins to climb the steep slope.

It's a long time since she's walked with no particular purpose. She notes the changes. How dry the bush is, even after the recent downpour. She listens to the rustling undergrowth. She notices birds wheeling across the sky. She has climbed nearly two-thirds of the way up to the ridge. Thunderclouds are forming over the ridge top as she turns to make her way down the slope that descends to the creek. A zephyr streaks through the treetops. Leaves swirl about her head. Heaving clouds congeal in a dark-blue clot, which changes to a greenish hue. She watches as a seething mass of cloud convulses, coiling and re-coiling, then squeezes up into a kind of mushroom shape; she can see the updraft that forms its stem.

She should go back, every instinct tells her so. Audrey shivers, though her skin is dripping from her exertions. A thunderclap shakes the earth. Treetops creak and sway, bending before a great gust of wind. And from the earth she can smell the odour of scorched soil before rain. Such folly. Why hadn't she turned back sooner? Why had she been so stubborn, so driven to walk outdoors? She well knows the risks. To walk and walk with no thought of the consequences is something she would never tolerate in others. She scrambles down the steep slope, keeping her eyes open for shelter in one of the caves gouged into the ancient sandstone that forms the gully.

She looks up. The heavens are swirling in giddying eddies of grey and indigo cumulus nimbus and at its massive centre that weird greenish glow. She stands mesmerised, face upturned to the sky. She can't recall seeing such an angry sky and is fearful of being out under trees in this foul weather. The sense of unease that has lately pricked at her gives way to genuine awe. The forces of nature are not to be trifled with. She hasn't lived this long in the bush without learning that much. Who does she think she is out here exposed to the elements? Who does she think she is fooling? Is she now mad enough to contemplate taking on all that the elements can unleash?

Find a cave. She knows there are many dotted about these steep slopes. One cave had revealed small hollows with traces of paint and grinding stones, which had crushed ochre, left carelessly as if the artist might return at any moment. She has never told anyone about her secret discoveries and has never disturbed them, only sought them out when needing solace. Yes, she will find a cave and take shelter as others have sheltered for millions of years; she'll be safe—if only she can recall where. She had always come upon the caves quite suddenly, she remembers, and could never distinguish them once at a distance. She grabs at a low branch and pauses to take a breather. There is a flash and a crack as if from a monstrous whip. She loses her grip and her feet slide on leaf litter; she skids on her bottom over sticks and stones and mulch. As she grabs at a sapling and regains a foothold, another brilliant flash throws everything into silhouette for an instant. She realises she has lost her flask. She lets go of the sapling and again a preternatural whip cracks. Then the heavens let loose a deluge that stings as she claws at the earth, slipping and sliding on her hands and knees. She feels splinters of ice before she sees and hears them striking the ground. Hailstones, gaining in size and momentum, strike her with chilling blows. She grabs at another sapling, pausing again for breath, shielding her head with her forearm, and sees the dark shadow that betrays the opening of a cave.

Glowing green sheet lightning illuminates the landscape, changes to pink then back to green again, bathing everything in its alien glow. The ground trembles as a great rumble rips through the gully. Hailstones fall thick and fast. She edges her way across the slippery rock face; stones loosen underfoot, and roll down into the gully below, as she gropes for the entrance she knows should be there. For a few seconds she panics in case the shadow had been just that and no more, then she feels an edge, a gap in the rock face, and slips in out of the maelstrom.

She leans against an interior wall, chest heaving and breath rasping. She hears a creaking sound as if the cave is restless. She tries to tell herself she is being idiotic, letting her imagination, egged on by fear, take the reins. The cave creaks louder and she can hear a strange humming sound. Lightning flashes right into her sanctuary; she sees movement and jumps. She feels disoriented, as if the chaos in the elements has upset the equilibrium of this land and set malevolent spirits free. Another brilliant flash illuminates the cave. From the corner of an eye she sees movement, dark figures

dancing and leaping in the shadows. She shakes her head and covers her eyes with her hands. She hears the inevitable thunder crack. As she takes her hands from her eyes, lightning flashes in quick succession. She sees the dancing figures flickering like an old movie reel. Disembodied hands stretch out as if in warning, then she notices a snake that seems to flow the entire length of the cave. A strong vibration travels from deep within the earth right up through the cave floor. Audrey wills herself to think of normal everyday things.

When that strategy fails, she remembers a poem by Huldah Turner. She had gone to a stock sale in Newcastle and later had found the poem on a pamphlet in a gift shop.

She hears a mighty roar that sounds like jet-plane engines and cowers against the rock wall. She tries to recall the words of Huldah's poem[1].

> Walk into a long and narrow valley, carved out many million years ago … Through this lowly scrub, a curving line of river-gums, will mark the way – creamy trunks, twisted and gnarled…a level time-crazed ledge spreads out, fretted, pitted, worn to a dull mosaic by water, wind and rain … Walls of jagged rock stand sentinel, around the sacred crouching cave … Over the concave fire-abraded wall, the dreamtime Rainbow serpent coils, dusky-red, it weaves a way, through upturned ochre-stencilled hands. Etched and carved from base to arch, on a painted web of lore and ritual, warriors hold high, long spears in battle victory, hunters triumphantly, bring home the kill – , kangaroo and emu, reptile, bird and dingo.

Huldah could have been writing about this very cave. Was it warriors she had seen? Is she the prey? Is that throbbing humming the sound of 'tribal incantations'? Is this how it feels to lose one's mind? Or has the poem somehow taken hold of her?

[1] *Quotes from poem: *Mootwingie – Snake Cave* by Huldah Turner © 1994, Nimrod Publications, New Lambton, NSW, Australia. ISBN 0 909242 34 8. A copy of this poem was given to me by the late Huldah Turner. I have included it because it allows us to share the experience through the perspective of an Indigenous poet. https://uoncc.wordpress.com/2010/04/14/huldah-turner-writings/

> … you will see, angularly dark against the night, naked dancers leaping all together … awesome complex shadows, flung in quivering patterns, intricately moving, over watching walls, the coiling snake flickering life-like in the night…

She moves slowly and gradually to the cave opening and peers out.

The wind has gathered force to gale strength and is lifting tussocks of kangaroo grass, which tumble on the thermal currents. The sky is gangrenous. She sees then, bearing down from the ridge top, some kind of gigantic willy-willy; watches incredulous as trees are tugged, twisted like corkscrews and lifted into the air; huge branches and all manner of leaf, bark, stones, rocks, bush litter, tiny animals thrown up into the air and sailing along as if the laws of nature have been suspended. The roar is deafening. Her chest tightens, as if a python is squeezing her organs. In a phosphorescent flash, she sees a figure appear. It's human. Before she loses consciousness she recognises who it is. 'Mathew,' she tries to gasp as her chest constricts. 'Mathew, I'm so glad you have come.'

When she comes to, she thinks at first she has lost her senses. Then she remembers the cave. It is cold and dark now; in the eerie stillness there is complete silence; when she coughs the sound echoes. She remembers the storm, the snake, the dancing warriors. She remembers Mathew. She calls his name.

'Audrey?' A reply comes back.

Audrey catches her breath. 'Mathew,' she calls again, her feeble voice full of hope.

She hears a match strike. 'Are you all right?' The voice holds a note of urgency. 'Damn burnt my finger.'

It isn't Mathew's voice, she realises. Who is it in the cave with her?

'Who is it?' she ventures, suddenly afraid, vulnerable in the dark.

'It's Dan. You know who I am, don't you, Audrey? Don't be afraid. It's only Dan here to help you.' He strikes another match and holds it high. His face is closer than she realises.

'Of course I know who you are, what do you take me for? I lost my way, not my marbles.'

'That's more like it. You had me worried for a minute.'

‘What the hell happened? There was a storm, hail, wind so strong it was snapping the treetops, lifting them and tossing them into the sky, then the lightning struck again and I saw figures jumping at me.’

‘I think you might be concussed.’

‘Perhaps they didn’t jump at me, but they were there all right. I was twitchy, I admit, but I saw what I saw.’

‘I want to check your pulse, if you’ll let me. You’ve had quite a fall, by the look of these scratches and grazes, and a fair shaking up by the sound of it.’

‘I don’t need a nursemaid; I’m fit as a fiddle.’ A tremor runs through her body. She has a mental image of people traipsing over her grave. She feels deathly cold.

‘Were you dizzy at all before you fell?’ Dan, too, is dripping wet and muddy into the bargain, but still warm from his exertions. As he holds Audrey’s arm he notices that it’s as cold as a cadaver.

‘The lawyer has turned doctor, has he?’ She remembers the python squeezing her chest. No need to make a fuss, she decides. ‘There was a fair-size snake in here, too.’

‘You called out for Mathew.’

‘Yes, I remember. I thought I saw him—another trick of the light, no doubt. These caves are strange places. I’ve known that ever since I discovered them as a child: some of these caves have a curiously charged atmosphere. Some I recall had a distinctly malevolent feel about them.’ She feels the rock shelf hard beneath her and shifts position to get the blood flowing in her veins again. ‘I never wanted to revisit those; they were oddly repelling. A snake chased me once in one of them. I’d gone in despite the hairs standing up on the back of my neck and that sense of foreboding; I stepped into the cave and a snake reared up and chased me out. I was only young, of course, but I’ve never forgotten it.’

‘You’ve had a bit of a scare, one way and another, haven’t you?

‘Why is it so quiet?’

‘The eye of the storm. It’s like a moment suspended in time, isn’t it?’ Even as he utters the words, the wind begins rushing up the slope to howl around the cave.

‘I wish we had a flaming light,’ Audrey growls, hardly able to believe that on top of all her other foolishness she had not thought to bring a torch or matches. ‘Didn’t think to bring a torch?’ she asks Dan.

‘I dropped it, went careering down a slope and the damn thing slipped out of my daks and went rolling away. A few fishermen’s matches are the best I can do.’ He goes over to the wall of the cave and lights a match; as he lifts it up and down he can see the cave paintings. Though unable to take in the whole at one time, he can make out a large figure and smaller figures of native animals, though some are faded and naively painted. He lights another match and crouches down. Running the length of the cave wall near the floor are etched long ochre lines that might, if he could see it all, give the impression of a snake.

As the wind shudders and moans outside, whipping aside branches, tearing away bark and leaves, he can understand how the lightning might have affected Audrey’s vision, making it appear as if the figures moved. She could have mistaken the large kangaroo for a human figure.

‘Optical illusion, I’d say.’ Dan lights another match just for comfort. As the thin light flickers over his face, Audrey catches her breath. He has Mathew’s chin. Why hasn’t she noticed this before? The shape of his eyes is also similar, though Dan’s irises are a darker brown. She knows this isn’t possible but as the light fizzles out she knows that she knows what she knows but how this can be so, she does not know. In the dark a thought circles her mind.

‘Why have you got Mathew’s eyes?’ she demands of Dan.

‘Are you all right? You aren’t seeing things again, are you?’

‘I want you to answer my question. You have Mathew’s eyes; they are exactly the same shape, with that little droop in the corners. I can’t understand why I haven’t noticed it before.’ Though she suspects her subconscious has known all along, has known and tried to keep it from her, which explained the sudden jolts of unease and flashes of recognition that she can’t explain any more than the phenomenon of Mathew’s eyes.

‘I don’t think this is the time. You’ve had a nasty shock, quite an ordeal, in fact …’

‘Don’t patronise me, Dan.’

‘I’m just worried. You’ve had a fall. God knows what damage you’ve done and no decent light in here to see and at——’

‘Go on—*at my age*.’

‘Even you have to admit this is not a good situation. It does seem to be letting up a bit outside but even so——’ As he speaks the noise outside drops from a deafening roar to a tolerable din. The hail ceases but is followed by sheeting rain. ‘It’s a super storm cell,’ he shouts.

‘If I’m going to be stuck in this cave till I die, I think I’m at least entitled to ask questions.’

‘You do exaggerate.’

‘Nevertheless——’

‘Nah, yeah, I don’t want to go into it now. Not here—not after all you’ve been through.’ He checks her forehead with the back of his hand.

‘I’m not feverish. I want to know and I want to know now.’ Her knees buckle when she tries to stand up. She feels drained of all energy. Her body is numb. She slides down to the ground.

Dan watches, unsure of what she wants him to do; he makes scuffing sounds as he shifts from foot to foot.

‘How can you possibly have Mathew’s eyes and chin?’ It was Dan she had seen in the cave entrance before she fainted, she realises.

‘You’ve had far too many shocks for one day—and we still have to make our way back, if this bloody wind and rain will let up for a spell. It’s pitch black outside.’ Dan’s voice vibrates around the cave. ‘I saw you earlier, well saw someone in the distance. When the storm blew up I realised somebody was out there, you know, on my property. I waited for the worst of the storm to pass over, then came out to check. I had no idea you were in here. It’s pure luck that you picked this cave for shelter. I’d spotted it on a walk last time I was up here. It’s the only cave I know how to find.’

‘How old are you, anyway?’ Audrey demands to know.

‘What?’

‘How old are you?’

‘I don’t know what that’s got to do with anything, but I’m thirty-four.’

‘Then you must have been born before Mathew and I were married.’

‘What? You’re not delirious again, are you?’

‘Please, Dan. For God’s sake tell the truth. I can take it.’

‘I don’t know for sure what the legal marital status of my father was at the time,’ Dan says wearily. ‘But you’re right—Mathew is-was my father. I don’t know what happened with him and my mother. It’s my guess that it just didn’t work out.’

‘You mean you knew that when you bought this property?’

‘My mother died some years ago without revealing the identity of my father. She told me only that he provided for me. My mother’s sister ended up telling me the story about two years ago. I’ve been trying to track Mathew down ever since. Just to put a face to this mystery man, you know. I wasn’t sure if I even wanted to speak to him. Just to see, you know.’

‘To see if he was worth anything?’ Audrey says with contempt in her voice.

‘That’s unfair, I knew nothing about him or his circumstances. My mother’s only contact was through a solicitor. It’s only natural, don’t you think, to wonder about your own gene pool? I’m thankful to have had a good education. As you can see I have no problem buying my own property. I’m not looking for handouts or to con you or anyone else.’

‘You’re a liar!’ Her voice trembles. ‘You’re no more a solicitor than I am. You’re nothing but an opportunist. I knew from the first, knew it in my bones, I didn’t trust you from the start——’

‘Calm down, Audrey——’

‘I’ll not calm down!’ she shouts. ‘I will not.’

‘It’s the shock, it’s just the shock. I’m sorry I never meant to scare you.’

‘You did. You did mean to. All along you meant to. You’ve been scuttling about, setting up your web of deceit, waiting for the right moment to spin your lies.’ She is groping for the floor again, rising to her knees. ‘You inherited Mathew’s eyes, that’s what you’re trying to tell me, is it?’

Dan is silent.

‘Well, isn’t it? It’s all filthy lies—Mathew would never have abandoned a child, not even a bastard child.’ She crawls across the floor on her hands and knees to where she thinks the opening of the cave should be.

‘Audrey?’ She hears Dan scraping a match along the box.

‘I don’t feel safe in here with you,’ her voice rasps, as she crawls out of the cave.

Out in the open, she feels the rain once more sting her face. The wind blows through her wet clothes. The night is dense with the darkness of the bush on a moonless, starless night.

'Audrey!' She hears Dan roar.

Only faraway sheet lightning, flashing on and off like Christmas lights, impinges on the gloom. She tries to concentrate on how she will get home again. It exhausts her just thinking about it. There are mounds of unmelted hail on the ground. She ought to keep moving, she knows; her entire body is shaking and she can do nothing to stop it; but to try and find her way in this evil dark is too risky. Rocks and bushes, even trees, have been loosened from the soil by the rain and hail and the willy-willy to beat all willy-willies. She can take a risk of falling and killing herself in the dark or at least breaking several bones—or staying put. Since she hasn't the wherewithal to move, she decides to stay. She longs for the clouds to pass so she can see the Southern Cross; to die under the Southern Cross would at least give her some small satisfaction.

She doesn't want to believe Dan's tale. It's a fiction—made up by a con artist trying to trick her out of her land. Pretending to be related! But then there are his eyes—there is no mistaking his eyes—but he is not hers, he is not hers. She sinks onto a flat boulder and rocks back and forth. Why couldn't Mathew have sired a daughter? Perhaps she could have accepted a daughter—but a son? Men in her life had a way of disappearing; she isn't sure she wants another on the scene this late in life.

She lifts her head and, mustering what's left of her energy, she shouts into the wind, 'Why did you come here? Why did you buy this land? You must have known there would be complications.'

Dan has found her but she refuses to acknowledge him.

'Audrey you can't go off alone, you'll bloody kill yourself. I swear I don't want anything from you.'

There is silence.

'You're so comfortable with your heritage, your proud lineage—what do you know of my life? What do you know about having your identity ripped out from under you? What do you know of spending your life wondering about where you came from and where your family is? All I wanted was to have a connection, to the land, to my

father—however tenuous. Is that so much to ask?' Dan is trying to keep his anger and frustration under control.

Audrey remembers the way that Dan had held on to Mathew's photograph, reluctant to let it go. She thinks of her mother, remembered now only from photographs and anecdotes. The people she has lost mean more to her than losing her land. The only reason she had kept a small portion of the property was because of the connection to family. That is what she couldn't bear to lose.

'I just can't accept that Mathew had a child while I was denied that. Even worse, a male child. If you were female perhaps I'd be more willing to accept you.' Audrey's voice is little more than a whisper.

'You want me to wear a dress?' Dan tries to lighten the tension.

'No Dan, I'm tired and confused—and yes, feeling my years. I want to go home. Henry will be missing me and no doubt fretting by now.'

'You can check out everything I've said with Mathew's solicitor. You don't have to take anything I've told you on trust. Are you at least willing to trust me to walk you home now?'

'What have I got to lose?' Audrey looks up at Dan; she feels drained of all resistance. 'If you can't trust family, who can you trust?' There is resignation in her tone.

'You don't expect me to answer a loaded question like that, do you?' he asks wryly.

He is surprised to hear a dry laugh from Audrey, or was it a cough?

'Ready?' she asks.

'Ready when you are.'

In the early-morning light, Audrey feels the dead weight of sadness pressing on her. She seems to be making little headway through the all-enveloping fog. Her limbs seem to have lost their sense of purpose and she flounders like a fly in syrup. She is sure she no longer has substance, is merely a collection, an arrangement, of atoms trying to get from here to there. When at last she manages to sit in her chair she feels not relieved, not relaxed, merely defeated. Weary and defeated. And ready for the world to continue on

without her. For now she cannot even begin to imagine being weightless and unfettered. She recalls a Wilcox poem. *There Comes A Time*, that was it.

She dozes for a while before noises outside disturb her nap. Her eye catches a movement through the window. She watches as Henry limps slowly up towards the fence line and settles himself among the mangled iron and twisted steel a few feet away from Dan, who is winding the fence strainer until the wire stretches taut around new star posts and binds them securely.

Sunbeams stream through the window, warming Audrey's bones and her flesh. She feels as if a curse has been removed, a shadow lifted. Rockbeare had been a place of death and loss for too long. Now new life will take root, a chance for new beginnings and new growth. She knows that one day she will be gone, but Rockbeare will live on and evolve and change with the years and the seasons and the generations to come.

Alice Returns

Audrey lies on the sofa unable to move. A paralysis of the mind—for her body is willing but her brain won't co-operate. She feels completely drained of life. She has become a rock. A grey lump of heavy matter, impervious; and locked inside—compressed into the smallest fissures—anger, guilt, fear and hatred—invisible, immeasurable, untouchable, unreachable but there just the same. And the weight of these keep her immobile.

How could it all have turned out this way? When she had been so sure of her life. So sure that she knew what was what. But nothing is as it seems. Nothing. And she has lost everything. The land her ancestors had toiled to cultivate, the child she should have borne to inherit, her husband—lost, she can see now, long before he breathed his last at the kitchen table. There seems no end to her losses—even the town is disappearing like a mirage—and she feels the weight of it all.

Through the fog of her mind she realises a dog is barking. Her dog, her dog—she must somehow force herself—she tries but cannot. She remains a grey rock.

There is noise. Voices, is it? A low murmur—or just the wind moaning through the eucalypts? She is aware of light and warmth. Does a rock itself feel light and warmth as we feel it in the rock? she wonders. Can a rock absorb sound?

This blend of light, warmth and murmuring is soothing. Perhaps she is dying. Isn't this the kind of thing that Kubler-Ross described? Or perhaps it is merely her brain closing down, as some claim happens. Whatever it is, it isn't so bad. She can just be. She can simply exist and nothing more. She feels a sense of relief and drifts out of consciousness.

'She'll be all right now for a while. This will settle her for a good few hours, I expect.' The doctor packs up his bag. 'I know she lives alone so I'll arrange for a community nurse. She'll need care for now at least. Can someone stay with her until the nurse arrives?

'Sure,' Dan offers.

‘She’ll rest now, but she’s bruised and battered and suffering exposure and shock. She’ll be sore and sorry when she wakes fully. The community nurse should be here by then, so there shouldn’t be any problem.’

‘Shouldn’t she be in hospital?’

‘The chance would be a fine thing,’ the doctor answers. ‘We’ll see how she goes with the nurse. If her condition deteriorates or there’s no significant improvement I’ll see if I can find her a bed in a Sydney hospital.’

‘Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,’ Dan says. ‘Audrey has an old friend in Sydney. I’ll see if I can find a contact number for her.’

‘Here’s my phone number,’ the doctor says, handing him some business cards. ‘If there’s any change or you’re really worried about her, call me. You can leave my card here for the nurse if you wouldn’t mind.’

‘Thanks Doc,’ Dan says and accompanies him to the car.

Bert sets Audrey’s dog barking when he pulls up outside. Dan opens the door. ‘Glad to see you’re all right, mate,’ Dan says. ‘How’s the rest of the family?’

‘Same here,’ Bert says. ‘We’re all fine. We had the grandkids staying with us for a spell. Scared witless they were, as the saying goes, with all that thunder and lightning. Lucy’s a bit shook up but she’ll come through. Hell of a mess outside, though. What’s going on here? Audrey all right, is she?’

‘She’s had a bit of a rough time,’ Dan says.

‘She all right?’ Bert asks again.

‘Basically, yes, but she was out when the storm broke and she passed out. She suffered exposure and a few bumps, bruises, aches and pains, according to the doctor,’ Dan tells him.

‘She’s seen a doctor, then?’

‘He left not long before you arrived. A nurse is on her way; I’m just holding the fort.’ Dan indicated the teapot. ‘Cup of tea?’ he asks.

‘Don’t mind if I do, mate. Since two of the people I was going to check on are here,’ Bert said. ‘I could do with a nip of something stronger, as the saying is, but tea will suffice. Didn’t have a chance at home. No sooner had I checked outside than they

packed me off to do the rounds of the neighbourhood. It's a bit hazardous out there. There's debris lying everywhere. I should suss out the road if a nurse is coming.'

'Right.'

After Bert leaves to check on the road, Dan tidies up. Audrey's journal is lying open on the kitchen table, as though Audrey was making new entries before she left the house earlier in the day.

Dan leafs through the pages. He realises it's not one of the journals that Audrey has shown him before, with the facts and figures of the farm, but a personal journal recording her private thoughts and feelings. Dan makes herself comfortable in one of Audrey's armchairs and begins to read through it.

Audrey is still sleeping when the nurse arrives, though the occasional moan sounds from her lips.

'You'll find everything you need,' Dan says, closing the journal and slipping it into the drawer of Audrey's desk. 'I hope you don't mind if I leave, it's been a rough night.'

'Of course, it was good of you to stay with her,' the nurse says.

Dan uses clues from Audrey's earlier journals on her bedroom bookshelf, and his contacts in Sydney, to track down Audrey's old friend, Alice. Alice is shocked to see Audrey looking so fragile, but pleased to see that the slab hut has escaped relatively unscathed. It had hung on just as it had weathered storms for nearly two hundred years. It would need a new roof and guttering, the chimney fixed and a window had been cracked by a stray hailstone, but it had survived. She's sad, though, to see it so neglected.

'Not a single birdcall in the minutes before that storm broke. It was eerie,' Dan says.

'What about your place? Are you insured for hail damage?' Alice asks.

'I have insurance but I'm not sure what it covers. I wanted a hideaway, a sanctuary, to think, to put my ideas and emotions into perspective. I hadn't got around to practical aspects.'

‘And you a lawyer. It’s the same with builders and doctors, so busy looking after others they neglect their own.’ Alice searches for two mugs. ‘No milk in the fridge,’ she adds.

‘It sounds like a cliché, I know, but what I’ve discovered draws me to this place even more.’

Alice finds a canister of tea. ‘How come?’

The tea is brewing in the pot between them as they sit at the table.

‘One day when we’ve lots of time I’ll tell you what I know, which isn’t much. Possibly no-one but Audrey knows of the existence of some of the cave paintings and sacred sites in this area.’

‘Sacred sites?’ Alice sounds horrified. ‘That could mean losing your land, could it not? Audrey’s father once told me if I ever found one to shut up and tell no-one.’

‘Why don’t we have a bite to eat?’’ Dan says. He searches the fridge for something he can rustle up in a hurry. ‘Once you’re all set up, I’ll leave you to it.’

‘Stay here,’ Alice offers. ‘I insist. At least it’s dry and comfortable—I can make up a couple of beds. Besides, truth be told, I’m a bit spooked. If a strong wind springs up I’ll be under the bed quick smart. Come on, you deserve it after all you’ve done to help.’

‘All right. Since you insist.’ Dan feels relaxed now and is looking forward to a meal, no matter how simple it might be; anything to curb the hunger pangs.

‘I’ll put the radio on,’ Alice says. ‘See if there’s any news.’

‘Did you know Audrey kept a diary?’

‘Oh, those journals of hers? She’s written in her journals since even before I met her.’

‘I found a kind of personal diary, not like the others with all the records and statistics. There are all these notes about us all.’

‘What kind of notes?’

‘What we do and what she thinks of us and stuff.’

‘You’re joking?’

‘Nope. It’s in the top drawer of her desk.’

‘Do you think you should be reading it?’

‘Nope. But once I’d started and realised what it was, I couldn’t put it down. Do you want to take a look?’

‘No, I don’t think so. It’s a bit like eavesdropping, you know, you’re sure to hear no good about yourself. I think I’d rather not, thanks.’

‘Spoilsport.’ Dan grins.

‘You’re not really going to read any more of Audrey’s journal, are you?’

‘Well if I do, I’m not going to tell you, am I?’

‘You could let me know if there any juicy bits,’ Alice says with a chuckle.

‘See! You’re just as curious as I am. You’re just not game to do it yourself.’

‘You’re absolutely right. But if I were you, I’d think twice about it, too. Remember what I said about what you might find. There’s always a fly in the ointment.’

‘All right. All right. You win. I’ll mind my own business. Satisfied?’

‘To good mates,’ Alice toasts her success and sips her tea.

Bert's Road

Lucy turned onto the Rockbeare road. The car shook as she traversed the corrugations that had appeared on the unsealed road. She slowed down but still the car bounced all over the road and she had trouble hanging on to the steering wheel. She didn't like driving at the best of times and hated this potholed, corrugated strip of dirt. She wondered why she ever agreed to leave their comfortable suburban home for the sticks. Everything was so convenient before they moved here, she failed to see how living in the country could be as relaxing as everyone tried to make out.

She gripped the wheel as she followed the bends in the road and felt thoroughly shaken up by the time she turned into her driveway. She called it a driveway though it was little more than a gravel-covered dirt track leading up to the house. Her legs felt wobbly when she got out of her car.

'Bert!' she called, as she opened the front door of the house. 'Bert, where are you?' As usual, he was nowhere to be found. She supposed he was pottering around outside somewhere. She unpacked the shopping and put it away.

'Ah, you're back,' Bert popped his head into the kitchen. 'A cup of tea would be nice.'

'Yes, it would.' Bert failed to notice the sarcasm in her tone. 'You have got to do something about that road,' Lucy demanded.

'What d'you mean?'

'My car is going to fall apart if it keeps shaking and rattling the way it does. It's all I can do to keep a grip on the steering wheel.'

'It's not that bad, is it?'

'You don't even notice it in your ute with the you-beaut suspension and great thick tyres. You should take a drive in my car and see how you like it.'

'Well, I don't know what we can do about it.'

'Ever since we had all those heavy vehicles coming and going, with supplies to build our house, the road has been a shambles. There are a couple of potholes you could lose yourself in, and those corrugations are impossible.'

'I'll check with the council and see what can be done.'

'If you don't it'll cost us a fortune in car repairs.'

'I said I will, didn't I?'

'Good, then.'

'What about that cuppa?'

'I've only got one pair of hands, Bert. I've put the jug on; just give me a minute, will you?'

'Any biscuits?'

'Bert!'

'I was only asking.'

'I hear the post office is in danger of closing,' Lucy told Bert when she had made the tea and found the biscuits.

'You don't say.'

'Yes, Coral is thinking of selling up and moving away.'

'You'd think it'd be a little goldmine, being the only one for miles around.'

'It probably needs streamlining,' Lucy said. 'It's old-fashioned, isn't it? It's dingy and dark. I bet it hasn't been redecorated in years. It's not what you call welcoming, is it? A nice bright paint job and some window-dressing, as they call it, would make all the difference.'

'I wonder if they'll attract much interest in the business.'

'About the road, Bert…'

'At least we're not going to have all kinds of strangers coming and going, up and down our road with the state it's in.'

'For Pete's sake, Bert!'

'I said I will see what I can do. Have patience, woman.'

'You tell that to my car.'

By the time she had prepared and cooked dinner she was worn out. She stared at the dirty dishes for a few minutes before filling the sink with hot water and detergent. She had finished washing up and had just made a pot of tea when Bert ambled into the kitchen and stood behind her.

'I thought we might have an early night,' Bert said. Lucy knew this comment was his version of foreplay. She pulled a face at the teapot. She dawdled as she tidied up and checked all the switches were off and the locks turned, but Bert was still waiting for her

when she finally went to bed. As he grunted and panted like an animal in pain, Lucy thought about suitable material for some new cushions for the sofa. Before she could make a decision, Bert rolled off and was soon snoring.

Audrey and Henry led a parade of brown-and-white Poll Hereford steers. Audrey rode her elderly horse, which habitually followed in the footsteps of those before him. Audrey with her fly-switch and Henry with his tail swished away the flies.

They had not travelled more than a few metres when a ute came speeding out of the driveway across the road. It skidded as the driver tried to brake too quickly and the car fishtailed, stirring up a plume of red dust, before the unseen hand on the steering wheel recovered control.

'You bloody idiot. What are you doing with bloody cows on the road?' Bert roared.

'Language, please!' Audrey shouted.

'For Christ's sake, I could have been killed.' Bert is out of the ute and tying to tower over Audrey in an attempt to appear threatening, but he is too short. His opaque sunglasses cannot hide his glowering face.

'But you weren't. You look perfectly all right to me. It doesn't do to drive so fast on rural roads. You might care to slow down in future.'

'It's a private bloody road. I don't expect to find cows on *my* private bloody road. Can't you shut that dog up?' He raised his foot in a futile kick.

'Actually it's a right of way. Slightly different interpretation, I think you'll find.'

'I bought my property with *my* private access. I didn't see anything in my contract about sharing it with cows. How long is this cow thing going to take anyway, for Christ's sake? I don't have all day. I've got important work——'

'I understand perfectly, but it's a bit difficult to explain your important work to the steers. You'll have to be patient. It doesn't hurt, you know, to take time out, as they say. Enjoy the break, take five.'

'Good God, you people are unbelievable. Unbelievable!' he shouted.

Two of the yearlings chose that moment to lift their tails.

The expression of horror on Bert's face was a picture. '*And* sodding cow shit on the wheels,' he yelled as he slunk back to the womb of his car.

Audrey found a message from Bert on her answering machine, to say that he wanted to hold a public meeting. Audrey wanted nothing more than to sink into her sofa with a good book, but if Bert and Lucy were going to put their heads together she knew she ought to be there to keep her finger on the pulse, so to speak.

When she arrived at Bert's meeting she could tell her presence was having the effect of inhibiting the true flow of discussion.

'Mind if I smoke?' the local councillor asked, as he drew a silver cigarette case from a pocket of his jacket.

'You'll have to do it on the veranda,' Lucy told him. 'It might be more secure if we had a gate across the start of the road,' she added, as she searched for an ashtray for the councillor.

'You could always get a dog, Lucy, if you're worried about security. A gate up the road isn't going to afford much protection, in fact it's likely to give you a false sense of security and encourage carelessness,' Audrey warned.

'I see your point,' Lucy began, but withered under Bert's glare.

'What good is a gate going to do?' Audrey asked again.

'It's a deterrent!' Bert shouted. 'It makes people think twice.'

'If it would really do that, I might agree,' Audrey argued. 'But in my experience that's another furphy.' If it made people think once, it would be worthwhile, Audrey felt. 'I can't see why you bothered moving here.'

'I have every right to live wherever I choose.'

The councillor, forgetting his instructions on where he could smoke, lit up right in the living room.

'You certainly do, but what gives you the right to move in and start changing things to suit yourself? You surely bought the place because you like it as it is.'

Bert looked at her as though he thinks she is mentally defective. He shook his head. 'It's not what's here that's important. Any investor knows that. It's the possibilities on offer that count.'

'In other words you bought it for what you can exploit from it?'

'I wouldn't put it as crudely as that. Sure, it's a nice place but it's also a wise investment. Look at it this way, Audrey, if you kept up with the times, if you understood economics, you wouldn't be in your position.'

'I beg your pardon.' Icicles dripped from Audrey's words. 'For four generations my family has produced from this land and contributed to the wealth of this country. It's the madness of economic rationalism and the intention to drain every drop of lifeblood from the rural sector that has brought about this ruination. Too many farmers have gone to the wall for it to be entirely our fault. The economists and multinationals must take some of the responsibility for their actions, for lifting tariffs, for importing cheap rubbish in direct competition with our farmers. You call that a level playing field? I think the umpire is asleep.'

'You have to react to how things stand now—change is necessary, as the saying is, it's obvious,' Bert insisted.

Lucy kept looking for an ashtray as the growing worm of ash threatened to fall from the councillor's cigarette.

'Change for the sake of change is madness. Blind Freddy can see this method is not working. All over the world economies are collapsing, unemployment is rising, people are suffering terribly, but the high-flying experts are so dazzled by their own notion of brilliance that they are incapable of seeing what's under their very noses. Tell me, Councillor, how can putting farmers who feed the country out of business be a good thing for anyone in the long run?'

'It's a global economy, Audrey. We can buy food from anywhere in the world—wherever it's cheapest and most accessible—just the way you choose the cheapest supermarket to shop.' The ash fell; the councillor ground it into the carpet oblivious to Lucy's horrified expression. She handed him an ashtray and he deposited the smoking butt.

'Australia is an extremely isolated continent and an island. It's not astute management, in my opinion, to rely on the world outside for our basic needs. Did we learn nothing from the lessons of World War Two?'

'That's simply old-fashioned isolationist thinking. Look at Dan, he didn't come here to be a real farmer, did he? He bought to speculate on the land prices, I'll bet. Yes, one day I hope to earn a little something from my land,' Bert agreed, hitching up the

waistband of his shorts. ‘Meanwhile, it’s a nice life—so it’s partly an investment, partly for the lifestyle, as the saying is.’

‘What about you, Lucy?’ Audrey prompted.

‘It seems to me that Audrey is saying that if things are maintained properly and wisely there’s no need to fix what’s not broken. While you two seem to believe that everybody ought to go out and invest in the latest, newest, whiz-bang idea or gadget, that way mending or maintaining becomes obsolete; you simply follow trends and keep reinventing.’

Bert was dumbfounded.

‘Good for you, Lucy.’ Audrey applauded. ‘In a nutshell.’ She couldn’t help noticing that Bert was impressed, though he blustered on about inconsequential matters to cover his amazement.

‘We’ve digressed a long way from the road situation,’ Bert said abruptly.

‘I don’t believe we have a road situation’ Audrey looked Bert straight in the eye.

Bert tossed his head. ‘No mail delivery, no newspapers, no garbage-collection service and that dreadful track you refer to as a road. Call this civilisation?’

‘There’s something to be said, you know, or maybe you don’t, for solving one’s own problems and clearing up one’s own messes.’ Audrey rose from her chair, ready to leave.

‘Bert has never cleaned up after himself in his life. Do you know he won’t even stub out his cigarettes because he says it makes his fingers stink? He leaves them to burn away in ashtrays that somebody else will empty or drops them on the ground outside.’

Bert was struggling to control the meeting. ‘I’m fully within my rights to hire a crew to fix the road and bill you for your share—and to put a gate across the road and bill you for that, too.’ He glared at Audrey.

‘Go right ahead,’ Audrey said with honey in her voice. ‘But don’t expect cattle to admire your new road. A gate across the road is not necessary and an impediment, so I shall take it down again, as is my right. Goodnight, all.’

The councillor carefully stubbed out the remains of his second cigarette in the ashtray, then sniffed his fingers before collecting his belongings. Before he followed Audrey outside, he stopped and turned to Bert. ‘She’s a formidable opponent, you

know. Her family are well-known and well-connected around here. I wouldn't rile her up too much.'

Audrey was disturbed by Bert's argument, particularly when the councillor seemed so inclined to agree with him. As she drove home, she turned over the conversations in her mind. *It seems Rockbeare is now an investment and no longer farming country. It matters not any longer whether we feed ourselves or no. If we cannot do it, someone else will, and not only that but do it faster and cheaper. Quality and taste have become simply aesthetics—no longer an integral part of the experience of eating. Like a lot of lemmings, we all rush forward to embrace nothing. I think I have made an enemy of one of the lemmings and I don't like the look of his teeth.*

'She isn't so bad, Bert,' Lucy said afterwards as they sipped their cocoa.

'Not so bad. She disagreed with everything, silly old windbag. And you—,' he turned to face her. 'Egging her on. My own wife. There's loyalty for you.'

'I wanted to be sure I'd understood what she meant.'

'Understood! How can you understand that twaddle?'

'Well I did, Bert. She said so.'

'Talk about bite the hand that feeds you,' Bert snarled. He went in search of the newspaper he'd picked up in town that morning.

Lucy put untouched peanuts and pretzels into Tupperware. She had hoped for a jollier affair with everyone putting aside their differences and behaving like good neighbours. She thought they would at least make an attempt at being civil.

She turned on the tap to wash up the nut dishes, glasses, cups and saucers. It was so much easier sometimes to go along with things. What would be the point of expecting Bert to change? She remembered when she'd had a short spell in hospital once. Her son, Eamonn, had told her later in mournful voice of how Bert had burned the potatoes for dinner every night—except for the last, when he'd served up a mound of soft, snowy mashed potatoes. Eamonn had taken a mouthful and nearly choked, they were saltier than the Dead Sea, he'd said.

She set the table for breakfast. Bert at the head, of course, and to his right was her place. She wouldn't have minded if Bert washed up occasionally, but he would never think to offer and she couldn't be bothered to ask again. Bert wouldn't hear of buying a dishwasher. 'I've a perfectly good one already,' he liked to say with a smug smile. She'd heard dishwashers were disappointing anyway. She thought of the many meals she had served up to Bert. Chops shrivelled in the pan—just the way he liked them—beans and carrots, goodness knows how many potatoes boiled, the gallons of gravy she had made. The meat and two or three veg and gravy served up every night just as the fanfare sounded for the ABC radio news. Every night she poked her head through the kitchen door and called out for Bert to come to dinner. Even though it was always served at exactly the same time, she still had to call before he turned up at the table. Some nights she could scream with the frustration. But what would be the point?

Every night after the meal was eaten Bert wandered off to watch television. Lucy cleared the table, stacked the crockery, glassware, pots and pans, ran the hot water, pulled on her rubber gloves and wondered—surely anyone could wash up, couldn't they?

Audrey thought about the bizarre exchange long after she returned home. Are humans getting soft? Or is it that time has somehow sped up without anyone noting the phenomenon, so that there was no longer time to solve one's problems and clean up one's own messes? The slab hut had been built from one enormous turpentine felled on the property, most of the furniture had been crafted from coachwood or cedar that had long ago been logged out of the valley.

She remembered her grandparents. Theirs had been a harsh life, yet they had loved the bush to death. The chores were never-ending but the days had somehow accommodated that and more. When they were too busy to stop, she had worked alongside them helping to plant, or pick, or shell peas or saddle horses or whatever task was at hand, whenever her small hands could be of use. There had rarely seemed to be any hurry—just a steady working away until a task was complete, then on to the next. They had grown and made everything they ate and most of what they wore. Shawls and blankets were knitted from the spun fleece of the few sheep and goats they had bought.

Meat came from any one of the domestic fowls or beasts or from trapped fauna. Dripping from the fat of animals to cook with and to provide tallow for lighting. Bees for honey, wax and candles. Everything done between them with their own four fair hands. Then came more hands, four sons in all. One killed felling a tree, two lost in the Great War. Her grandfather and the youngest son, Audrey's father, had kept the farm going. These days, Audrey often bought her daily bread and froze it; and had found in the supermarket all kinds of shortcuts to cooking, now that there were no objections from Mathew or her father. She had electricity, pumps, irrigation, motors, vehicles, machines, refrigeration and a whole town of shops and services nearby. Still the chores seem never-ending. She could not see how this could be so.

'How're you coping with the DTs, Audrey?' Coral asked next morning at the Currawong post office as she fetched Audrey's mail.

'The DTs?' Audrey repeated, puzzled. She examined the envelopes and packages that Coral had handed to her.

'Deadly Trendies. Pitt Street Farmers, we used to call them. All those city types with nothing better to do than create trouble. More money than sense, half of them.'

'I do sometimes wonder why they come. They seem so intent on changing everything.'

Audrey called Dan, as soon as she returned home and read her letter.

'What do you think? I've had a legal ticking off—Bert has had his solicitor send a letter about cattle blocking his right of way on the road. He intends to collect payment for grading the road and I'm to pay a portion of the cost for a gate across the road at the intersection. Did you ever? Bare-faced cheek.'

'What do you reckon you'll do?'

'Write a letter instructing my solicitor to tell the king of the castle exactly where he can put his right of way. I know well from the many fights in this district, that there are as many precedents for, as against, just about any property access, road complaint and gate proposal ever made, but it isn't his road and he has no exclusive claim over it. As a matter of fact, the easement is on my property. My boundary stretches to his fence.'

By week's end, everyone in Rockbeare, including Dan, received a letter from Bert Dwyer.

Audrey was stewing over the official notice from Bert's solicitor to carry out fencing work under the *Dividing Fences Act 1991 No 72*; and requiring adjoining owners to contribute to the cost under this Act. The notice specified the boundary line on which the fencing work was proposed to be carried out and the line on which it was proposed to carry out the work.

The comment Bert had made about her grasp of economics still stung. She felt she was better informed than many. Though she admitted to herself that it was true that she had allowed Mathew to take over more and more of the running of the property and he had not always made wise decisions.

She reflected on the bean-counters who thought human resources were interchangeable. They must have sad lives, she decided. Somehow they had missed absorbing the diversity of life.

Then she thought about the banks and their Sheriff of Nottingham antics, the local branches disappearing and small towns with them. The local garage was closing down, even old Bluey's son, who could be said to be in Blind Freddy's league, sensed a change. He had put his property on the market last month, ready to sell up the garage his father had built up and left to him and which he had turned into a service station. It was pride ebbing away, that Bluey's son sensed. A man's pride or a woman's was what had always kept them going in these parts: pride in their efforts, pride in their produce and pride in their community, in the clubs, the CWA, the church, schools and even the pub. Wasn't that success? What else would you call a thriving community? Look at the disaster that was their town now. No bank, no garage, and the likelihood of no post office and general store. How could it all ever be rebuilt once it was gone? Where was the reward for decades of effort? Just who was the rationalising of the economy benefitting, Audrey wanted to know.

It was Bert who had not grasped the repercussions—who was taken in by superficial theories. The Emperor had no clothes, she wanted to shout. There was no substance to all this finery. How long did Bert think rural society would last if

remaining productive land was turned into resorts and retreats for the overworked and overpaid to experience a nanosecond of an illusion of tranquillity? Was this to be the fate of Rockbeare? 'Perish the thought,' she said aloud.

She returned to the notice from the solicitor. Bert, it appeared, was determined to erect gates across the entrance to the right of way to Rockbeare, where their boundary lines lie—almost at the intersection with the ridge road. 'You've got Buckley's and none,' Audrey said to herself as re-read the paragraph about how everybody in Rockbeare was to contribute to this hideous barricade—not that Bert's solicitor used anything like those terms to describe it. The estimated cost of the fencing work was astronomical, in Audrey's opinion.

Audrey drove to visit her legal expert. Malcolm was slightly younger than Audrey. His father, George Dean, had been the Rockbeare family solicitor. Malcolm had helped Audrey through the passing of both her father and Mathew, and had seen her safely through the process of subdividing and selling off her property. He eased her through the minefield of regulations and contracts, making sure it didn't all blow up in her face. He even saw to it that she retained the best portion, albeit only fifty hectares, so that she had a house and patch of land to her name and enough money to see her out, provided she was sensible.

She knew it meant a lot to Malcolm that it had all gone relatively smoothly. He would be upset to learn that he had not foreseen these troubles but, really, she thought, how can one protect oneself from sheer lunacy?

'I expect a letter will be sufficient to start with,' Audrey had said to Dan. 'It'll be better to proceed cautiously. To state that we are not agreeable, and that litigation could prove costly, may be enough to put an end to the matter.' She hoped this would turn out to be true, but had said it mainly to cheer herself up. In reality, Audrey expected that Bert wouldn't be satisfied until he had his own way. She knew his type.

'I've known you all my life, and you know me well enough. The land is my lifeblood—even as it shrinks like the veins that nourish my shrivelling body. All I ask is to remain at Rockbeare and end my days in peace; is that too much to ask, do you think?' Audrey asks the solicitor.

Malcolm manages a smile. ‘I’ll do everything I can, rest assured, Mrs Beaufort. I’ll have Father to answer to if I don’t. He finds his law books and quotes from the *Dividing Fences Act 1991 No 72*:

> An adjoining owner is not liable to contribute to the cost of any fencing work in respect of a dividing fence [if]:
>
> (a) carried out before a notice under this section is served on the adjoining owner (unless section 9 applies or the notice is served in accordance with section 22), or
>
> (b) carried out after the service of the notice on the adjoining owner and before agreement is reached by the adjoining owners concerning the fencing work (including the contributions to be made in respect of the work) or before the matter has been determined by a Local Court or local land board.

‘That means Bertram Dwyer can’t begin erecting his gate until agreement is reached. A letter stating that you are not in agreement should at least delay matters. I’ll draft your response right away and have your reply off first thing in the morning.’

‘You don’t want to seem to be too hasty,’ Audrey said. ‘George was a great one for taking his time.’

Malcolm winced. Perhaps he had heard this refrain too often. She really ought to let people get on with their work instead of constantly trying to look over shoulders. She leant over and patted his hand. ‘I’m sure you know what’s best,’ she said softly. ‘You have to remember I dealt with George for a long time. Old habits die hard.’

‘I really will do my very best to protect your interests,’ Malcolm said. He wiped his spectacles with a piece of paisley silk which he kept folded in a small purse.

‘Thank you for your time, Malcolm. I’m sure we’ll sort this out calmly and rationally.’ Audrey stood up, shoulders square, back straight.

Bushfire

The morning held a rare brilliance after a night of rain. It encouraged thoughts of riparian picnics and swimming in clear tumbling waters that rushed from mountain springs, and memories of the sheer delight of that first plunge that took the breath away.

Audrey stood on her veranda sipping a cup of strong tea and drinking in the wondrous moment. The beginning of a perfect day, if ever she saw one.

The telephone rang insistently; Audrey went inside to answer it, not for the first time resenting the intrusive instrument.

Lucy was in full flight as soon as she heard Audrey's voice. A picnic lunch, perhaps? Somewhere pleasant and secluded but not too remote.

Audrey, caught off guard and still under the influence of a champagne morning, found herself acquiescing. After last night's rain she could manage a couple of hours off. What could she contribute? As Lucy reeled off suggestions, Audrey tried to think of the perfect picnic spot.

'I'll bring all the plates, bowls, cups, cutlery and linen,' Lucy was saying.

Audrey remembered somewhere. 'Meet me here, I know just the place.' She interrupted Lucy's flow.

'How long will it take us?' Lucy wanted to know.

'Not long. Ten-minute drive or so.'

'We'll meet at your place then, is eleven-thirty all right?'

When Lucy arrived, Audrey told her that they would follow a rough track down towards the creek. 'You'd better come in the ute with me, Lucy. Your esky and picnic basket can go in the back.'

'But the dust,' Lucy protested.

'I'll cover it all with a tarp.' Audrey cut short her concerns.

They followed the track, which almost petered out in parts, to the furthermost reaches of 'Lasthope'. Audrey parked the ute and they carried the picnic paraphernalia to the bank of the creek, where a grove of shady trees stood with branches swooping low over the water and a small waterfall babbled nearby.

A wisp of a breeze ruffled tufts of grass. They relaxed on Lucy's blanket and drank coffee poured from a flask. Lucy had roasted a chicken to golden perfection. She had steamed tiny new potatoes and tossed them in warm butter and herbs, and baked bread rolls, all stored in matching Tupperware. Audrey produced a small bucket of shiny cherry tomatoes, a large salad with freshly laid hard-boiled eggs and a bottle of Barossa Valley chardonnay.

'What a banquet!' Lucy exclaimed, when it was all set out on the bright gingham cloth that she had spread over her blanket. She fanned her pink face and rummaged in her bag until she fished out a spray can. She sprayed a fine mist of insect repellent on all and sundry.

With the sun high overhead in a brilliant azure sky and not a cloud in sight, they let the day wash over them as they savoured the food with suddenly sharpened taste buds.

After sharing the gastronomic delights and fine wine, Audrey had the feeling, as she sat listening to Lucy chatter, that she ought to catch this moment and imprint it onto her very being. This rare moment of warmth and light. I am half-sick of shadows, she thought.

Audrey produced a yabby trap. When they'd had their fill, they strolled downstream alongside the creek, looking for a place to set it up.

'This creek used to be full of yabbies, I'd almost forgotten,' Audrey said. She had a photo somewhere taken with a box brownie camera. In the photo, she is standing beside a bucket, it was almost dark but just possible to see the yabbies she had caught that day using only a couple of rabbits they had shot earlier for bait and a net.

'How deep is this stretch?' Lucy asked.

'It varies,' Audrey called back. 'It'll be a bit low at the moment, probably not more than waist-high for the most part, but there are often submerged logs and branches and sudden waterholes where the creek bed drops away, so you can never be sure.'

Audrey set up a yabby trap by the edge of the creek. Deep green shadows slowly cloaked the eucalypt canopy, making stripes on the mountain opposite. After an hour or so, Audrey checked the trap but there were no yabbies. She decided to leave it there and check it again later on.

'I didn't realise the creek was so low,' Audrey said.

The sun beat down as they followed the watercourse that bubbled from mountain springs on the far side of what was now Lucy and Bert Dwyer's land. Slowly over the eons the spring water had worn away the soil and created a creek bed that had widened and deepened during the occasional full flood to become a water course, which flowed the length of Rockbeare gully and beyond. Today, instead of clear water, brown water moved sluggishly. Audrey had not seen the creek in such a bad state for a long time. Further upstream they found the problem.

The bush was quiet in the heat of the day. Even the blowflies were languid. Only the persistent bush flies were hanging around. The occasional bird flew from tree to tree and a westerly wind rustled desiccated leaves.

'Geez, we'll need the ute to dislodge this lot, I reckon,' Audrey said as they inspected the debris damming the creek.

A tree trunk had fallen across and formed a snag, upon which other debris had collected, effectively creating a dam wall that was retaining the water on Bert's side of the creek, where the water level was much higher.

Audrey worked at removing the blockage to allow the water to begin trickling through. The sun baked her back through her thin cotton shirt. Lucy attempted to give a hand. Their feet and ankles sank in the cool oozing mud of the creek bed. After an hour or so, they sat on the bank and picked off leeches from their feet and toes.

The westerly wind picked up strength. Brown leaves fluttered down from gum trees and whirled about before landing on the brittle undergrowth.

Clearing the debris from the creek was going to be one hell of a job. Audrey would have to come back with her ute; she hoped someone would give her a hand.

Lucy and Audrey packed up the remains of their picnic, reluctant to acknowledge that a perfect day must end.

'Don't you wish you could just bottle it?' Lucy said.

By the time they reached Audrey's homestead, the magic had already evaporated as each remembered the chores awaiting them.

It had been a morning to refresh the body and mind. It was as if a good fairy had waved a wand over the valley and conjured up a perfect day. The spontaneity of the picnic made it magical. Audrey couldn't remember ever having done that before and

would never have thought of it herself. Imagine Lucy being the one to think of it. It was a pity Alice wasn't here; she would have loved it.

Though Audrey noticed that Lucy occasionally pursed her lips when something offended her sensibilities, all in all they had both made a real effort to keep the mood relaxed and friendly. It was surprising how much the weather and atmosphere affected one's spirits. She wasn't sure if it was to do with positive and negative ions or atmospheric pressure, but it did seem to impinge on people's mood and behaviour. A day like today seemed to bring out the best in them both.

Bert was feeling poorly. The sun was blinding in a sky so clear and bright it hurt his eyes, not a single cloud to relieve the monotony of endless blue. The infernal heat irritated him. Now that a stable had been built, Lucy wanted a pony for the grandkids. She was even today going to an auction of horseflesh. His irritation and indigestion were not helped by the knowledge that the pony was not really for the grandkids, but for Lucy, who wanted to impress as many people as possible with her new country retreat.

Sweat stung his eyes and trickled down his nose. He lit a cigarette and drew harsh hot smoke into his lungs. He lounged against the newly built stable, shielding his eyes from the sun's glare. He enjoyed owning a country property, but the idea of it was more appealing than the reality. Always, always something needed doing when all Bert wanted was the leisurely lifestyle he imagined in his own vision—where somebody else took care of all the hard yards. He longed for a jack-of-all-trades to take care of all the routine chores. Bert could see this person in his mind's eye, chopping wood and stacking it in neat piles. His caretaker would know how to keep the pump free of air locks and make sure the water tanks were kept full. He would remove the garbage and household waste, grow a decent lawn and keep it mowed. Bert saw himself overseeing the running of the property, keeping the wheels oiled, as it were. Knowing what needed to be done and when, so he could organise his manager with authority. That's how it ought to be, he told himself crossly.

Earlier, a westerly wind had sprung up and was now gaining strength and working against him. He inhaled again before flicking away the butt of his cigarette He retrieved the list that Lucy had typed out for him and held it up. The hot westerly tugged at the

piece of paper. It waved like a white flag. Bert squinted into the distance as if he was expecting someone to turn up and grab Lucy's list and take care of it all. But there was no-one.

He licked his lips and tried to swallow. His mouth was so dry he felt he might choke. He went back to the house to pour himself a drink. His chest heaved. As Bert stumbled back to the house, he saw the leaves of gum trees drooping like closed umbrellas, to deflect the scorching heat.

After he had drunk a full glass of water and slowed his heart rate, he went back out to the stable. It looked smart and clean and smelt of newly sawn timber. A brush-cutter was stored in one corner with a small can of fuel. He remembered they were on Lucy's list. He was to move them to the new garden shed—which he hadn't yet erected because the instructions were beyond him. The westerly wind tugged at the stable door until it swung on its newly oiled hinges. Bert propped the door open with the fuel can. He carried bales of hay and sacks of oats inside the stable. He hauled the strap of the brush-cutter over his shoulder and tottered over to the garage, where he dumped the machine and took a breather. He lit up another cigarette, coughing as the smoke grazed his parched throat. He exhaled, blowing smoke at a cloud of flies, and leant against the garage wall, almost dozing off for a moment or two. He jumped as the cigarette burned his fingers. He decided he needed another break; it wasn't too early for a cold beer. He walked up to the house and discovered he was down to his last cigarette. He'd have to drive back into that pissy little town, named after some daggy bird. He hoped they carried his brand.

Neighbours noticed a thin stream of smoke thicken and rise straight up to the sky.

'Even a hint of smoke is worrying when everything is so dry and a hot westerly is blowing through the valley. I'd hate to see a fire start in these conditions,' Audrey said.

'What about the Dwyers? They always seem to be having a cook-up,' Dan suggested.

'Lucy told me she's terrified of fire and is almost obsessive about it out here in the bush. She's very fussy about dousing any fires properly, she even has buckets of sand for the smokers.' Audrey said. 'It looks as if might be coming from their direction,

though. We'd better call triple 0. Then give Lucy a call to see if everything is all right there. I'll have to be careful not to make her anxious, though. I'll just say that there's some smoke around and we want everyone to be alerted, just in case.'

'I can smell smoke, now,' Dan said.

Audrey tried Lucy's phone number several times, but only reached an answering machine. She looked out over the veranda that faced north. It didn't look good. She could smell smoke, now, as well.

By the time the fire truck from Currawong arrived in the valley with its volunteer crew, the smoke had turned dense and dark, as flames that had fed on leaking fuel and a wooden stable begin to creep along the crisp grass and undergrowth into the surrounding bush. The fire crew emptied their water tank and started pumping from Bert's newly filled swimming pool. The sky above turned an eerie orange as the firefighters worked to put out the fire in the oppressive heat. The stable had been reduced to a smouldering heap of ash, blackened timber and twisted metal.

Audrey and Dan went over to see what was happening.

'At least the house is saved,' the fire captain said. He called for reinforcements from around the district to help fight the spot fires that, having been ignited by flying embers, had now taken hold in the bush.

'They'll have to refuel the truck and refill the water tanks,' Audrey said. 'With this wind I'm worried about the fire getting away.'

Bert arrived and climbed out of his ute. His first reaction was shock and disbelief, followed by relief that the house was still standing. He puffed out his chest and strutted around importantly, while not quite knowing how to make his importance more obvious to the fire crew. He hadn't been able to reach Lucy and for all he knew she could be on her way right now with a pony for the grandchildren needing to be housed in the non-existent stable. One of the firemen was writing an on-site report. He had spotted the overturned fuel can, now charred and misshapen.

'I'm willing to volunteer to put out the bushfire,' Bert said.

'Have you had any training?' the deputy captain asked him.

Bert huffed and puffed.

'Have any of you had any up-to-date training?' the deputy captain repeated.

Bert was furious. He stamped off to his ute.

The fire captain took a list of names of local residents, and a record of who was staying where in case the situation worsened. Then he checked on the local water resources while he waited for the fire truck to return with fresh supplies.

The wind continued to strengthen, bending the branches of gum trees. The smoke behind Bert's house billowed in a thick cloud. The bush had well and truly caught fire.

The fire truck returned with the news that extra crews were on their way.

Audrey checked with the deputy captain before going home to sleep for a while; it might be a long night.

The fire jumped the creek and continued to burn behind Bert's place.

'We've decided to back-burn,' the deputy captain told Audrey. 'It'll take the best part of the night, if we're lucky.'

Bert arrived for an update on the progress of the fire and Audrey heard him draw a sharp breath. 'I can't believe they're thinking of setting the bush alight.' His voice betrayed a tremor.

'If the wind strengthens and the fire breaks the containment lines and gets away it'll happen quickly, so you had better be prepared. It's pretty unnerving, even when you've been through it before,' Audrey said to him. 'But in the bush where water resources are scarce, one strategy for fighting fires is to burn ahead of the front to starve it of fuel and try to stop it that way. The fire is showing no signs of abating, so back-burning is our best strategy.

The wind dropped as fire-tankers rolled down the road, heading for the fire front. The sound of their motors echoed through the eerie stillness of the valley.

'Ah, reinforcements,' the deputy-captain said. 'And hopefully in time. You must be sorry you ever sold this land, Audrey.'

Audrey watched the RFS tankers and heard the sirens, megaphones, the sound of static electricity interspersed with muffled voices emanating from hand-held radios. Disembodied voices echoed across the gully. No matter how many times she had to go through this nerve-wracking experience, it would never get any easier.

Back home, she leant on her veranda rail and listened to the continuous 'whooshing' sound that was the sound of either the wind or the fire, or both. The only noticeably absent sound was that of the wildlife that were usually out and about at night. She felt sympathy for all the poor creatures fleeing from long tongues of fire creeping

along the undergrowth. Grey and white ash floated in the air, as Audrey stood watching both fascinated and repelled by the eerie phenomenon of a bushfire.

The fire had scorched most of the flat land going down to the creek on Bert's place and the slope behind it, but luckily *Lasthope* had escaped the worst.

Audrey picked up the phone and called Dan. 'How are you doing, there?'

'All's well here now, but I got the distinct impression that Lucy thinks I had a hand in it.'

'Nobody has mentioned you in connection with it, as far as I know. You don't want to take any notice of Lucy, or Bert for that matter—he's all mouth and trousers.'

'Just so long as nobody jumps to conclusions with no evidence whatsoever.'

In the early hours of the morning, ahead of the predicted change of direction, the wind whirled around, whipping up leaves and dust in little willy-willies. She knew this was one of the worst times for keeping bushfires contained. The flames became redder and fiercer. The smell of burning assaulted her nostrils and she could taste smoke and ash in her mouth. She heard a whooshing noise racing up the gully again. Firefighters managed to keep the fire controlled through the wind change and keep it contained. Again, the slab hut survived. And then— seemingly from nowhere— rain!

Audrey was sure that there had been no mention of rain in the weather forecast, nor was there any sign of rain earlier. At first she thought it must be ash but it was definitely wet, it was indeed sprinkling drops of rain.'

'Send her down, Hughie!' she yelled. 'You beauty!'

Whether it was kinetic energy, the prayers of the residents, or someone doing a rain-dance, it truly was a miracle. A fine mist of rain covered the mountains and gullies before a downpour gave the firefighters a well-earned break. The fire was far from out, but a brief respite was more than welcome.

Later in the day when the rain eased, local residents turned up to survey the damage from the fire. Around Bert's property, the ground was blackened and the bark of trees scorched. Smoke was curling from smouldering logs and the roots of trees and shrubs.

One of the firefighters mopping up mentioned the fuel can he had noticed and had duly recorded in his report the night before. He told Bert and the fire captain that, in his opinion, the fire may have been a result of carelessness, rather than accident or natural causes. Bert was incensed. 'You're not blaming me for this,' he fumed. 'Bushfires happen all the time. Anything could have started it. It wasn't me. I was away when it started.'

'Are you suggesting that this is arson?' the fire captain asked.

'It could have been. There's all sorts with nothing better to do than create mischief. Anybody could have started it.'

'Arson is a serious charge. You had better be sure of your facts.'

'That's right, harass the victim,' Bert grumbled. 'Isn't that always the way?' He was far more frightened of what Lucy would do to him when she found out, than anything the law might come up with. 'Not to mention the mess you've made of my road with your vehicles.'

Dan arrived just in time to hear Bert's accusations. 'I'd be careful what you say, if I were you, mate,' he warned.

'Thanks,' Audrey said to the fire captain. 'The rest of us are grateful even if that fool isn't.'

'Donations are always welcome from satisfied customers,' the captain said. 'The crew will need to keep an eye on this for a few hours.'

'Bert can't be trusted, he's a complete lunatic, as you heard. But he can well afford a donation for your trouble,' Audrey told him. 'Why don't you mention it to Bert's wife, Lucy. I'm sure you'll find her much more co-operative.'

'Thanks for the tip.'

'And meanwhile Dan and I will keep an eye on the fire and smoke from my place, as well. Thanks for all your trouble.'

'If it hadn't been for you, it might have been a much worse situation. Maybe you should join the volunteer firefighters, Dan?'

'Not a bad idea. It takes some guts, though. I still can't believe those firefighters started back-burning in the middle of that bush in front of the fire. They deserve a bloody medal.'

In the aftermath of the fire, even the rooster stopped crowing. The landscape was parched. Behind Bert's property the land was burnt black. Audrey knew that in a few weeks it would regenerate with new green shoots springing up out of the baked soil. Then there would be an influx of wallabies, kangaroos and rabbits that can home in on a new blade of grass practically from the other side of the black stump.

She looked up and gazed at the horizon, then up at the bright-blue dome of sky above, squinting in the strong sunlight. Never-ending—the sky, the demands of the land, the challenges of nature. She would end—but the sky and the earth would be endless. Unless humans blow it up, of course, she reminded herself, bringing things back into perspective.

'What would it take to make you give up?' her friend, Alice, had once asked her.

'I don't think I'll ever give up,' Audrey had said. 'I'll die planting my cabbages. That's the logical outcome for me, don't you think? What alternative is there?'

It was different now, certainly, things had happened that she'd never expected, but she still owned her small part of the world—her last hope.

'Bert?' Lucy was in his ear on the phone. 'Can you hear me, Bert?'

'Yes, it's not terribly clear but I can just about hear you now. Lucy, I've been sent a summons.'

'What? A summons, Bert! A summons? What for?'

'For starting a bushfire.'

'What? They can't do that.'

'Apparently they can, Lucy. I have the summons right here. Does this mean I have to go to court?'

'That's what a summons usually means.'

'Will you stop using that tone with me, Lucy.'

'It'll probably just be a fine.'

'Did you say it will be fine?'

'For Pete's sake. I said you'll probably *get* a fine!' Lucy repeated

'Oh.'

'I'm driving back home and then we'll decide how to deal with your summons.'

'I could come to you there, I'm fed up with being here.'

'No, we need to do this there and I need you there because you're the one who was on the scene.'

'Can you bring something decent to eat, then?'

'I'll pick up some shopping on the way.'

'Thank God for that. I haven't had a proper meal in days.'

'You can think about food when we've worked out what we're going to do.'

After he finished the call, Bert decided he had better give fate a helping hand. He took a couple of cheap cigarette lighters bought at a local petrol station and a plastic bottle of lamp oil from the glove box of his car. He flicked the lighters a couple of times each to make sure they lit up. Then he wrapped the lighters and lamp oil in a hand towel and stuffed them inside his shirt and made his way along the boundary between his property and Dan's. He climbed the fence onto Dan's side about halfway down to the creek, where he unwrapped the towel, poured the oil onto the ground, wiped the plastic bottle and lighters and dropped the 'evidence' into the blackened undergrowth. All he had to do now was make sure that someone found it.

'We'll have to completely rebuild the stable,' Lucy said to Bert when she arrived home. 'Thank goodness the right pony wasn't at the auction. The ground is scorched, so that will mean hand-feeding a pony; it can't possibly graze now. The feed we had has gone up in smoke. I suppose the new riding gear was in the stable?'

Bert nods sheepishly. 'It's what you wanted.'

'We'd better hope the insurance will cover it all. Just as long as there is no lengthy investigation, we can't afford that— and there will be if any suspicion falls on you, Bert. Why don't you put away the shopping and I'll call the fire service. Leave it to me.'

Bert was having a siesta when the fire captain arrived. Lucy led the captain into her living room, where he stood awkwardly.

'Please sit down,' Lucy said, pointing to an armchair.

The fire captain brushed his trousers before sitting gingerly on the edge of an overstuffed, expensive chair.

‘I understand your brave firefighters helped save our property, Captain,’ Lucy purred.

‘Well, most of it,’ he said.

‘Yes, it was a shame about the stable, but at least the pony wasn’t here.’

‘It was a bad business that fire, it could have been a lot worse. Although we got it under control overnight, there was still hours of mopping up to do afterwards.’

‘Yes, I’m very grateful to you all. I think you’re all absolutely heroic. In fact, I’m making a substantial donation to the brigade for all your trouble.’

‘We’d certainly appreciate that; we can always use money for equipment.’

Lucy reached for her handbag and cheque book and made a show of filling in a cheque with a number and then adding a couple of zeros.

‘I’m sure you’ll find that will help to show our appreciation for your efforts,’ she said as she handed the cheque to the fire captain.

The fire captain raised his eyebrows. ‘I’m sure this will go a long way in helping to replace and update some of our equipment, as well as soothing a few ruffled feathers.’

‘Yes,’ Lucy said in a chastened tone. ‘I know how Bert can be in a crisis. He’s not the best at keeping his cool. I do hope your fire crew can understand that he didn’t mean what he said under stress. It’s just that he has this way of completely unravelling and saying all the wrong things. He’s very upset and contrite about that now.’

The fire captain looked around the room as if expecting a contrite Bert to appear at any minute.

‘He’s lying down.’ Lucy whispered unnecessarily. She moved closer to him. ‘We’re quite alone,’ she added.

The fire captain looked at his watch and shook his head.

‘As well as my cheque for the brigade,’ she said, with a winning smile, ‘I have an amount of cash here that I’d be willing to also donate, for you to use in any way you see fit, in return for a little help from you.’

‘I’m not sure I follow you.’

‘Well, you know how it is. People make little mistakes because they don’t quite understand what they’re doing. After all, nobody is perfect. Can I get you a drink, er, I didn’t quite catch your name, dear?’

'I'm fine, thanks.'

'As I was saying, nobody is perfect, least of all Bert. Perhaps a man of your accomplishments finds it hard to understand how he could be so——'

'Stupid?'

'Yes, stupid. But he's harmless—really.

'I wouldn't say that, I'm afraid.'

'Well, normally he's harmless—and we don't know for sure that Bert is at fault, do we?'

'After reading the brigade's report, I think we can reasonably assume that the fire started at your stable.'

'Are you absolutely sure, though?' Lucy cut to the chase. 'I understand that one of your crew is claiming that the cause of the fire wasn't accidental, when we would hardly set fire to our own property and our brand-new stable and all the equipment, would we, Captain?'

'What are you getting at, Mrs Dwyer?'

'Please call me Lucy,' she purred again. 'All I'm saying is that either the fire was started accidentally or it was started deliberately by someone other than Bert. But if anyone starts raising other scenarios, my insurance company is going to latch onto them quick smart. You know how insurance companies are.'

'So what are you saying, then, that I should alter the report?'

'Not alter, Captain, simply do a little more investigation and correct any mistake. Surely that's not a problem?'

'The report is an official document, Mrs Dwyer. I can't go altering an official document after the fact.'

'Surely you have to be sure it's accurate? What if new evidence were to turn up?'

'Are you calling my crew's assessment into question?'

'I'm saying that people make mistakes—in the heat of the moment, as it were, if you'll pardon the pun.'

'I think my crew made a fair assessment of the situation. You're quite at liberty to write to Fire Control and state your case, if you want to.'

'You mean Fire Control is the authority?' Lucy asked, wondering why she was wasting her time with the local fire captain.

'I'll give you the address,' he said, getting up to leave. 'You do know that offering money to alter an official document could be viewed as a bribe.'

'A bribe, Captain! Nothing is further from my mind, I assure you. I'm making a simple donation to a good cause. Now, you do have the cheque, don't you?'

'I certainly do, Mrs Dwyer,' he said, patting his pocket. 'You'll get a mention in the minutes of the next meeting.'

'Well that was a fat waste of time,' she said to Bert afterwards. 'He was the wrong person altogether.

That same evening Lucy drafted a letter to the insurance assessor disputing the Rural Fire Service report and putting her version of the events. 'I've stressed how many insurances we have with them and how much we pay in premiums. Are you listening, Bert?'

'Do you think they'll pay up?'

'If they want our continuing business they had better, hadn't they? Now I have to try and persuade that very efficient tradesman who built the stables to come out and rebuild them.'

'I thought he said "never again"?'

'Don't be silly, Bert.'

Bert remembered it was when he had told the tradesman that he didn't think the invoice should have been so high that the man had come out with that remark. He poured the drinks, then wandered off to watch the football on television.

Next morning, Dan paid Bert a visit. He showed him plastic cigarette lighters, the sort bought at the local petrol station, that had melted together and a melted plastic bottle. 'Apparently, you were seen dumping these near my boundary fence,' Dan said.

'No, I wouldn't think so. It wouldn't have been me.'

'I could ask you to give me your shoes; there's quite a clear footprint where these were found.'

'Look, I might have dropped them at some time. My memory comes and goes some days, as the saying is.'

‘I’m sure it does, but the evidence is pretty damning.’

‘Look, there was no harm done.’

‘No, you silly bugger, because the ground was already burnt out.’

‘Can we just keep this between us?’

‘Perhaps if you drop your plan to put a gate across the road, I could consider dropping my plan to speak to the fire chief.’

Bert looked pained.

‘You realise that a gate would’ve slowed down the fire brigade, don’t you? Is it a deal?’

‘Well, when you put it like that.’

The Grandchildren and the Dead Cow

'You know that the children are coming this week, don't you, dear?' Lucy says, bringing in Bert's cup of tea.

'Which children?'

'Jemima and Jeremy, of course.'

'Coming here?'

'Yes, their school and preschool is closed for the holidays and Janice has to go back to work.'

'How long are they staying?'

'A week or so, until the school term starts. We told you all this at Christmas.'

'That long ago, no wonder I've forgotten. I can't be expected to remember everything.'

'Well you'd better prepare yourself, because I can't be expected to do everything!'

'Why do you take these things on then?' Bert grumbles.

'What else are they supposed to do? Do you want Janice to lose her job? That would be a fine thing, they'd *all* end up here then!'

'Over my dead body, as the saying is,' Bert mumbles.

'Yes, well there's always a bright side,' Lucy says under her breath.

'What was that?' Bert asks cocking his head to one side.

'Oh, never mind. Anyway, you can get Jeremy to help you. It'll keep him out of mischief. Just remember to be patient with him. Don't go losing your temper every five minutes like you used to with Eamonn.'

'Eamonn has always been all fingers and thumbs.'

'Just take your time to show Jeremy how to do things properly. The more we tire them out during the day, the better, if we want a good night's sleep.'

'I can't wait,' Bert says, laying on the sarcasm.

When Lucy opens the door of her air-conditioned car to take the children into the house, the heat hits them like a blast furnace. The lawn that was beginning to look reasonable is brown, with large patches of dirt where the grass has died off. Most of the shrubs and plants that she has planted in circular garden beds have given up the ghost. She hurries the children inside to the comfort of the air-conditioned house. She can feel the perspiration trickling between her breasts already.

'Bert! Bert!' she calls out. 'We're here! Bert! Bert! Where are you?'

'All right. All right. I'm coming,' Bert calls out.

'You've been asleep, haven't you?' Lucy accuses.

'It's too hot to do anything outside,' he protests. 'Hello, you two. Did you have a good trip?'

'Jemima was sick—twice! Come on dear, let's get you cleaned up.'

Bert sniffs and pulls a face. 'And how about you, young man?' he asks Jeremy.

'I wanna drink,' the boy says.

'Look at you, I think you've grown since Christmas,' Bert says. Jeremy puffs out his chest. 'Are you sure you're still six?'

'I'm nearly seven. I need a drink!' the boy answers.

'Bert! Pour him some juice, will you? And a glass of water for Jemima—from the bottle in the fridge, mind, not from the tap, they're not used to tank water.'

'Come on Jeremy,' Bert says. 'Let's go and get the drinks. While Miss Smelly makes herself a bit sweeter.'

'Bert! Don't call her that, you'll upset her,' Lucy reprimands.

Bert pulls out a kitchen chair for Jeremy and organises the drinks.

'I'm hungry,' Jeremy says.

'Here, you can have some cheese and crackers,' Bert says. He finds the cheese and slices it.

'I want vegemite,' Jeremy whines.

'Ever heard of the word "please"?' Bert asks him sharply.

'I want vegemite, pleeese.'

'What does Jemima like?'

Jeremy shrugs.

'Make her a vegemite sandwich,' Lucy says, coming in with Jemima. 'It's always good for a wobbly tummy. Cut the crusts off, mind.'

'I want tellnutter,' Jemima pipes up.

'What?'

'I want tellnutter.'

'Whatever is that?' Lucy asks her. 'I've never heard of it.'

'Mum puts it on her bread,' Jeremy tells them.

'Well we haven't any here,' Lucy says. 'You'll have to have a banana sandwich then.'

'Okay,' Jemima agrees.

'You could go to the shop,' Jeremy whines.

'Go to the shop? It's miles away.'

'You have to have a shop,' Jeremy insists.

'The shop is in Currawong, that place we went through fifty kilometres back,' Bert tells him.

'No way,' Jeremy protests in disbelief. 'That can't be right. No-one lives that far from a shop.'

'Well, we do,' Lucy says. 'Next time Grandpa goes into Currawong to the shop, you can go with him and see how far it is.'

'It's a long way to the shop if you want a sausage roll,' Bert sings, mimicking an AC/DC song.

'Wow!' Jeremy says. 'Whatever are we going to do without any shops?'

'Well, for now you can watch television until it's cool enough to go outside.'

'Can I have the remote?' Jeremy asks.

'I'll put on the children's programs. You can watch those.'

'Your TV isn't as big as ours,' Jeremy tells Lucy when she takes them into the family room.

'Never mind, it still shows the same programs,' Lucy says. The children sit on the floor in front of the TV. Lucy is worried that they might be sitting too close, but is too tired for another fight. She sinks into an armchair and kicks off her shoes. Jemima climbs into the other armchair. Lucy half-dozes while the children watch their programs. She looks over at Jemima, who has fallen asleep. She is glad of the casserole

in the fridge that only requires reheating; she feels worn out and the week has only begun.

Jemima is fretful during the night and Lucy is still tired when morning comes. She gives them breakfast and asks Bert to take Jeremy out with him before the temperature soars. She washes up the breakfast dishes and leaves them to drain, while Jemima watches her morning television programs. She is still in her nightdress and dressing gown, but decides to wait until Bert returns before taking a shower. When she checks on Jemima in the living room, she finds the child sitting on the floor with ornaments in a circle around her.

'Oh dear, you shouldn't touch all Nana's things,' she says, collecting them up.

'I want to play with them.'

'They're precious,' Lucy tells her.

'I'm precious too,' Jemima says.

'Indeed, you are, but you're not breakable like Nana's ornaments. So, if you don't mind, we'll put them back.'

'Can I keep two?'

'All right,' Lucy says, giving in for the sake of peace. 'Here, you can have this cowry shell and listen to the sea.'

'How?' Jemima asks.

'Put it up to your ear and be still and quiet and listen.'

Jemima puts the shell to her ear.

'Can you hear the sea?'

Jemima looks puzzled. 'I think it needs batteries,' she says.

'Move your hair out of the way and press the shell right up close to your ear.'

Jemima presses the cowry shell hard against her ear. Then her face lights up and she nods.

'No matter where you are, you can always hear the sea,' Lucy tells her. 'Isn't that nice?'

'What?'

'Never mind.'

Jemima removes the shell from her ear and cocks her head. ‘What else can I have?’

‘Here, this dog that nods its head, your daddy gave it to us.’

‘Okay,’ she says, satisfied for the moment.

‘We’ll unpack your toys in a minute,’ Lucy says. She hears Bert and Jeremy coming in.

‘Nana! Nana!’ Jeremy shouts. ‘We found a dead cow!’

‘You found what?’

‘A cow lying down in the paddock. Dead as a doornail, Grandpa says.’ Jeremy swelled with importance at being the one to spread the news.

‘Can I see it?’ Jemima asks.

‘Certainly not,’ Lucy says.

‘Why? Why can’t I see it, too?’ Jemima says, pouting.

‘Because it’s not a nice thing to see,’ Lucy tells her. ‘Bert! Where are you?’

‘I’m coming,’ Bert says, puffing, as he leans on the doorjamb to rest.

‘What’s all this about a dead cow?’

‘Down in the paddock. One of them has keeled over, as the saying is. Must be the heat. I’ll have to call the vet.’

Lucy fetches Bert a glass of water.

‘It was lying down,’ Jeremy says. ‘It didn’t move. Grandpa made me stand back while he went over and inspected it. He said, “It’s dead as a doornail.” Then I went over and had a look. There were all these flies on it—crawling all over its eyes and nose and——’

‘That’s enough, Jeremy,’ Lucy scolds. ‘We don’t want to give anyone nightmares.’

‘Why were flies on it?’ Jemima asks.

‘Because flies get on everything,’ Lucy says in exasperation. ‘Now can we talk about something else, *please*.’

‘What’s the vet’s number?’ Bert asks.

‘It’s on the fridge magnet,’ Lucy says. ‘What good is the vet if the animal is—*dead*.’ She whispers the last word.

‘I need to find out why it keeled over,’ Bert says. ‘I don’t want to lose any more.’

‘I’ve never seen anything dead before,’ Jeremy says. ‘It doesn’t look any different, just like it’s asleep. It was just lying there not moving.’

‘Let’s have a game of snakes and ladders,’ Lucy says.

‘Snakes?’ Jeremy shrieks.

‘I don’t want to play snakes.’ Jemima is on the verge of tears again.

‘Cake, anyone?’ Lucy asks in quiet desperation.

Bert is on the phone to the vet.

Jemima watches television while Lucy makes morning tea. Jeremy sits at the table, waiting.

‘Tide’s out a bit, as the saying is,’ Bert complains, frowning at his mug of tea. Lucy tops it up with some hot water. ‘Vet says she’ll be out this way this afternoon and she’ll call in then,’ he tells her, as he puts down the phone.

‘She?’

‘Yes, a lady vet, it seems. I hope she’s strong enough.’

‘Come on, Grandpa. Let’s do something,’ Jeremy whines.

‘As soon as I’ve finished my cup of tea. Go and watch TV with your sister.’

‘She watches baby stuff. I’ve seen it all before.’

‘Well, go and get that game-watchamacallit that you’re always clicking away at.’

‘Okay.’

‘It’s going to be a long week,’ Bert says.

By late afternoon, when the vet is due to arrive, Lucy is almost ready to collapse. She hears a shriek and hurries to the living room. ‘What is it?’

Jemima looks up at her with a tragic expression. ‘Where’s my handband?’

‘Handband? What’s a handband?’

‘It’s gone,’ Jemima wails and falls to the floor.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what it is.’ Lucy throws up her hands in despair.

‘I need it for my hair,’ Jemima sobs.

‘Do you mean a hairband?’

Jemima looks up with wet eyes and slowly nods her head. Lucy finds a hairband in the overnight bag and the drama dissipates quickly.

Bert takes the vet down to the dead cow. Jeremy follows behind.

‘I want to go,’ Jemima whines.

‘You can see the vet when she comes back. What’s that noise you’re making now?’

‘I’ve got teacups,’ Jemima said.

‘Teacups? Oh, you mean hiccups? You funny girl. Let’s set up teacups for tea with our guest, shall we?’

The kettle was boiling by the time Bert returned with Jeremy and the vet. She couldn’t stay after all; another emergency awaited her.

‘What’s the verdict?’ Lucy asked Bert.

‘It starved to death.’ Jeremy said, mimicking the accusing expression of the vet.

The vet had given Bert a sound ticking off after she diagnosed his small herd as suffering from malnutrition. Apparently the poor old beast who dropped dead was starving. Bert couldn’t see why the vet blamed him. How was he to know that cattle could starve when left out to graze? Wasn’t that what cattle were supposed to do?

Lucy reaches for bottles of gin and tonic water in the cupboard.

‘She has to have a bath now,’ Jeremy says.

‘Na-ah.’ Jemima runs off down the hallway.

Lucy turns on the oven to heat up the tuna mornay she made earlier. Once dinner was in the oven, Jemima could have a bath and put on her pyjamas. She hopes there won’t be a fight at bedtime.

‘I can’t believe you let the beasts starve,’ Lucy says with her hands on her hips, when Bert appears for breakfast next morning. ‘You told me you knew all about raising cattle.’

‘How was I to know the grass was no good?’

‘Look at it, dear. You can see it’s all browned off over the last few weeks. Common sense should have told you.’

‘Well it didn’t tell you, did it? I hope the woman doesn’t spill the beans in town.’

‘You’ll look pretty silly if she does, dear. When she was writing out her invoice, she mentioned that she was calling in at Audrey’s place to look at some cracked hooves. If she tells her, Audrey’ll think even less of you than she does now.’

‘Make us a cup of tea, will you?’ Bert says with annoyance. ‘A man could die of thirst around here.’

‘And as if I have time to check on your cows, for Pete’s sake. they’re your responsibility. How much is it going to cost to buy the food for the cattle?’

‘More than I bargained for, as the saying is. I’ve rung as far afield as Sydney and it’s a devil to even find any.’

‘Have you thought of selling off the cows, then?’

‘I’ll see. I don’t suppose I’ll get a cracker for them now. Surely this weather can’t last forever. If I can track down some feed for sale, maybe we can stick it out.’

‘Don’t forget you have that meeting tonight where you’re going to bring up the condition of our road, dear.’

‘I’ve found out that some of the roads in the district have a grader come regularly to fix the surface. I’m going to propose a motion to write a letter to have our road included in the maintenance program,’ Bert says, puffing up again. ‘I’ll soon have this road smoothed out for you, don’t you worry.’

‘I can’t wait for the day. You should’ve seen the children bouncing up and down in their booster seats on the way here.’

‘Where are they?’

‘They’re on the veranda making a little chicken run for some chicks you’re going to pick up when you go for the cattle food.’

‘Am I?’

‘Can you, Bert? I’ve promised them they can have some chicks, just half a dozen, mind, don’t go buying a whole boxful or anything.’

‘You don’t buy chickens by the boxful,’ Bert says scornfully.

‘Well, no more than six then. And I want the fluffy yellow ones. You should see the effort the children are making. It’s kept them quiet for ages. We can’t disappoint them now.’

‘Let’s hope the chicks don’t suffocate in this heat.’

‘Put them in the cabin of the ute for the drive home,’ she tells them. ‘And switch on the air conditioning so they won’t be too stressed.’

‘Turn on the air conditioner for chooks!’

‘They’re only babies. You don’t want them to be half-dead when they arrive. The children have seen quite enough of things dying since they’ve been here.’

‘We’re ready for the chicken wire, Nana,’ Jeremy calls out.

‘All right, I’m coming. I’m just saying goodbye to Grandpa; he’s going out and he’s going to pick up your chicks on the way home.’

‘Bye, kids,’ Bert calls.

‘See you later alligator,’ Jemima yells.

‘See ya, see ya wouldn’t wanna be ya,’ Jeremy chants.

‘The vet suggested we consult a stock agent before buying a pony, too,’ Bert lets slip.

‘A pony!’ Jeremy shouts as he whoops and gallops around the kitchen.

‘Bert!’ Lucy glares at him. ‘Not yet, not yet, Jeremy. Grandpa has to build a stable for a pony first. A pony has to have shelter and food stored. It can’t just stand in a paddock and be left to graze. You saw what happened to the cow.’

‘When? When? When?’ Jeremy repeats.

‘Next time you come here,’ Bert promises.

Lucy shakes her head. ‘You know you shouldn’t make rash promises. You haven’t even started rebuilding a stable yet.’

‘I’ll get him to help me mark it out. That’ll keep him busy for a while tomorrow.’

‘I want to have tea,’ Jemima whines. ‘And I want a pony too.’

Jeremy gives her a withering glance. ‘You’re too small for a pony. It’s my pony.’

‘My pony!’ Jemima glares at him.

Bert is out the door in a flash, leaving Lucy to mop up, as usual.

Curiosity

‘Well, now.’ Audrey peered over the letter she was reading. ‘Lord Bertram has changed his mind about erecting his gate across the road. Wonders will never cease. I wonder what caused that, all of a sudden?’

‘A bolt out of the blue, perhaps?’ Dan said with a poker face.

Audrey shook her head. ‘I’ll never understand people like him.’

‘Oh, I’ve had to work with a few. The trick is to use just the right method of persuasion.’

‘So, what do you know about Bert’s change of mind, Dan?’

‘Nothing. Nothing at all. Just making an observation.’

‘Alice called. She’s coming to visit. I’ll have to shop for supplies. I don’t know what I’ll do if the shops at Currawong keep closing. I don’t want to drive further to shop at one of those ghastly malls, where you have to park miles away in their huge concrete carpark and then try to remember which level you parked on. At Currawong, I can pull up at the kerb alongside the shop.’

‘When is Alice arriving?’

‘On the weekend. It’ll be good to see her again. I miss her. I’m picking her up from the railway station.’

‘How about I drive you, then you can both chat on the way home?’

‘I’d rather pick Alice up myself. It’s a bit of a ritual for me to pick her up and give her a lift, it’s a long story so I won’t go into it now. Thanks, anyway.’

‘You know, you could go to Sydney occasionally to see Alice now that I can take care of things while you’re away.’

‘I could, but I probably won’t.’

‘Why not? A change might do you good. There’s a chance you could even enjoy it?’ Dan teased.

‘How odd, that’s just what my father used to say.’

‘And did you go?’

‘Yes, I went a few times to the Sydney Royal Easter Show.’

‘And…’

'That's where I met Mathew.'

'You are a dark horse, aren't you? Full of surprises.'

Audrey smiled to herself. There was a time and place for everything, including stories of her past. Dan would have to wait for the next instalment.

Audrey drove her ute to the station. It was not the same vehicle that had picked up Alice in the past. The sale of her land meant Audrey could buy a late-model ute. But it still felt like old times.

She saw Alice emerge with her small suitcase and wave to her. They had a lot to catch up with since they had last seen each other. Their rare telephone calls were costly and kept short. The gaps between letters had grown longer. Audrey realised Dan was right, she should make more of an effort. One of these days she could turn into a grey lichen-covered rock at *Lasthope* and most likely no-one would notice.

Alice noticed all the changes to the landscape since her last visit, the new ute and the signs of time passing on Audrey's appearance. What she wanted to know most about, though, was Dan. How was it all working out? Did she trust him? Was there any resemblance to Mathew? What was it like to have a grown stepson?

'Curiosity killed the cat,' Audrey laughed. Would a weekend be enough, she wondered, to satisfy Alice's curiosity?

'Yes, but satisfaction brought it back,' Alice said smugly.

ALICE

Buzz-bombs

When the clock struck midnight, Alice was still awake. No glow from a streetlight, no moonbeams filtered through the heavy blackout blind, and she knew better than to lift it even a crack, in case her mother had to come in and see to her baby sister.

In the oppressive dark, she heard when her sister stirred in her cot. She heard the air-raid warden making his rounds. She heard the caterwaul of tomcats. But in between was the silence. All through the night, she cuddled her teddy bear

Before the blackout, she had liked to watch the man in the moon at night. She had been six or seven then, but she could still remember how she liked it best when his face was full, round and luminous, his chubby cheeks puffed out and his crinkled eyes smiling. Other nights when she got the `willies', as her mother called them, she could comfort herself by staring hard till she could make out the old woman rocking a cradle. She had watched as the clouds changed, drifting sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly across her shining companion. If they blocked it from view, she played a game of trying to guess where the moon was hiding and made bets with herself on when it would peep through.

That was years ago; nights now were of thick suffocating darkness, into which everything in the room disappeared. If she closed her eyes, bright colours darted back and forth, flashing and colliding and melting together, or else disembodied faces leered at her before dissolving and reforming into tormented beings mouthing silent screams.

And she would have to hold in her own screams so as not to wake baby Ivy, or cause her mother to turn on an unnecessary light. She was eleven now, and not the baby any more.

Sometimes it was the face of Robbie Packer that loomed over her behind closed lids. A big, towheaded youth from a few streets away, Robbie liked to pull wings off insects and poke the helpless creatures with pins. Much worse, he boasted to Alice about how he drowned kittens in a bucket, and gave graphic descriptions.

Passing Robbie in the street was more of a trial than walking past the pub. There the good honest working men with a bit too much under their belts, as her mother put it, would call out harmless things meant to make her smile, but which made her face burn.

Sometimes her granddad, there more for company after his shift at the factory than for the drink, would wave to her, delighting in her embarrassment.

She tried to put Robbie and the workmen out of her mind, as she lay in bed listening.

Judy, her granddad's Jack Russell terrier, started to whine and scratch frantically at the door. Alice knew this was a signal that the air-raid siren was about to sound. Judy always heard it long before anybody else and came to let them know before running underneath the heavy scrubbed-wood table in the kitchen.

Any second now, Alice would hear the siren. She didn't want to have to jump out of a warm bed and stand under the chimney. She hated it when soot fell into her hair and made dirty streaks across her face and hands.

The sound of the siren went up and down, up and down, up and down. Alice imagined all the people in all the houses leaping out of warm beds to stand shivering in fireplaces or to sit crouched under heavy tables in a Morrison shelter. Some spent their nights in Anderson shelters in their gardens or the Royal Pavilion wine-cellar shelter which, after four years, had become a home-away-from-home, but they had to leave their houses to get to them. And what if they should be buried alive? Alice stayed in her bed.

Her mother came stumbling into the room, bruising her thighs on the shapes of furniture. She grabbed baby Ivy from her cot and moved towards Alice. They both heard the motorcycle sound of the doodlebug. Several had struck Brighton and Hove during the past few months. Some of her friends had been evacuated to billet with families in the north, but her mother had not wanted her to go. 'Either we all go or we all stay,' her mother had said firmly. Alice rolled reluctantly out of bed. Still as statues, they listened for the ominous silence that fell seconds before the blast.

The last thing Alice heard before the loudest noise in the world was her mother's voice, *Jesus! It's stopped!* They scrambled under the bed as windows imploded.

Ivy began bawling at the top of her lungs. Everything else was still. Her mother passed the yelling Ivy to Alice, crawled out from under the bed and got to her feet. Alice and her mother helped each other to put on their gas masks. Alice was worried about Ivy, who didn't have a gas mask yet. She was too young for a Mickey Mouse mask, yet too big for a baby mask even if her mother had one, which she didn't because

of the stories of babies who had suffocated in them. Gas masks were supposed to keep them safe, though Alice wasn't sure from what. They covered the whole face and had a filter near the mouth, which when you breathed in stopped bad gas from coming inside. The police instructed everyone to carry one at all times and to find cover or shelter when the air-raid siren sounded. The townspeople, including children, had had so many drills that putting on a mask had become routine. Some people wore them whenever they were outside. Yet, though hundreds had died or been injured by bombs, Alice had not heard of a single person in their county who had been gassed.

Her mother grabbed Ivy and cuddled her into her shoulder. *Quick, downstairs*, she said and pulled Alice by the hand. Alice grabbed her teddy bear and they crept down the dark stairs, not daring to turn on a light.

Judy would have roused Granddad, who slept in his room in the basement. He was stone deaf and wouldn't wake up even when a bomb went off. This week, he was on the early shift at the munitions factory and would curse Hitler for disturbing his sleep again. He usually stayed right where he was, in bed. Mother didn't argue with Granddad.

Will Daddy be all right? Alice asked her mother through the mask. Far away, her father was 'doing his bit'. He had told her to help her mother until he came home. He had been away for ages and had only come home on leave twice.

Her mother nodded, *Of course he will,* and pushed Alice into the fireplace, where they stood in their nightgowns huddled against the cold, waiting for the all-clear signal.

Alice wondered if it was possible for the world to be blown apart into smithereens. But that night they lost only windows.

In the morning, Alice's mother wanted flour and suet from the shop and perhaps half a pound of broken biscuits if there were any left. Alice fidgeted while her mother found her purse and ration book. The hands of the clock slid towards nine o'clock.

To reach the shop she had to walk to the end of her street to the corner pub and turn left into a crescent. Alice noticed that all the houses had lost their windows. The publican had the doors open and was sweeping the floors. Around the corner, Robbie Packer was leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette. She had no choice but to walk past him to the little row of shops bang in the middle of the crescent. Even if she crossed to the other side there was no guarantee that Robbie wouldn't yell out to her all the way across the street.

She kept her head down, feeling her muscles tense as, stiff-legged, she kept walking.

Alice from the palace, Robbie said, smirking. *And all alone too. I've got something I bet you'd like to see. Come over here, Alice, I'll let you have a feel, you'd like that, wouldn't you?*

She kept her scorched face averted. Her legs seemed paralysed. She had to concentrate to keep on putting one foot in front of the other. Slowly she felt the gap widen between them and managed to walk faster.

She waited outside the shop for her face to cool and her pulse to stop thudding in her ears.

On the walk home she kept to the other side of the road, her head down, resisting temptation to see if he was still there.

When she got back she told her mother what Robbie had said.

He's a nasty, common boy, her mother sniffed. *A lady wouldn't flatter him by even listening*.

After lunch, Alice had to go to school. *An education was not to be trifled with*, Miss Brown had impressed upon her children and parents, *even if there was a war going on*. The boys and girls took turn-about so they could avoid using the third floor of the building, which had been damaged in an air strike. This week the girls had afternoons.

She walked along the pavement past the pub. She ran through the pedestrian tunnel under the railway line, footsteps echoing, and then along the adjacent road to the school gates.

The capital of Malta is … In the classroom, the voice droned on like a bee collecting pollen. Alice could see in her mind a beautiful cottage garden of roses and hollyhocks, with bees hovering over bushes of soft squashy lavender.

The next thing she knew she was on the receiving end of a chalk duster. Instinctively she picked it up and threw it back, hitting Miss Brown. The class sniggered, making the teacher all the wilder.

Go to the Head, she yelled. *It'll be the strap for you, Miss Alice Kingsley.*

Oh no, it won't, Alice thought. She took one look at the headmistress's door in the hall and fled to the iron fire escape that clung to the outside of the building. She ran out

of the school gate, along the road, under the railway line, past the pub, to home and safety.

But she had forgotten her gas mask. No amount of pleading would convince her mother to let her stay home without the precious mask.

She left home again in a pout, dawdled back to school, toying with the idea of throwing herself under a passing car to make her mother sorry. She ran past the pub, hoping Granddad wouldn't notice her.

She turned into the school gate as the girls were lining up after a mid-afternoon break in the fresh air. She doubted she would be able to sit down tonight after adding truancy to her sins.

She slipped unnoticed into line with the other girls in her form who were making their way to their second-floor classrooms. They were using the outside fire escape since the staircase was damaged when part of the top floor collapsed. The air-raid warning sounded above their chatter and laughter. Seconds later came the drone of aircraft. The girls had no time to turn around and bolt for the school bomb-shelter. They quickly donned gas masks.

Where's your mask? the girl next to her whispered.

Alice shrugged and covered her mouth and nose with her hand.

Everybody, down. Flat as you can! Miss Brown was shouting. The girls quickly and quietly tried to make themselves as flat as possible on the metal staircase. Sharp edges bit into soft bodies. Alice heard what sounded like a thousand hornets.

It's a Messerschmitt, she heard the teacher say. She raised her head and looked behind her, staring at the plane coming closer and closer until she could plainly see the swastika; it kept on coming until she could see face of the pilot. She couldn't believe that he would attack a school.

The plan dived and opened fire on them. She held her breath as a spray of ammunition flew all around them.

He's off course, he's confused, Miss Brown said in a withering tone.

Can't tell his arse from his elbow, Robbie would have said; but Alice knew that the pilot was aiming at her because she was so wicked, it was all her fault. Now she would be shot or gassed and she had no-one to blame but herself.

After the pilot had flown off to let loose a couple of bombs over the town, the girls crawled up the staircase, keeping as low as possible, and crept inside the door of the building. Miss Brown administered first aid to injuries and found that miraculously no-one had been seriously hurt. She tried to rally the girls with choruses of 'Jesus loves the little children' and 'There'll always be an England'.

After what seemed an interminable time, the single note of the all-clear rose and fell and Miss Brown decided that the girls should go home. She had to check on the rest of the school.

Alice found her gas mask and walked sombrely out of the school gate. God had only punished her this time and she knew she must try to do better. She wondered what he would do to Robbie Packer. She turned into the railway tunnel, broke into a run and almost cannoned into Robbie coming from the other direction. He, too, was wearing his gas mask but his white-blond hair meant it was unmistakeably Robbie. He stood blocking her way, arms akimbo, making himself as tall and as wide as possible. She hung her head, holding back, waiting for him to pass.

Robbie raised his mask. *Don't know what you're in such a hurry for*, he taunted. *Don't you know our streets were a direct hit? They missed the factory but blitzed the pub. Packed they say it was, with the early shift.*

Alice stared at him, then pushed past and began to run. The odour of rubble from exploded houses seeped through the blue asbestos filter of her mask. Her mother could be standing in the fireplace, Ivy over her shoulder, Judy at her feet, fretting about her and Granddad. Teddy would be all alone in bed.

Didn't you hear me? she heard Robbie scream. *It was a hundred-pounder, it flattened everything, there's nothing left.*

Alice in DownUnderLand

Alice woke up in bed. It didn't take her long to realise it wasn't her bed and that she was in a room that she couldn't recognise. Her teddy bear was nowhere to be seen.

Was she in heaven? The room was clean and neat, but not what she imagined as heavenly. She was wearing a nightie. She didn't know what she should do. Should she get up and get dressed or stay until someone came? Was she ill? She concentrated for a minute or two. She didn't feel ill, though she felt some bumps and bruises. Then she remembered the explosion. She must be in heaven. Perhaps she was in some kind of waiting room? Robbie Packer's face leered up at her. Could she be in that other place?

Alice woke up. Thankfully she was in her own bed. She was no longer a child – as she was when her night terrors took her back there. She was trembling. She breathed deeply. Trying to shake the memory of waking up that other morning.

That other morning, when a woman came and told her that she was an orphan, she had tried to convince them that they were wrong. Her father was away at war doing his bit. He would come for her, she knew he would. She couldn't really believe that her mother, baby sister and grandfather—even Judy the dog—were all gone, either. They had not survived the bomb blast, the woman told her. They really were in heaven. She wished she was with them. The woman told her she was lucky to have been spared. How was she lucky? She had lost her home and her family. She had waved goodbye to them after lunch on her way to school and now they were no longer alive. It would have been better to go with them than to be left behind. She was going to Australia, the woman told her. She would grow up where it was always sunny and pineapples grew in the ground and were eaten fresh instead of from tins. It sounded better than her present surroundings but still, she knew her father would come home and expect to find her. How could she leave without letting him know?

The next thing she knew she was kitted out with other kids' cast-offs. *Charity,* her mother would have called it and charity was supposed to be given not received. Now it seemed she was a charity case. *I have a father*, she kept telling them *and an auntie*. Her father's name was Corporal Edwin Kingsley. Her Auntie Mabel had been evacuated and no-one knew where she was. Nothing had been heard of her father either, she was told.

The world had gone mad and now she was going to end up on the other side of the world—she truly was going to be Alice down the rabbit hole.

Now, at home in her own bed, she could feel her legs again. The question that had plagued her since she was a child intruded again. *What had they felt, her grandad in the pub and her mother with baby Ivy and Judy the dog, as they crouched in their Morrison shelter under the heavy kitchen table? If only she had stayed home from school that day.*

She wanted to curl up in a ball and stay where she was, but another night terror might be brewing and she couldn't take the risk. Instead, she brewed coffee to give her a caffeine hit. She was feeling disoriented and would have to check her diary to see what she was supposed to do today. She was relieved to see it was Sunday and she had made a note to give Audrey a phone call. She drank her coffee and flicked through a magazine. Sunbeams streamed through the window.

It was sunny all right in DownUnderLand, a relentless sun that burned and blistered her fair skin; but she didn't taste a fresh pineapple for many years. She got used to the unfamiliar accent and the strange sense of humour that people had in the Great Southern Land. She got used to being called a Pommie bastard. What she never got used to, was being treated as an orphan. She knew deep down that it wasn't true. She spent the first three and a half years not in wonder, but in despair. Schoolwork was repetitive and boring, they had to learn to cook, serve meals, sew, clean, do the laundry and supervise smaller children.

Alice found that she could fly in the night all the way back to her home in Brighton. She would hover over the house and watch through the windows as her mother, baby Ivy and Grandad with Judy moved through the house.

At fifteen, she was sent to a farm to work as a domestic and labourer. Her skin turned rough and red as she sweltered through her housework and farm duties. Her employers provided a bed and meals, but rarely paid her. She was not allowed to leave the property unchaperoned. For reasons she had never fathomed, they called her Jane. One night, she flew off to Sussex to visit her home, but when she arrived it was no longer standing. Then she found that she could no longer fly through the cool air of the night, she could no longer clearly picture the house, her mother's face was a blur. She had turned into Jane.

Eventually, after her eighteenth birthday, she was permitted to go into town alone on her day off if she could organise a lift. She decided to walk and selectively thumb a ride. A young woman driving a ute had slowed and then stopped. That was how she met Audrey Hamilton.

She introduced herself as Alice Kingsley, instead of Jane as she was called now. Away from the property, she found she could be herself again.

After that first meeting, Audrey had stopped and picked her up whenever she saw her walking along the road. The two seemed to hit it off. When Audrey learnt that Alice, too, had lost her mother when she was a child, it brought them closer together. One day, Audrey invited Alice to visit her at home to meet her father and grandmother. Her brother was conscripted for two years military service in Vietnam and her grandmother wasn't getting any younger, so they were short-handed.

Alice was soon pitching in on her days off and it wasn't long before Audrey's father offered Alice one of the small cottages on their farm and a monthly wage to work with them. The small cottage had lain neglected for years but was structurally sound. Audrey's father found some corrugated iron and put on a new roof and guttering, so the cottage was waterproof and the rain ran down the roof into the gutter and flowed into a galvanised steel water tank. He unblocked the chimney and cleared out the fireplaces. Alice and Audrey scrubbed and painted the inside, then scoured charity shops and second-hand shops for furniture, utensils, pots and pans, kettle and teapot, crockery and cutlery, dustpan and brushes, linen and blankets—everything Alice needed to set up house independently.

A transistor radio tuned to the ABC crackled on a pine slab table. Alice heard the fanfare for the six a.m. news as she coaxed a match to kindling. A thin yellow flame flared as the paper caught alight, then the kindling ignited with a hiss of blue. Alice stacked chopped wood into a small pyramid with spaces for air and closed the iron door, clunk. She filled a kettle and a large pot with fresh tank water and set them on the hob.

Audrey appeared just as the water in the kettle was bubbling. 'We'll turn the compost and mulch this morning, eh?'

'You certainly know how to brighten a morning,' Alice complained, as she reached for her half-loaf of bread. She made a pot of tea and toasted slices of bread.

The two paused mid-sip as nascent light revealed glittering crowns of gums, their trunks drowned in a lake of mist. Each felt a gentle soaring of the soul, a moment of being as the earth seemed to stand still for a heartbeat and creatures were silent. A mild breeze carried a delicate honey perfume of bush flowers, the fresh taste and fragrance of a brand-new morning. The dawn chorus began with metallic chinks like bells chiming and chiselling on stone, then whirring and chirruping and cawing before the currawongs came carolling a descant.

The two stacked their breakfast dishes in the sink. When Audrey had washed the dishes, she shouted out, 'Are you ready?'

'Just let me clean my pips,' Alice said, as she appeared again with her toothbrush in her hand.

Audrey watched the faux lake that was already dissolving, drifting in upward spirals circling the trunks of trees, curling up through twigs and branches, leaving the sodden foliage dripping. The birds and creatures, now busy with the business of feeding and surviving, emitted only an occasional call.

By the time Audrey and Alice returned to the cottage after digging in compost, they were sodden and dripping with perspiration from their labours. The sun was now high in the sky.

Alice grabbed her oven gloves and picked up the huge stainless steel pot still simmering on the stove. She poured half the water into a steel bucket. She topped up the bucket with cold water until the temperature was just right, then carried it out to the big canvas bag tied to the lowest branch of a tall angophora. The canvas bag had a large brass shower rose attached. Alice climbed the stepladder and tipped the warm water into the canvas bag, which had become an alfresco bathroom since there was no shower in her cottage. Audrey turned the rose and threw back her head as a cascade of water poured over her thick wavy hair and deeply tanned skin, before splashing over her toes. When the cascade slowed to a trickle, Alice scrambled down the stepladder to hold out a towel to enfold her friend. The ritual was repeated for Alice, who doubted that Audrey would notice her rough red flesh with its generous spattering of caramel-coloured freckles.

From Audrey's father, Alice learned about the RSL clubs and army records. She enlisted his help and Audrey's to try and track down records of her father. Slowly Alice pieced together the puzzle of her father's disappearance. He had been missing in action during the war. He was found in France—suffering shell shock and memory loss. When he was brought back to England, he was put into an asylum. His sister had discovered him in a terrible state. She supervised his rehabilitation and, when he was fit to leave, took him to her home. It was years before he conquered his fears enough to leave the house. Reading between the lines of war records and census records, Alice could see that her father had never fully recovered.

He had been naturally suspicious when she found him. He was told that she was dead, he said. Through a series of international trunk calls, she managed to convince her aunt and from then on her father seemed to accept her. He couldn't manage a trip to Australia. Sometimes in his confusion, he thought she was her mother but at least he didn't call her Jane. The street where they had lived had been rebuilt, her auntie told her. Three-storey terraces replaced the eighteenth-century stone terraces that had graced the old neighbourhood. Little of Alice's past remained intact.

Auntie Mabel had photographs of Alice with her mother, father, and even one or two with baby Ivy, which she sent in an airmail packet. Alice stared hard at the box brownie black-and-white photos. In one photo her father was wearing his uniform. Her auntie seemed quite happy for her to keep the photos.

One day, Auntie Mabel rang to tell Alice that her father had passed away in the night. Alice revealed to her auntie how grateful she was to have seen the family photographs and told her about the day she found she could no longer remember what her mother looked like. How she had tried to recall her face when she went to sleep, but when she closed her eyes bright colours darted back and forth, flashing and colliding and melting together, or else disembodied faces leered at her before dissolving and reforming into tormented beings mouthing silent screams. And she would have to hold in her own screams, as she searched for her mother's face.

A parcel arrived in the post; the Queen's head was on the stamps. Inside were bits and bobs that had survived the blitz and a tattered but clean teddy bear. Her teddy bear had come back to her after all this time. It had been found in the rubble after the bombing, along with the other few belongings that had survived. As the only known

next of kin, Auntie Mabel had eventually been sent the items. She had cleaned them and stored them. When Auntie Mabel had found her brother, Alice's father, she gave him the teddy bear and the few other fragments of his family and his past.

From that night on, Alice shared her bed with Teddy again.

When Audrey's father received the news that her brother had been killed in Vietnam at the Battle of Binh Ba, Audrey was numb with grief. Alice was dealing with grief of her own. She pitched in to do what she could to ease their worries and keep things going, though she had to fight her way through the mental fog that enveloped her each morning. Most days she was Alice trying to make the best of things, but some days she was Jane and spent those days in silence. Jane would remember a job that needed to be done in the farthest reaches of the farm where she could keep to herself for a while. It helped to be too busy to have time for the black thoughts and night terrors that plagued her in the silence of the night.

Audrey was concerned about Alice as she drove over to check on her and to catch up on the hours she owed her. She knocked sharply on the door, then opened it. 'Hello, friend, I've come to see how you're doing and give you a hand.'

'Hi Audrey. I'm getting nowhere fast today.'

'Still down in the dumps?'

'I don't know where I'm going any more. I don't know what to expect any more. I just can't seem to walk out the door.'

'You can never know what to expect, that's life. You can only plan for the worst and hope for the best, in my experience.'

'You don't say?'

'The amount of times I've thought I had things all worked out—sometimes things do go regular as clockwork but other times the best-laid plans of mice and men, and even we women, turn out to be of little consequence in the greater scheme of things, it seems to me.'

'Expect the unexpected.'

‘Something along those lines. I drove over because I was worried that something might have happened to you.’

‘You’re letting your imagination run away with you. See, here I am.’

‘Look, I understand why you need to be able to rely on yourself. You can’t trust anyone but yourself in the end, it’s true. But I do care.’

‘I know you do. I’m an ungrateful wretch.’

‘At least I raised a smile, that’ll do me for now. Now that I’m here, let’s get this shit heap cleaned up, shall we?’

Audrey stayed and worked till dusk helping Alison to tidy, clean and polish. Alice was in better spirits by the time they had finished.

‘There’s nothing like hard yakka to work off tension,’ Audrey said.

‘I’m exhausted now. I think I’ll sleep tonight. Sooner or later I’ve got to catch up on all the sleep I’ve missed. D’you want to stay for a bite to eat, Audrey? Nothing flash, just salad and bread and maybe a cold lamb chop or two.’

‘I’d love to, and then after we’ve eaten I’m quite happy to leave you to your beauty sleep.’

‘You’re a good friend. I don’t know what I’d have done these last few days without you.’ Alice gave Audrey an unexpected hug.

None of them felt like celebrating Christmas when it came around that year. No-one thought to put up festive decorations or buy gifts. The snow-white damask tablecloth that had belonged to Audrey’s mother, and always graced the table at Christmas, remained in the drawer.

Somehow the new year brought new energy to the homestead and its occupants. A new decade had begun. Spirits began to lift, imperceptibly at first, but gradually the needs of the farm and the living took precedence over the need to grieve.

Another year passed. Summer had arrived early; the unrelenting heat scorched plants and grass. By November, the word ‘tinderbox’ had already been mentioned several times. Hardly a shower of rain had fallen for weeks. Audrey confided her fear to Alice that if there wasn’t some rain soon all the irrigation that took so much time and money would be useless. The dam held less than a metre of water, the sides parched and

beginning to crack. The windmill creaked day and night to pump bore water from underground springs, which had never yet run dry.

A ceiling fan stirred the heavy, humid air. Alice noted the temperature, thirty-seven degrees, sixty-percent humidity and the barometer steady, not a breath of breeze, rain gauge empty.

They were doing their best to keep the plants watered and mulched. Ignoring the bush flies, working steadily, rhythmically.

Cold ginger beer revived her for a bit after work. She took a shower, allowing the merest trickle of water to run from the tap, the least she could possibly use to rinse off the dirt and sweat. Wearing her cotton pyjamas, she lit a mosquito coil and listened to the news on the ABC, and reached for a Thea Astley novel before falling asleep in her chair.

In the witching hours, she woke with a start. She was still in her armchair. An adrenaline rush made it impossible to escape back into sleep, so she reached for her journals. In her blue book she recorded the daily weather conditions. In her black book, she listed every single item she had purchased and the date and amount. In her green book she wrote down the work she had planned and completed, while in her private red book, she allowed her thoughts free rein.

Easter brought the longed-for rainfall. On the veranda, as the three sipped welcome glasses of homemade ginger beer, Audrey's father decided the young women deserved a holiday. He suggested they stay a few days in Sydney at the YWCA and visit the Royal Easter Show.

'It's a long time since you've been to the Show, Aud.'

Audrey protested at once. 'I can't go at this time of year. There's just too much to do. Suppose the pump was to pack it in—how would you manage?'

'You never want to leave this place any more,' Alice butted in. 'You're a pain in the bum. It's always you, you, you and the farm, farm, farm. Hide yourself here, then, up to your elbows in compost——'

'It's a farm, for Christ's sake, someone has to look after things. I can't be swanning around Sydney. I've got to remember to get the chainsaw fixed too.'

'Can you not? You mean, this is it? For the rest of your life?' Alice stared at Audrey, daring her to say that this was all she dreamed of.

'Of course, what d'you expect? I love farming and the land—it *is* life—what else is there?'

'Sometimes, Audrey, I really wonder about you. Don't you think it would be fun to get away for a bit? It's all right for you, I've never even seen Sydney.'

'Go on, Aud.' Her father was insistent. 'Alice is right. You need to get away once in a while. No-one is indispensable, you know. If you or I keel over tomorrow, the world would hardly notice our absence, so don't get too full of yourself.'

'Que la mort me treuve plantant mes chous, mais nonchalant d'elle, et encore plus de mon jardin imparfait.' Audrey said.

'What?' Alison jerked her head up.

'I was thinking of Montaigne; he wrote: *and that death may find me planting my cabbages, but indifferent regarding it, and even more regarding my unfinished garden.* He wrote that even though we all know we will certainly die, still people refuse to believe that death could come in the next hour, or day, or week but rather that we can defer it until we are ready.'

'Too right. Granny used to think she'd go on forever,' Audrey's father said suddenly. 'If only she had—she used to joke about it all the time—I suppose I just wanted to believe it would never happen.'

'You have to allow for loss.' Audrey said.

'I'll drink to that.' Alice frowned and knocked back the rest of her ginger beer.

The Royal Easter Show was magical—Alice hadn't seen anything like it. For the first time in years, she felt free. She fell in love with Sydney, the crowds, the atmosphere. It was at the Easter Show that she tasted her first fresh pineapple. Her excitement bubbled like champagne. They visited the intricate fresh-produce displays and tried to decide which would win the prizes. They oohed and aahed at exquisite handmade garments and crafts in the craft pavilion. They watched the entertainment in the arena while sucking on refreshing ice blocks.

They chatted to cattle farmers, while admiring the fine bovine specimens on show waiting to be judged. After the awards were given, the farmers invited Alice and Audrey to dinner and dancing that evening.

The hall blazed with coloured lights and local Sydney bands vied with country bands to tempt dancers onto the floor. As if hearing the music of a pied piper, more and more people arrived to squeeze into the crush on and around the dance floor.

Alice and Audrey slipped outside to gulp fresh, cool air and stare at the bright moon, an Easter lantern shining in the dark sky. They were soon joined by a couple of young men. Mathew Beaufort introduced himself. He was a surveyor who had surveyed the properties of some of the farmers who were there tonight. Plainly Mathew was attracted to Audrey. His friend, Mark, was doing some sort of research on underground water sources for a university. It turned out that Mark had offered to act as Mathew's 'wingman' so that Mathew could approach Audrey without seeming too forward.

Mathew soon monopolised Audrey's life. Alice had to take a backseat while listening to Audrey's father grumbling and making snide remarks about Mathew. It turned into more than a fling; it got serious. The following year Alice was bridesmaid at Audrey's wedding.

She realised that she couldn't stay at the farm under the circumstances. She was about to turn forty. The time had come to move on. Perhaps the next wedding she attended would be her own. She hadn't exactly hit it off with Mathew's wingman but Mark was a good companion and they'd stayed in touch. She would contact him to see if work was available in Sydney. A change of pace would do her good.

Mark's sister was a receptionist who offered to put Alice up in her flat for a couple of months and taught her to type. She practised on an old Remington and built up speed by typing to the beat of music; Belinda also helped to find Alice a job in a typing pool at the Department of Agriculture.

With a regular wage coming in, Alice could rent a basement flat in an old converted Paddington house. She celebrated the New Year of 1973 with Mark and Belinda.

In May, Alice read about an Aquarius festival somewhere up north to celebrate the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. Over the following months, she was introduced to several decent men who, like Mark, were good company and partners for dances— but no spark flickered, the chemistry just wasn't apparent. She was content enough with her independent life and social outings. Though it had to be said, that on nights when air-raid sirens and buzz-bombs did not invade her dreams, an innate loneliness haunted her and she would wake and find herself in DownUnderLand, with pieces of her heart missing. She would cuddle her teddy bear; it knew the secrets and memories from before her home had been blown to smithereens while she was at school. It had been through it all, from being brushed gently by her mother and sat upright on her bed, to squeezy hugs from Ivy that left dribble in its fur, to being in a comfy bed and then being found in the rubble, then gently washed and brushed by Auntie Mabel. Teddy had survived the blitz and been reunited with her dad and now it had found its way back to her. The best part of her life was stuffed inside Teddy.

When she felt lonely or down or excited, she would call Audrey and catch up. It meant walking down to the phone box and standing inside to chat in full view of the street, but she always felt better after speaking to Audrey.

Then, in the middle of a heatwave in February 1976, a letter came for her.

Dear Alice,

This letter will come as a shock. I'm sure. As the only way to contact you is out of the blue like this, I will explain.

My name is Ivy Kingsley. I was born on the 4th August, 1950. My mother's name on my birth certificate is Alice Kingsley. When I found out that I was adopted, I went to India to try and sort myself out. I ended up living there for some months. When I came home, I made enquiries but hit a brick wall. A friend who is a licensed Private D offered to help me. He traced my original birth certificate. His further enquiries led him to you at this address.

I would like to meet you at least once. I have no animosity toward you nor any expectations of you. Are you willing to give it a try?

Best regards, Ivy Kingsley (Elliot).

Alice was completely bewildered. She knew nothing of any baby adopted or otherwise. Poor child had been misled and would be disappointed. Should she reply and let her know? Should she stay out of it? The names, though, were certainly a disconcerting coincidence.

The mention of a baby Ivy triggered memories of her sister, the blitz, the air-raid sirens, Judy the terrier who was their own early-warning system. Her sleep was disturbed by distorted dreams, snatches of conversations.

The next day, she couldn't function. As her willpower drained, Jane took over. Jane called her office and told her colleagues she was ill. Jane closed the curtains and blinds, drank a bottle of vodka and went to bed.

As the alcohol wore off, Jane's nightmare returned with a vengeance. She had a big belly, she endured intense pain, a pillow was held over her face, she heard the cry before the prick of the needle and the fog of drugs. She held out her arms but there was nothing there. She was given more drugs before signing papers—what were they? On a number of pages there was a place for her name, despite her confusion she wrote *Alice Kingsley*. There was also a place for a baby's name, where naturally she wrote *Ivy*.

The baby hadn't survived, they told her. Best to forget all about it. No sense in dwelling on it if the poor mite was dead, they advised. But she knew that, didn't she? She had heard her cry. Did she feel anything when the bomb dropped? she asked the nurse.

They had given her more drugs which sent her to sleep. There was an answer for everything, except for where baby Ivy had come from and where she had gone.

Alice emerged from her long sleep. She remembered Jane's nightmare as if it was a movie reel. She remembered what had happened. That first time when she had been assaulted was when she had turned into Jane and Alice had disappeared—until the day she had met Audrey.

Somebody had to be playing a cruel trick. 'They told me you were dead,' Alice's father had told her. Alice had been told the same about him. Since the bomb that ended everything, everyone had lied to her. The bomb had destroyed her family, her home and the truth. There was no telling what the truth was.

But the thought niggled at her. She had lost Ivy twice already, could she risk not finding out?

She made a concerted effort to pull herself together. She sat for hours composing a reply: that she didn't know Ivy was alive but if she had the birth certificate and proof, then of course they must meet. Alice didn't see the need to provide details at that point.

She imagined a few days' grace before a response. So she was not prepared when two days later, as she turned on the radio, she heard a knock on her front door. *Buckets of rain, buckets of tears …,* the radio blared as she went to answer the door.

A young woman in her twenties stood on the doorstep. Alice was taken aback.

'I'm Ivy,' the young woman said with a tentative smile. 'I'm sorry, I couldn't wait. I hope you're cool with my just arriving like this.'

'You'd better come in,' Alice said.

'Is that Dylan I can hear? Cool. That song seems to be playing everywhere I go. It's going around and around in my head as well.' Ivy was wearing a cheesecloth skirt and an embroidered peasant-style cotton shirt. Her honey-coloured hair spilled over her shoulders and flowed down her back in a ripple of waves.

Alice shrugged. 'I can never understand him.' She turned the music down to a reasonable level for conversation.

As they sat at the table, each feeling somewhat awkward. Roberta Flack sang 'The first time ever I saw your face' over the radio. Alice's voice cracked. 'I never saw your face then—this is the first time ever I've seen your face.'

Ivy jumped up and hugged Alice. 'It's the first time I've seen your face, too, in that case. Even that was taken from us.'

'It's not a pretty story, Ivy,' Alice admitted. 'It's painful and piecemeal. I'm glad they kept your name.'

'One of the nurses told Colleen, my mother—my nurture mother—adoptive mother—that you called me Ivy. Colleen said she felt I was a gift from you and wanted to keep the name you'd given me. We've got plenty of time, let's not rush things.' Ivy sat back in the chair. 'Let's just enjoy this moment. I've imagined it so many times.'

The trouble for Alice was that she had not. She had not even known of Ivy's existence until a few days ago. Of all the things she might have imagined, this was not one of them. She would try to enjoy the moment then and not think of past and future. Who knew what might be around the next corner? For now, she had a daughter, a daughter who had moved by herself to India—no less—a daughter who had wanted to

track her down. She was no shrinking violet, this girl, then. ‘I am savouring the moment,’ she said. ‘And later I want to know all about you.’

After a cloudy start, by late afternoon sun streamed through the window. ‘I was going to offer tea,’ Alice said. ‘But I think it’s late enough for something stronger and god knows I need it, two—surprises—in one week!’ She had nearly said ‘shocks’ but stopped herself in time.

Alice filled two glasses with Pimms, which they sipped as they watched the setting sun wash the clouds pink and tinge the edges with gold.

IVY

A Northerly Direction

Ivy was restless. Living in Sydney was pleasant, safe—and boring. She was fortunate to now have two mothers and a father who all doted on her, sure, but she had established her independence by going to India and now she was keen to move on.

Her feared prospect of divided loyalties had been avoided. Her nature mother, Alice, seemed happy to see her whenever she turned up, and just as happy to leave the rest to Colleen, her nurture mother. Russ, her adoptive dad, was her anchor. The missing link, her natural father, was still a puzzle.

Ivy felt fortunate to be able to uproot herself without too much trouble and settle for a while just about anywhere. She missed the sounds and sights of Delhi, the stretches of farming land dotted with small villages in rural India, the Mughal architecture, the big red ball of sun that floated above then sank below the horizon, animals, music, noisy traffic, decorated vehicles, voices and the people, the people everywhere, wearing bright colours and travelling to a beat of a different drum.

She felt she was hemmed in by concrete and sandstone. She wanted to move away to a place where she could feel the earth underfoot, see the stars at night, grow fresh organic food and continue her journey of discovering who she really was. She had enough savings to travel backpack in a northerly direction up the East Coast of New South Wales and into the hinterland. She had heard stories about alternative communities being set up and decided to suss them out.

Alice, her nature mother, seemed nonplussed. ‘Isn’t that where they had that Aquarius Festival in 1973? Subsistence farming is not my cup of tea, Ivy. It’s far too much hard yakka, believe me. But if you ever need any help with growing produce, I’ve plenty of experience doing that.’

‘This is growing food without superphosphate and pesticides,’ Ivy said.

‘Is it now? That’ll be even more hard yakka,’ Alice retorted. ‘You’ll be picking off every slug, snail and aphid by hand, then.’

‘Partly—but assisted by organic sprays of garlic, soapy water, citrus—depending on the pest involved.’

Alice suppressed a grin. Ivy realised that she understood her need to learn in her own way. Nonetheless Alice could not resist humming ‘This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius’.

Colleen made a fuss at first but after India, a hippie commune in the same state seemed mild in comparison. She let out her usual sigh of frustration and gave Ivy her full support. Russ, her adoptive father, was his usual kind self. Although he was not given to displays of affection, he had a good sense of humour and could give and take a joke.

Ivy rented a caravan for a month in a small town, which suited her plans very well.

The main street of Nimbin was a tableau of entertainment, from buskers to beggars. The Rainbow Cafe seemed to be the place to observe interlopers and locals, the sickly-sweet smell of homegrown dope as it was cut, crushed between fingers and thumb, then rolled up in Tally Ho papers. Ivy strolled along the main street and bought a hand-tooled leather box embossed with strawberries, a pair of Indian cotton pants, a small copper dish and a vial of patchouli oil. Heavy wholemeal doughnuts were not a success. She offered one to a dog on a leash outside a shop, but even the dog refused.

Ivy ventured out to Tuntable Falls, adjoining Nightcap National Park, where she visited camps and communes with tents, caravans and hand-built dwellings made from mudbricks, straw, glass bottles, wattle and daub—or material from demolished buildings, whatever was at hand and cost-free. She learnt that growing organic food, far from idyllic, was a constant battle against the wildlife, birdlife, insects and elements.

As a newcomer and outsider, she was privy to their complaints. How some smoked a few spliffs in the evening after work to relax, while others sucked on joints all day long; how some did all the work while others just hung about or grew dope or searched for gold-top mushrooms; how some cooked while others just turned up to share in the eating; how some people grew food while others, when called on to help, would simply wander off, leaving their tools behind for somebody else to pick up.

An alternative lifestyle was no utopia. As Alice had foreseen, it was a lot of hard yakka for little return. She was not ready to give up on the idea yet, though. There had to be a better alternative, right?

Nimbin was a rad place to visit but it wasn't for her. Tuntable Falls was a challenge she wasn't yet ready for. Ivy packed up her belongings and hitched to Byron Bay to spend a few days on the coast. She sent picture postcards to Alice and Colleen.

She rented another caravan overlooking the ocean. As she lay on warm sand looking up at a clear, blue sky, Ivy wondered just where she did belong.

By the end of the week, Ivy had convinced one of the new-age cafes advertising for a waitress that she would be ideal because she could make chai tea and South Indian filter coffee. She also had blonde hair bleached by the sun and sea, and golden-brown limbs, which no doubt helped her to score the job.

In Byron, she enjoyed the mellow life of people-watching and observing all manner of intriguing behaviours. Everyone, it seemed, had a story— and most were keen to tell it. She met a woman who crocheted fine covers edged with beads to keep flies and insects from landing in mugs and jugs. She met a man who had a 'music machine'. War veterans, bikies, surfers, farmers, hippies, buskers, musos, writers, artists, photographers, craftspeople, shopkeepers, public servants, crazy people—all sorts came to Byron for a spell.

For five months, Ivy enjoyed her hiatus. Then winter arrived with grey skies, heavy rain and strong winds that whipped the caravan and clouded the windows. Ivy decided to move on.

Shahra owned an antique jewellery shop in Byron. She claimed to be a ninety-year-old Persian aristocrat. Shahra's imperious manner, her airs and graces, rubbed some people the wrong way but Ivy found her fascinating. She was slim and looked frail but walked erect using only a walking stick for support. Her skin was not thickened like most Australians; it was the colour of porcelain with fine blue veins visible. She had silver hair caught back smoothly into a chignon. Tiny golden chandeliers dropped from her ears, while her wrists shimmered and tinkled with gold bracelets. Ivy bought a pair of tiny gold elephant earrings from Shahra's shop.

One afternoon, Ivy showed Shahra the gold mesh and turquoise bracelet she had brought back from India. It turned out that Shahra had once lived in India, too, though much, much earlier than when Ivy had lived in New Delhi for a time. Shahra told her that she'd lived in India post-Mughal and post–East India Company but before partition, before all-India when the country became an independent republic. Born in Persia, she

had been everywhere from Kabul, Rawalpindi, Lahore and Kashmir to the Bay of Bengal, and Kerala on the Arabian Sea. From that day on, Shahra took a liking to Ivy. She took Ivy's hand and studied her palm.

'Will I meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger?' Ivy joked. 'And travel to unfamiliar places across the sea?'

Shahra frowned. 'You can joke, or you can listen.'

'I was half-hoping, actually.'

'You have a long and fascinating life ahead of you. There will be travel, yes, but you didn't need me to tell you that. You will meet a soul-mate, though you may not recognise them as such at first. You will have both challenges and opportunities aplenty. Stay awhile, take your time, there is no rush to meet the future.'

'I don't think I can spend much longer making coffee in the cafe. Truly, it's depressing,' Ivy argued.

'I can understand that. As a matter of fact, I need to go away. I need someone to look after my shop. If you are interested, I can show you the ropes.'

'That's a big call. Some of your gear must be worth heaps of money. You hardly know me. How do you know you can trust me?'

Shahra arched her eyebrows. 'The most precious can go into the bank. I'll leave the lesser value items in the shop. I should mention the job has a house attached.'

'Outta sight! You're kidding me?'

'Now you think I am joking? If you are willing to look after the shop, you may as well house-sit for me.'

'How long will you be away?'

'No more than a month; what do you say?'

'It's tempting, and it's not as if I do have anywhere to rush off to.'

'It may help us both out, but no need to rush into a decision on this, either. Think it over and let me know.'

Ivy asked if she could take a look at Shahra's house, so on the following Monday when the shop closed for the day, Ivy rented a bike and followed the directions.

Just a short way from Byron Bay, Shahra's old homestead stood within a glorious garden. It was built in 1888, 'the year I was born', Shahra told Ivy. They wandered around the gently tamed wilderness bursting with colour and shades of green; shaded by

a canopy of liquid amber and jacaranda trees. The liquidambar was losing the last of its red and orange leaves, which were now forming a blanket covering the roots beneath the tree. The house and garden were a lovely reminder of times past—but if the outside was a time capsule, the inside was something else altogether.

Under the very Australian bullnose veranda, where baskets of plants hung from the roof and large ceramic pots fought for space on the deck, Shahra opened the door to a home that would not have been out of place in India. The decor in the living room took Ivy straight back there. So many hand-woven silk rugs and shawls, cushions embroidered with silver and gold thread or tiny mirrors; figurines of various Hindu deities; candlesticks and small bowls of silver, brass and gold; intricately enamelled vases, boxes, pin dishes and incense burners; carved soapstone, sandstone, ivory and wooden sculptures—impossible to take it all in at once. A brightly decorated Singer sewing machine sat on a carved wooden table in the next room amid swathes of expensive fabric and bric-a-brac for detail—sequins, beads, gems, pearls, silk thread glittering in small sandalwood bowls. Another room revealed musical instruments and score stands with music sheets—a saxophone, a flute, a cello and a small piano, as well other wooden instruments that Ivy couldn't recognise.

The large old-fashioned and well-scrubbed kitchen boasted both an Aga stove and a more modern gas cooker, a good-size fridge, wide benches and a big window overlooking the back garden. The bathroom looked as if it had been frozen in time since the 1920s with its quaint geometric tiles in green, black and cream. The deep freestanding bath looked inviting.

Upstairs, heavy carved beds graced each of two double bedrooms. A third double room had been partitioned allowing a smaller, modern bathroom to be installed on one side and a cosy reading room on the other.

'Far out! It's all so…wow…amazing!' Ivy said. 'I don't know that I can keep it looking as funky as this.'

'Three people come here every day,' Shahra said. 'They are trusted friends. Tim looks after the garden, general maintenance and any heavy work, cleaning gutters and so on, Susan cleans and tidies the house and looks after the indoors. Malathi comes to continue our work of making an inventory of my collections and recording provenance. You are welcome to stay here but your job is to mind the shop; the running of the house

will be taken care of by Tim, Susan and Malathi. Any problems, they will deal with them. Mind you, they are the only people allowed in unless you are present.'

Ivy couldn't think of a single reason not to stay another month and enjoy living in Shahra's house and look after her shop during the quiet season. 'I can promise you that I won't poke around in your private spaces—I understand that everyone needs their privacy, and their secrets, respected.'

'Anything off-limits will be locked away. Malathi has an inventory of most of the contents of the house – and my judgement is rarely at fault. I leave in the morning. Please feel free to move in then. Here is a set of keys to the shop and house.'

The arrangements made, Ivy settled into her next habitat as happily as a hermit crab with a new fancy shell. It didn't take her long to unpack her few possessions. Shahra had left a note on the kitchen table. *Make yourself at home and enjoy my two story house. I'll see you anon.*

Business was predictably slow at the shop, with only a few locals and off-season tourists dropping in every now and then. In between customers and browsers, she read books she'd discovered on the shelves about antiques and collectables and learnt about the history of some of the wares in the shop—Victorian, Edwardian, art nouveau and art deco designs in precious metals, gems, jewels and enamelling from Europe and Britain. There were older pieces, too, from South Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Shahra bought estate jewellery at auctions, as well as jewel boxes, ornaments and knick-knacks that were a cut well above the average charity or op-shop offerings.

Her shop was shaded by a wide awning to keep out the sunlight. Inside, candelabras with faux candles flickered making the gold glister, pearls gleam and gems glitter: it was truly an Aladdin's cave.

Ivy picked up a ring and wondered whose fingers it had adorned over the decades. She turned over a black brooch and wondered who had been loved and missed so much that they were commemorated by mourning jewellery, a locket encasing a lock of their hair and a carved jet brooch. Who, Ivy speculated, was deserving of a fine filigree, negligée 'drop' necklace studded with rubies and pearls? And who was the lucky recipient of two natural pearls set into the shape of a dragonfly body with ruby and sapphire wings edged in diamonds? All of the owners were now dead and their exquisite possessions in the hands of strangers.

Ivy mentioned this to Malathi when she saw her during the week. ‘It’s true,’ Malathi agreed. ‘Shahra and I are making a full inventory of every piece she owns—not only that, we have recorded the provenance and stories that accompany them. Shahra calls it her “two-story house” because every evening we choose two of her possessions and record their stories.’

‘Really? When she put “enjoy my two-story house” in her note, I thought she’d made a spelling mistake. I’d love to hear some of those stories.’

New residents moved in next door; the house had been unoccupied for three months or more with tradesmen coming and going to renovate and redecorate. A smart-looking card arrived in the mailbox with an invitation to a housewarming ceremony on the Saturday night. Ivy was surprised as she’d seen the new neighbours only briefly as they were coming and going. They had barely acknowledged her. They seemed much too stylish for Ivy’s unsophisticated tastes, though she was sure Shahra could give them a run for their money. She decided that her social life at the moment wasn’t so great that she could afford to turn down too many invitations and she was curious about them. She asked Malathi to go with her to the housewarming do next door.

Early on the Saturday morning, Ivy was in the back garden hanging out her laundry when she saw a ginger tomcat saunter past. Later that morning, the cat stretched full-length in a patch of sunlight near the washing line and took a nap.

When Ivy first noticed the ginger tom loitering in Shahra’s yard, she mulled over ideas to get rid of him. She was concerned that he might dig up the soil in the flowerbeds or vegetable patch. She rarely saw Tim; he tended the garden while she was at Shahra’s shop and she didn’t want to disturb his work.

The ginger cat had no collar or perhaps had lost it. No name, no ID, no pack drill. Just a proprietary air as he swaggered through the garden, tail upright like a flagpole advising of his sovereign rights. He rolled in the grass then curled up in a patch of sunlight.

The cat woke, stretched and washed itself when the new neighbours arrived home. He stared as they unpacked their parcels from the car boot and carried them indoors. She saw him disappear into their place. Good, she thought, he’s decided to up stakes

and leave. No such luck. He almost flew across Shahra's back garden, drops of water flying from his fur. Ivy saw him pause for a moment, his tail swishing in anger. He shook himself and disappeared through the foliage.

That evening, Malathi arrived wearing a rich-red, intricately embroidered kurta with contrasting dark-green leggings and matching scarf. Ivy had bought a cream silk shirt and a midnight-blue satin skirt for the occasion. Her feet were shod in silver sandals.

'You look fab, Malathi. Uber cool. This evening should be a blast.'

The sun sank to the horizon with an obliging show of orange and mauve as they arrived at the housewarming soiree. They heard a tinkling of bells from the sunroom - or conservatory, as Ciel and Mondo called it. Plants now flourished there in decorative pots of all shapes and sizes, stood proud in stencilled window boxes or came cascading from baskets suspended overhead. It certainly rivalled Shahra's display, and these neighbours had only been here for five minutes.

Indoors, Ivy's feet sank into plush jade-green carpet. Ciel and Mondo were not so much chatting with their guests, as talking at them; not so much conversing, as bragging.

Ivy noticed a refectory table laden with delicious and innovative finger food, little parcels wrapped in seaweed or bamboo, slices of fish nestling in miniature fried noodle baskets, an Asian influence, according to Ciel, who was informing a small gathering, 'all so innovative, exciting and more-ish'.

The hosts seemed full of themselves and the splendour they had created. To listen to them anyone would think they had drawn up the plans, laid the foundations and hammered in every nail themselves. Ivy had no doubt that the teams of builders, electricians, plumbers, landscapers and consultants coming and going over the past weeks had had a hand in the renovation somewhere, though one would never guess from the blow-by-blow description Mondo and Ciel insisted on repeating to all and sundry.

Ciel continued to hold court, babbling on about how they thought the Federation and California bungalow colours so passé, they had decided to take a risk with the latest rag-finish stucco technique in terracotta colour and how delighted they were with the

fabulously ethnic result. Though the lengths they had to go to, then, in decorating, finding just the right pieces, like their gorgeous Samian ware, to create authenticity.

A fey woman, with wispy hair like fairy floss, drifted about tinkling finger cymbals, her gossamer dress trailing behind her. Ivy had seen this woman before at the beach and in town. Tonight, she looked as if she might have popped out of one of the larger Ali Baba pots on the veranda. Tiny bells tinkled on her toes and about her ankles. Every so often she paused and swayed like a hypnotised cobra. Guests shuffled their feet, expelled little coughs and avoided looking at each other. Ivy recognised a few from around the neighbourhood—business people, the state MP for the area and local government councillors. People of influence not the hoi polloi. Either she was invited as a courtesy, or they had intended for Shahra to be there.

Everyone looked up sharply as the wail of a tomcat pierced the delicate mystic ritual and the ruminations of onlookers.

The fairy clapped loudly amid a frenzy of tinkling bells. Three times she skirted the room, each time more loudly chanting, clapping and tinkling, as she tried, without quite managing, to rival the howling tomcat.

The fairy paused, thrown by this unexpected interruption. There was blessed silence, even the cat ceased its din, but not for long—soon the caterwauling resumed, even louder than before. In the middle of the room the fairy lit aromatic oil burners, raised her arms above her head and breathed deeply as the room filled with perfume. The fine fingering of a flautist floated through the blooms briefly before being drowned out by the ululating feline. The cat was reaching for a crescendo when Mondo lost his cool and raced out into the garden looking for hose and tap.

Malathi was at Ivy's elbow. 'I reckon this is about the most boring do I've ever sat through. And that's saying something considering the number I've had to attend with Shahra. I think it's time I got out of here.'

The party more or less dispersed after that.

Back at home, Ivy noticed the ginger cat on Shahra's veranda sleeping it off. He's a born performer, she decided, deserving of a place to rest his bones for the night.

'Early this morning, I saw that tomcat saunter by as if he owned the place,' Ivy said to Malathi. 'Tonight, he is lying insouciantly on a comfy cushion on a wicker peacock chair.'

‘He was the highlight of the evening,’ Malathi said, laughing. ‘Poor Tinkerbell was completely overshadowed.’

‘I’ve seen her on the beach, she reads tarot cards, doesn’t she?’

‘Tarot, I Ching, irises, jewellery, you name it. She claims to be a medium, as well.’

‘She would have a field day in Shahra’s shop, then, with all that estate jewellery.’

‘In more ways than one, I should think,’ Malathi said. ‘If she was to go into Shahra’s shop, I have no doubt that Shahra would pop out from the shadows to follow her every move.’

The next day poured with rain, as Ivy opened the door of the taxi and struggled with her shopping bags. As the taxi drove away, one of the bags split, spilling her groceries on the driveway. She hoped Tim might be about to give a hand.

Instead, Mondo appeared. ‘Let me help,’ he offered.

‘Is Ciel there?’ Ivy asked.

‘No. She had to go to a meeting. She’s supposed to be back any time but I expect she’s running late, as usual. Why?’

‘I just wondered.’ Ivy said, rebalancing her load.

‘Let me take those. I expect she’ll be here any tick of the clock.’

Inside, Mondo pushed aside some coffee table books and dropped Ivy’s belongings on to the table in the living room. ‘Now, what about a drink?’

‘Well, just the one, then.’ Ivy said ungraciously. ‘What would you like? We’re well stocked.’

‘A whisky?’

‘No problem.’

‘Crikey, it looks as though this room has come out of the Ark. No offence.’

They stood in silence sipping their drinks.

‘Your hair is different,’ he said.

Ivy perched on the edge of a Chesterfield sofa and glanced at her watch. Mondo sat beside her, raised his glass and sipped his drink. Ivy shuddered involuntarily.

‘Are you cold?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, no, sorry. Someone walked over my grave, I think.’ She tried to make light of it.

‘Won’t happen to me. I’m going to be cremated. Tell me about you?’

‘What about me?’

‘I want to know all about you.’ He tried to strike an interested pose. ‘And this weird and wonderful place.’ He waved his arm about.

Conscious of her responsibility to care for Shahra’s house, Ivy was not keen on letting Mondo stay any longer than necessary. ‘Actually, since Ciel is obviously delayed, why don’t you come back tomorrow?’

‘What’s your hurry?’ Mondo asked her. ‘The evening is young. You’re young. And there’s nothing around here worth hurrying for, my love. Let me refresh your drink...’

‘You should go home. I want to unpack my shopping and...’

Mondo caught hold of her arm. ‘One more drink. Then I’ll go. What’s the rush, babe?’

‘I think you should leave now.’ She shook free of him.

‘Dead set. What are you getting your knickers in a knot for?’ Mondo swayed slightly as he got to his feet.

‘You’d already been drinking, hadn’t you? Before I arrived home.’

‘Isn’t a cosy room on a rainy day supposed to be a turn-on?’ His disappointment was obvious.

‘What? You thought if you pretended to help me, bludged a shot of Shahra’s alcohol and pressured me to join you, that I’d be panting for you, is that it?’ She grabbed her bags from the coffee table. ‘You did, didn’t you? You’re disgusting, Mondo! I swear to God.’

‘Maybe your exotic friend ‘Latté’ will be more interested,’ Mondo called out, as he left slamming the front door.

Shahra's Story

Indoors, the heat from the Aga kept the house warm; Malathi cast off her jacket. Ivy made fresh plunger coffee, then added a tot of rum to each mug. 'Why don't you stay overnight? There's plenty of room.'

'I have a room, here, with toiletries, toothbrush and a change of clothes. Sometimes Shahra and I work long into the night, documenting, photographing, attaching provenance, archiving, completing her inventory.'

Ivy told Malathi about their sleazebag neighbour trying to seduce her on the pretext of helping to carry in her shopping.

'More interested in helping himself, isn't he?' Malathi said, with a disdainful sniff.

'Talk about giving me the hairy eyeball. He makes my skin crawl. He thought you might be more interested.'

'Me! Why me?'

'Something about being exotic. Next door seem to go for 'ethnic', don't they?'

'Do me a favour.'

'Forget him. I won't be letting him in again. Tell me about Shahra. I'd really like to know more about her. She seems mysterious and fascinating, I'm intrigued. Nothing personal, I'm not prying. And where you fit in, Malathi, of course.'

'It's interesting you should say that because it's when we're working late and I stay over, we wind down by telling each other a story.'

'Oh, yes, the *two-story house* that I thought misspelt, but was meant as a pun.'

'So I'll tell you one story each night I stay here—but only the one—about one of her possessions; and in return, you must tell me one story.'

'That seems fair. You first, then.'

'To briefly give a background. Shahra was born in 1888, incidentally on the same day as Groucho Marx, but into a noble family in the Sublime State of Persia under the rule of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar. During the cholera outbreak of 1892, her family fled to Turkey. From there they moved to France, where Shahra was educated. She has married wealthy and influential men and had affairs with others, and travelled the world over.

Her collection of objets d'art and jewellery includes examples from the best jewellers, designers, craftspeople, silversmiths, goldsmiths, artists and artisans. When the inventory is completed, she is planning a major exhibition. She is calling it *Pleasures and Paramours of a Persian Princess*.'

'I knew she was a woman of mystery.' Ivy sounded smug.

'The most valuable pieces are, of course, locked in a bank vault. I have one piece here, though, that we've been tracing.' Malathi unlocked a casket and brought out a kind of brooch made of gold or a yellow metal, inset with red glass, or maybe rock crystal, engraved into a flower with a green and gold–coloured fern behind it. A long, slim natural pearl hung below.

'Very pretty.' Ivy turned it over in her hands and admired it.

'It's a turban ornament. A present from an Indian prince who Shahra met when she was seventeen. The stone is an uncut ruby engraved with a diamond-tipped knife to represent a flower; the fern leaves are inset with emeralds and topaz. The drop is an unusually-shaped natural salt water pearl. It was made for a Moghul sometime around the end of the 17th or beginning of the 18th century.'

'How did Shahra meet this prince?'

'On a trip to India with some French friends. It was 1905. Queen Victoria, Empress of India, had died in 1901 and the mourning period was over by the end of that year, by proclamation of the King. India seemed exotic, extravagant and exciting. People from all over Europe were interested in art nouveau, the Brits were obsessed with the treasures of the Empire. That she and her friends were French was likewise fascinating for the prince. He'd met too many Englishwomen and was intrigued by Shahra. From the way she told me the story, it sounded to me like it was a true-love match, but not a match that would be approved. When Shahra returned to France, the prince gave her a gold signet ring with an uncut balas ruby engraved with his name, and this turban ornament.'

They sipped their rum and coffee nightcaps. Ivy held up the turban ornament and the precious jewels glowed in the light.

'I'd never have guessed if I had come upon it,' Ivy said. 'It's truly fabulous but I would never have picked that it was a huge ruby, especially with that engraving on it. It has to be worth a fortune.'

‘Oh, it is. As soon as we’ve finished documenting the provenance, it will join the others in the bank vault.’

‘I can’t imagine what it must have been like to meet an Indian prince back then.’

‘It was like Kismet, according to Shahra. It was written in the stars, but in the wrong galaxy. The prince was the son of a maharaja of a kingdom in the north. He was tall and so handsome that women swooned. Particularly British women, who were trussed up in tightly-pulled corsets, so they couldn’t breathe at the best of times. Shahra managed not to swoon. Instead, she was amused by this exhibition of sycophancy. Her mischievous smile caught the eye of the prince. Elegant, slender and graceful, she made quite an impression, or so the story goes.’

‘It’s beginning to sound like a Disney film.’

‘Not unless Disney are making R-rated movies these days.’ Malathi chuckled and poured the remaining coffee into their mugs then added another slurp of rum.

‘She was seventeen. Didn’t anyone try to stop her?’

‘The French, of course, encourage paramours and, noticing the frisson between the two, her friends discreetly left to visit the Taj Mahal. Shahra and her prince were free to enjoy each other’s company and a lot more besides. All good things end, though, and when the time came for the prince to return to his duties, he reluctantly let Shahra go.’

‘She was still only seventeen.’ The same age as Alice when I was born, she thought.

‘True, but an extremely well-educated, liberal and sophisticated seventeen, brought up in France during the fin de siècle. It was a time of great change. She was not like your average teenager today. Shahra seems to view it as an extension of her education—an exciting and memorable experience.’ Malathi held up the turban ornament. ‘She wasn’t ready to settle down, even with a prince. Even if an arranged marriage wasn’t already in the offing for him. And she didn’t do too badly out of it, if you ask me. She gained not only the jewels but also many connections through personally knowing the prince. The prince continued to have a small place for her in his heart, if not his home.’

Shahra had fared a lot better than Alice, then, Ivy thought. ‘Wow! I’m flabbergasted. I mean, you can tell she’s different from most people, there’s something

about her…but I'd never imagined anything this extraordinary. What happened next? Who did she connect with?

'One story, remember? What happened next is for next time. Now it's your turn.'

'Let's refill the coffee plunger then.'

Malathi found a bar of dark chocolate and some almonds to complement the coffee.

When they were sitting comfortably again, coffee, chocolate and almonds at hand, Ivy began her tale.

'My story happened much later, in 1975 and, not surprisingly, there are no princes involved. I had found out some months before that I was adopted. It completely unnerved me. I love my adoptive parents. They've done so much for me. But at that time, I had no idea who I really was. That demon curiosity wouldn't leave me alone. I had recently graduated and wanted to get away so I could think without feeling guilty and conflicted. First, I moved to inner Sydney, where I could feel alive. I joined anti-war marches. I marched behind Patrick White. I went to rock concerts at the Hordern Pavilion—I heard some fab concerts and I joined the crush to hear bands like Radio Birdman in pubs, jazz in the Basement and … I met a lot of different, cool people. One of these people I fell for was not so cool. He was my first and most disastrous love affair. When my romantic notions disintegrated, I needed to move on again. This time I wanted to put more distance between my new life and my old life.

'I heard people talking about travelling through India and that idea appealed to me. I knew my parents wouldn't go for it, so I did my homework and organised contacts, so that I had my argument and plan prepared. In the end, I got there and it changed everything.'

'Tell me about the disastrous love affair,' Malathi interrupted.

'OK but indulge me with setting the scene.' Ivy turned off the lights except for a small shaded lamp. She poured two nips of straight rum into each mug. 'It's evening, towards the end of the year 1975, and we're sitting in a dimly-lit pub lounge in Darlo.' Ivy seemed to slip somewhere into the past.

Malathi sat back, mug in hand, and closed her eyes, as Ivy began her tale.

Buckets of Moonbeams

[Author Note: When reading this story, you can enjoy a multimedia experience by clicking on the link for the lyrics from the Official Bob Dylan website. You could also download the album track from "Blood on the Tracks" and listen while reading this story. https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/buckets-rain/]

It's a strange feeling returning after being away for a long time. It all seems the same yet not the same. One of the biggest shocks is the sky—so clear, so blue—the next is the smell.

After Delhi, the air seemed almost medicinal, though I missed the cacophony of noise, the traffic with ceaseless honking of horns, the calls of hawkers, the preparation of food by street vendors, the rumble and screech of building sites, the ubiquitous throbbing murmur of life on the move. Aromas, odours of dust, animals, people, vehicle exhaust fumes, spices, tantalising food wafting through the air. Sydney seemed a pale comparison; it lacked colour and vitality.

I unpacked in my newly rented flat and tried to become more oriented to my surroundings. It felt surreal to be back here. For a few days I re-familiarised myself, visited op-shops for second-hand furniture and utensils to set up again, and arranged my bits and pieces brought back from India.

I had a job waiting for me with a media company. The staff were friendly but distant. I knew I felt different, was different since returning and was not yet in synch. People seemed to feel my uncertainty, my lack of feeling for this place. Old friends had moved on, some physically, others emotionally. Life moves on for all of us.

One night, out of sheer boredom, I revisited old haunts. Now I know what people mean when they say they feel as if they have seen a ghost.

He is sitting in the same corner, wearing a Dylanesque hat, his eyes covered by mirrored shades, surrounded by his coterie, just as he did in times past.

https://www.bobdylan.com/songs/buckets-rain/

The new Bob Dylan song played in my head. I wondered what sort of moonbeams my ghost had in his hands now? What myths he unravelled about himself these days, woven out of scraps and hearsay.

His face had the texture of dough and his sparse hair was stained with nicotine. His frame had shrunk as if the flesh had fled his bones. Back then, he oozed charm; a devilish smile enchanted the features of his somewhat striking pale face of perfect symmetry, with high cheekbones and a strong, square chin. A shock of platinum hair flopped casually over his forehead. He was blessed with Nordic genes, he said. The fact that he got about in a wheelchair seemed hardly a handicap at all to such a personable fellow. He used his outrageous sense of the absurd to face any obstacle and unfailingly managed to get his own way.

I was impressed when he showed me a fantastic painting, three-quarters finished, that he was working on. Though I had seen a strikingly similar painting in a book, Picasso's *Weeping Woman*, I encouraged him to practise. One of my first acts of kindness was to spend a fortune on oil paints. I could hardly afford it, but I felt I had to encourage his talent. Except for the occasional touch-up when I queried his lack of apparent interest, he never painted a single brushstroke while I knew him. It was fake, a paint-by-number replica, a cheat.

I'd like to think his love for music was genuine. Dylan was our hero. Blues everything. In our love of music we found a common bond.

He was eleven weeks behind in his rent when I took him in. He said he didn't want his friends to know that he had nowhere else to go. You would think that would have made me wary, wouldn't you? Not on your life; against all reason I was hooked. After worming his way into my romantic fantasies, where he was at once a hero and a victim, he simply moved in 'temporarily'; lobbed round with his few clothes and this one canvas, partly finished. Can you imagine, no knick-knacks, no bits of him, no toiletries even?

He always had a deal of grass. Good heads, not leafy shit, he would say. He explained that he would never be really sure if he could trust me unless we smoked the joints together.

We shared everything. Well, mostly I shared because he had so little. I gave him my possessions. Can I blame him for taking when I was so ready to give? I not only encouraged, I insisted. I wanted to give him my all.

I could never understand, then, when he retreated into deeply depressive moods; he would be rude and sarcastic to me, who was so eager to be kind. So willing to be put upon. He used language I had never heard before, that made my heart twist with pain. It was a kind of martyrdom being weighted with this abuse, to suffer without reproach, to love unconditionally.

It was during one of these strange moods that he laid out his insecurities and examined them, frightening himself badly. I had never witnessed so much anger. The pupils of his eyes became two black beads of hate. He spoke in a bitingly bitter voice.

'They say my mother was not all there. When I was born she couldn't bear even to look at me; refused to believe that I belonged to her. My father was persecuted for taking advantage of a woman with a child's mind and did not dare to come near. Even when I was tiny, people could not bring themselves to love me.'

'You poor darling, but at least you have someone who loves you now...' I had lost my mother, too—but at least I had loving adoptive parents.

'You think the sons of bitches that run those institutions give a shit? Let me tell you. I've seen them stick a flower up the arsehole of some poor bugger paralysed from the neck down. I've seen them stroke the dick of an imbecile and then roar laughing when the poor bastard cracked a useless erection. And the women, too, "I bet you've never tasted spunk," they'd say. "Take off your clothes and let me feel your tits."'

'But not you, they didn't touch you?' I wanted reassurance.

'Yes, me, too, and if I gave them trouble they'd shower me with cold water in the middle of the night. I wanted to kill those bastards! They would starve me for days, if I spoke out; withdraw my painkillers; you can't fight that kind of power with a useless body. Those dumb bastards whose minds had given up were the luckiest. To be a vegetable was nirvana!'

He went away, crying real tears. When he didn't come back I fretted that he wouldn't survive without my care. He did, of course.

There were good times, too, fabulous, fun times. Although he seemed allergic to paying his way with day-to-day expenses, he treated me to sizzling garlic prawns and

well-sauced Italian food. Once even pheasant under glass at some elegant French place. He would take us all to the theatre or a concert and afterwards order white Russians all round in the local pub, or brandy Alexanders upstairs at the 'Royal'.

I was astonished at his inventiveness in creating ways to use his disability to his advantage. He was a chronic shoplifter, and proud of it. One of the reasons it gave him such a kick was because as he said, 'it takes a hell of a lot of courage to challenge a handsome and charming cripple'.

If he was picked up for one of his habitual misdemeanours, in the lock-up and in the courtroom he played on his infirmity for all it was worth. He rarely received more than a caution or a small fine.

I could never get over how many funky people he knew. Peculiar people; colourful types; rough, downright dangerous-looking, some of them, with their lank greasy hair, tattoos and black leather boots. He never explained his actions and since nagging is so tiresome in a relationship, it was better not to ask, or even to notice. I was always careful not to be paranoid; or blow my pseudo sophistication. I smoked Sobranie cigarettes and tried to look pale and interesting like Marianne Faithfull, as if unsavoury people had always been a normal part of my life.

Of course they were drug dealers and addicts; I realise that now. Drugs linked them all like a network of veins. But life was far too groovy to question then. Because with him, I was part of an underground scene where the scent of danger was always present and where I could feel the heaviness of desolation row, without actually having to live it.

While I paid the rent on time and bought the groceries, his money was for blowing on the cool stuff. It bought nights of bluesy music and bourbon and Cokes, when the basement flat became a dim nightclub filled with the smoke of joints and Camel cigarettes, and all sorts turning up.

Or we'd come here to the pub where everything was garishly lit; where bubbling bright personalities were convinced they were enjoying themselves, and were dying to be noticed. Rivalry was intense among these people whose entire being was nothing more than a role they played. For whom no act was too outrageous; they had nothing to lose and just each night to live for.

My friend in the corner had his own bag of myths and miracles. Always with himself as the hero.

He was half-drunk when he first told of a motorbike accident at age eighteen, 'When the compo comes...' he said, as he fantasised about his comfortable future. When he was very drunk, he told another version of having had his legs deliberately broken by vicious police in a South American country.

When he was stoned he recounted how he was beaten up in an unfair street fight and left for dead. He also used to tell of breaking his back in a rodeo fall.

In the end I became bored with all his stories, disillusioned at the way my encouragement and sacrifices were not evoking the miracle I required.

I arrived home unexpectedly early one afternoon, to find the front door ajar and the television and stereo conveniently placed beside an open back window. I was furious. I rang the police who arrived, gave a cursory glance around the flat and asked what I expected if I chose to live in this kind of neighbourhood. When my friend rolled through the front door, one of the cops gave a flicker of recognition.

Later that night we were visited by the vice squad. I didn't believe them when they told me who they were. They had to show me proof of ID before I would let them in. Three detectives, who seemed to know my friend, questioned us at length. I was confused. They made me feel nervous. What were they doing at my place? They fired their questions, moved ornaments, lifted cushions—eyes everywhere.

They seemed disappointed when they left, with a warning to me to be careful with whom I associated.

My friend laughed his guts out. I had never seen him so hyper. He was shaking, too, but with laughter! He disappeared and returned with a rubber strap and syringe. He opened the pages of my magazine on the sofa next to him; inside was a capsule which the detectives had missed. He broke it open and mixed it with some liquid on a spoon.

With a lighted match he warmed the spoon until it was black underneath; he drew the stuff up into a needle and shot it into the vein that bulged above the strap. He was celebrating his great luck!

Either it was an uncharacteristic mistake in judgement on his part, or else he no longer cared what I thought. In any case for me it was the proverbial final straw.

‘How dare you be so fatuous?’ I screamed. Supposing those detectives had found the smack? Supposing they’d charged him? I remember still the icy-cold trickle that crept down my spine as a thought struck. Supposing he’d denied it was his? He was capable of that. The flat was leased in my name. He was using on my premises. If he’d said the stuff belonged to me, what chance would I have had?

And all the while the pupils of his eyes were shrivelling smaller, smaller, contracting to two black pinpoints. He started to snicker and taunt.

‘You’re a vacuous bitch! Did you really think I survived on a pension?’ The smile left his face. ‘I need to support my habit. You’ve seen me when I’m coming down—I have no choice. You’ll stick by me, won’t you babe? You’re such a sweet thing.’

‘But you deal with death,’ I whispered. I felt like a fish discovering the water.

‘Death is all I look forward to,’ he said, and I finally heard truth in his voice; and I knew now why ‘I shall be released’ was his favourite track.

I began to surface from the depths I had been sucked into; and when I saw the danger, I knew I did not want to die with him. I heard my real self speak for the first time in months. ‘Get out!’

I threw everything within reach that was breakable. Knowing it was him I wanted broken; shattered into tiny pieces that could never be put together again.

He loved the drama, laughed out loud, tried to kiss me, forgetting his acrid breath, forgetting he had already gone too far.

He left, still chuckling at his own joke, his few belongings hanging on the back of his chair.

Ivy softly sang the final verse of the Dylan song.

Malathi seemed to enjoy the story and congratulated Ivy for singing in tune. It was time to turn in for the night.

Lyrics from *Buckets of Rain*, released by Bob Dylan on *Blood on the Tracks* album, 1975.

A Chance Meeting

Ivy sat in the pub looking out the window as the rain lashed the beach and flooded the paths. She had stayed on with Shahra after her return, continuing to work in the shop and live in the house. Malathi showed her how to research reliable and authentic provenance for antiques, so that she could assist them with the inventory. Many stories had been told; Shahra had a retentive memory or else a vivid and credible imagination. She had related a tale of a Frenchman who had a Mughal-engraved emerald set in a frame of diamonds for her by Cartiér; another of a Tsarina presenting her with a Fabergé egg. Several of her splendid treasures carried the marks of Fabergé, Carlo Giuliano**,** René Lalique, Cartiér or Arthur Gaskin.

For a time, Shahra was a favourite of a British aristocrat who had spent time in India on a tea plantation. He was fun for a while but, on the whole, she tended to find the British dull, she said.

During breaks for tea, which Malathi served in turquoise Minton cups with saucers, Ivy had told Shahra about the three parents she was blessed with, but not about the one who was missing from her life; her loves lost and her sojourn in India. The past few months had flown by. She knew she couldn't continue to stay with Shahra. Spring was around the corner; she felt a need to move on. To try something new.

Lost in her reverie, she didn't see the tall young man come into the bar and order a schooner of beer. The first she knew of his presence was when the bartender said, 'We're practically empty today, bring him in.'

She sat up to see who the man was bringing in. He returned with a soaking-wet red kelpie. She laughed aloud. The tall man said, 'A downpour while he was sitting in the tray of the ute. It was too late to let him into the cabin; he was already soaked'.

Jack, the barman, brought out an old stained towel and threw it at the young man. His hands full with towelling off the dripping dog, the young man winked at the barman. 'Thanks.'

'What's his name?' Ivy asked.

'Chance,' the man said. 'And my name is Andy.' He grinned at her.

Ivy blushed. 'Sorry,' she said, 'I didn't mean to be rude but he is a fine-looking dog. My name's Ivy.'

‘I’m used to being his wingman,’ Andy said. ‘Excuse me, now I’m being rude. Can I shout you a refill?’ He indicated her empty glass.

Ivy blushed again. ‘Since you ask, I’ll have a pony, please.’

‘What d’you think, Chance? Should we ask Ivy to join us?’

The kelpie, red coat glistening, trotted over and sat next to Ivy.

‘Perhaps you’d like to join us, Andy?’ Ivy asked with a grin.

‘Well if that don’t take the biscuit,’ Andy said, shaking his head in mock disgust. ‘You’re a traitor, Chance, you know that?’

Chance looked at Andy and wagged his tail.

‘Perhaps some hot chips?’ Ivy enquired. ‘To keep the wolf from the door.’

Chance barked in agreement.

‘A total traitor, mate,’ Andy repeated. ‘And why would you want chips? You’re as fat as a butcher’s pup.’ He went off to order a plate of hot chips. Chance stayed put, his tail thumping rhythmically on the floor.

‘Where are you headed?’ Ivy asked.

‘I have a small property south of here. A nice quiet spot in a valley with a spring-fed creek.’

‘It sounds idyllic. There must be some catch.’

‘Not a one. Chance and I wouldn’t live anywhere else. It’s a great little community where dogs are as welcome as humans.’

Chance wagged his tail.

‘How did Chance come by his name?’

‘He was already more than a year old when I saw him first. I’d stopped at a sheep farm to drop off some timber the manager had bought from me. When he told me the pup was about to get a bullet because he had a mind of his own instead of following commands, I asked if I could take him with me.’

‘You’re taking a chance, there,’ he said to me. ‘He’s unpredictable. I take no responsibility and no return.’

‘“It’s a deal,” I told him. I called out: ‘“C’mon, Chance.”’ The pup followed me to the ute, jumped in and he’s been with me ever since. Right, Chance?’ The kelpie barked with enthusiasm and wagged his tail furiously.

They shared a steak, hot chips and salad. The pub seemed warmer, friendlier, although it was still pouring with rain when Andy and Chance drove off.

'What do you know about Andy?' Ivy asked Jack.

'He comes here fairly often, but irregularly. He owns a small rural holding; he has his dog and his ute. He makes extra money where he can, fencing, supplying timber, helping out local market gardeners. Nothing grand, I wouldn't think. He always looks as if he could do with a good feed, but he's no weakling. He's helped me move kegs, he's as strong and fit as a mallee bull.'

'Interesting.' Ivy smiled as she gathered her things to leave. 'And that kelpie is cute.'

The barman laughed. 'I reckon he'll be back. Keep your distance for a while, love. Andy's the sort who'll run a mile if he feels fenced in. Be friendly, be your lovely self and let him warm to you. You've already made an impression on his best friend.'

'Right. I get you, but I'm moving on soon so distance won't be a problem.'

'Shame. I reckon you too would make a good pair.'

'I hadn't realised you were such a romantic, Jack,' Ivy said to cover her embarrassment at this speculation. She couldn't wait to tell Malathi of this chance meeting.

Malathi suggested that she stay on for a while because 'who knows what might develop', but Ivy had no intention of wasting her time waiting for her mystery man to materialise. Though Mondo next door was in awe of Shahra, he continued to annoy Ivy whenever the opportunity arose. Shahra, Malathi and Ivy had all arrived at the same conclusion that Mondo was a sleaze in wolf's clothing and Ciel was clearly neurotic and spaced out. While Mondo was seeking new conquests, Ciel seemed to be on a quest for eternal youth and beauty.

Shahra also urged Ivy to linger longer. 'If not', Shahra insisted, 'you must be back in November for my ninety-first birthday. I shall expect you.'

Ivy scoured the pages of newspapers and magazines for prospective employment. She could now add her experience of working with antiques and collectables. Shahra would supply a reference. Shahra read Ivy's palm and advised her to visit her parents before moving on again.

Colleen was overjoyed to see Ivy. Full of questions and advice, she followed Ivy from room to room. Her dad was likewise happy and gave her a bear hug before going out into the garden, whistling.

Ivy called Alice, but connected with her answering machine and left a message instead. She tried again later and Alice answered but she sounded strange, as if she was drunk, and told Ivy that she couldn't see her.

Ivy turned up on Alice's doorstep and called her from outside the house. 'I shall wait here until you let me in, all day and all tomorrow as well, if necessary.'

Alice let her in; she looked dreadful. 'I'm not myself,' she said.

Ivy wouldn't let go. She told her she'd stay until Alice was feeling better. Alice tried to put Ivy off, until eventually she broke down and wept. She explained that she was Jane. Ivy, confused and frightened, asked Alice to come back to her. Ivy stayed for a week, during which she witnessed Jane's night terrors and sleepwalking.

Then abruptly, Alice returned. She'd had one of her dreams of flying back to Brighton, to her childhood home in Upper Lewis Road before it was bombed into rubble. This time, the house in Brighton was silent and eerie. No-one was around, though she searched all through the house. She went to her grandmother's bedroom. Her grandma and grandad were sitting up in bed, dead. Alice broke down.

Ivy called Shahra and Malathi for help. She organised counselling and a psychiatrist.

'When I was sent to the farm as a domestic and labourer, I nearly went to pieces then and there. That's when Jane took over. Whenever I couldn't manage, whenever it all became too much, Jane would take care of me. Arrange for me to have time off or take me away from it all, where I could focus on something else until my energy returned.' Alice sipped at a cup of hot tea. 'Then, when I felt better, Jane would slip away and I'd be myself again.'

Alice slipped her hand into Ivy's hand.

'When I went through labour with you,' Alice squeezed Ivy's hand. 'I went from Alice to Jane and back again. I went back in time and space, to when my sister Ivy was born. When I heard a baby cry, I thought it was my little sister.'

Ivy slid a hand to her cheek to surreptitiously wipe away tears.

'Jane took over when I had to sign you away. I remember I told her to call you Ivy.' Alice looked up at Ivy. 'I know this must be painful for you.'

'I have to know.'

'They took you away before I saw you. Apparently, they thought it "for the best". I've no animosity towards Colleen—she has taken great care of you and made sure you used your brains. When I met Audrey and went to live on her farm, I became stronger and healthier. I felt safe there.'

After six months, when Ivy and Alice had talked it through, they decided to move together to somewhere more peaceful to live. They discovered a place called Kiewa, built alongside the beautiful clear Kiewa Creek. Kiewa had a sign that boasted 105 residents had settled there. Plenty of work seemed available on surrounding farms and market gardens. The pace of life was slower in Kiewa, the air so pristine that rare mosses grew on the tree trunks there. A tight-knit community supported each other in times of crisis and were able to live and let live the rest of the time, according to those Ivy asked. The community was made up of diverse people, from Indigenous Australians to descendants of convicts and settlers, later migrants from Europe as well as a Sikh family who ran the local trading post.

Before the final move, Ivy went to see Shahra for her ninety-first birthday, as promised. Malathi had arranged dinner at a fine restaurant followed by an evening of storytelling. Before she left, Shahra read Ivy's hand. Without a word, she left her chair, leaving Ivy bewildered. She returned with her hand closed tightly around something. When she opened her hand, Ivy could see three rings, an oval ruby and two gold circles. When Ivy tried on the ruby and gold rings, she found one of the gold rings a perfect fit, while the other was slightly too large.

'You'll be needing these,' Shahra told her.

Everyone in Kiewa seemed friendly and fairly easygoing. They were certainly self-sufficient. Since there were no town services, including water and road maintenance, the people of the village of Kiewa took pride in providing for their own needs, either individually or collaboratively.

The small school had a large old-fashioned bell, which hung on a stand and was rung every morning and afternoon. The trading post had chairs and tables set up outside, under a tin roof, where locals met for meetings, discussions, catch-ups and conversations.

The move to Kiewa wasn't easy. Several times, Alice thought better of it and had cold feet until she took a shine to Ben, a kind fellow who helped her find a place to stay where she and Ivy would have power, water tanks and a phone line. Alice was happy to do seasonal farm work, more to keep occupied than for the money. Ivy volunteered at the local museum while she looked for opportunities in the area.

At last, the removal van was on the road, transporting their worldly possessions to Kiewa as Alice and Ivy waited on the doorstep of their new home for any sign of the van. Ben was coming over to help after work. He and Alice were getting on famously.

Ivy heard a loud bark—and again. She thought she recognised it, but shook her head. It was impossible. Another bark sounded and as Ivy turned around a flash of red lunged at her.

She heard a whistle. 'Chance,' she gasped.

'You two know each other?' Ben was laughing as Ivy got up awkwardly and dusted herself off.

'They sure do.'

Ivy knew the sound of that voice. She spun around to see Andy standing there with a bemused look on his face.

'You sure do get around, Ivy,' Andy said with a big smile.

'Well, just look at these two dark horses,' Ben said. 'How do you know each other?'

'We met up north.' Ivy was still almost lost for words.

'In a pub,' Andy said with a wink. Chance barked again. 'Yes, mate, you were there, we all remember that. First you hustled Ivy and then you hustled a feed out of me by charming this lovely woman.' Chance wagged his tail fiercely and barked again.

Before long, Alice and Ben were spending a lot of time together. It was the first time that Alice had trusted any man, but instinctively she knew Ben was one who could be relied upon.

Andy had his own place further away from the creek up on the high ground—a few acres of native bushland that he had bought for a song when the new owner who inherited it wanted to get rid of it quickly to pay the back rates owing. Wombats, wallabies, possums, goannas, lizards, water dragons and snakes wandered the property among banksias, wattles, tea-trees, gums and casuarinas. Koalas hid high in the eucalypts, fairy gliders and sugar gliders lived in hollows. Birds of all feathers—from tiny finches, blue wrens and willy wagtails which bathed in the water bowls and bird baths that Andy had set up for them, to cockatoos, hawks and wedge tailed eagles that glided and swooped between trees in the gully. Andy and Chance roamed their tiny paradise on earth, enjoying the fragrances, colour and birdsong of the bush and returning afterwards to the drop-log cabin that Andy had built using skills he'd learned from locals, and had furnished with handmade and locally bought items. Ivy was enchanted with it all. It didn't take them long to realise that they had much in common.

Alice, who had not had the courage to tie the knot yet herself, roped in Ben, Colleen and Russ to organise a bush wedding on New Year's Day for Ivy and Andy.

It was held in a small marquee on Andy's acreage. Russ gave Ivy away to Andy. Dan arrived with Audrey who kept bossing him around, which Dan endured with good humour. Malathi brought Shahra, who looked so elegant and walked as upright as ever using only her Fabergé promenade cane. 'She took ages to decide between this cane and the 18-carat-gold vermeil,' Malathi whispered to Ivy.

'Well, Ivy has Andy and you have Ben. Perhaps Dan will meet someone nice today,' Audrey said to Alice.

'Nineteen-eighty could be his year,' Alice said with a wink. 'It's so good to see Ivy so happy and such a relief. Whoever would have thought that this would be me? I sometimes have to pinch myself. What about you, Aud?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Audrey said sharply, but she couldn't help a quick smile at the suggestion. 'I might end up with someone like Bert.'

'How are Bert and Lucy?'

'As irritating as always, but one lives in hope that one day they'll do something sensible.'

'And Dan?'

‘Dan has turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Whoever would have thought that, either? Life is full of shocks and surprises. Hindsight is a grand skill but really, would we want life any other way?’

‘Sometimes, yes,’ Alice demurred.

‘You’re right, lots of water under our bridges, eh? But here we are.’

‘Here we are, indeed.’ Alice smiled and tucked her arm through Audrey’s arm, just as they used to when they were young women on Audrey’s family farm.

Everyone had brought a plate and a bottle of something to drink, instead of a gift, and there was a feast of food from around the world to tuck into after the ceremony.

Then Ben drove Andy and Ivy to Sydney airport, where they flew off to a honeymoon in India, a wedding present from Shahra.

‘It’s as if we’re on a magic carpet,’ Ivy whispered to Andy as the plane soared above the clouds.

All Is Well if End Is Well

Anta Bhala to Sab Bhala

Their first stop was Kerala. Ivy and Andy dipped their toes in the Arabian Sea at a beach and went to the many glorious gardens, buildings and even a palace at Killimanoor, thanks to Ivy's friend Priya, who'd also wanted to book them into an Ayurveda centre that she'd been to, but Andy was not so keen to try it.

They flew on to Delhi and stayed at the Oberon for a weekend before meeting Priya again, who had befriended Ivy on her previous trip some years ago. It had been exciting to catch up again; they had so much to talk and to reminisce about.

Ivy could see that Andy was missing home and, worse, missing his kelpie Chance. She realised the fabulousness of the gift of a trip to India had blotted out the fact that they would miss Chance more than Ivy had anticipated. It was almost as if Andy was pining and she felt guilty that Chance was probably pining for them too and wouldn't understand why they'd abandoned him, just as they'd all got together. What had she been thinking, dragging Andy all this way? While he was fascinated by India and everything she offered, his heart was at home, she could see that now.

When the hired car pulled up at Jhansi station, Priya's brother Anil bagged the front seat beside the driver. Andy opened the rear door, Ivy slipped in first and slid over to the far window seat. Priya looked at Andy who signalled for her to get in and from then on Priya was stuck between the two in a car that bounced over an unsealed road with gaping potholes and crumbling edges.

Conversation was minimal, mostly when Priya or Anil pointed out something of interest along the way. It took two hours or more to travel from Jhansi to Khajuraho through rural India.

Clusters of oncoming vehicles passed by, Tata or Ashok Leyland lorries brightly painted and decorated, buses packed with passengers, small cars, bicycles, motorbikes and Vestas, auto-rickshaws and goat carts. Their car occasionally picked up speed on a relatively good stretch of road, but mostly they moved sedately past fields of mustard,

wheat and forage crops, which lined the road between straggling villages, then slowed even more when they approached a village, as the road became increasingly clogged with vehicles and pedestrians clustered around the produce, stalls, street-food vendors and chai wallahs. As they left the village behind, the driver once again accelerated. Ivy gazed silently and determinedly at the passing scenery. After a while, she turned and whispered to Priya, 'The man who joined our train carriage wearing the long white robes—did you see what he was carrying?'

Priya nodded.

'Do you know who he was?'

She shook her head.

'He was carrying an automatic rifle! Then he dozed off with the rifle leaning against his knee!'

Priya nodded again. 'I know.'

'I kept hoping the safety catch was secure. Everyone averted their eyes. With all the security we go through, how can he just casually walk onto a train carrying an assault weapon?'

'Obviously has government clearance.' Priya's tone dismissed further questions.

Ivy realised that this was not the time to press for more answers.

As dusk fell they reached their destination. Apart from a short break at Jhansi to visit the fort, where a monkey stole Ivy's water bottle, they had been sitting for nine hours since joining the train at Delhi. What a relief to uncurl their bodies and stretch their legs, even if it was just a few steps to the hotel foyer. A smiling doorman greeted them, as a waiter approached carrying a tray of refreshments. The spacious and impressive foyer displayed expensive antique furniture and rugs; in the centre sat a large sculpture with bright orange marigolds at its feet.

Ivy and Andy's room had two comfy queen beds and was nicely appointed. Ivy decided to lie down for half an hour, while Andy went off to check out the grounds, swimming pool and upstairs bar. She had showered and dressed for dinner by the time he returned.

'Priya called, she suggested we eat here at the hotel restaurant tonight to save going out again,' Ivy told him. 'I'm about to meet them there. I'll tell them you'll join us when you're ready.'

'Fine,' Andy said and disappeared into the bathroom.

They were greeted by a smiling maître d' and shown to a table. By the time Andy joined them, they were ready to order from the range of Indian and international dishes on offer. Ivy chose a paneer, Priya decided on a Chinese dish—'anything but Indian food', she said—Anil opted for risotto and Andy plumped for biryani. Anil and Priya shared a bottle of shiraz, but Ivy decided to stick with her preferred drink of sweet lime and soda, while Andy wanted whisky and soda.

'So what are we in for, tomorrow?' Andy asked.

'Temples of Khajuraho,' Anil said between mouthfuls.

'What's so special about these temples?' Ivy asked.

Priya shot a glance at Anil.

'They're temples of the Kama Sutra,' Anil said, wiping his mouth with his napkin. 'And you rounding off your honeymoon, it's a must, isn't it?'

'They were lost to the jungle for many years,' Priya added. 'Now they've been recovered and are being restored. I've waited long to see these temples.'

'*Achcha!* Okay, we should kick off early,' Anil suggested. 'Breakfast here at eight and ready to leave by nine o'clock.'

'I'm going to turn in, then,' said Ivy.

Anil signed the chit for dinner and went to the reception desk to confirm the driver for the morning's trip to the temples, while Priya went off to her room to finish unpacking.

Ivy was ready for sleep, yet could hardly wait to see Khajuraho by daylight. She and Andy undressed in silence and sank into their respective beds.

Priya popped into her brother's room for one last nightcap. 'What are your thoughts?'

Anil knew quite well the question was in relation to Ivy and Andy. He wasn't sure exactly why he was here on this trip, only that Priya had said he must accompany her. He had acquiesced because he had missed her graduation ceremony—he owed her. 'My master's—and you, Bhaii, missed my big day when I passed out of university, *haan*?' Priya had said.

'I noticed they hardly spoke to one another, or looked at each other for that matter. Each wrapped in their own thoughts,' he said.

‘That’s what I mean. When they arrived in Kerala, you could hardly prise them apart. Now they seem to be drifting in opposite directions. Ivy looks so sad. One reason for bringing them here is that the temples of the Kama Sutra might have some desirable effect.’

‘It’s a push in the right direction, but one hand alone cannot clap. Let’s see what tomorrow brings.’

Priya raised her glass. ‘To tomorrow’.

After breakfast, the four gathered in the hotel lobby where they met Raj, their guide, before being whisked away in the hire car to the temple gates.

Wrapped in the cool embrace of the morning, they wandered through the grounds of the Western temples. Raj showed them the feats of fine craftsmanship, from the oldest ninth-century constructions to the more recent eleventh-century temples. The relief carving and sculptures took Ivy’s breath away. She couldn’t resist taking snaps.

Anil preferred his own pace, while Andy lingered to examine the temples more thoroughly. Ivy and Priya continued on with Raj.

‘Ma’am, where are you from?’ he asked.

‘Australia,’ Ivy answered.

‘Ah, Kim Hughes, very good captain,’ Raj said with a broad smile.

‘Kim Hughes and Kapil Dev.’ Ivy nodded and returned his smile.

Raj had a practised patter, a comedic routine. No doubt he had various approaches depending on his clients. As a guide for two females in their late twenties, he thought himself quite the star.

Priya fell in love with the Nandi temple, dragging in Raj to take snaps. Ivy noticed a sign advertising a sound-and-light show that night. ‘We must come back, Priya,’ she said.

At midday they all met at the gate to go on to the Eastern Group and Jain temples. In the golden light of the afternoon, they visited temple after temple, each one intriguing and skilfully crafted, some exquisite, such as the black marble statue of Parsvanath.

Ivy was speaking animatedly as she walked beside Anil. Andy had wandered ahead with Raj. Priya caught up as Ivy put Anil in the sights of her camera lens. Anil

posed and smiled, but seemed a tad embarrassed. Later, at dinner, Ivy focused almost all her attention on Anil. Even Priya found it difficult to engage with her.

'Sound-and-light show,' Priya reminded, as they left the restaurant.

In the dark of the moon, the town centre itself was a light-and-sound show. Neon signs, streetlights, multicoloured fairy lights festooning trees and balconies; and, high above in the heavens, a scattering of stars. Music filtered down from restaurants and merged with a medley of voices, accompanied by sounds of traffic. The fragrance of jasmine and aroma of spices blended with earthy, animal scents.

In the quiet grounds of the Western Temples, they settled into chairs that had appeared since they left earlier. Priya squeezed in between Ivy and Anil.

An illuminated temple and music signalled that the light-and-sound show had begun. From a speaker in a stand of trees, a voice boomed out telling how the magnificent temples had been built, then lost to the jungle for centuries, and their rediscovery. Each temple, in turn, became luminescent with coloured lights as it became the focus of the narrative. Voices 'off-stage' representing British army engineer Captain TS Burt, who rediscovered the temples in 1838, and his English staff were comically pukka. The show was exciting, if a bit melodramatic at times.

The four strolled back to the car, enjoying the night air and a display of stars that spangled the heavens.

'Tired, *yaar*?' Priya asked.

'It's early yet, we could have supper,' Anil suggested.

They scanned neon signs for a suitable place. When they were ensconced at their table, Priya noticed that Ivy was again flirting and taking photos with Anil. She invented an excuse to take Anil away from the table.

'What are you doing?' Priya demanded to know.

'Whaat?'

'What's all this flirting-shirting? I'm trying to reignite Ivy's honeymoon romance with Andy and you're posing-shosing for her holiday snaps.'

'You're a hopeless romantic,' Anil said with an indulgent smile. 'But you should know something. As we left through the gates after the light-and-sound show, someone bumped into Ivy and was then quite rude to her. Andy stepped in at once and guided her through the gate.'

'So you're saying, it isn't a hopeless cause?'

'Perhaps what they need *is* a cause—a common cause,' Anil said with a pronounced wink.

Priya frowned. 'What kind of common cause could we possibly find for them?'

'Everything okay?' Andy asked when they returned to their table.

'All izz vell,' Priya joked.

'Let's order then.' Andy was an action man, especially when action filled a void.

They made a few selections, veg and nonveg, to share. A waiter took their order, which left them to sit and wait. The air seemed thick with awkward silence.

'So, what did you think of the light-and-sound show?' Priya asked in desperation.

'Great,' Ivy answered. 'Spectacular colour illumination, lots of drama and history to boot.'

'I wonder what the Brits think of the representation of their accents,' Andy mused.

'Lucky it wasn't the Australian army,' Anil said. 'Imagine the locals trying to get their tongues around Aussie accents, leave alone their colourful idioms. There are times when Aussie sounds like a foreign language rather than a version of the English language—g'danya mate—I can't tell you how many times I heard that before I realised what it meant. I query that Aussies have English subtitles for Indigenous Australians but not for regular Australians—as if people understand everyone there except the Aborigines.'

'That's to ensure Indigenous people aren't disadvantaged,' Ivy assured Anil.

'Surely it's discrimination?'

'Well, positive discrimination, then,' Ivy answered, a trifle sharply.

'So Australians discriminate positively by adding subtitles to their dialogue, yet your Indigenous people are overrepresented in prisons, have a much shorter life expectancy, higher infant mortality, are dispossessed, have lost languages and suffer from chronic illnesses—where is the positive discrimination there?'

'It's happening—it's difficult, complicated—there are policies and programs to address the problems. Attitudes are changing—the mortality rate is better than it was.' Ivy's frown deepened.

'My query, are attitudes changing fast enough for a prosperous place like Australia?'

'Anil is just being the argumentative Indian,' Priya said with an apologetic smile.

'It's a valid query, Priya. We all know about racism in Australia.' Anil was not about to be shut down.

'Hang on a minute, mate,' Andy interrupted. 'We're not all racialists in Australia.'

'Of course, not,' Priya agreed.

'You're not suggesting that we…' Ivy couldn't finish her sentence.

'No-one is suggesting anything of the kind,' Priya soothed.

'I'm not pointing the finger at any one person,' Anil went on, '*but*…'

'But what?' Andy asked testily.

'That's the word Australians use, isn't it? I'm not racist—*but*—it was said to me regularly when I was in Australia—to Priya, too.'

'Not by me,' Andy argued, 'or Ivy.'

'I'm not accusing you two.'

'Just Australians in general,' Andy said sourly.

'*Some* Australians,' Priya said, trying again to calm troubled waters.

'*Many* Australians,' Anil corrected her.

If looks could kill, Anil would have died right there and then.

'Leave it, Ivy. He's just being a smartarse,' Andy said.

'At least we don't have passengers carrying automatic rifles on our trains!' Ivy argued. 'I've never seen anything like it!'

'It was disconcerting, to say the least,' Andy said.

'We don't have our trains blown up, either,' Ivy added.

'My God, that has been worrying you?' Priya asked. 'Why didn't you tell me? It's a sad way to make a point, don't you think? We live with these things all the time—violence is part of our history—but we don't get hysterical, we take it in our stride. Australia could take a leaf out of our book.'

'Action rather than what passes for debate.' Anil nodded. 'It's wonderful in a way that Australians are so relaxed about security—there's a certain charm in their naivety—but it's not a realistic attitude in these troubled times.'

Their meals arrived at last and the four lapsed into silence. Anil ate with gusto while the others pushed food around plates, nibbling a morsel here and there. 'Tomorrow morning we leave for Orchha,' he announced, 'to visit mausoleums. We should call in at nearby Shilpgram before we set off. It shows examples of ancient Indian culture, various styles of dwellings, folk arts and so forth, including dance. It's well within walking distance from our hotel.'

'Definitely worth making time to see it,' Priya agreed, relieved at the change of topic.

Anil noticed Ivy and Andy exchange meaningful glances and chuckled inwardly.

They paid for the meal, woke their driver and made a tense journey back to their hotel.

'What got into you?' Priya asked Anil, when Ivy and Andy had disappeared into their room.

'Me?' Anil asked with an air of faux innocence.

'You were so mean!'

'I was thinking the two of them seriously need someone to gang up on. Meet the devil's advocate,' Anil laughed.

Priya scrutinised his face. 'What am I supposed to say to them tomorrow, *Bhai*?'

'Let's see if the trap is sprung first.'

Priya checked her wristwatch for the umpteenth time while waiting for the others at the breakfast buffet. Anil appeared and checked the time. 'They're late,' he said. 'We should start breakfast.'

'Maybe they're swimming in the pool before breakfast,' Priya said. She and Anil chose freshly made dosas and Darjeeling tea. They checked with the maître d' for messages while they ate breakfast. Though they took their time, there was still no sign of Ivy and Andy when they had finished.

Anil said. 'I'm checking if they're out in the pool.'

Priya knocked on the door to their room several times without a response.

Anil shook his head when they met in the lobby. 'No sign,' he said.

‘I hope they’re okay.’ Priya’s concern showed in her worried frown. She went to the front desk to ask the staff to check on them.

‘Room is vacant, madam,’ the young man said, ‘since last night.’

‘They left?’ Priya asked him.

‘Yes, madam, checked out late last night. All accounts settled, then called taxi.’

‘A taxi?’

‘Yes, madam.’

Anil settled their own bill and the porter took their luggage out to the waiting car.

‘I can’t understand,’ Priya said. ‘I know they were angry with you—but to leave without so much as a word to me. I’m definitely hurt by this—yet I still feel responsible. Where can they be?’

‘How am I to know?’ Anil said. ‘They at least have their train tickets back to Delhi, Andy asked for them when we arrived back at the hotel last night. Said something like “in case we’re separated”.’

‘So Ivy and Andy planned this?’

‘It may have been spur-of-the moment, pure coincidence. They’re adults, Priya, they’ll be fine.’

‘Oh, you know that for a fact, do you? ‘

‘No need to worry, madam,’ their driver interrupted. ‘Your friends are at hotel along the road only.’

‘I’m definitely not getting my head around this at all. They left this hotel to put up in another hotel in Khajuraho?’

‘Yes, ma’am, Lalit. I took sir and madam. They are booking car and guide for Western temples visit today. Sir said madam here very sweet but they on honeymoon.’ His smile resembled a leer.

Priya’s expression was pure astonishment, but she did not doubt that the driver knew all the latest gossip. ‘Ivy could at least have let me know. Does she not think I’ll worry? It’s just not done.’

‘Relax. Your wish has been granted, *haan*? You wanted the two back together. Perhaps now you should leave them alone, let them honeymoon in peace.’ Anil leaned back in the comfortable car seat with a smug expression on his face. ‘*Anta bhala to sab bhala.*’

Glossary of words and phrases

Acchaa – great!

Anta bhala to sab bhala – all is well if end is well (or all's well that ends well).

Bhaii – brother

Biryani – Indian dish of meat, fish, or vegetables cooked with rice flavoured with saffron or turmeric

Haan – yes

Yaar – friend, mate (colloquial)

A Mountain Eyrie

After India, Andy's bush retreat seemed quieter than ever. Up on the high ground on a mountain ridge, they pegged out the boundaries of their house that they would build themselves from recycled and forgotten materials. The view over Kiewa Creek was spectacular. The first time Ivy saw a full moon rise in the east, she thought she would burst with joy. In the dark of the moon, the Milky Way stretched out above, shining and twinkling in the black sky. In the sunshine, rose quartz ground into the sandy soil sparkled like diamond dust.

Andy had to bring in expertise to persuade a rural council that didn't want to extend any of their rules that had served them so well in the past. He wanted the council to seriously consider his plans for a mudbrick, straw-insulated dwelling on a mountain ridge. He had studied the process and made some prototypes to test which would be the best composition. They had collected *Grass Roots* magazines and learned how to set up a compost lavatory, how to build goanna-proof chook houses, and how to grow successful subsistence crops. They would do it without electricity connection, town water or telephone line.

Eventually his development application was approved with provisos. They bought their first water tank. The long process of making mudbricks began with a small celebration bringing together family and friends. Local Aborigines performed a smoking ceremony for them.

The first settlers in the area had not had a happy history with the Indigenous people. Accepted to a point, and given assistance to find food and water, the local tribe had been generous enough to show the settlers how to grow yams along the creek. They worked together to prepare and plant the yams. When they were ready to harvest, the local settlers shot the Aborigines who had helped them, so they wouldn't have to share the produce.

Nonetheless, those who survived in the area were accepting of locals who were invited to corroborees in special places, and to share their culture, art and stories.

The mountains and gullies were riddled with caves, some with engravings, or paintings, some with ochre handprints fused into the rock surface centuries ago.

Local children were taken to visit the caves that welcomed them. They learned the significance of the caves and middens. Respect for land, air, fire and water was imbued into their spirits. Most of all they loved the corroborees, especially when they were invited to join in.

Ivy named their place 'Aroona', meaning a place that's refreshing with running water. In Urdu, *aruna* meant dawn. She felt it a fitting name and for five years the two lived like gypsies. They sank a bore and were rewarded with fresh spring water that surged from deep below the surface. Under a huge eucalypt, they set up a bush shower, a large canvas bag with a brass shower rose which could be lowered with a rope and pulley system to fill with water and hoisted up again to shower. It refreshed them and the tree.

Slowly, the house rose from the ground. Gardens and trees were established. Ivy was able to sing, *I have a little nut tree*. In fact, she had several and fruit trees as well. Once the roof went on, Andy helped secure solar panels for power and hot water for their new bathroom.

The place was alive with wildlife, Andy and Ivy enjoyed spotting brushtail and pygmy possums, feather-gliders, koalas, wombats, bandicoots, dunnarts, as well as water dragons, frilled-neck lizards, skinks and sand lizards; and a diverse bird life, from wedge-tailed eagles soaring on thermal currents and freefalling into the gully and lyrebirds imitating them, to colourful parrots and tiny fairy wrens darting in and out of leaves, among flitting butterflies, and bathing in the bird-bowls that Ivy had set up.

Paradise has its secrets and serpents, too—poisonous snakes, prehistoric-looking goannas and spiders in trees and on the ground. Ivy learned to shoot a rifle, use a whip, and fire an arrow from a bow. The place was alive with wasps, mosquitos, horseflies, bush flies and march flies. Chance, the kelpie, was her protector. He never left her side, except to work with Andy when he was confident she was safe. He was always happiest when they worked together and he could watch over them both.

Ivy's feet and hands turned to leather as she worked away growing and cooking food, doing laundry in a large clean garbage bin, making everything from reed baskets and sunhats to mudbricks and retaining walls. Alice and Ben chipped in with the labour

too. Chance worked alongside, keeping wildlife from coming too close, chasing off the odd magpie that became too curious and too close to Ivy.

Almost every evening they walked down to Kiewa Creek and joined the other locals splashing about or sitting leisurely on the banks, reading or chatting.

Jane had decided to retire, Alice told Ivy in a moment of quiet repose. She was no longer needed. Ben had helped Alice to find a female psychiatrist who was helping her through the transition. The psychiatrist's rooms were in Sydney, which gave Alice an added incentive. She found that spending a couple of days in the city every month reenergised her. Audrey wanted Alice to return to 'Lasthope', with or without Ben, so that they could spend their last days together. Much as she loved Audrey still, Alice could not be buried there again—not while she was still alive.

By the time Andy and Ivy were ready to have a party for the raising of the roof, they had easily quadrupled their number of friends. They had had challenges and successes, fire and flood, feast and famine, but they had made it. Even the weather was a blessing. Rain that had slowed the process for months, even while improving the garden, had eased. The day for raising the roof looked promising. Colleen and Russ brought enough supplies to feed an army, including pots for boiling water and heating food on a portable gas stove. Andy cooked on his newly built barbecue. Shahra read palms to amuse. Then she gave a small parcel to Ivy. 'You'll be needing these,' she said with a wide smile. Malathi giggled. When Ivy opened the parcel she found a solid silver christening cup and a silver, gilt and ivory teething rattle. 'One is never too young to use and appreciate fine craftsmanship,' Shahra assured her.

A year to the day that they moved into the house, Shahra's gifts came into use for Rose, then two years later for Lily. 'Our garden rose and lily of the valley,' Andy liked to call them. Alice was ecstatic. 'A whole bouquet of family,' she was given to adding to Andy's remark.

Shahra and Malathi were thrilled. Shahra had reached the age of one hundred and one, yet still managed to attend the babies' naming ceremonies with Malathi's assistance. Malathi introduced Ivy to editors of arts magazines. Soon Ivy was writing for glossy magazines and auction-house catalogues, which supplemented their income very nicely.

It was a full year later that Shahra went on her final adventure—'into the bliss', she had told them before she gave up the ghost. Malathi was distraught but promised to stay in touch with Ivy. Shahra had left Malathi her house and contents. The rest was to go to museums, galleries and charities. Malathi had much to do.

At home, Chance was in his element: a whole family to supervise and shepherd together. He was better than a nanny. He was happiest when they were all together in one place. Apart from that happy time, he seemed to have worked out a priority of supervising the youngest of his flock and was known to sit for hours watching Lily. Chance seemed anxious when Rose went off to school, greeting her with such joy when she returned each afternoon.

When Lily started school, Chance could rest easy. Greying at the gills, he had become used to the routine and knew the girls would burst through the garden gate at the same time every day, when he would rush to meet them. Most days, once chores were done, they'd all head off to Kiewa Creek. Andy would join them there after work. Often Alice and Ben would be there, too, so Ivy could relax for an hour or so, or write to meet a magazine deadline. Chance would run back and forth, checking on them all.

Until one day when Chance didn't come running to greet them. They found him stretched out on his bed in his kennel, for all the world as if he was asleep. He was buried with ceremony and stories of his exploits and adventures, his heroism and his love and protection.

Ivy enrolled in a fine-arts course recommended by Malathi. She pursued her interest in her studies, while continuing to write for auction houses and fine-arts magazines. She began taking her daughters on trips to Sydney to stay with Colleen and Russ. Colleen was over the moon when fussing over them all.

It was a year before they could bring themselves to replace their beloved dog with a second Chance, another kelpie which the kids named Lucky because they were all lucky to have each other.

Lucky was more obedient than Chance, but nonetheless he had his moments when precious possessions were torn up, holes dug in the garden, and rotting carcasses dragged from the surrounding bush proudly presented. By the age of two, he showed himself to be intelligent and keen to learn. The girls enjoyed teaching him tricks and 'manners'. He could rush to meet them without tripping over himself and jumping

around their feet. He could sit and shake his paw. He could leap to great heights to deftly catch a ball or Frisbee. He was companion, guard dog and assistant to his family.

Ivy was content as she could be. She still wanted the mystery of her natural father solved, but there seemed no way to proceed any further. She was sure that Alice knew, if only in her subconsciousness, but she refused or was unable to recall. Jane was no longer around to help her. Soon it would be too late.

Dan drove all the way to Kiewa to tell Alice when Audrey died. He didn't want Alice to hear the news over the phone. Alice managed to hold together for Audrey's funeral during the last month of the last year of the century. She had held together for Audrey, but then fell into a dark place where she wondered where Audrey was. Was there anything after this? She remembered Shahra telling her that religions had got it all wrong. She said that the mind entered a state of bliss, and became part of the universe. The discarded body should return to the earth in one form or another.

Audrey was cremated and commemorated with a tree planted on 'Lasthope', which she had left to Dan. 'Not an angophora,' she had said, laughing, to Dan when they were discussing the arrangements. 'I don't want to be a widow-maker. Cedar is no good, someone will chop it down to make furniture. A redgum will do, it'll have a good chance of survival and look impressive.' Alice had pressed the soil around the sapling after Audrey's tree was planted.

Alice decided she had to make the most of what she had left, and worked every day in the garden or spent time around Kiewa Creek helping to keep it healthy and shady. Being outside, doing useful work, helped to lift her mood. She could also keep an eye on her granddaughters after school when they came to the house or went to the creek to swim. She knew that keeping busy, healthy and useful was the way to keep her sanity and keep her body supple. Now in her sixtieth year, she knew that 'use it or lose it' was not just a cliché, it was true. She might move on yet, or maybe use Kiewa Creek as a base to travel. For the moment, she would enjoy her time with Ivy. She knew the cruel misfortunes that could suddenly confront one. If she had one wish for Ivy, it was for her contentment to last. Surely, that was the best one could hope for?

Kiewa Creek Diary

Sunday, 1 February

The day dawns. Sulphur-crested cockatoos shriek as they rise from the trees. Startled kookaburras call out in raucous laughter and baby magpies squawk.

By midmorning, heat and humidity drive the locals to the spring-fed creek that bubbles and babbles through the village. Dragonflies skim the surface. Cicadas are in full chorus. Kiewa Creek is awash with adults, school children, toddlers and babies. Depending on which part of the meandering creek they choose, the locals are diving, swimming, floating on inflatable pool toys. A few family dogs join in. The air fills with the sound of squeals, laughter and excited barking, as the locals frolic in cool, pristine water.

The Riparian Regeneration Group, a volunteer committee dedicated to cleaning, weeding and regenerating the banks along the creek, is also ready for a quick dip by mid-afternoon. At the local general store—called the Trading Post because it is also a co-operative for local producers—the manager orders supplies of sunscreen, sun glasses, personal insect repellent and sunburn relief. He stocks locally made hats woven from reeds, hemp fibre and softened cane.

Kiewa Creek is the spot to be, and many stay well into star-studded summer evenings to swim, or relax on towels covering patchy kangaroo grass, before reluctantly heading for home. Even the odd hermit in the hills comes down to cool off in the creek at night. Koalas dog-paddle across to find choicer gum leaves or a new mate, and wombats and wallabies drink and dart about. After dark, the creek is an orchestra pit of frogs croaking, crickets rubbing, nightjars calling ‘whook, whook’ and the low haunting hoots of tawny frogmouths.

Kiewa means ‘clear water’ in the local Indigenous language and the creek is the lifeline of the village, landscape and wildlife.

Sunday, 8 February

Night owls living on higher slopes above the creek watch a vapour exude from the trees and plants. It gathers into a cloud and slowly sinks until it hovers just above the creek.

Dawn breaks above the cloud in the gully. As if drawn by sunbeams, thick mist rises from the cloud floating over the creek and drifts higher and higher until the trails of white cloud dissolve.

Heat and humidity encourage the locals to immerse themselves in the flowing creek, cooled by crystal clear springs gurgling up from a water table deep below. Children are collecting cicada shells.

'Look, there's a yellow Monday here coming out of its shell,' a small boy calls out.

'I spotted a greengrocer, a floury baker *and* a black prince.'

Young Rose creeps up to her father and surreptitiously sticks cicada shells to his T-shirt, then shrieks with laughter and gives the game away.

'What do we do when we see a brown snake?' one of the Riparian Regeneration Group volunteers asks the children.

'Keep still and don't bother the snake,' they chorus.

The RRG is a loosely organised mix of mums and dads, retirees, young people between jobs, even a few 'weekenders' who drive up from the city. They have no hierarchy, no affiliation, incorporation, registration or insurance, but nevertheless they clean up litter, remove weeds, whipper-snip the grasses and keep the place in good order. Some have qualifications and know how to plant sympathetic flora and grasses to prevent erosion and give stability to the soil on the creek banks and steeper slopes of the gully. They study the best preservation methods for the shady tree canopy, made up of river gums, eucalypts, acacias, casuarinas and angophoras. They keep the landscape well-watered in times of drought.

On summer afternoons, when school ends, the widest shallowest stretch of creek becomes the next playground as the younger children run or cycle down to the water. Homemade boats created from paddle-pop sticks with paper sails skim along. Toddlers scoop water, sand and pebbles washed up from the creek bed into plastic buckets and bowls. When the high-school bus arrives from the nearest town, the older kids stream

off wearing swimmers under their uniforms. They head for deeper water and whoop loudly as it hits their skin. They shout and splash about until parents heading homeward call to them.

The Riparian Regeneration Group keeps an informal eye on proceedings over the course of the day, sometimes acting as referees, as they rake leaves to add to the compost covering the roots of trees or remove gold-maned dandelions and rosettes of heart-shaped oxalis leaves, seeded and fertilised by birds. Everyone keeps alert for any sign of smoke.

Even the village book club becomes a floating fiction group as the mercury continues to soar. Swimwear is the most practical choice for a relaxed discussion. The mosquitoes are not out in the plague proportions of the early summer, and warm nights keep locals at the creek for longer than usual. Some families picnic on the creek banks instead of cooking meals in steamy kitchens.

Under a full moon, the silvery creek takes on a life of its own.

Sunday, 15 February

When the first few toddlers become ill, the common symptoms are irritation of the eye, skin, and throat. Various tests come back negative but by the time the results arrive, pre-schoolers have succumbed to these same symptoms. Dr Andrew, the village GP, gives a primary diagnosis and prescriptions for local cortisone applications or antihistamines. Parents, needless to say, are worried about this mysterious illness. The Trading Post sells its entire stock of cough and cold syrup, antihistamines, eye drops, vapour rub, calamine lotion, Condi's crystals and other home remedies.

A few days later, some of the older residents come down with similar symptoms. The heat and humidity show no sign of abating and only make the locals feel worse. Soaking in the cool creek water brings temporary relief, at least. Locals compare symptoms. Some of the Riparian Regeneration volunteers wonder if the problems could be caused by an allergic reaction to one of the plants, grasses or weeds growing on the banks of the creek. All the group's work is done by hand. No-one uses pesticide or chemicals.

Dr Andrew is at a loss. The skin rashes and associated cough and watery eyes usually indicate measles or some other infectious process. This urticarial type of rash, raised and streaky like hives, which worsens if scratched, suggests allergies of some sort. But so far no-one has enlarged glands. Then again, it could be a form of dermatitis—but with increasing presentations, alarm bells are ringing. He reads through medical books, checks online and confers with colleagues but the eye problems, skin rashes and respiratory irritation continue to mystify him. Harry, the manager of the Trading Post, orders additional supplies. Parents are anxious. Nobody knows how the illness is spread.

In the late afternoon shafts of golden sunlight penetrate the canopy to illuminate the creek below and create rainbows from the spray. Discussion continues as the locals gather around their favourite waterhole. At sunset a sentinel cocky calls out to the stragglers in his flock as they fly back for the night. Cicada song comes to an abrupt halt. The sky turns pink, orange and purple as the sun melts on the horizon.

After dark, a cool breeze shakes the canopy and moonlight filters through the branches, creating patterns in the silhouette. Hand on cheek, on the banks of the creek, lovers dance to the light of the moon.

Sunday, 22 February

The wait continues for Ministry of Health results and analyses, and some of the senior residents develop secondary illnesses. Every member of the Riparian Regeneration Group is affected. The Trading Post orders fresh batches of over-the-counter medications in bulk. Some family dogs scratch so furiously they rip out their hair. The local vet takes her own samples and prescribes cortisone ointment in the meantime. Rumours fly thick and fast.

A few children develop lesions, which become infected from constant scratching. Harry orders boxes of manicure scissors, and cotton gloves though keeping gloves on the hands of small children in a heatwave is not easy. The local primary school closes temporarily. Parents' schedules are thrown into chaos.

Much to the students' disgust, classes continue as normal at the high school, since there has been no confirmation that the illness is anything out of the ordinary. Nobody wants to spread alarm by mentioning isolation. Teachers keep a supply of soothing lotions and throat lozenges for their classes and themselves, and wash their hands religiously.

Dr Andrew advises his patients to send off samples of spring water, bore water and even rainwater from tanks to the Department of Agriculture. Selena, the primary school principal, does the same for the school water sources. For the first time in memory, Harry at the Trading Post adds bottled water and antibacterial hand cleaning gel and wipes to his next order.

On a restless, moonless night, the mostly peaceful village becomes a hotbed of gossip, accusations and conspiracy theories, as locals debate the source of this unwelcome outbreak.

Sunday, 1 March

The air is suffocating. Weather forecasts indicate a trough of high pressure hovering over the area. What with the discomfort of their symptoms, the heat, and pitching in with child-minding, Riparian Regeneration Group volunteers are thin on the ground. Leaves pile up on the tracks and creek banks. The remaining volunteers resort to using leaf-blowers, which scare the birds. They pump water from the creek to hose the leaf litter covering tree roots to protect them from the searing midday sun. Perspiration flows in tiny tributaries as the few willing workers try to tend to the landscape.

Some children recover, while others become worse. No word yet from the Ministry of Health about the source or cause of the outbreak.

Selena, the primary-school principal, notices that dragonflies no longer skim the creek. She collects and sends off samples of creek water, riparian plants and soil to colleagues at the CSIRO. Born and raised at Kiewa Creek, Selena trained in ecology and founded the Riparian Regeneration Group. Her enthusiasm sparked the village's interest in studying and caring for the creek and its surrounds. She continues to be a motivating force in the community.

Under a high dome of cloudless sky, Kiewa Creek is a shady oasis of relief from draining heat and burning irritation. Lying in the shallows to read or gossip or watch over small children is still a favourite pastime.

Sunday, 8 March

Government officials appear in the village, poking in their noses and asking questions. Apparently, some of them are doctors. Gossip ratchets up a few notches. The words 'disease' and 'infection' – even 'Ebola' – circulate. Residents scratch their heads as they struggle to remember anybody who has been on holiday or had visitors lately, and speculate about 'weekenders' who may have visited foreign shores. Selena and Dr Andrew stave off questions.

'Are you going to tell us what's going on?'

'Why are we being treated like mushrooms?'

'Will our kids be okay?'

'Not to mention the rest of us, we're all worried here.'

'We can't say yet,' says Dr Andrew. 'The wrong information won't do you any good. Please be patient.'

The officials won't reveal their reasons for visiting this small community that's so unremarkable it's difficult even to find on a map. Except for approvals of development applications to build homes, the regular rate notices and maintenance on the main roads before state government elections, the place is normally all but forgotten by all three tiers of government.

The Riparian Regeneration Group is invited to participate in 'voluntary interviews', in which they are grilled by officials. Even after answering the questions, the volunteers are no wiser as to the reason for the investigation, though some say they recall an unusual odour of aniseed or liquorice at the creek lately. Swabs are taken from the cabins and trays of utes and trucks in the local area. Car boots are searched. The officials interview the manager of the Trading Post.

'We need a list of anyone who has bought liquid fertiliser, chemicals, or containers for such products.'

‘It’ll take a couple of days to go through the receipts, but I can get the information you need,’ Harry says. ‘What’s the time frame?’

‘We’ll start with the past month and work back from there.’

Harry nods.

‘And do us a favour, don’t go telling everyone about this.’

On the surface, life is going on as usual—but suspicion, slander and superstition are rife. Locals brood over the continuing outbreaks of skin and throat irritations, and the peculiar interest of the government in their neck of the woods.

Sunday, 15 March

A cool change blows through the village. It feels like autumn. The window of the Trading Post displays firelighters, tins of powdered chocolate and packets of marshmallows, as well as locally designed and knitted beanies and scarves.

Selena leaves for the city, to confer with her colleagues and get to the bottom of this sudden government interest in her community.

Dr Andrew contacts the Ministry of Health. The reports he should have had days ago still haven’t arrived.

Fewer volunteers and a drop in air temperature mean less activity down at the creek, though the weather is mild enough for a dip during the middle of the day. Naturally, the children still flock to the water—one of their favourite haunts.

Sunday, 22 March

In the dark of the moon, two babies and three toddlers are sent to the children’s hospital in the city. Their infections have become serious.

Selena visits Dr Andrew on her return from the city. They ask all residents and visitors to attend a public meeting at the school next Sunday morning.

Locals also receive letters from the Ministry of Health advising of an information session next Sunday, which they will hold at the public school hall. In the meantime, the creek is under a safety assessment and off-limits to all except authorised personnel.

Riparian Regeneration Group volunteers wear protective clothing as they erect barriers and signs painted with a skull and crossbones along the creek banks.

Apart from avoiding the creek, residents continue to live as normally as they can. Gossip goes on unabated. Everyone has a theory, a solution or a cure, if only people would listen.

Discussions continue long into the night outside the Trading Post and Harry obliges by closing the shop later and later. Dr Andrew warns against using alternative therapies until it is clear what they are dealing with. People are more circumspect after that. Harry optimistically orders Easter eggs in shiny foil, along with extra groceries for the holiday period, then adds more home remedies and comfort items to the list.

Sunday, 29 March

The number of visiting officials and their staff grows. Police officers arrive to investigate the problem. Everyone but the hermits is interviewed. Medics from the Ministry take over Dr Andrew's rooms. Specialists prod and pinch and paint the 112 local residents with potions. Assessors from the Department of Agriculture check local produce and water supplies. Journalists arrive to investigate the cause of all the activity.

Caravans are parked alongside the creek. The visitors commandeer a mobile canteen and set it up on the oval.

In a show of solidarity with the residents, Harry at the Trading Post increases his standing order for supplies of fresh fruit and vegetables, eggs, and prettily decorated jars of honey and preserves from local producers, and readjusts his order for alcohol.

Everyone in the village attends the public meeting called by Dr Andrew and Selena. Even the hermits appear and hover in the doorway. The principal's expression is sombre as she announces the results of her independent inquiry and her analysis of samples taken in and around the creek, subject to official confirmation by the experts.

‘Not long after New Year, a spill occurred upstream in Kiewa Creek,’ Selena says to the worried locals. ‘It went unnoticed and unreported. While the source of the spill and the exact composition is still under investigation, it appears to have affected our community. My own investigation implicates a chemical compound often used for coal cleaning. Whether it leaked accidentally or was dumped waste is still to be confirmed.’ She looks towards Dr Andrew.

‘So far, bore water and tank water tested is clear,’ he says. ‘But you should wash all produce thoroughly with bottled water and use bottled water for drinking and cleaning teeth for the time being. At least until official clearance is given.

‘As a precaution, the creek, creek banks and several hundred metres either side are declared strictly out of bounds until further notice. The pristine springs should help dilute the spill, if it hasn’t seeped through to the water table.’

A ripple runs through the hall. Dr Andrew continues.

‘It looks as if the health problems will be temporary for most. All the symptoms suffered fit Selena’s hypothesis. While there is no specific data on the toxic effects of this chemical compound—no known long-term carcinogenic effects or developmental toxicity—it is noted that it may cause harm if ingested or inhaled. It may have adverse effects for those with suppressed immune systems. But those who have been hospitalised are improving and are expected to recover.’

The afternoon meeting called by the Ministry of Health is less straightforward. The locals sense a cover-up as officious public servants beat around the bush and fend off questions, while insisting that all is under control, that the creek will be properly fenced and sealed off, and that a crisis management team will assist residents. When the question is raised of compulsory or forced evacuation, the information providers clam up. One moron jokes that the reports state that their exposure to small amounts of a chemical diluted in creek water will not cause residents to drop dead anytime soon. A senior medic frowns and advises everyone to avoid the creek and to drink and use only bottled water because at this point in time it is the sensible thing to do.

Complimentary bottles of water are handed out. Selena wants to know who will collect and dispose of the mountain of empty plastic bottles piling up in the school recycling skip. She tells the officials that everyone in this community is responsible for disposal of their own rubbish and waste; there is no council collection service.

Sunday, 5 April

Easter Sunday. The sun is shining, and a few residents drive off to a church or club in town or to the Easter holiday markets. At home, parents hide Easter eggs for excited children. Nobody has friends or relatives visiting this year. Even the weekenders are keeping away.

All week, Kiewa Creek teemed with anonymous figures in hazmat outfits, some putting up permanent barriers and signage, others taking more samples from the creek and surrounds.

In a few days, results will confirm the spill, its extent, how far it has leached into the creek bed and whether it has affected the effervescent springs from the water table deep below. The official results from testing bore and tank water will be available. Arborists are coming to check the state of the trees and plants, once the level of contamination is established.

The locals try their best to stay calm and carry on, but the jitters don't subside easily. No spume, no discolouration, no obvious sign of adulteration can be seen with the naked eye. Kiewa Creek is eerily silent and the water remains crystal clear as it snakes its way through the valley.

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CODA

‘Mum’s asked us to stay with her,’ Ivy said as she read through the mail she’d collected from their roadside mailbox. ‘She’s worried about the contamination, she wants us to take a break. She wants us to bring Lucky too. The garden is fenced and he’ll be fine there.’

‘You and the kids should go,’ Andy said.

‘We should *all* go,’ Ivy insisted. ‘Until the creek is given the all-clear. Alice is going back to Sydney.’

‘Colleen will have a full house, then.’

‘Alice won’t stay there, she’ll find somewhere else. You know there’s room for you, why don’t you want to come with us? You know the kids will miss you if you stay here.’ And I’ll worry, she wanted to add.

‘I’ll think about it. When do you want to go?’

‘As soon as possible. There’s no point in exposing the kids to god-knows-what any longer than we have to, is there?’

‘Right.’ Andy went outside to think.

Ivy made a list of items to pack.

Andy came back and made sandwiches for lunch. ‘You often go to Sydney without me, I don’t think I need to go.’

‘This is different. It doesn’t feel the same anymore.’ Ivy shuddered involuntarily.

‘It’ll blow over. We’re on the high ground, it’s not as if we’re next to the creek.’

‘The creek will never seem the same,’ Ivy argued. ‘There’ll always be that suspicion. I’ll worry about the kids going there, even if the all-clear is given.’

‘This sounds as if you’re thinking of a more permanent move than a few days in Sydney.’

Ivy played with her sandwich, tearing off the crusts. ‘It’s this sense of betrayal. That our corner of the world is not important. Nobody seems to care. A little poison in the water, some pollution and coal dust in the air, not to worry, she’ll be right. As a species we’re headed for extinction, you know.’

Andy went outside again to work off his thoughts.

Later that night, Andy called Ivy outside to look at the sparkling Milky Way overhead. ‘Malathi has also asked us to stay with her,’ Ivy said.

Andy poured two glasses of red wine. ‘So has Dan, with Audrey gone I think he feels a bit lonely. He says he’s thinking of going into the Farm Holiday business to make an income from the property. He’s not making any money from the place, apparently. He says that from fresh farm produce to rural hospitality—he can provide the total package. He’s going to ask Alice to be a part of it all.’

‘Sounds like Dan has gone commercial.’

‘See, everything changes—but I reckon the devil you know at least gives you a fighting chance. How do you know another place might not end up worse?’

‘You’re right, I know. We humans have one wondrous magical planet and all we can do is fight among ourselves and stuff it up.’ Ivy rested her head on Andy’s shoulder.

‘Let’s take a break away and then decide what to do,’ Andy said. ‘There’s no rush.’

Ivy lifted her wineglass to the sky, as a shooting star made an arc through the darkness.

ENDS