

**Title:** A Creature's Tale

**Accompanying exegesis:** Exploring otherness through the human-animal relationship

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## CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

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

This creative thesis and exegesis explores the experience of the outsider and the concept of ‘otherness’. In the creative thesis, a novel titled *A Creature’s Tale*, the experience of otherness is many faceted – it is the otherness that separates different races and cultures, that which separates white Australian settlers and Aborigines and, most extreme of all, the otherness that separates humans and other species. At its heart the story is about the links between all animals, human and non-human.

The novel, narrated by a now deceased dog, tells the story of life in the 1850s and 1860s in a whaling community on the far south coast of NSW and in Kiandra, a gold mining town in the Southern Alps. Through the perspective of the dog we hear the story of the two young protagonists, Hannah Conway and Ah See Quong, both displaced and both outsiders. The dog is also an observer of the various disparate communities of colonial Australia, the indigenous people, the white settlers and the many immigrants working in the goldfields. Through the narrator’s commentary the reader is given an insight into these communities.

The protagonists in the story struggle to find their place in the Australia of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hannah Conway is the daughter of entrepreneur and pioneer Arthur Conway and after the death of her mother she is brought to Conway Town, a half built whaling town on the shores of Twofold Bay. She is left to her own devices much of the time and finds solace in painting and drawing, for which she has considerable talent. Ah See Quong is a young boy when his father dies in the Kiandra goldfields, leaving him alone in a strange land. He is taken in by the local schoolmaster and life is relatively stable for a short while. With the death of the schoolmaster, Jimmy, as he becomes known, leaves Kiandra to make his own way, ending up eventually at Twofold Bay.

By the time Hannah and Jimmy meet, Arthur Conway’s investments and many ventures have gone sour and life at Conway Town is beginning to unravel. Central to the story is the co-operation between humans and killer whales, or Orca, in the hunting of the various species of whales that visit Twofold Bay. The success of the land based whaling venture is dependent on the intense working relationship between the whalers and the killer whales, the killers rounding up the humpbacks as they pass Twofold Bay and herding them into the bay so that the whalers can

finish them off. So close is the relationship that the Orcas even tell the whalers when they need to come out in their boats, continuously thumping their tails on the surface of the water to summon the men. This working relationship originates with the indigenous whalers who pass on the knowledge to the white whaling crews. It is the refusal of Arthur Conway to acknowledge the importance of this relationship that is his undoing, and after the killing of one of the killer whales by his white crew, the story comes to a dramatic conclusion.

The accompanying exegesis explores the concept of otherness through the human/animal relationship. The introduction poses some questions that surround this relationship, such as why humans feel compelled to both understand and to dominate other species. In Part I these questions are then examined through the prism of a dog-focused business, Café Bones, and also through the legal system as it relates to animals. Part II examines some of the ways that both writers and philosophers have tried to unravel the mystery of animals and their ‘otherness’.

**Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison house of our personal desires by widening the circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures.**

– Albert Einstein, letter 1950

## **A Creature's Tale**

### **Prologue**

The dog emerges from the scrub into the bright bareness of morning. She knows she is exposed on the open road but her progress will be much faster here. Dust rises in gentle puffs, the breeze a whisper in the she oaks as she pads up the road, head bent with the burden of her load. Her mouth is stiff and aching with the effort of holding her jaws in place so carefully around her prize, but she can't relax for fear of crushing it. She feels the carriage before she hears it, a tremor in the soft dirt, a quiver in her withered haunches, and as it rounds the bend and begins to climb the slight incline she melts back into the scrub, careful not to move her head too violently. A blur of metal wheel rims, rhythmic drum of hooves, then there is only the sound of her heart. She is alone.

As she starts back on the road she stumbles and nearly drops the bundle and for a moment it seems she might fail. Her mouth is so dry she can barely feel where her teeth begin and where her tongue is rooted in its socket. She is dust itself. But she can't let go; she is propelled forward by her yearning. She has no will beyond this. She continues on the road while the sun rises high in the sky and follows its arc down to the other side. Some horses carrying people come and go, birds soar far above, sheep scramble in the rubble of the fields. The dog pads on.

It is dark when she reaches the settlement and she can smell a southerly change rolling in from the sea as she emerges from the scrub. Families are inside their houses and the sounds of plates being scraped, glasses clinking, of murmurs and laughter spill out into the night air. She reaches the shacks and squeezes through a gap in the wire fence. She moves on towards the aboriginal camp. Someone is yelling nearby and she flinches, lowering her belly closer to the hard packed earth. Slowly, silently, she creeps along.

Her lair is a pile of boxes and old rags wedged behind some metal sheets. She wriggles under the sheeting holding her bundle out in front but it slips just as she is almost through and falls into the dirt with a dull thud. She is almost spent and her back legs fold beneath her. She muzzles the silent mound, pushing it with her

snout towards the safety of her nest. It drags in the dust but she gets it to the base of the pile and then pulls it upwards inch by inch. Finally it is there and she circles, frantically pulling at the rags, pushing and prodding until they surround the limp form. Then she sinks down beside it and gently licks the grime from the tiny human face, the velvet of her tongue caressing the grooves of its eye sockets.

### **A creaturely word**

**S**o we have something of a scene before us and you are possibly settling in for some enlightenment (or am I being too presumptuous about capturing your interest?) Well let me just say before we start in earnest, it is a crusty tale you are about to embark upon – considerable quantities of salt, grit, dust and yes, bodily fluids, along the way. I will guide you when I can. You must bear with me as I attempt to find my voice, to gather my form – sometimes you may encounter me as that ever-present mongrel, *Canis lupus familiaris*, at others I feel the lofty tones of a sea eagle, genus *Haliaeetus*, may suit my purpose better.

Or maybe the supercilious tones of the *Felis catus*, otherwise known as the common moggy, will do the trick. To be fair I should give those creatures of the sea a go – maybe the pipsqueak of the oceans *euphausiids*, or as the Norwegians would say ‘young fry of the fish’, probably better known to you as krill. It does after all play a leading role in this tale. Do I hear you scoff? No doubt you would rather hear from something a little more substantial and in the class Mammalia, a large cetacean perhaps, a.k.a. a whale. How very predictable of you – shrimp have feelings too you know – who knows they may even be sentient. It’s true they don’t cavort and leap from the ocean in graceful arcs, or sing to each other in plaintive voices. And they aren’t the prettiest of things. On the other hand even though they are close to the bottom of the food chain they are now being hailed as the key to life in the oceans– a crucial element in the continuation of things. They’re even being held up as a sign that it’s getting warmer down there – something you humans are all in a knot about apparently. That is hot off the press from those in the know – the scientists. Who would have thought it? There was certainly no concern back in my time about what critters like krill might have been up to. There were trillions of them swirling around out there doing their thing, feeding those whales that play a starring role in this tale. Such an unassuming, not to mention ugly, critter and it turns out to be the answer to so many things. Well, we will see.

But I'm getting ahead of myself – this tale takes place in the late 1850s and 1860s in the far south of the Colony of New South Wales – that Englishman Charles Darwin had created a stir even in this far flung place for suggesting your species was pretty much first cousin to the apes. Many of those in the Establishment, who didn't like to have their views given a nudge, found the notion too horrible to contemplate. Or so I've heard. Hard to remember now how I know these things – when I was fleet of foot I had other things to concern myself with. Now that I really am a drifter, in the true sense of the word – deceased in actual fact - there are so many things I just seem to know that I would have had no interest in back then. Quite the sponge I am.

Back then of course, for us lesser animals, theories of evolution were of no consequence. We just went about our own business. And it's not as if it would have made a difference – first cousin or third cousin twice removed – we still would have needed to keep out of your way. It hasn't changed anything much in the 150 years since as far as I can see – knowing we're all related I mean. Let's be honest, you lot never let a little detail like that get in the way of things.

Anyway, I digress so let's move on. There is much to tell you. Whatever creature I may be - creature personified, essence of creature – or plain old canine who drifted in and out of the scenes you'll find on these pages - you can be sure I will return to whisper and natter in your ear along the way, to put you in the picture, so to speak.

First let me introduce you to Hannah, a girl all at sea when we first find her – literally, and, as you will see in due course, metaphorically speaking. When we meet her she has great fears for her future. But she is an optimistic creature, so she also has great hopes. Ahh how hopeful and naïve the young can be.... I won't keep you any longer – or the tale will never be told.

## Part One

### Twofold Bay 1860

Hannah Conway arrived in Twofold Bay on a clear spring day in 1860, right in the middle of a whale hunt. It was a formative experience for Hannah, a devastating one for the whale.

The steamer on which she had travelled most of the distance from Sydney had pitched and rolled so violently Hannah was sure it must tip over and drop them all into the churning sea. Somehow it had arrived at the far south coast port of Tathra intact, offloading a few passengers onto a lighter just off a small rocky cove called Kianinny. She watched as several country men, ruddy faces tight with concentration climbed aboard the smaller vessel as it pitched and twisted and she wished she could escape with them despite the fearsome swell.

Her companion Miss Pringle became so ill from the rough seas that she spent the entire trip in their tiny cabin, which of course just made matters worse. By the time they disembarked at Twofold Bay Miss Pringle was grey with nausea and fatigue. That was not the end of it. They were then loaded onto a small rowing boat that was to take them to their final destination – a cove a small distance south where her father was constructing a new settlement he said would rival the port of Sydney Town for the transport of goods from the New World to the Old World.

She had hoped her father would be there to meet the steamer and when he was not her last remaining courage dissolved and she felt she would not be able to set foot in that tiny boat. She was coaxed aboard by Mr Blakely, the gentleman who her father had sent to fetch her, along with two men who were to row them to Conway Town, as the new settlement was to be called.

‘Don’t worry Miss Conway – the swell has eased now and we will be there in no time, you’ll see. Then you and Miss Pringle here can have a good long rest on solid land.’

Mr Blakely had not allowed for the whale hunt that was reaching its climax as they rounded the headland. He had estimated it would be concluded by the time they made their way into the bay, as it had been going for many hours already and the beast must surely be dead from exhaustion. As it turned out he was wrong. As the men heaved on their oars to take the small rowboat well out from the treacherous rocky headland and peninsular that held the small settlement of Eden,

and that also divided Twofold Bay into two distinct parts, Hannah heard yelling from the cliff tops above them.

She looked up – there were people standing looking out to sea and they were calling out. What they were saying she could not tell as the wind was blowing their words back into the sandstone cliffs. Then the boat was beyond the headland and before them was the full curve of Twofold Bay. It was a sight to behold – towering forests edged with a long arc of white sand ran down to meet an ocean of the deepest green.

And there in the middle of that wondrous harbour the largest creature Hannah had ever seen leapt from the water twisting its massive body as it rose in the air and fell back in a surge of white foam. She could see other creatures around it that looked like large fish or sharks, black and white with rounded heads and tall fins that stuck up above the surface. They seemed to be surrounding the whale. Close behind was a timber boat full of men and another boat was closer to shore. Hannah turned to Mr Blakely.

‘What is happening Mr Blakely? What are those animals there – are they sharks?’

‘It’s a whale hunt Miss – a humpback. I’m sorry about this - thought it would be finished by now. The beast has given them a run – a real fighter that one. They’ve been at it since dawn. The others you see there are killers, killer whales that is.’

‘Are the men trying to catch all these whales at once?’

‘Oh no Miss – just the humpback. The killers are part of the hunt. Very useful they are – they round the thing up and get it into the bay. By that time it’s mightily worn down, what with all the chasing and biting from the killers. Makes the whalers’ job much easier, that’s for sure.’

Mr Blakely muttered to the rowers to move it along a bit but by then they were just a few hundred yards from the hunt. A blackman stood at the bow of the whaling boat, hand raised above his head as he held a long metal harpoon attached to a rope. The humpback had risen to the surface again and the killers were circling and hovering. And then the man thrust the harpoon at the whale and a moan rose up from the water. It seemed to Hannah that the sound travelled under their flimsy boat and came back up beside them, resonating through her body. The men were yelling ‘It’s fastened. Hang on now’ and rope was unravelling, whining as it burnt through the fastening cleats and the whale headed for the open sea. She

could see the men clinging to their lifted oars and to the sides of the boat as it lurched forward after the whale.

‘Will it escape now?’

‘Well Miss, it’s always a risk but unlikely at this point. These men are skilled in the task of whale hunting and that creature is at the end of its tether. Don’t you worry yourself unduly. We will be ashore soon.’

Hannah had forgotten the shore and her desire to see her father. She saw the whale had risen to the surface once more and the black fellow who had thrown the harpoon had another long spear-like lance in his hand. They were very close to the whale now and the man stood poised, his arm pulled back high, muscles taut and his body twisted to the side. Hannah felt the man must be so close to the animal he could see its eye and she willed it to sink beneath the surface and slip away.

‘Be gone, be gone. Quickly,’ she whispered to herself.

Then the man lunged. Hannah thought she could feel the quiver of the large body as the lance entered it. This time the moan became a long drawn-out groan that seemed to speak of utter weariness. The sound wrapped itself around Hannah’s head and lodged inside her. She looked down into the water and saw that the sea had turned red.

Then the creature reared up and when it breathed out a crimson fountain filled with blood and gore rose into the air. Beside her Miss Pringle gasped and put her head between her hands. Hannah looked at the men surrounding the whale and heard their cries of exultation. She wanted to scream at them or to lance them as they had the whale but she sat rigid in the boat, her face awash with sea spray or her own salty tears - she was not sure. At the edge of her vision came a flickering of light and floating specks she knew heralded the arrival of a migraine.

The world had become overly bright and the light bounced in flashes from the surface of the water in sharp, bright daggers.

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Joseph Blakely closed the door to the whalery. He grunted softly, straining with the effort. The damn door was so heavy and the hinges had slipped. It needed to be solid to keep out the weather but that meant it was continually in need of maintenance. In the two years he’d been here they had replaced it several times.

He found it hard to believe he'd been here for that length of time. In actual fact he never stopped counting the days. He hated the place – the weather, the stink of whale innards and boiling blubber, the darkies and chinks, the slackers who called themselves workers and the long winter nights stuck in that damp, draughty house on his own. He missed his wife Martha's warm round rump snuggled up against him, the smell of her hair on the pillow beside him. Just thinking about her made him hard inside his woollen britches. God knows when he was going to see her next.

He had come here temporarily to get the place running smoothly and he was still bloody well here. What a grim place. Accidents happened with monotonous regularity - men caught in machinery, limbs cut or scalded. He sighed, remembering the gruesome event a couple of months ago when one of the men had slipped into a massive try-pot, his bellows rising with the veils of steam that snaked in endless drifts to the metal roof. By the time they reached him his skin was bursting like an over-ripe plum.

He could well understand why the men got disgruntled and moved on – the place was hell on earth in his opinion. The floor where the creatures were cut up was slick with blood and gore, making it a treacherous place to work, particularly when the men removed the blubber with razor-sharp blades attached to fifteen foot long spades. It was easy for workers to slip as they put their full weight into the cut. If it went well and the blade hit the mark the blubber pulled away like an orange being peeled. If they slipped there was no telling where the blade would end up. And then there was the smell, an evil, rank odour that filled the air, clung to clothes and seeped into your skin, no matter how much you scrubbed and soaked.

Not that many of the workers had the luxury of a warm bath. Even with his weekly soak he could not get the filthy stink off him – it had permeated his very being and settled in his nostrils so that he breathed it day and night.

He couldn't fathom how Arthur Conway had convinced him to come down here –except that he'd insisted of course. He had been managing Conway's pastoral interests, up in Goulburn and he'd protested he would be no help with a whaling operation. Not his area at all – he was a financial man, good with figures. People were another matter entirely and he didn't have the necessary grit to deal with the types here. All sorts of itinerants came through – he found them harder to deal with than the aborigines when it came right down to it. At least the blacks

were good with the whaling – they got results and payment rates were not an issue – not like the damned Irish who turned up from time to time. Troublemakers and rabble rousers they were. Didn't get so many of the Chinese down here though – to his mind they were a shifty lot - he'd seen enough of them in Goulburn when they drifted through on their way to the gold fields. They were usually in mobs - safety in numbers no doubt. He had not had any dealings with them personally but they made him uneasy with their strange get-ups and long thin plaits hanging down their backs and that incomprehensible gibberish they called a language.

Arthur Conway was also making him nervous of late. He was spreading himself thin with his grand schemes. The whaling business was just a small part of his plans. He was also building this town, convinced it could rival Sydney as a port, and purchasing vast swathes of land from the Monaro down to the Victorian border, which required considerable livestock. Then there was the shipping company and the timber business. All of these ventures carried risks and Blakely had tried to advise him to consolidate in one or two areas before leaping off into others. All to no avail of course – Conway regarded him as a solid workhorse who could keep the books efficiently but with no imagination or flair. In Blakely's opinion the whole thing was teetering on the edge of disaster.

There were other problems of course but those were of a personal nature and Blakely was loath to mention to Arthur Conway that his indiscretions had not gone unnoticed amongst the men. There had been murmurings of late and the black fellows had become less reliable, not so willing to make up a crew.

His own life would be a damn sight more comfortable if he was at the top of the heap, schmoozing with politicians and wealthy businessmen like Arthur Conway. That was never going to happen so no point dwelling on it. Besides, he couldn't imagine having a wife like Martha if he was Arthur Conway. He'd seen a photo of Mrs Conway once in the boss's office at the homestead- a pale, fine-boned woman, with long dark hair and a distant expression. Not his type at all. He felt a twinge of remorse, remembering the talk amongst the men that her passing had not been an easy one.

Now the girl was here, expected to live in the house on the peninsula with no company her own age and only limited supervision from that sickly governess and the tutor who was to travel from Eden twice a week. That didn't seem right to him. In fact the girl made him uncomfortable – he had no idea how to address her. She did not go in for small talk that was for sure – seemed a bit odd to him, but

then was it any wonder with her father so absent and her mother gone and all. Of course she could not have stayed at the residence in Sydney after her mother died, not with Mr Conway so much away, attending to his land holdings and his ventures here at Twofold Bay. This was no place for a young lady though – isolated as it was from proper civilised society. Just whalers and blacks for company.

He thrust his hands deeper into his coat pockets. It seemed to him that women like Mrs Conway and the governess Miss Pringle were brittle, unwholesome creatures. Not enough hardy stock mixed in. His wife Martha, on the other hand, was what you would call fulsome - big breasted and soft where it counted. He grunted slightly as he shifted his weight forward onto the balls of his feet, leaning his shoulder into the metal door and giving it a final savage shove.

He turned the key in the lock, feeling the grinding of cold metal on rust. Behind him the bay curved in a smooth arc. The light was all but gone from the sky and a light wind danced across the water's surface, causing it to fleck and pucker. A sea eagle cried out and circled in slow, graceful loops, a final flight before heading back to the cliffs for the night.

He could smell rain in the air – must be a southerly on the way. The deep bay gave the settlement a small measure of protection from the full brunt of cold fronts as they moved in across the ocean but they could be ferocious in their suddenness, the storm clouds rolling towards the coastline, broiling and festering as they came, driven by the icy power of the southern winds.

Blakely looked out across the bay. He could see a line of clouds banked along the horizon, their inkiness lit with an eery green tinge. It was going to be a whopper and as he moved off down the path towards his house he felt the familiar tug of fear. He had never become used to the storms. At night he would bunker down in his four-poster bed, blankets pulled high around his ears to block the sounds. It was futile. The high-pitched howling of the wind in the casuarinas that lined the fence chilled him to the core and around him the house moaned and heaved like a creature in pain, its roof metals screeching and straining and windows rattling in a frenzied protest.

Now, as he headed towards the house, he felt an irrational desire to run back along the cliff path and down to the sea, not stopping until he felt the icy foam of the breakers moving over and through him. Give himself over to the demon. He shook himself abruptly and quickened his pace, pulling his overcoat tighter as the

first drops of rain fell. In the small settlement of workers' huts back behind the try works a dog barked forlornly, a repetitive and monotonous sound, as if no response was anticipated.

He thought he might just make it to the house before the worst of it began. As he moved heavily along the narrow cliff path he saw something move in the scrub up ahead, a dark shape darting off to the side of the path. He stopped abruptly and tried to see where it had gone, squinting into the semi-dark. A hush had fallen over the coastal heath, a stillness that heralded a turn in the weather and he stood rigid, straining to hear movement. But there was only the coarse beating of his heart and he moved on towards the lights of the house just as the first icy drops began to fall.

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All night the mournful moans of foghorns filled the air, prompting strange dreams so that Hannah woke with a lingering feeling of melancholy. There was the briny smell of sea fog, a thick grey wall of it pressing up against her window.

No telling how long it would last. It might lift by midday or it could stay like this all day, everything beyond the front gate shrouded in its milky thickness. In the two months she had been at Twofold Bay there had been at least five, maybe six, of these heavy sea fogs. She curled into the warm centre of the bed smiling at the thought of her new tutor, Ben Symonds, rowing across the bay in this, hat wedged onto his slicked orange hair, sharp nose twitching in alarm. With any luck there would be no lessons today, just drawing with Miss Pringle.

There were the sounds of movement downstairs in the kitchen. Josie, the housekeeper, cook, and organiser of all things domestic and otherwise, would have risen hours ago, bad weather or fine. She would not be pleased about the fog. They were expecting a carriage to come with deliveries and the mail. No possibility of that now - they would have to wait until later in the week or maybe Father would send the stablehand into town with the wagon if it cleared early enough. If that happened she would try to convince him to let her go with him. That was if she saw her father at all – since she had arrived he had spent very little time with her and when he did his moods were unpredictable. She did not remember him as so withdrawn and changeable, but then she had rarely been alone with him when her mother was alive. He seemed a very different man to her

now, distracted and distant. Even his greeting when she had first been delivered to the homestead was strangely removed, as if her arrival was simply another item on the day's agenda.

Water was dripping down the windowpane in slow trickles and she watched the progress of these tiny rivers, each one cutting a crooked course across the frosted glass. The weight of the bedclothes pressed around her like a comforting embrace.

By the time she had dressed the fog had edged back from her window so that she could see the stone wall that surrounded the garden, the spiked tops of the metal gates disappearing into the vapour, like spikes puncturing vast cushions. She went downstairs and walked through the formal sitting room, its elegant settees and heavy mahogany sideboard barely visible in the gloom. In the kitchen Josie was stoking the fire and the orange glow of the flames danced around the pale walls. A large ginger cat was weaving in and out of her skirts. She pushed him aside roughly with the side of her shoe when Hannah entered the room muttering 'go on now, out from under my feet Bobby.' She turned to look at Hannah.

'Mornin' Miss Hannah, we've got a thick'n today. It couldn't be worse timing with the carriage due and all.'

'But it might still come - the fog could still lift.'

'Well, I hope and pray it does or we'll run out of flour and salt. And Mr McFarlane at the haberdashery had promised some fabric for new curtains in the sittin' room. Mr Conway's got important visitors down from Sydney next month and they got to be ready by then. We'll be in a real fix if nothin' comes.'

Hannah sighed and moved to the small window. She pressed her forehead against the glass. Outside she could see the girl who helped Josie with chores bent over some task, dark wrists emerging from pale cotton sleeves. Ellen – a girl of quick movements and liquid eyes. She turned back to the small room.

'Josie would I be able to have some of that damper and maybe an egg? The smell of it cooking is making me hungry.'

Josie snorted but took an egg from a bowl on the workbench and broke it deftly into a pan on the stovetop. 'You know your father doesn't like you eatin' in the kitchen Hannah. It's not fittin' for you to be spendin' so much time in here.'

‘Well I am not sure what it is I am expected to do. Sit in that room with only myself for company? It is cold and smells of furniture polish. Father would not wish for me to be alone I’m sure.’

Josie huffed and rolled her eyes and then bent down to the oven, pulling out a loaf of bread, puffed and golden. She placed a large slice of the loaf on a plate, spread it generously with butter and topped it with the fried egg, the vivid orange yolk glistening and wobbling against its bed of white.

Hannah turned from the window and sat at the small table against the wall. She gathered the warm furry form of Bobby the cat under her skirts and bent to inhale the aroma of old forests, smoke and chickens. It was enough for now.

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At first the days at the new settlement of Conway Town were long beyond endurance for Hannah. It was hardly a town, just a few wattle and daub huts and some partly constructed sandstone buildings. There were two buildings already completed - Arthur Conway’s large sprawling house, positioned at the highest point on the headland so it commanded a broad view of the bay and 500 yards further south a sandstone tower that Conway planned to have commissioned as a lighthouse. There were other buildings still under construction, a general store, a post office and courthouse, but these sat in their partly finished state, awaiting building supplies. Hannah did not know what she was meant to occupy herself with. It was not that she was easily bored but rather that she had been uprooted and deposited here with barely an introduction to the place.

She had begun lessons with her tutor Ben Symonds who she found unimaginative and priggish - a mediocre man with a very high opinion of himself. He had declined the offer to take up living quarters in the settlement and travelled daily by boat from Eden – a strange arrangement considering the unpredictable weather here but one that suited Hannah as there were many days when he was either late or did not arrive at all. No doubt he found the company here beneath him.

In Sydney she had been tutored each day by Mr Albert Jones, a quiet Englishman who Hannah liked a great deal. Lessons began at nine in the morning and broke at midday for lunch. Then there had been music and art with Miss Pringle from two until half past three.

It was her mother who had insisted on the art lessons, believing her daughter showed considerable artistic flair. She had pressed the point with Mr Conway and

after much enquiry had found Miss Pringle through an agency in the city. On the whole the arrangement had worked well – Hannah applied herself to her morning lessons so the time would pass more quickly and she could be drawing again. But it had all come to an end with her mother’s illness, the fever taking hold so quickly she seemed to be gone before Hannah had even realised she was gravely ill.

What she remembered most about the period following her mother’s death was the feeling of disembodiment. She felt physically out of place, constantly bombarded by sudden silences and nervous glances from both servants and visitors as she entered a room.

Her father was never visible during those days. He had returned to their home in Sydney when he received word of his wife’s condition but Hannah saw him only briefly. Where he was she had no idea. She imagined him locked in a room somewhere, held against his will by forces unknown. Was it something to do with her? Her power to silence adults made her think this was likely. It seemed her very presence had drawn a veil down over the house.

It was during this time she began to suffer from migraines, as if somehow her psychic and emotional suffering had manifested in this strange and equally untreatable form. For days her thought processes would become scrambled, her words disassembled so that they spilled from her mouth in a jumble of nonsensical phrases. Sometimes she would see flashes of bright lights, at other times the headaches were heralded by floating black specks that blocked her vision, like a curtain placed over her eyes.

Now she was having difficulty remembering details about her mother – her face, her voice, how could these have faded in such a short space of time? She remembered her long thin hands, the fingers curled against the floral pattern on the cotton overlay and the silvery hairs on the side of her face glowing in the afternoon light from the window.

She had not been permitted to stay with her mother in her room and towards the end she was told not to speak to her as it would tire her too much. If she could not speak to her, how could her mother know she was there? Would she think Hannah had left her when she was so ill? So she pressed her face into the quilt, willing her mother to hear her thoughts and her own life forces to make her mother well again. It was all to no avail. Maybe she had not willed it sufficiently, had not concentrated hard enough. What she had learnt very well was how to

inhabit spaces intensely and yet invisibly. It was a talent that would serve her well.

On a morning soon after her arrival at Twofold Bay she employed this talent to explore her father's study, her curiosity piqued by some remarks he had made the previous evening regarding a man called Charles Darwin – 'a blasphemous scoundrel if ever there was, but if he was right it would explain why the blacks were what they are.'

He had been reading a newspaper at the time and had flicked at it angrily before retiring to his study.

Hannah knew her father had local blacks working for him at the whalery and on his land holdings. She'd seen the Aboriginal whaler with his powerful thrust of the lance and its lethal effect. She had tried to talk to the girl who helped Josie but with little success. The truth was she had little understanding of her father's ventures or who worked for him. Now, at the age of twelve, she had a strong desire to know more of him and to have some connection with the one person who was left to her.

When her father left the house the following morning for one of his meetings at the whalery she went to his study, closing the door behind her and slipping into the large leather chair. The room smelt of cigars and old books and she inhaled it deeply, hoping that in its acrid maleness she might discover her father.

She was not sure which newspaper or journal he had been reading there was a neat stack of them on his desk so she sat and leafed through them, the pages crackling in a satisfying way as she turned them. Much of what she saw baffled her but when she came to some ink drawings in one of the journals she was delighted.

She had little awareness of how long she had been in her father's room when came across a sketch in a journal called Punch – maybe this was what had prompted her father's comments on Charles Darwin. Titled 'Monkeyana' it was a drawing of a large hairy ape-like creature, maybe a gorilla, and on its front it carried a banner which read 'AM I A MAN AND A BROTHER?' It stood tall like a man and it held a long staff or walking stick in one of its large paw-like hands. At first she smiled at the oddness of the picture but the more she looked, the greater was her unease. The animal seemed grotesque and at the same time immeasurably melancholy.

She closed the journal and set it aside, then she continued her perusal of the newspapers until she finally came upon a large article about Mr Charles Darwin and his new book, *On the Origin of Species*. It quoted a section from the book, which was underlined in red ink – maybe her father had done this:

‘All that we can do, is to keep steadily in mind that each organic being is striving to increase at a geometrical ratio; that each at some period of its life, during some season of the year, during each generation or at intervals, has to struggle for life, and to suffer great destruction. When we reflect on this struggle, we may console ourselves with the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply.’

The words were strange to Hannah and felt far removed from her life. She was interrupted by the sound of her father’s voice somewhere in the garden. She gathered the pile of papers and placed them back on the shelf, the pounding of her heart seeming to propel her forward. Even as her fear of discovery made her breathless she hesitated to leave before she had sampled more of this world into which she had managed a mere glimpse.

In front of her on the shelf was a large volume, its deep maroon binding and the sheer size of it drawing her eye. Not the work of Mr Darwin perhaps, but something luminous and precious. She took it from the shelf and then took the journal containing the strange drawing of the ape from her father’s desk before hurrying from the room and closing the door behind her.

**J**ust as you thought you were settling in and getting to know the place, I must take you 150 miles inland, up into snow country. Not so far really and yet such a different land. I travelled there during several summers – walking on the ancient paths with the coastal people, the Thawa, one of the many Yuin mobs – for the gathering of the Bogong Moth feast, the Urri Arra. There were millions of those moths, *Agrostis infusa*, with their rotund, juicy bodies. Even for me the long trek to the highlands was worth it – and what an easy feed it was, the brown furred creatures beating themselves senseless against the light sticks. Then roasted to perfection over coals. Apparently they travelled thousands of miles every summer, from the soil plains of northern Australia to the cool air of the alps, just

to deliver themselves up to the likes of me, and the Thawa of course. The word is they still make the journey – but they've got the run of the place now pretty much.

Once there was a great gathering of people from different mobs who met on the high grasslands for this treat – it was a joyous time. There were the coastal people and those from the mountains - the Bemerigal of the Ngarigo, from the Monaro area around Cooma.

By the time this tale begins those gatherings were coming to an end. The numbers had diminished and old patterns were disappearing – white people came and that was that. They say there were once more than 11,000 Yuin who lived along the coast from the Shoalhaven River to the land south of Eden but by the time of this tale smallpox and other white men's diseases had killed many. Then there were the battles over land – spears were no match for guns, or for arsenic-laced water holes. I ran with these people but I did not fight their battles – for me it was enough to survive for the years that I did.

It was while I was at one of the gatherings in the very early summer of 1859, my stomach bulging with sweet Bogong, that I first encountered Ah See Quong. He was a sorry sight I can tell you. A new town had sprung up in the alpine country – Kiandra it was called by the whites, Gianderra by the Aboriginal people, which I have been told means 'sharp stones for knives' – you'd understand why if you went there – flinty stones in plenty.

The town came into being because of that rock you call gold. Gold fever they called it but me, I called it madness. Never was there a more inhospitable place to create a town. At one point there were more than 15,000 people there – they poured in from everywhere, some walking the 150 miles from the coast with nothing more than a spade and a dish, some coming by coach from Sydney to Queenbeyan via Goulburn and walking the last 50 miles. Many Chinese came carrying their pots and pans on long sticks, plaits hanging down their bowed backs. We saw them plodding along the tracks they called roads but they only saw our shadows.

The place was a sea of tents and calico houses with a huge dose of suffering thrown in for good measure. Some men just strung up a blanket and called it a shelter. Pure insanity because that place was colder than any I have been. Trees did not grow up there on the alpine flats – they knew better. In summer the air was sweet and pure but in winter it was the devil's breath laced with ice. I saw good horses drop dead overnight, the life sucked out of them by the cold.

It is here that we find Ah See Quong. He has lived through a winter in this place. He is twelve years old but he looks much younger because he is half starved and very small. He is a bag of bones in a soggy tent.

### **Late spring 1859, Kiandra – Snowy Mountains, New South Wales**

The silence in the tent made Ah See Quong nervous. All night he'd lain there listening to the rattling of his father's breathing. Like the scratching of the sand in the bottom of the gold pan, the water a murky swirl, driving the grains against the tin. Tiny flecks of gold glinting in the sun – fool's gold. A world of scratchings, scrapings and rattlings.

Now his father lay still in the canvas bed, his body barely causing the fabric sling to sag. He murmured to him in the gloom, placing the water tin carefully at the tent entrance. The water glimmered in the early morning light.

Outside the sounds of people preparing for the day filled the narrow valley. The clanking of bowls, the splashing of water and the rise and fall of men's voices. He stood silently inside the entrance of the tent – he could see pinpricks of light through the perishing fabric of the tent. When it rained these pinpricks became the source of tiny rivers that coursed their way across the tent until gravity turned them into a thousand weeping eyes.

The tent had become a sodden place where mould sprang from every corner – mossy things of brilliant greens and blues and some of muted, sinister grey. They glowed like New Year lanterns, winking at him in the night when he was too cold to sleep, the snow piling up against the sides of the canvas as a blizzard raged outside.

It had been too much for his father, this last winter. As it had been for many others in the camp – dozens had succumbed to influenza, some to tuberculosis. Coughs rang out night and day like a macabre chorus. Still, if they could walk they would go to the digs or at least to do some panning in the creek. His father hadn't been out for days but he'd sent Ah See with the men, pushing him feebly with his withered arm when Ah See hung behind in the tent. He dreaded leaving his father alone in this sodden place.

He stood and listened. His father had been quiet when he'd left to get water from the trough, his mouth hanging open against the rough fabric of his bed. In the stringy pre-dawn light he had seen the faint rise and fall of his chest, reassuring him before he went to get the water.

Now the day held its breath. Ah See moved to his father's side as if in a trance and sank to the ground beside him. When he reached out to touch his father's face it was as cold as the icy water in the tin.

Then a high pitched wail pierced the air, rising and circling to fall back on him, entering him through the top of his head and filling his chest so that there was no space for anything else.

And then he was up there in the corner of the tent looking down at a boy curled up beside a shrunken man in a stinking pile of rags. He thought it strange that this thin boy could make such an unearthly sound. Like a raw inside-out thing.

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James White had heard about the Chinese boy down at the digs several weeks before but he hadn't seen him yet. He didn't often go to China Town, as folk called the vast rows of canvas lean-tos at the edge of town. It made him uneasy – not for the reasons most of the others avoided the Chinese. He supposed the feeling was something akin to shame.

He dreaded the sight of the sprawl of mouldy canvas and churned mud surrounding the camp. He knew it was not for want of cleanliness or order that the Chinese lived in such an unhealthy way. Those he'd had dealings with were on the whole industrious and energetic, although he was aware some had succumbed to the attraction of opium. They weren't alone in this - many a white miner spent days flat on his back in the smoke haze of Ah Chee Yan's joss house.

The state of Chinaman's Flat had more to do with its location. The camp was in a narrow part of the valley that was almost completely shaded by the escarpment by mid afternoon in winter. The district magistrate had ordered the camp be moved twice after numerous complaints it was too close to town. The final straw was an all-out brawl between European and Chinese miners. Some nasty injuries from attacks with axes and long handled shovels.

There had been some attempts by the Chinese to plant vegetables on the edges of the settlement but the poor soil and the aspect meant this was only a success at the height of summer. Some of the more vocal of the Chinese settlers had been pushing to have land allocated for market gardens which they wanted to develop to supply the whole town. So far there had been resistance from the Councillors who suspected it was a thinly veiled land grab.

The local doctor, Joseph Morgan, was one of the few in favour of the idea and had written to the *Alpine Pioneer & Kiandra Advertiser* the previous month to express his view that a 'greater supply of fresh produce would go a long way to reducing the prevalence of disease in the town.'

James, as the town's lone schoolmaster and occasional photographer for the *Alpine Pioneer*, was all too familiar with the effects of malnourishment in his pupils. He sighed as he thought about the truancy rate at his ramshackle school. Only a handful turned up on a regular basis and most of those were more interested in huddling around the stove than opening a book. It was an uphill battle just to keep their attention.

He'd lost count of how many times he had visited the flimsy lean-tos that most of his pupils called home only to be greeted by a blank resistance and ignorance as to the truant's whereabouts. More often than not there was nobody at home, just the creaking of a tin roof in answer to his knocks. Or the half hearted barking of a dog as it strained against its chain.

They were a stubborn bunch – no time for schooling that's for sure. Polite enough to him on the whole though – these exchanges were marked with a kind of grudging respect, on both sides really. He knew most of these families worked like navvies, either at the gold digs or in some endeavour that fed this sprawling, muddy settlement. Like a creature prematurely birthed and abandoned in inhospitable surroundings. Left to struggle and stagger until it found its legs.

To be fair the school had received a lot of support from local families, many of the men turning up to help build the tiny schoolhouse on the hill even through the bleak winter months. They loved the idea of the school – it gave the place some substance, some respectability even. Sending their children there when they needed them to do chores or help boost the family's meagre income was another matter altogether.

He didn't blame them – he just felt battered by the grind of it all. If he was in their position he couldn't be sure he wouldn't do the same thing. It was hard to see the point of English literature when people were dying of exposure and malnutrition.

Which brought him back to the purpose of his outing – the young Chinese boy who was refusing to leave his father's graveside and had not eaten for some time – he wasn't sure exactly how long. The Chinese usually dealt with their own problems – they rarely asked for outside help but the settlement's own doctor,

Moo Choo, had sought him out late the day before to see if he could help in some way. As the local schoolmaster and closest the town had to a scholar he was seen by many of the Chinese as someone they could come to if they needed help to deal with local authorities. It was not a position he particularly relished but he helped where he could.

He and Moo Choo had struck up a kind of friendship – he enjoyed the man’s company and spent a couple of evenings a week playing mahjong with him. He was trying to teach him chess in return but somehow they always got back to mahjong. It had a rhythm to it that became almost meditative. Moo Choo’s English was not too bad and he was mightily amused by James’ attempts at Chinese.

According to Moo Choo the boy’s father had died over a week ago – influenza or TB – or maybe just the god-awful cold. The boy was around 12 or so – nobody really knew exactly how old. There were a lot of these boys – far too young for a place like this. They’d come over with their fathers to help make the fortune they were going to take back home, or send it back while they made more. But it was never like that, not from what James had seen. Just slogging away for some boss – whole teams of them, highly organised, efficient, working from light to dark. Moving from one diggings to the next, lugging all their worldly possessions with them. Little wonder they were a thin, wiry lot.

He passed the joss house, the cloying acrid smell of opium and men’s bodies pungent in the cool morning air. He’d been there himself, partly out of curiosity but also to find his old friend Joe Cotter who had developed a weakness for the substance. Joe’s wife was at the end of her tether and had pleaded with James to bring him home, to make him see some sense. A carpenter, socialist, poet and wayward husband, Cotter was drawn to the musty opium tent like a blowfly to dung. Said the stuff made him have visions like nothing else – fuelled his poetry and inspired colourful dreams. From what James had seen, the opium-inspired poetry must still be stuck in Joe’s head – there was no evidence of it on paper that he had seen. Still, the effects seemed less harmful than the grog. Joe was a much more placid creature these days than when he’d been a regular at The Alpine Inn. But the drop-off in customers at the hotel had raised the ire of publican, who vowed he’d have the Chinks’ ‘evil doin’s outlawed.’

James had reached the edge of the sprawling tent settlement and he headed towards the dirt track that ran up to the cemetery. It was midday and the valley

was flooded with light, the flinty rock outcrops that dotted the grassland glinting and flashing. The air was still and he could hear the thudding and clanging of men at work in the diggings at the other side of the plateau. He stopped and lifted his face to the sun like a light-starved plant – ahh it was good to get outside and feel this warmth, to breathe in the smell of things beyond his books.

He sighed and continued the trek along the narrow path. He could feel the first stirrings of spring around him – grass tufts were visible amongst the snow and he could hear the faint trickling of water. The melt was beginning. As much as he welcomed the idea of warmer weather, he knew the thawing of the snow would turn the town into a muddy morass.

The path came to an abrupt end and widened into a broad area of snow covered grassland, dotted with rocks and crosses. The graves seemed to have been laid out at random – some had elaborate piles of rock like cairns- others were adorned with the crudest of timber crosses. One in particular stood out - a fence of wrought iron surrounded a headstone as if guarding it from the bleakness of the surrounding landscape, its black silhouette in stark contrast to the crisp whiteness of the snow. It reminded him of a child's cot - the black metal lacework absurdly out of place in this landscape.

The Chinese graves were further on in a separate area marked by a paling fence. Here the snow was deeper and James felt the cold seeping through the soles of his boots. He reached the fence and looked around for the Chinese boy but the place seemed deserted. There was a large eucalypt not far from the fence with a log underneath – looked like it had been dragged there as a rough bench. He sat down on it and lifted his feet off the ground, banging his boots together to loosen the snow from the soles. A weariness settled on him and he looked around for a warm spot in the sun to close his eyes for a while.

He became aware of a murmuring sound somewhere nearby. A faint drone. It was hard to tell where it was coming from as the snow contained sounds, made them seem near when they could be some distance away. He stilled his breathing and listened intently. There it was again. A muffled kind of murmuring, pausing every now and then, only to start up again.

James sat for a while trying to get a bearing on the direction of the sound. A crow called out somewhere nearby, its mournful cry making the place feel desolate. He smiled – such melodramatic creatures those crows – hard to express anything other than doom and gloom with such a doleful and emphatic call.

He heard the murmuring again and got up from the log, the snow squeaking and crunching under his boots. It seemed to be coming from just beyond the cemetery and he moved towards the far side of the fenced area, his cold joints resisting the movement after the brief rest. Damn this aging body he thought. It seemed only a couple of winters ago he'd been able to trek for miles in this sort of country – in reality it was probably more like ten. He'd just had his fifty-sixth birthday and he was really feeling his age today.

His reverie was cut short by the sight of a small figure hunched in the snow, jet hair vivid against the white. He was just outside the fence in a spot that looked like it had provided a small amount of shelter from the blizzard of the last couple of days. The snow had banked up on the other side of the fence to form a solid windbreak. He couldn't have been out here at night though thought James or he'd be a solid block of ice. Little blighter must've been coming out at first light.

The murmuring had stopped and he could see the taut alertness in the narrow shoulders. Ready to make a dash for it, thought James.

But there was no dash. The boy simply waited for James to reach him, his head bowed and his hands gripping what looked like a rag. As James got closer he could see it was a piece of clothing, maybe a jacket, faded green. He saw an opening in the fence a few feet away and moved towards it. There was a flash of movement and before James even realised what was happening the boy had reached the far end of the cemetery enclosure where there was another entrance, or in this case, exit.

'Bloody little nuisance,' muttered James. 'What the hell am I supposed to do with him even if I can catch him?' He sighed and watched as the boy stopped near the fence, obviously waiting to see what he would do next.

'Boy, it's alright – I'm not going to cause you any harm. I've got some food here.'

He reached into the deep pockets inside his overcoat and pulled out the parcel of bread and beef jerky which had been carefully wrapped in cloth by Martha, his housekeeper. The parcel was clammy from his body heat and he suddenly felt extremely weary. He pulled a water container from his pocket and took a long swig. When he looked back the boy was standing in the same place watching him with an impassive expression. He was in no mood for a cat and mouse chase.

He walked along the fenceline towards the boy and stopped when he reached the mid way point where there was a large square support post. He placed the

parcel of food and water container on the flat post top and turned to look at the boy, who was standing in the same position clutching the faded green jacket.

‘There’s food here for you lad. And water.’ He picked up a piece of the bread and put it to his mouth, made chewing motions and then placed it back on the fence post, then pointed to the food and to the boy.

‘For you.’

The boy looked at him, his eyes dark and expressionless.

‘I’m going now but I’ll be back – hopefully tomorrow.’

‘For all the damn good that will do,’ he muttered as he walked away from the graveyard. He knew the boy wouldn’t be left out here during the night – Moo Choo would see to that but he felt as if he’d failed some basic test. As if he’d let the boy down.

The temperature had dropped and his feet were aching in his boots. As he reached the top of the slight slope he turned to look back. The shadows were beginning to reach across the expanse of white and it suddenly felt desolate to James. He looked for the boy but all he saw was a strange fenced paddock full of makeshift headstones.

A crow cried out with its mournful *caw, caw, caw* and he turned to head down the hill to town.

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Over the next week James set off daily for the Chinese graveyard with the same results. The boy barely acknowledged his presence and managed each time to avoid any contact with him. The food always disappeared from the fence top but whether or not it was the boy James could not be sure. His small pinched face and emaciated frame showed no signs of nourishment.

The daily trek had become part of his routine but it was beginning to wear him down and on the seventh day he set off reluctantly after his morning classes.

It was a bleak day – a sharp wind laced with sleet blowing from the south, dirty grey clouds hanging low. He knew what that meant – there was a heavy dump of snow coming and he groaned inwardly at the thought of more shovelling to clear the path to the schoolhouse and to his own small place.

At least both buildings had verandahs and steps at the entrance, which meant the front door did not get snowed in like so many of the shacks around town. It

was a common excuse for not turning up to school – ‘But sir I couldn’t get out the door – it was jammed shut and I was shovelin’ half the day with pa and all. We ’ad to climb out the window.’ A pair of small grubby hands would be presented to him, palms up to reveal rows of blisters on top of old calluses.

It was an unpredictable time of year, the thaw eagerly anticipated by all, which made these sudden cold snaps even harder to bear. Just when you thought Spring was around the corner, winter shook its fist in your face.

His progress through the town was slow as he was walking straight into the wind. He pushed his hat further down over his ears and retreated inside his coat, pulling the collar up high to cut the wind. A new overcoat was sorely needed – he’d ordered one months ago from Robinson & Tebbatt but still no sign of it. He was tempted to go over to George Ah Chee’s and ask him if he could get one in. This would be contentious, he knew, but a man damn well needed a good coat and if the Chinese storeman was a better businessman, then to his mind that meant he deserved his business more than Bill Robinson, who half the time didn’t seem to know what stock he had in his store, let alone when new orders were coming in.

He thought fondly of the new pipe George had selected specially for him, its cherry wood richness buffed to a smooth, high gloss. It gave him such pleasure of an evening to sit on the porch and puff on this beautiful thing, the smoke wafting around him in the fading light. It showed considerable astuteness on George Ah Chee’s part to have picked out this pipe for him, to have understood that for him aesthetics and serenity of mind were inextricably linked. He snorted in amusement – no doubt that’s why he found contentment so elusive these days – aesthetics were in short supply around these parts.

He was suddenly aware he was being followed. He stopped and turned, pulling his neck up out of his collar and pushing his woollen cap back to get a better view of the surrounds. There was a scuffling behind him as a scrawny black dog came to an abrupt stop, hanging its head and standing statue-like in the road. He’d seen it before on his walks up here, sometimes along the way, other times close to the graves. It looked young and half starved, and it always kept its distance.

‘What is it you miserable creature? I suppose you think you are invisible if you don’t raise your eyes to me.’

James waved his hand at the dog and stamped his foot in its direction. ‘Go on, be off with you.’

The dog flinched and took a step away, its gaze still fixed on the road in front of it. James shrugged and started off again up the road. After ten minutes or so he turned to see if the dog was still following him. It was plodding along behind him, eyes fixed ahead. When it saw that he had stopped it also stopped, repeating its earlier performance.

‘Damn nuisance – what do you want? Ahh what the heck – do what you like. I haven’t got time to convince you otherwise.’

James continued south towards the Chinese settlement and then took the turn to the cemetery. He could hear the sounds from the mining sites – men’s voices, the banging of picks and shovels and the rhythmic humming of a pump. As he came out of the protection of the valley, the wind whipped these sounds away and he was aware of the gathering clouds and the oppressive green-grey light. He’d need to move faster if he was going to get back home before that lot dumped their load on the valley. He looked around for the dog but it seemed to have disappeared. Now for the boy.

The cemetery was deserted. A couple of the wooden palings in the fence had come loose and fallen into the snow, leaving deep furrows where they had landed. James trudged across the white expanse and pulled the palings up out of the snow, pushing them back into place so that the gaps were closed again. He was not sure why but it felt important that these men at least had a solid fence around them, some small protection from this place’s harshness. Protection in death that had been denied them in life.

He shivered in his coat – this place was getting to him. He needed to convince the boy to come down into town somehow because he couldn’t keep up these daily treks. It wasn’t just the physical toll – he felt it was sapping his spirit. There was no sign of the lad anyway. He walked around the perimeter of the fence. Fox tracks crisscrossed the untouched snow, heading off into the scrub up the slope from the graveyard. A scuffling sound behind him made him jump and he turned, expecting to see the boy. Instead, the brown dog stood a few metres from him, its eyes no longer fixed on the ground. This time it was looking straight at him with an unwavering intensity. Where the hell had it sprung from?

He ignored it and listened for any sounds of the boy and his strange murmurings. Nothing.

‘Hello. Hello. Are you there boy?’ His voice fell flat, swallowed by the whiteness around him. He listened but there was nothing, only the sound of the

wind. The boy must have gone back to the settlement – thank god for small mercies.

He looked around him one last time and started to move off towards the track. The dog stood in his path, its withered hindquarters and jutting ribcage starkly apparent at such a close range.

‘What is it? Come on, move out of the way.’

The dog moved a short distance then stopped in his path again, as if willing him to follow. The behaviour was strange and slightly unnerving. If James attempted to walk around it the dog simply ran ahead of him and then stood its ground again. At a certain point in the path the dog stopped and looked at him, then headed off the track towards an outcrop of rocks. James saw the chance to shake it off and continued on the path, increasing his speed to discourage the dog from following. He felt almost guilty and was startled when there was a series of short, sharp barks followed by a long mournful howl. So, the silent creature had a voice after all.

He stood on the path, uncertain what he should do. The sky was getting darker by the minute and there was a nasty tinge to it that he knew was a sign of foul weather. The dog continued to howl and in spite of his strong desire to get back home, James was intrigued. He groaned and headed back to the rock outcrop.

When he was a few feet away from the first boulder, the dog appeared like an apparition and then bounded up the slope towards some large rocks bordered on one side by thick scrub. It disappeared behind these and James followed, hesitating slightly before stepping out of sight of the path below.

The rocks created a shelter from the wind and James felt the relief immediately. He realised just how cold he was and put his hands to his mouth to warm them with his breath. His breath caught in his chest when he saw the boy’s limp form slumped behind a boulder, his sallow face pressed against the granite. The dog sat next to him, its eyes watching James’ every move. He bent down and felt for a pulse – he thought there was something but his own heart was beating so hard he couldn’t be sure it wasn’t that he was feeling. He put his ear to the boy’s chest and tried to still his own breathing. Deep inside he thought he heard a rattling, a flimsy sign of life.

He lifted the boy in his arms and hoisted him across his shoulders – it was as if he was throwing a bundle of soiled rags onto his back for all the weight there was. He felt suddenly angry and deeply ashamed. How could he have let this small

creature evade him for so long so that he starved himself to death? It was a terrible thing he had done. For the seventh time that week he headed off down the path to town – and this time it was not the featherweight boy on his back that weighed heavily upon him.

Behind him the dog walked silently, acutely alert to the man's progress.

**Animals, whom we have made our slaves, we do not like to consider our equal.**

– Charles Darwin, *Metaphysics, Materialism, and the Evolution of Mind*

## Part Two

### Earth Dog

I am in the earth. I am of the earth. I am earth. And I am Dog. My bones sit snugly in this place of grit, a place without light or wind or sky. They are content to lie here, wedged in, caressed by grains of dirt, washed gently by drips of moisture, rivulets trickling down through layers of grey, brown, red; all the colours of this earth are me.

I was not always so content. When I ran on top of the earth as a dog I was often yearning, driven by loss and hunger. My final home was a pile of old tin and rags, debris abandoned by humans. Before that I lived in many places, sometimes with humans, many times on my own. I belonged to no one but there were many who I accompanied and I am still with them in an earthy kind of way. I travelled often with the humans who knew this part of the world best – the Yuin. Others, like Hannah and Ah See Quong, I brushed against.

Hannah was all light – hair like gossamer, skin pale and luminous. Large white teeth that I particularly admired. Like mine, they were useful and strong and could be applied as weapons when the need arose. When she was young I'm sure she used them to ward off some of the lecherous types that kept company with her father – or she thought about it at least. Or her fingernails – they were also strong and useful. It was her teeth that set her apart though. They were straight and white with a very attractive gap at the front that gave her a predatory and vulnerable look all at the same time. It had a strange effect on both humans and other creatures such as myself. We were drawn to those teeth set in a face fine boned and pale. The combination drew us to her, prompting a response from both protector and prey.

When Hannah first encountered me I was engaged in a skirmish with that feline demon she called Bobby. I had been enjoying the unrivalled delights of a bowerbird egg, stolen from the nest while the bird was momentarily off somewhere in the scrub. My tongue had just probed the lusciousness of the yolk, creamy and gelatinous, when that cat appeared, maybe with the same intent. It flew at me with such viciousness I had no time to prepare, its claws ripping at my nose most violently. My only desire at the time was to tear the fiend apart with my

teeth. I longed to feel them sink into its overfed body and had curled back my lips to prepare my fangs for the lunge. But it was not to be. An apparition appeared – white hair streaming in strands on the breeze, sharp white teeth bared and flint-grey eyes glowing with a terrible light. She screamed with such intensity that I trembled where I stood and that fat cat escaped with my egg.

From that day our paths crossed from time to time – her in her layers of cotton and silk and later those ridiculous whalebone threaded undergarments and me in my coat of coarse dog hair. Underneath, at our very cores, we were much the same creature, believe it or not.

### **1863 – Conway Town**

Drifts of mist push up against the windows in the lesson room like the eager faces of children asking to be let in. Hannah would gladly let them in. Anything to relieve her agony in this room – no that is too melodramatic - it is oppression and boredom that afflicts her in this room, nothing more.

Ben Symonds is late – it must be the mist as he is very particular concerning punctuality. His house is not far as the crow flies, or in fact as the boat rows, but on a morning like this it is hazardous and slow. It would be safer to take the road but that takes a good hour and a half and means handling a horse – something Symonds is loath to do, not to mention the horse, who must loathe him after all the whippings it has endured.

She can hear him approaching, his boots crunching on the gravel just outside the door. She sighs and looks up as the door opens.

The smell of earth and sea enter the room with him and she breathes them deeply into her.

‘Good morning Miss Conway. I apologise for my lateness - unfortunately the weather is very poor, as you can see, and progress was slow. I trust you have started on your exercises.’

She cannot feel what her face is doing – it feels disconnected from the rest of her - like a blank slate. ‘Good morning Mr Symonds. I have begun, yes. But I have some questions.’

‘Yes?’

‘I am curious about the author’s views about the superiority of people – his belief that animals are mere machines and feel no pain. Surely that is a nonsense ...’

‘Miss Conway the exercise is one of translation not analysis. It is not for you to question one of this century’s most eminent theologians and philosophers. Reverend Paley is considered the authority on natural theology.’

‘Mr Symonds the translation did not take long so I gave some thought to what he was proposing and it did not ring true from my own experience. It seems to me he cannot have spent any time with other people, and definitely not with the creatures he seems to think are nothing more than clocks.’

Symonds’ face adopts its customary sneer and he laughs, a short wheezing sound.

‘What exactly is it you take issue with here? What, I pray, is your question Miss Conway? We have a lot to get through today.’

Her nails press into her palms as she looks at the cool damp skin of Symonds’ neck.

‘I wondered Mr Symonds if you had considered the views of Mr Charles Darwin, who I have heard has the most intriguing things to say about the animal kingdom. He is of the view that we are all animals– even you and me, and as far as I understand it, even Queen Victoria.’

Symonds’ face has gone crimson and he is flexing his fingers.

‘Miss Conway, your father would be most displeased with your views. This sort of talk is blasphemous and I will not abide it in my classroom.’

With the mention of her father she looks down at her hands resting on the desk and they are but ordinary things with their longish but harmless fingernails. She raises her eyes to look directly at Symonds’ face. He is only feet from her and she can sense his unease, smell it wafting from him.

‘I was simply trying to engage in analytical thought – something my father encourages.’ Oh that this were true – she has no real notion of what her father would think if he knew she was reading his journals and books. No doubt it would not occur to him that this was a possibility. She looks Ben Symonds in the eye. ‘And I’m sure Queen Victoria would not be offended by my views – I have read that she is against animal cruelty and has leant her support to a group who protects them.’

Symonds narrows his eyes as he looks down his thin nose at her. He begins to say something and then shakes his head and turns away, striding across the room. He picks up some charts and places them on her desk.

‘It is time to get on with our lessons for the day. I’ve brought some charts for you to trace.’

His spidery writing is scattered across some crudely drawn astronomical charts. She takes out her charcoals and drawing paper from beneath the desk and moves over to the drawing table under the window to begin work. When she looks across some time later he is glowering, his shoulders slumped forward and his hands fidgeting in his lap.

She feels inclined to take pity on Ben Symonds. After all it is not his fault she is of an entirely different nature to him, that she sees nothing except wonder in the strange animals that inhabit the bushland where he sees only loathsome creatures that should be kept at bay or preferably shot and analysed as specimens. She knows she could learn more in an afternoon of wandering the coastal paths than she could in a week of his lessons, prepared as they are by a mind intent on narrowing her world, when she is bursting with the need to expand it.

She adds a flourish to her drawing and lets Symonds’ chart fall to the floor - as he well knows she has not done a tracing since she was eight years old. Drawing is as natural to her as sneering is to this man and she has no need for his charts or primitive scribblings to imagine the world around her. Tracing is only for the likes of Ben Symonds, who must chart the world through the eyes of another, fumbling blindly in their wake.

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It is evening and Hannah is listening intently to the sounds of the household, alert to an opportunity to leave the house. Over the three years she has lived here she has learnt the rhythms of the house and its inhabitants. By evening, activity is winding down – Josie and the other servants, who must arise before dawn, have retired to their quarters, Miss Pringle will be in her room writing letters home or reading, and her father, if he is in residence, will be in his study or engrossed in business matters. Tonight though, she knows he is not at home because he left when the whaling siren sounded several hours earlier – there is a whale hunt underway.

She feels light headed and awkward in her odd attire. She is dressed in the stable hand's trousers and shirt, which she took from the laundry room some months earlier, and has wrapped one of her shawls around her neck to block out the night air, although it is a mild Spring night. She has on her walking boots but they are made for city streets, not the uneven paths she will be walking tonight, so she sits on the edge of her bed and removes them. At least in her bare feet she will be more agile and much quieter. She descends the staircase as silently as she can, her heartbeat drumming loudly in her ears.

As she leaves the safety of the walled garden and heads down the path to the headland the coarse fabric in the trousers rubs against her inner thighs and she tries to walk so that her legs are planted apart like the bandy-legged lighthouse keeper. The effort of maintaining this strange gait is too tiring and she goes back to her useless girl's trot, muscles and flesh soft and doughy from lack of any real exercise. This she is determined to change. She has plans to walk and climb and to make her limbs strong and lean like the sinewy arms of the whalers, tendons and muscles traced out like knots. To do this she must escape the confines of her life, days filled with domestic routine, echoing hallways and silences.

In her anatomy lessons she follows the lines of the muscles on her diagrams over and over until Ben Symonds barks at her to stop her idle daydreaming. Dreaming it is not. These thoughts and drawings are more real than anything that weasel-faced creature can impart to her. This she knows to be fact.

She can smell the sea now as she pads through the forest on naked feet that are unused to anything as fine as the feel of bark and leaves under them. Freed of the confinement of woollen stockings and boots, they are flexing.

The crackle of the bark from the melaleucas comes to her through the soles of her feet - a whisper that creeps along the roads of her veins and nerves towards her centre. All around her things creak and groan, branches rub against each other, tiny unseen creatures rustle in the undergrowth, shadows caress the path ahead. She should be afraid but she feels as if her skin has been peeled back so that all sensations can take the shortest route to her heart. It is as if the top of her head is lifting and expanding and a wild joy is in her. She is an animal of the night - pungent earth beneath her and an endless inky sky above.

Then the night is rent by a moan. It is the most melancholy sound she has ever heard and it stills her blood. She is once again just a girl, standing in the middle of a forest, clad in the false garb of a stable boy.

Down at the moon-bleached shore the whaling crew is at work. They finally harpooned the whale just beyond the opening to the bay; it had turned back from its breakaway run towards the open sea to come to the aid of its calf, trapped in the bay by the harrying of the killer whales. So it chose its fate, the steel tip of the harpoon hitting its mark as the spent creature neared the headland. This was followed fast with the lance, an act of sheer will on the part of the whaler after a night riding the boat's bucking prow.

Then followed the long process of the whale inhaling its own blood and gore and macerated flesh, hacked by the lance as it was thrust over and over into the whale's massive centre. The red spume rose high into the night sky, flecks of the creature raining down on the men as the whale writhed in its death throes. When it seemed that the beast might smash them to smithereens with its tail, the headman called for the boat spade and severed its tail ligaments. With that the whale gave a long drawn out groan and it was finally still.

A great hush descended then, the gore-flecked men hunched in their boat as the full moon rose in the sky. The killer whales went into a frenzy, circling the whale and biting at its mouth. The men prepared the marker buoy and attached the rope to the now still creature. They would return at first light once the killers had had their feed of the tongue – it was all the Orcas were interested in and it was their due.

The calf is in pieces, its carcass glistening and dewy in the moonlight. Above, in the fringe of trees that line the headland, a small figure crouches, its presence announced by the sougning call of a masked owl. But the men are not tuned to such warnings and they work on, oblivious to their observer.

By the time Hannah gets back to the house the moon is high in the sky and the shadows reach out towards her, like long wavering fingers in the undergrowth. She is cold and her feet are leaden weights. A sticky ooze from her lacerated soles is coated with twigs and leaves so that she rustles and snaps with each step. She had not reckoned on the roughness of the ground – she had little experience of such things and her naivety had left her exposed. It had also made her more daring and she did not regret her actions.

Josie has left a lamp glowing in the outhouse in preparation for her early morning duties and Hannah moves towards it as quietly as she can. Her earlier

euphoria has been replaced with a profound heaviness. She is no stranger to this feeling and knows she must get to her room quickly before she succumbs to the near blindness that will surely follow.

Later pain has her in its grip and the air is full of moans –they are hers, she realises, as she tosses in her bed. Her head is being crushed but even though the pain is immense she cannot rise to the surface, break her stupor. It is as if she is underneath a large rock and cannot get to the light. She sees the figure sitting over near the window where she used to often sit when Hannah was small and in the grip of this blackness. Her hair, released from its bindings and pins, is cascading over her shoulders down to her lap. So small is her mother but such presence. She could silence Hannah's father with a glance and soothe her with a stroke of her tiny hand.

What is it she is saying to her? If only she could hear her words she knows she'd be able to wake. She stretches her mind towards her, straining and pushing against the weight on top of her but it is hopeless and she can't make out the shape of her words as they drift past. They become perfect, minute birds, their filigree wings spread wide against the window pane before they disappear into the bright, bright light, leaving her bereft and alone once again in the silence and the dark.

Hands are touching her and she knows whoever belongs to them is trying to be gentle because there is a hesitant feel to them. But they are rough and large and they could easily snap her parched and brittle bones. There is nothing she can do to stop them anyway. She is as useless as a lump of Josie's pastry dough. Then she realises it is Josie and she wants to cry with relief.

'Come on little one, come back, wake up,' she is saying, and Hannah groans.

'You're so pale luvvie – have you 'ad a turn? Should I get your father? If I can't rouse you soon, I'll have to call him. He'll have me guts for garters if I don't look after you proper.'

Hannah manages to shake her head against the pillows and Josie sits down and takes her hand.

'I don't know. I really should be tellin' him. You're a bad colour – all black under yer eyes and white as the sheet 'ere. And cold as ice, love. I know he'd want the doctor called out.'

She opens her eyes – such effort. Words have not yet returned to her – they have flown from her brain with those tiny birds. Josie strokes her hand.

She hears her going back down the stairs and closes her eyes. She is sinking back into oblivion when there is movement beside her and then the softness of cat fur as Bobby rubs against her face. The last thing she is aware of before she disappears again is the soft drumming of purring against her ribs. It resonates deep inside her and she feels the tightness in her retreating. Under the covers her shredded feet settle back into place, safely hidden from the probing hands of Dr Morton.

In her closet, pushed behind her winter coat, are the stable hand's woollen trousers, ready and waiting for her next foray into the forest.

For the next three days she is in her bed, her limbs weak and her brain even weaker. Josie feeds her soups and fusses around her. Joseph Conway has been informed that she has caught a chill and he has only visited her once, apparently when she was sleeping. Satisfied she doesn't have a raging fever and is not gravely ill, he has left her alone to recover.

She is grateful to Josie for her discretion - her father is uncharacteristically vigilant regarding her strange 'turns', as he calls the crushing headaches. He has given instructions to Josie to report any signs of distraction or of 'strange behaviour' in his daughter. Unfortunately, distraction is a common state for her - or so it seems to others. For her it is more a case of her thoughts and senses being absorbed in matters important to her - like the patterns and colours when birds sing. She discussed these once with Josie but was met with blank incomprehension.

'What do you mean dearie? Are you saying you think of the colour of the bird when you hear it singing?'

'No it is there in the air, the colour. Like pictures. Surely you know what I refer to.'

She no longer mentions these things. The experiences have been heightened since her new treatment for migraine began more than a year ago. He was eager to try the treatment as it was achieving very good results in migraine sufferers in Europe, he said. She had heard the conversation between the doctor and her father regarding the treatment outside her room on one of the doctor's house visits.

'If we can get the dose right I think we will see much improvement in her Sir - Indian hemp is widely used in Europe for migraine and other nervous disorders.'

‘I do not want my daughter reduced to a blithering idiot, Morton. If you can guarantee she will be otherwise unaffected.’

‘Sir, I will be monitoring her closely. She will only need to take the medication when she feels one of her turns coming on – if all goes well it will reduce the severity of the attacks and may cure her altogether. That is my hope.’

‘Well hopes or not, I will stop the treatment at the first sign that my daughter’s faculties are being unduly interfered with. I’ve enough damn fools to deal with already, without another on my hands.’

She is not sure if Josie talked to her father about the colours – he certainly was more watchful for several weeks. She would catch him studying her when they were in a room together or if he came across her drawing in the garden.

This has made her reserved around her father. She finds, on the whole, that he prefers it that way – he would never tolerate a show of strong emotion. He has encouraged one of her passions - she has convinced him that her drawing and painting classes are soothing to her mind and keep her ‘turns’ at bay (this could well be true as she feels completely serene when she paints). An added benefit is that it means fewer hours with the dreadful Symonds. The new treatment has brought a calmness of spirit and heightened her senses – sounds, colours and smells all seem so much brighter and stronger.

Her classes with Miss Pringle have gone ahead in leaps and bounds and they are now travelling further afield to sketch and paint the surrounding countryside. The unfortunate aspect of this however has been that Mr Symonds has been called upon to chaperone them, something most disagreeable to Hannah.

Miss Pringle could not be more different to Ben Symonds as far as Hannah is concerned. Where he is pale and pinched and mean, she is dark and beautiful and generous. And she tells Hannah when her work is good, patting her gently on her back and exclaiming in delight over a pleasing line in her drawings or a colour that has matched perfectly the wing of a bird. Not once, has Ben Symonds praised her, not for the most difficult of Latin translations or for the tedious tasks he sets in Botany and Astronomy. Instead, he sneers at her attempts and it is clear he believes it is a waste of time teaching such a poor scholar, a girl at that, who will only marry anyway.

What does he know about her and her plans? He knows only about facts on a page written by someone else and only sees the value in dead things, pinned to boards or floating in jars. Does he not understand the beauty of the living and

breathing creatures all around him? She could show him things he will never find in his books or specimen jars - the blur of a dragonfly's wing as it hovers in flight, the tiny green skull-face of a preying mantis as it cleans its front legs, Bobby's nostrils quivering as he lies in wait for rats in the laundry room.

Or the songs of birds that burst in colours around her head when she walks in the forest – yellow with green highlights for the currawong, brilliant cerise and orange for the magpie and shades of orange for the jagged laugh of the kookaburra.

The strange thing is, when Mr Symonds accompanies them on the field trips he is a man transformed. Never before has Hannah seen the man smile but on these outings he is all smiles and gracious behaviour, rushing to assist Miss Pringle by carrying the easel and holding the parasol when she is gathering plant specimens.

It is a strange and disturbing turn of events.

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On the ten-year anniversary of his settlement on the south coast of New South Wales Joseph Conway thought it appropriate to throw a large party to which he invited all the local gentry as well as landholders from the Monaro district where he had invested a considerable sum in land and stock, an investment that was proving less than satisfactory because of long periods of drought and the ongoing problem of squatters. Between these two things he had seen barely a return on his money, in fact this year he was looking at a substantial loss.

He also sent out invitations to men he considered of influence in both Melbourne and Sydney – politicians and businessmen, along with their womenfolk.

It was to be a grand affair and he had instructed Josie to hire some help from town – they would be needing extra kitchen hands, cleaners, handymen and serving staff for the event itself. This sent Josie into a state of panic. She sought the advice of the only person she considered cultured amongst the hired help – Hannah's art instructor Miss Pringle - on the practicalities of finding such a large number of experienced staff at such short notice. Hannah had never seen her in such a state – she arrived at the schoolroom door late one afternoon, out of breath and flushed.

‘Excuse me Miss Pringle and Miss Hannah. I’m not wanting to disturb your lesson but I really need an urgent word. I’m in a right flap, I am – I just don’t know where to start. What on earth does Mr Conway think asking me to be in charge of such an important thing? I don’t know about such matters – it’ll be the death of me, I’m sure.’

Eleanor Pringle had been showing Hannah a new shading technique and they were absorbed in the task, mouths pursed in concentration. They both looked up in surprise at such an unaccustomed interruption.

‘What has happened Josie?’ Miss Pringle asked in alarm.

‘Oh it’s this party that Mr Conway has decided to put on with all manner of important folk coming. I’m to find kitchen helpers and cooks and some to serve at table. I don’t know where to begin.’

‘I’m really not sure that I can be of much help Josie.’

‘Oh please Miss Pringle I’m sure you know some people from out Goulburn way - or even in town here you might be able to make enquiries for me. I’d be that grateful for your help.’ Josie looked as if she might expire.

‘Josie it can’t be that bad – come and sit down.’ Hannah patted a stool beside her. After some sighing and wringing of hands Josie sat on the stool.

‘It really is not fair of Mr Conway to expect this of me,’ she said. ‘I’m only good at doin’ the everyday meals and ordinary household chores – nothin’ fancy.’

‘That’s not true – what about the Christmas parties you organise and my birthday picnics – you do them every year.’

‘Oh that is just for the folks from around here, not important city types and fancy ladies.’

‘I’ll make some inquiries with the agency that organised my position here,’ said Miss Pringle. ‘They deal with many different occupations I think – that might be a good place to begin anyway Josie.’

‘That is a mighty relief to me Miss – it takes such a weight off my shoulders.’

‘I can’t promise you anything – it may all come to nought Josie.’

Josie was already on her way out the door, the spring back in her step and her mind fixed on the next task at hand – cornering the gardener, old Bill. There was just so much to be done – it would need a miracle to get that garden into shape in time.

When the big day arrived it did indeed seem as if there had been a miracle. The garden was trimmed, clipped and groomed and new specimens of roses ordered from the city. In order for the imported plants Joseph Conway preferred to survive, a large hedge had been established over the previous five years to provide a windbreak – this had only happened after dozens of rose bushes, rhododendrons and numerous deciduous trees imported directly from Europe had died off due to exposure to salt spray and harsh coastal winds.

After several years of these wasted efforts Joseph Conway brought a horticulturist down from Sydney to advise on how to establish a formal garden. A high hedge of salt resistant species was the chosen solution. It had worked to a degree but there had still been numerous casualties over the years and old Bill muttered about the waste of Conway's schemes and pretensions. 'Waste of bloody time and money – be better off with a bit a' lawn and make do with the eucalypts and tea trees. Too much salt and no goodness in the soil for these things – it's all sand and salt.'

Conway was going to have his flowers and a formal garden even if it meant replacing all of the specimens every six months. It was essential, he said, for a man of his stature to have a garden that matched his Victorian style home. His next plan was to have a bird aviary built in the garden to house exotic birds from all over the world.

The plants arrived and were discarded on a regular basis and Old Bill learnt to keep his silence on the subject and hide his disquiet as the glossy new plants gradually wilted and died, or were attacked by insects.

He took to collecting manure from all the visiting horses as well as from Josie's chooks – that, together with the compost pile he tended with the intensity of a zealot, had allowed him to build the soil's richness up over time and greatly increased his success rate with the new plants. He didn't like the chances of all these latest arrivals lasting the summer though – that was beyond his powers.

Hannah watched the preparations for the party with detachment. While she longed for new activities, she knew from past experience these social events of her father's were not going to provide anything other than boredom and discomfort. These people were strange to her – the women trussed up tightly in fabrics she admired for their richness of colour and texture, faces bright but blank,

while the men, starched and primed, sweated and scratched in the late afternoon sun.

She was expected to dress for the occasion and to mix with the guests but she had no common ground with them – the women were invariably restricted to conversation on domestic matters, of which she had little knowledge or interest, and the men made her feel simultaneously indulged and less significant than the food on their plates. Her thoughts were only of escape. This was rarely possible but as she grew older she became more practised at disappearing, despite the fact there was also more pressure on her to be on display and to converse. She would excuse herself from conversations, saying her father needed her for a moment – to her father, if he asked about her absence, she would murmur of domestic crises, and while he was not satisfied with her excuses, his ignorance of all matters domestic rendered him defenceless.

The house was turned upside down– it was swept and scrubbed continuously in the weeks beforehand, repairs were made to furnishings right down to the smallest cushion, windows polished and all of the glassware and silver cleaned until they shone.

This event had an undercurrent of tension Hannah had not felt before – she felt it was linked to her father’s increasingly taciturn demeanour and outbursts of temper. His trips to his landholdings and to Sydney had become more frequent and there was no doubt in her mind this party had significance beyond the need to expand his social circle. Politicians and bankers were prominent amongst the guest list.

As the afternoon wore on and the salt-damp air rolled in from the ocean and settled on the guests, their conversations, along with their clothes, became somewhat soggy. Hannah had just extricated herself from the town’s aging physician, Doctor Morton, and his wife Elizabeth. He was of the opinion Hannah had a frail constitution but she knew better – her headaches and periods of blackness, as she thought of them, were enmeshed in the fabric of her. They had begun not long after her mother died and to her they were linked to the memory of her – she couldn’t imagine a time without these episodes where the world became too bright and loud and words fell from her mouth like broken glass. He had been treating her with Indian hemp for the past year and was sure he had cured her. Hannah did not bother to correct him; she just used the substance when it suited her, enjoying the strange fluidity of her thoughts that it brought.

‘So I trust you’ve been keeping well Hannah. I have not examined you for some time so I assume you have had no turns of late.’

‘Thank you Doctor Morton I have been quite well.’

Mrs Morton placed her hand on Hannah’s arm.

‘Dear if you ever need anything, help of any kind, someone to discuss things with you know you can come to me any time. You are so isolated out here on this headland – it must be lonely at times.’

Hannah looked at this elderly couple gripping each other tightly as if they might lose their way if separated even briefly. Just what could she possibly discuss with them? She felt imprisoned by their notion of her.

‘Thank you Mrs Morton. You are very kind but I have much to occupy me here. It is never dull. I must excuse myself as I have something I must attend to in the house. It has been a pleasure to see you again.’

The doctor and his wife exchanged a sideways glance and Mrs Morton patted Hannah’s arm and smiled. ‘Of course dear. Off you go.’

She was heading across the lawn to the house in the hope of some respite from these grasping, leaden people when her father appeared in front of her with a tall man. She noticed the pallor of his elongated face and when he was introduced to her he took her hand, his long thin fingers strangely cool and dry against her skin.

‘Hannah I’d like you to meet Mr Alexander Kingston. Alex, my daughter Hannah Conway.’

‘Enchanted to meet you Miss Conway.’

‘Pleased to meet you Mr Kingston - I hope you’re enjoying the party.’

‘I am indeed. Such a charming place out here – quite the oasis in the wilderness.’

‘Oh it’s not such a wilderness, Alex, there are riches aplenty – you just have to know how to extract them. Mr Kingston is with the Bank of Australia Hannah – he’s interested in opportunities for investment in some of the ventures we have in these parts.’

‘Well I’ve heard some interesting ideas at least.’

Hannah was aware of the tightness in her father’s posture, the false note of confidence in his voice.

‘I do hope you enjoy your visit with us Mr Kingston – I hope you will excuse me – I was just on my way to check on something in the house.’

Her father put his hand on her arm – ‘No Hannah, just leave those matters to the servants. Mr Kingston is a keen naturalist and something of an art collector and I told him about your interest in drawing and painting. He’s very keen to see some of your work.’

‘Father my painting and drawing is not for others – it is just something I do for entertainment and not worth showing to anyone else.’

‘That is nonsense Hannah – I haven’t been buying all these materials and paying for tuition to be told you have no talent. Let’s see what Mr Kingston has to say.’

Hannah knew better than to argue with her father – he would become hard and unmoveable and there would be consequences later – silences doled out in cold reproach for weeks. She accompanied the strange duo to the schoolroom and was about to follow them in when her father’s right hand man, Joseph Blakely, suddenly appeared and drew Arthur Conway aside. Her father turned to the visitor.

‘My apologies Alex, I must attend to something. I’m sure Hannah can show you some of her drawings. This other matter shouldn’t take too long but I’ll try to find Miss Pringle to help explain what techniques she’s been teaching Hannah.’

He strode off with Blakely and left her with the pale, thin man. Hannah motioned to him to enter the schoolroom. She went to the small storeroom where her canvases were stacked along the wall and her drawings kept in a timber filing cabinet, made especially for her by the town’s carpenter, Tom Bailey. She breathed the cool air with its aroma of paints and turpentine and wondered what to show this man – it was an unfair intrusion on her privacy and she was shocked by her father’s behaviour – she didn’t show her work to anyone, except Miss Pringle who understood her, and her father when he insisted on seeing the fruits of her tuition fees. She could feel the colour rising to her face at the thought of being exposed to this stranger.

There was a shuffling outside the storeroom door and the shape of the man filled the doorway, blocking the light. Hannah couldn’t see the expression on his face but she could hear his breathing coming in short ragged puffs.

‘So what can you show me young lady? Your father has assured me I wouldn’t be disappointed.’

The air seemed to have been taken from the room and Hannah saw that a moth had landed on the wall, its creamy speckled wings the exact colour of the surface

so that only its antenna betrayed its presence. She looked at the pale man and back at the creamy moth and she spoke in a voice that was not her own.

‘If you would be so kind as to step back into the schoolroom I will bring some work out with me Mr Kingston.’

‘Oh that won’t be necessary – I can fit in there with you quite nicely and we can see what you have for me.’

He stooped down so that his head didn’t bump the mantel and entered the small room, his hands clenched against his trousers and his mouth stretched tight in a smile that was a grimace. Hannah moved back beside the open filing cabinet and pointed to a drawing that was jutting slightly from its folder. ‘If you would like to look at this one I’ll just find some canvases I can show you.’ The man looked at her for a long moment and then reached towards the drawer without taking his eyes from her face.

‘Yes, why not have a taste of what you’re capable,’ he said.

Hannah felt a cramping in her abdomen. Her mouth was as dry as the paper this man was about to touch. She remembered other hands and their clammy eagerness to touch her skin when she was young enough for them to find the excuse to do so. Her father, distracted by his business discussions, thought little of their attentions. She, starved of affection and fearful of angering her father, would allow herself to be drawn onto laps and sit awhile, until the pressure of their embrace and the heat of their breath in her hair alarmed her, and she would escape to the safety of the garden with its menagerie of insects and birds.

Now an icy calm enveloped her and she thought of her agile animal legs, the muscles quivering in readiness and of her sharp animal teeth that were made for cutting and ripping.

She waited until his hand was deep in the drawer before she moved and then she leaned heavily against it as she reached for a canvas. Kingston yelped in pain and Hannah turned and looked at him, an expression of surprise sweeping her face. Kingston was pulling at the cabinet with his other hand and Hannah leaned back to allow him to free his captured limb. He stood as if rooted to the spot, gripping his hand, the skin on his flushed face and his speckly neck reminding her of Josie’s plucked turkeys.

‘I’m so sorry Mr Kingston – are you hurt?’

He looked down at her with narrowed eyes. ‘I will be fine, however I think it would be better if I returned at another time to see your drawings, Miss Conway.’

‘Of course. I’ll fetch someone to look at your hand. We must be sure there is nothing broken.’

‘Thank you but that won’t be necessary. I wish you a good evening Miss Conway.’ As he hurried from the storeroom Hannah leaned back against the door and closed her eyes. Points of light and floating shapes filled the space around her like a multitude of darting insects.

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A sharp cry rang out in the night and Hannah woke in her dark room, alert and disoriented. Had she dreamt the sound? Then it came again and Hannah could feel the shape of it – hard edged like a piece of flint. So different to the calls of the solitary whales that woke her on other nights, their cries as the men and killer whales harassed them, round and elongated - liquid with despair. She lay still and waited for the sound to come again. When it did she was startled by the urgency of it – a sound just like the seals when the killer whales arrived at the rookery. But this was a creature on its own – a single cry in the dead of night.

Then there was another deeper sound and Hannah was completely awake. Two voices, one of them familiar, were close by. She rose from her bed, her feet recoiling from the cold floorboards, and padded quietly across the room to listen near her door. The house was silent. She opened her door and crept along the landing to the stairs – on the floor below was her father’s bedroom and study.

She stood and listened, her body stiff with the cold and the effort of being still. She let her shoulders slump and willed her body to relax in the way she had seen the native boys do when they practised their hunting skills in the scrubland near the lighthouse. She was the shadow child they learnt to ignore – like a spirit of the forest, white and strange. But to her they were the very energy that filled the world out there beyond these silent walls, along with the creatures and plants that were rich with light and colour. She was attracted to them as moths were to her oil lamp. Now she thought of them running through the forest and out onto the headland, bodies lithe and unencumbered by the layers of cloth and whalebone and ribbons that bound her.

To hunt the wallaby you must become a wallaby – to find the hunted creature in this house you must become that creature. I am that harsh, flinty cry, she thought.

When it came again the sound had changed – it was no longer sharp edged, instead it was a strangled thing struggling to burst forth. A deeper voice followed, guttural and coarse – and then a deep prolonged moan. Hannah was transfixed – the sound came from her father’s study. She trembled in the cold night air.

The sounds stopped and the house seemed to quiver with anticipation. There was not long to wait – from behind the door of her father’s room erupted a sharp slapping – flesh against flesh.

Hannah could not move – it was clear some person was being struck. But in her father’s room? She was spared having to act – the door was suddenly opened and the corridor below lit by the glow of the oil lamp on her father’s bedside table. And there was her father, his hair in wild disarray and his only clothing a pair of long johns and an undershirt. He had pushed the door open and turned back into the room.

The chairs and settee that were normally for her father’s late night reading were pushed up against the wall and the carpet was strewn with cushions and bedding. She caught a glimpse of another figure, much smaller, behind him. Then her father stepped aside and the other person moved forward into the hallway. Her father waved his hand dismissively, gesturing for the person to move on down the hall and then he turned, closing the door and leaving the hallway in darkness.

Hannah leaned forward to see more clearly. It was difficult because the light was so dim and she wished it was one of those nights when the house was streaked with the cool, clear light of a full moon. Her father’s door opened again and he stepped into the hallway carrying a lamp which he held high for a moment. The small figure was still there, leaning against the wall, and as her father walked purposefully towards it Hannah saw the dark face of the servant girl, Ellen, her eyes enormous in her small face, full lips split and swollen like smashed ripe plums.

Her father led the girl down the stairs, holding her arm tightly as they descended. Hannah went back to her room and sat on the bed. She sat rigid with cold and fear listening for more sounds in the house. There was nothing but the creaking of the pine trees outside her window. She went back to her bed where she lay awake until the pale light of dawn, when she finally slid into a troubled sleep.

**W**hen I first saw Ah See Quong, or Jimmy as he was called by then, it was because of his mongrel Hui. The creature was sleek and black and well fed. By contrast I was a scrawny brown creature forced to live on my wits, which are not always enough when you just want a good feed of possum or wallaby.

It was bogong season so I was up in the high lands for the feast. It was also a time for finding a mate – the spring thaw was well advanced and dingos would skirt around the edge of the camp at night. I went with them sometimes – maybe I felt the pull of my ancestors or maybe I was just on heat. That Spring I saw that black dog down on the flats with the boy and I watched them from a spot up in the rock outcrops where I was safely upwind from the dog. They were in the place where humans buried their dead, a desolate place full of bones and strange whisperings. The dog stayed close to the boy, ever watchful.

I didn't approach them. I waited until they were walking back towards the town and then I descended from the hill above the place of bones and followed at a safe distance.

It was clear the dog was only interested in being with the boy and this intrigued me. For me humans were an extension of my pack but I felt free to come and go, to drift in and out of their world, as they did mine. I felt bound to them as hunting partners and as companions but there was much to be had out there beyond their camps.

Clearly this pair did not drift far from each other.

When they got close to the settlement I turned and headed back to the hills but just as I stopped to retrace my steps the black dog turned and lifted its nose to the air. I knew he had caught my scent by the way he stopped in his tracks and threw back his head, nose to the breeze. I knew he was tempted because I saw the faint quiver in his hide. But he went with the boy and I went back to the hills.

It was to be another two years before I would see them again. By then I was fully grown and had put forth many offspring, some of them growing to full size and others going back to the earth.

### **Kiandra 1860-1863**

Jimmy was an unusual child. There was no getting away from the fact, thought James as he struck another log with the axe. He liked the rhythm of wood chopping – the slow arc backwards and the swift stoke downwards, the blade

biting deep into the timber, its grain guiding the way in. He found himself going over the problems of the day up here behind the woodshed, the physicality and repetition of the task sending him into a trance-like state, the sounds of the forest somehow louder and yet more removed at the same time.

Martha had been the one to start calling the boy Jimmy.

‘Damned if I’ll call him by that heathen name - Ah See whatsit. If you want folks round here to talk to him he’s got to have a decent name. ....Jimmy’ll do. He’s like your blinkin’ shadow so he can have your blinkin’ name. Nobody calls you that anyway, only James or Jim, so there’ll be no mixing up the pair of you. Not that anyone could get muddled about who’s who – he stands out like a sore thumb that one.’

So Jimmy it was. Not that it made any difference to the child – he didn’t speak and he didn’t respond to anyone except James and Martha. And to the dog of course – mostly to the dog – which had not left his side since it followed them back to the hut, barking and scraping at the door until Martha relented and let it in. A shadow child and his shadow dog, who could both disappear from a room as easily as vapour from a pot.

At first James thought he might be simple. It had taken a good month for him to recover from the pneumonia and it was many more months before his tiny malnourished body began to put on weight. Once the fever subsided he began to show an interest in the broths Martha prepared for him. James could see the conflict in those dark eyes when Martha brought the steaming bowls to his bedside, the dilating of his pupils as he battled between his ravenous hunger and a desire to refuse and block these strangers. He was a child though, after all, and his need for nourishment won out.

At first he turned away from them and slurped the broth noisily and efficiently, cradling the bowl against him as if it might escape. Gradually he began to eat more slowly, occasionally glancing around to take in its contents. But he was not prepared to look at either Martha or James, as if they were but ghosts who tended to his physical needs.

‘Ungrateful little codger. Just slurping away and never even so much as a look in my direction,’ Martha would mutter angrily as she cleared away the bowls and empty beakers. But James had caught her more than once sniffing and wiping her eyes after she’d changed Jimmy’s sweat-soaked garments and bedding and the

gentleness of her touch as she wiped the child's face during the worst of his fevers had not escaped his notice either.

It soon became clear to both James and Martha that Jimmy was far from simple – quite the opposite. Once he became physically stronger he began to survey his surroundings with obvious curiosity. He watched Martha as she prepared the meals and did her household chores, his dark eyes following her movements around the hut with solemn intensity. With James he was even more attentive, sitting alongside him at the work desk as he read and marked exercises of grammar and mathematics he had set his pupils that week – sorry pieces of work that they were, said James. He accepted the quills James passed to him and marked the paper with fluid strokes to create Chinese characters – compact and delicate like the footprints of some fine-footed creature of the forest. James was surprised by his deftness, but most of all by the fact that he was literate at all. Many of the Chinese, along with most of the white population, had basic literacy skills. Some were educated, but these were definitely the exception and Jimmy would have had little chance for any schooling, working with his father from sunrise to dusk, mostly on the gold sluices.

How the boy had even managed to be here was beyond him – he was far too young to be accepted as a worker in the gold fields. Either the authorities had turned a blind eye (which was a common occurrence in so many matters) or his father had managed to keep him hidden when the need arose – probably both. God knows he was small enough to be bundled up and secreted in a pile of belongings. Possibly his father had little choice but to keep his boy with him – it was not unlikely his mother had perished in China and that father and son had headed to the New World, like so many others of their compatriots, to make their fortune. But fate had intervened, thought James, and delivered only hardship and a harsh and unforgiving climate to these people.

And there was the question of the boy's age – because he was very small and undernourished James and Martha assumed he was somewhere between seven and nine years but as James was beginning to think he could be quite a bit older. He was obviously clever and a very fast learner and his proficiency with writing indicated maturity beyond 10 years of age. How to determine this James wasn't sure, particularly as the boy showed no signs of speaking no matter how much James tried to engage him in conversation, showing him objects and pointing to places of interest in the landscape near the hut, followed by the words to name

them. Jimmy looked at him with an unreadable expression and then looked away, his eyes scanning the distant trees and hills as if an answer might be found there.

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It was four months after Jimmy came to live with James that the miracle, as Martha liked to call it, happened. It was a summer day just like any other in Kiandra – stinking hot and long. The flies had kept up their relentless pursuit of the residents' sweat from sunrise to sunset, rising and falling like a black veil from the backs of the gold diggers as they swatted at them with makeshift woven flyswats, reaching back and over their shoulders with an impatient flick of the wrist. The dust was also rising and falling to the rhythm of the diggers' movements, swathing their sweaty bodies in a fine coating of grey which soon turned to tiny muddy rivers trickling down faces, necks, legs.

James had given his pupils an early mark and retreated to the corner of his wide porch in the hope of catching the whiff of a breeze. The air was like the hot breath of a furnace and his eyes felt raw and shrivelled. He sat on the rocker that was placed in the prime position for catching a breeze if there was one to be caught and expelled a long sigh of exhaustion and discontent. What a day.

Then he caught sight of Jimmy digging frantically in the dust, bony backside in the air and hands going ninety to the dozen in the dirt, like a dog burying a bone. Or looking for one it had hidden. This time it was the child doing the digging while the dog stood behind him and barked at regular intervals.

'Jimmy what on earth are you doing? It's more than a hundred degrees out there – probably a hundred under here in the shade. Jimmy! Stop that, you stupid little bugger.'

The digging only intensified, the boy's small frame shuddering with the effort and the dog turning in excited circles behind him.

Martha stuck her head out the kitchen door, peering down the slope at the growing cloud of dust.

'Do you think I spend my time working my hands near to the bone just to have you turning a morning's worth of washing to mud?'

But the digging went on, more dust rising towards the hut and the clothesline where sheets, cloths and a motley assortment of James's jerkins and undergarments were strung out beside the outhouse.

‘Right, you asked for it, you little devil.’ She went back into the kitchen returning with a large wooden spoon in hand and stomped heavily down the porch steps, headed for the upturned backside.

‘I’ll be damned if I’ll put up with this any longer. Ignore me will you?’ She flew at him like a harpy, face flushed, hair dishevelled and wooden spoon raised.

Jimmy hadn’t ceased his excavating – he’d simply moved further along towards James’ lemon trees, straggly looking specimens that had produced little fruit this season. His long, delicate fingers were now alternately probing and digging in the churned up dirt. As Martha swung the wooden spoon towards his backside he suddenly rose to his feet and began to turn, one fist clenched tight. The thud as the heavy spoon hit his chest was loud. James gasped and rose from his chair on the porch and Martha let out a sharp squawk as the dog leapt at her arm. Jimmy reeled backwards, his eyes widening in pain, but he regained his balance and looked up at Martha as if he were seeing her for the first time.

He reached towards the dog, pulling it towards him so that he could stroke its head, murmuring to it. The dog cocked its head and whined. Then the boy opened his fist to show the dog a piece of filthy fabric tied together with some sort of twine. He squatted, placed the small bundle on the ground and pulled at the string until the cloth unravelled and something rolled out onto the dirt. He picked it up and held it out towards James. In the palm of his hand sat a decent sized gold nugget. He looked up at James, who was still standing on the steps in something of a stupor, and smiled.

‘My father’s. For you.’

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Living with the schoolmaster, and closest thing the town had to an intellectual, gave Jimmy a certain status and a level of protection from the other children. But it was a precarious state. They didn’t exactly accept his presence in the schoolroom - they tolerated it because Mr White had made it clear there was no choice in the matter. Not that it was ever discussed – Jimmy just appeared one day in the hut they called the schoolroom and that was that. What they did object to was Jimmy’s ability to read and write and solve the most complicated maths problems. Clearly something was amiss but they couldn’t put their finger on what it was – it was just not fair or right that this scrawny kid with slanty eyes and

strangely proper way of speaking should beat them all in every task that was set. And him a coolie! They muttered about it in the lunch break as they huddled under trees or played tag in the paddock next to the schoolhouse – ‘Bloody chink – it ain’t right he’s allowed here – that’s what my ma says. Uncle Jack says you just can’t trust ‘em – they’re that sly and sneaky. They reckon old schoolie White has gone crazy lettin’ one live in ’is house, Anythin’ could happen they says.’

‘My pa thinks he could give us some disease or somethin’ – who knows what sort of germs and things he’s got on him. And that fuckin’ dog that’s always with ’im.’

‘Yeh well he shouldn’t be gettin’ special time with Mr White either to learn more ’n us ’cause that’s not fair. If I had a schoolie for a father I could do numbers too.’

‘No you couldn’t Billy Hunter – ya too stupid. That’s why ya eyes are so close together.’

‘Shut your bloody Irish gob McNally.’

Then it was all on – fists flying, a whirl of limbs and chanting voices - until Mr White strode across the schoolyard to pull them apart.

Jimmy kept his distance and nobody was brave enough to talk to him – even if any felt inclined the risk of retaliation from the others was enough to silence them. The solitude was fine by Jimmy. He would find a place as far as he could from the others, preferably out of sight. A favourite spot, especially in late winter and spring, was a small flat clearing up behind the school outhouse covered in long straw-coloured grass, each stalk bearing a fat seed head - intricate patterns of interwoven plaits. He could lie there in the sun, hidden in a sea of gold, the weight of his body forming a warm hollow, Hui pressed up beside him. On some days the bliss of this cocoon was almost unbearable. Above him the plaited seed heads waved in the breeze and as he watched them he would drift into a reverie, transported to a world where there was just him and Hui and endless golden warmth.

Jimmy was in this grassy burrow one perfect spring day when he became aware of footsteps approaching and the crackling of whispering in the air. Hui raised his head and growled softly - Jimmy signalled him to be silent and lay still and alert in his hollow.

‘He’s gotta be around here somewhere – we’ve looked everywhere else.’

‘Yeh but what a’ we going to do when we find ’im anyway?’

‘Geez McNally what do ya reckon? Give ’im a hiding.’

‘Yeh? And what’s old Whitey goin’ to say bout that?’

‘He won’t know who done it will he, stupid? That chink’ll be too bloody scared of gettin’ more from us if he tells. You chicken McNally?’

‘No more ’n you are Hunter.’

‘Well shut up then and help me look.’

Jimmy heard the shuffling footsteps, the crunch of brittle stalks. His heart was a trapped moth beating wildly in his chest. He held Hui firmly to his side and gestured for him to stay still. He thought about his father, silent and waxen, ice on the canvas by his face, and rose to his feet in the golden grass.

The two boys stood a few yards away, stomping the grass, grunting with the effort. One tall and bulky, the other stringy. He waited for them to turn, Hui silent beside him. Billy Hunter was the first to glance behind him – he jumped in surprise, bellowing to his companion ‘There he is – get ’im, get ’im.’

Hui growled and pulled against Jimmy’s grasp but he held him tightly and gave a sharp instruction in words the boys did not comprehend.

‘Fuckin’ Chinaman – shut yer gibberish,’ Billy Hunter snarled.

The whirring of cicadas filled the air, a kookaburra chortled in the distance as the boys circled their quarry. When the blows began to rain down Jimmy was back in the tent and his father was showing him how to mend a rent in the canvas, the rasping of the thread as it was pushed backwards and forwards through the dense fabric creating a soothing rhythm. He knew he had to close that tear or they would be tormented by the sharp winds and winter rains – he took the long awl from his father and drove it hard into the canvas feeling the satisfying progress it made as it penetrated. It was not the winter winds he heard as he fell to the ground but the high pitched shrilling of Billy Hunter as he leapt around the grass holding his side. ‘He stabbed me, he stabbed me. I’m dyin’,’ screamed Billy as Joe McNally ran down the slope towards the schoolhouse.

When James arrived on the scene minutes later, drawn by Hui’s barking, the dog was sitting beside the crumpled shape of Jimmy licking his face and Billy Hunter was nowhere to be seen. When he picked up the boy he was struck by the calmness of his expression, considering the split lip, bleeding nose and swollen eye. He was reassured when the boy opened his eyes. As he turned to head back down the slope he saw something glinting in the trampled grass beside his boot. He bent down to have a closer look, balancing Jimmy with one arm while he

reached to pick up a long, thick needle from the grass – obviously something for repairing leather or other dense material, he thought.

‘That’s strange,’ he said, looking at Jimmy’s battered face and then down at the dog. ‘What have we got here then Hui?’ The dog just looked at him with his yellow eyes and was as silent as the boy.

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By the following summer the gold was thinning out and disillusionment was everywhere. Men were leaving in droves, white and Chinese drifting through town like silent wraiths, the Chinese with their meagre belongings strung on long cane sticks. Businesses closed, families heading off on the long trek the coast or for places like Goulburn and Braidwood.

Numbers at the school had dropped to ten on a good day but more often it was just five or six children who appeared. Jimmy didn’t mind – those five were the best ones – the ones who thought of the tiny room as a refuge and whose parents were less likely to keep them at home to dig potatoes and lug their siblings around. They also left him alone most of the time.

When he went into town with James he felt light headed at what he saw. There were abandoned buildings, windows smashed and doors hanging from their hinges. Stores stood empty, wooden barrels once filled with flour, salt and sugar lying empty in the street. Even the Honeysuckle Inn, once brimming with white men keen for a cooling ale, was deserted. The dirt track that ran through the centre of town was littered with household items discarded when carts and drays could fit no more.

He thought about the Chinese camp and felt a coldness spreading from his chest into his gut but he pressed James to walk the extra mile beyond the town so he could see. When they reached the site of the main camp only a few dozen tents remained where once there had been hundreds – the rest was just a large muddy space.

He walked around the trampled place trying to remember where he and his father had spent those frozen, hollow months. But it was a blur of muddy footprints with a scattering of metal sluice buckets and stray items of clothing. On the branch of a tree a pair of trousers dangled forlornly, one leg torn and tattered. Jimmy bent down and dug a Chinese coin from the mud – he held it tightly, the

cool of the metal pressed against his palm. Hui ran around the flattened campsite as if trapped in an invisible maze –zigzagging from one side to the other, nose to the ground.

Jimmy muttered to himself, rocking gently where he stood, feet planted in the mud while James stood stiffly beside him. He reached over and patted the boy on the back. Jimmy started and looked around at James as if surprised he was there. 'I go to Father's grave today.'

'I'll come with you – we can take some bread, bit of that cheese Martha's been hiding from us as well.'

Jimmy shook his head. 'Just I and Hui.'

'Just Hui and me,' said James distractedly. 'It's a long hike Jimmy. I don't like you going up there on your own.' He knew the boy would go regardless - that he would slip away with the dog. So he didn't press the point. On the way back he made a point of stopping in at George Ah Chee's store where they sat out the back with George, drinking green tea while the two men smoked their pipes.

Jimmy sipped on his tea, the earthiness melting into him. James and George leaned back in their chairs sucking on their pipes, smoke drifting towards the ceiling in tiny clouds before dispersing into a gauze-like haze. The sweet pungency of the tobacco filled Jimmy with melancholy and he rose to his feet. 'What's up lad?' asked James, stirring in his chair.

'Can I go to the store?'

'Of course,' said George Ah Chee, waving his arm in the direction of a beaded curtain that led to the general store at the front of the building. 'Any time Jimmy, you know that. Please come and see me any time. I have plenty jobs in the store – my sons too little yet to help.' And his laughter filled Jimmy's head so that he thought it might split in two.

Out in the store George's wife Kate was filling jars from a large sack of brightly coloured sweets. Her fair hair was pulled back into a tight bun and Jimmy was struck by the pinkness of her scalp, the uniformity of her paleness. She looked up as he let the beaded curtain fall back behind him.

'Jimmy – how are you? You've caught me in a right mess here. So much to do with the delivery coming this week – unloading n' all.'

'I can help?'

Mrs Ah Chee straightened up and rubbed her back. ‘Well now, if you want to fill these jars I could start on the shelf packing. Yes, that would be a good help Jimmy.’

Her voice was high and breathy and she spoke with a slight lilt – she was born in Germany he’d heard Martha say – ‘and gone and married a Chinaman – mind you he’s one of the good ones. Could do worse than George Ah Chee – but it makes you think – couldn’t be easy. Still, their littleuns are the sweetest things you’ll ever see,’

When he got close to her Jimmy could smell the sharp muskiness of her sweat, see it glistening at her hairline. Outside the heat was building – Hui shuffled and let out a half-hearted bark from the porch. Somewhere a child was crying.

Jimmy walked around behind the counter to the sack of sweets. They were brightly coloured and sticky – he had tasted similar ones when he was very young but it was a rare treat, usually only for celebrations. Kate Ah Chee looked over at him – ‘Have a sweet Jimmy – I’ll put some in a bag for you to have later – maybe Martha would enjoy some as well.’

Jimmy chose a green one and popped it into his mouth. The sweetness was overwhelming and he felt his stomach lurch with the shock of it. In the back of his throat was a strange flavour he didn’t recognise but he didn’t have either the words or the courage to ask this pale, breathy woman what it might be.

He knew George had thought about taking him in when his father died – he’d heard James and Martha talking about it when he was ill. Them thinking he couldn’t understand anything, not knowing he’d heard plenty of English in other places – traipsing from goldfield to goldfield with his father, sometimes in groups with other Chinese workers, sometimes on their own. White men handing out orders to the headman in their work team and the other children in every town taunting with words always falling around him, like sharp stones spilling from their mouths. That’s how he pictured those English words – hard edged like the gravel he washed in the sluices.

In James’ house the words floated above him in his delirium like pieces of a puzzle, often out of his grasp, a babble of jarring sounds, other times forming images in his fevered mind. Martha’s sharp voice: ‘better off with his own kind’  
.....George Ah Chee ..... that woman should be run out of town for refusing –  
and her with her own has Chinese blood ...a man on his own – it’s not right,  
.....

And James' mellow tones: 'I've only got myself to consider – George has six young ones, eight with Kate's two from before. .... time on my hands to teach him.....camp's no place.....dysentery, influenza..... a dismal life.....'

Had it been a dismal life? All he could remember of his time with his father in Kiandra was the cold, always frozen. And a gnawing hunger. He had no memory of what they ate – there had been so little of it that it had evaporated from his mind. Yes, he guessed it had been dismal but he would have it back if it meant seeing his father again.

He pushed some more sweets into the jar and screwed on the large lid. When he placed the jar on the counter the green, pink and yellow shapes, pressed hard against the glass sides, seemed distastefully bright and cheerful. He looked across at Mrs Ah Chee who was bent over some jars containing translucent white balls floating in liquid. She noticed him watching her and pointed to them – 'Lychees. George loves them – can't get enough of them. You must've had them Jimmy. Do you remember if you have?'

Jimmy frowned and shook his head. 'Don't think so Mrs Ah Chee.'

'We'll fix that – come and have a taste.' She reached for a scoop on the shelf behind her and opened one of the jars at her feet. The liquid dripped from the scoop as she held it out to him, splashing the edge of her apron.

'Here Jimmy – see what you think.'

The white orb slid into his mouth, smooth and cool. It reminded him of something but whatever it was slid around at the edges of his mind like something glimpsed out of the corner of your eye.

'Careful of the seed – you should spit that out – it's too large.'

He spat the seed into his hand – it was black and glossy like a polished stone. He put it in his pocket with the Chinese coin for later contemplation.

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By the time the next winter's snows had arrived some of the Chinese had started returning, drifting back up the track into town, plaits trailing down their backs, pots and pans and various implements strung on long springy poles. The gold at Lambing Flat that had been talked up so much in the newspapers, including Kiandra's *Alpine Pioneer*, had fizzled out, as had the *Alpine Pioneer* as it happened. The riots at Lambing Flat had been the talk of the town for months.

Some thought the Chinese were to blame, with all their thieving ways, others said it was just bad sorts on both sides. Of course with so many Chinese making up the population these days such conversations were mostly had around private dining tables and on the verandahs of non-Chinese residents.

James told Martha he would prefer the subject was not discussed in the house after she came back from the store one day full of news of the riots and predictions by some in town that the same would happen in Kiandra. She puffed herself up with indignant rage, saying he had ‘no right to accuse her of any malicious gossip or prejudices.’

‘I just don’t want Jimmy hearing all the rubbish most of them speak – so much of it is codswallop based on ignorance,’ said James.

‘Yes well you can’t hide him away from it all either James White. He’s going to find out sooner or later what most folks think. It’s not like it’s him I’m talkin’ about. It’s not all codswallop either. Some of those Chinamen are bad types – look at that robbery took place down at old Mrs Hughes’ shop last year. She had to climb out the back window with all the day’s takings tucked in her bloomers while two Chinamen were breaking down the front door with axes.’

‘Yes, and for every tale like that there’s at least four about lawlessness or drunken mayhem wrought by our less savoury white citizens.’

Martha stomped out to the laundry tub where she set Jimmy to work stamping on the dirty clothes, his bare feet setting up a solid rhythm and the air around his head thick with grey suds.

With the returning miners came others– a tailor or two, a baker, a butcher and, best of all as far as Jimmy was concerned, a man with the greenest thumb in the world (in fact all of his digits were green said Martha). Ping Kee - or Pinkie as the locals called him – seemed to be able to grow anything. Just give him a patch of soil and he’d turn it into a thriving edible garden full of things people had never seen, let alone eaten. Brought the seeds with him – ‘must’ve brought ‘em all the way from China’, the locals said ‘cause we ain’t seen that sorta stuff before, not round these parts.’

By the time of the winter thaw when the whiff of Spring was in the air Jimmy took to spending hours with Pinkie, helping him collect manure from around town – chickens, horses, bullock – ‘whatever shit you find we use – better than gold’ Pinkie would tell him, throwing back his head and laughing, his gap-toothed mouth hanging wide. He’d let the shit pile sit a while, mature and settle till it was

ready to work into the hard, brittle mountain dirt. Weeks they spent preparing the beds - tough weeks of carting, digging and sweating. Pinkie built his own water tank from scraps of metal – banging and moulding the old bits together until he had a container large enough to last between dry spells. He spent a lot of time plugging up the holes but finally it was good and sound, ready for a decent downpour.

Jimmy was fascinated by the way Pinkie would scatter the seeds he kept in separate little bags, all tied tightly with different coloured silk cord. He would wait impatiently for the first signs of the pale shoots as they emerged from the clodded soil. It wasn't just Jimmy who was on the lookout for signs of growth – keeping the crows, magpies, cockatoos and other assorted birds away from the tender shoots was a battle like no other. As for the wallabies, wombats and possums – Pinkie declared war. He created all sorts of contraptions to keep them away – scarecrows dressed in a mix of weird mix of fabric scraps and old clothes, things that flapped and banged in the breeze and intricate traps for snaring larger creatures (these were particularly useful as they not only protected his crops but provided him with some hearty meals). Jimmy wasn't too sure the scarecrows would do much to deter magpies – not if they were anything like the ones that frequented the school yard with their pecking and swooping, terrorising anyone who happened by.

These were really only temporary measures until Pinkie could build some fences around his precious crops, something that had to wait until he began to sell them and could afford some decent materials. Meanwhile he had to be ever vigilant.

Jimmy was a keen assistant. As the summer neared its end he would rise with the first sounds of day - birds twittering and fidgeting in the scrub near the house, the sky still scattered with stars, a soft metallic hue staining its edges. The watering was done before the first rays of sun streaked the sky pink and Jimmy would sit with Pinkie backs against the big ironbark, legs outstretched on the cool earth. Hui lay between them, head resting between his paws as he slept.

These times were precious to Jimmy – only with Ping Kee could he speak his native tongue, the Chinaman having come from the same province as him and his father. They shared English words as well, laughing so much at times when they struggled to pronounce some of the stranger sounds, that Hui would whine and scratch at Jimmy's legs.

By the middle of spring their labours began to bear fruit. Rows of multicoloured cabbages, striped squash and leafy greens appeared. The locals were agog – never before had they seen such an array. In fact many of these strange vegetables had never been seen before, by the non-Chinese at least.

Jimmy would return home with a basketful of bounty strapped to his back, much to Martha's delight. Some things she had no idea how to prepare so Jimmy got instructions from Pinkie. Soon the kitchen was rich with the aroma of soups and stews and strange little rolled up things. New flavours arrived in the other humble homes of Kiandra - even those that were peculiar were welcomed – never before had there been such variety of fresh food available. When the mail coach arrived once a month everybody flocked just to get their supplies of dried mutton and preserves. Occasionally butter was to be had but that didn't last long up here in the warm months. In winter they were lucky to see any supplies, the roads buried for months under ice and snow. So Pinkie's supplies were a welcome relief – no, they were a godsend.

It wasn't long before George Ah See saw the potential in the fresh vegetable trade and he offered to invest in Ping Kee's venture for a cut in the profits. So Pinkie's Fresh Produce was born. Within weeks fences and enclosures had been constructed to protect the crops from marauding wildlife and a new water tank was underway. George set aside a section in his general store for fruit and vegetables, installing shelving seemingly overnight.

Business was brisk for Pinkie and George over the next eight months until the cold froze the ground once more. Pinkie then spent time preparing for the onslaught of the next Spring, gathering manure and mending fences and occasionally playing mahjong with Jimmy and James, and sometimes George Ah Chee, in the long winter evenings. That winter was also a quiet one for the town's one Chinese and two European doctors, with far fewer cases of influenza, scarlet fever and other usual winter ailments. 'That Pinkie', the locals were heard to say, 'definitely brought good luck with him the day he traipsed into town with his pack stuffed full of vegetable seeds'.

In 1863, the year Jimmy turned sixteen (or so they had estimated - James had chosen a date in late Spring to celebrate the boy's birthday the year he brought him to the house), James received a copy of Charles Darwin's much-lauded book, *On the Origin of Species*. He'd read much about the publication in one of the

scientific journals he subscribed to and had ordered a copy despite the exorbitant price. Still, he could afford a bit more these days as his income had been boosted by a constant demand for advice over legal documents and court orders since the town's only solicitor moved to Pambula last spring after burying his youngest child. He packed up and took his wife and four surviving children back to the coast.

The book arrived on the pre-Christmas coach, along with other supplies ordered in especially for the season's celebrations. Christmas was a grand affair in Kiandra - everybody regardless of their religious persuasion would celebrate in some fashion, those of European extraction eating big and drinking even bigger, while the Chinese gathered to play mahjong. Martha planned for a roast this year – damned crazy notion thought James considering the heat. Still it wouldn't be Christmas without a bit of a feast – pork, she'd said, as well as a good mix of Pinkie's greens, together with her own potatoes, dug fresh last week.

The few days of Christmas were spent pontificating over that year's events, the words flowing faster and conversations getting rowdier as the claret and whiskey consumption rose.

James unwrapped his packages, the prospect of a new book bringing a smile to his face. It was a substantial chunk of a book and he bent down to take in its distinctive bookish odour, sighing with pleasure.

He was tired – it had been a long year with one of the harshest winters on record and now the summer was threatening to be just as bad, the last three days breaking the record for the hottest consecutive days in ten years.

He wasn't sure how much longer he could teach these local children either – most of them didn't care much about learning – didn't give a damn about what went on in the world. Their world was limited to this tiny backwater – a town that had persisted long after its existence was warranted – a gold town without any gold. A bit like him – he really should've given up teaching a few years back. He would be sixty-one in the following year and he was feeling every day of it. But there'd been nobody else to make sure the young ones got at least some knowledge in their heads – and it had given him a certain measure of satisfaction to know he'd told them something of the world out there, even if they never got to see that much of it.

Martha was getting old as well. When she'd turned up to offer her services as his housekeeper and cook soon after her husband Alfred died he'd agreed only

reluctantly. He was managing very well, he thought – he'd long ago given up the idea of marrying – somehow time had slipped by and it had just never happened – and he liked his own company. Meals weren't something he gave a great deal of thought – he scraped something together that was reasonable enough fare and cleaning the place was simple enough – a sweep every now and then. Sometimes he put his students to work on the schoolroom when things got a bit rough around the edges.

He agreed that Martha could do a bit of cooking and cleaning - washing when it was needed - until she found something more suitable. That was six years back and they'd settled into a comfortable pattern – she'd kept her small cottage just over the rise and arrived each day in the early morning, leaving just after supper to walk the hundred yards to home. Sundays were her own – church and needlework she told James, though he wouldn't know – that was his reading day.

He settled back in the rocking chair to savour the strange world of Charles Darwin and his theory of the survival of the fittest. If he was right, thought James, then it was baffling to him how most of the residents of Kiandra had survived this long. They didn't seem to be the fittest of specimens to him. It was a town of misfits and downright eccentrics. But maybe that was the point – to survive in this place you had to be more than a little odd. Charles Darwin would have most likely have found more than a few aberrations in these hills to back up his theories.

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There was no warning for Martha the night of the fire. It was most likely an ember from her fire, not properly damped down, they said later. It was just five days after Christmas Day and Martha, exhausted from the preparations and the days of eating and drinking, was in a sound sleep. But for Hui whining and scratching at the door James and Jimmy would have slept through the night unaware there was anything amiss. Jimmy ignored the whining for as long as he was able but when Hui would not give up he went to the door to see what was wrong. The acrid smell of smoke hit him as he opened the door. He called out to James to wake him.

By the time they were on the track to Martha's the sky was just beginning to lighten with the first flush of dawn. As they rounded the bend closest to her house they could see the glow of the flames and James broke into a run, Hui just ahead

of him. Smoke wrapped Martha's outhouse in a smothering embrace and beyond that her small hut was ablaze.

James turned and yelled to Jimmy.

'Go and get help. Quickly. Just raise the alarm – the men will know what to do.'

So Jimmy and Hui ran and they brought back men and horses, barrels of water and sacks to smother the flames. It was all too late. When they returned to what should have been Martha's place it was a blackened shell, the flames replaced by smoking embers, the timbers of the roof collapsed and the walls completely gone. Jimmy could see straight through the hut to Martha's laundry block out the back, a wash bucket beside it and behind that her underwear and nightdress dangling forlornly on a clothesline strung between two small gums. He wanted to run and pull them down before these men saw.

There was no sign of either James or Martha. 'James.....Martha,' he called and his voice was a tiny, stringy thing that drifted off into the smoky treetops.

When they found Martha and James huddled together behind the woodshed they had trouble prising James's fingers from around Martha's. It was a miracle that even one of them survived that furnace, said the men. It was probably Martha's heart that gave way, said Moo Choo, the only person James would let near her. If it hadn't been for James she would've been burnt to a crisp in that house, everybody said. In the end it made no difference, Jimmy thought later. To James it was as if she had perished in the house – he'd just been too late getting to her and that was all there was to it.

**Way out in the valleys and  
mountain ranges of light**

**You came quiet in roaring tide  
in the sunset lagoon  
How softly whispers the river  
and streams in endless waters  
THOSE  
can't tell a lie.**

- *A Lie* by Lionel Fogarty, Murri Aboriginal poet

**Part Three**

**Sea dog**

**T**he wrecking of *The Seafarer* in 1865 was considered by many as the beginning of Arthur Conway's unravelling, but of course it started long before that. It really began when he arrived in the Colonies and rubbed his hands in glee over the fortune to be made. It only became worse when he claimed vast areas of land as his own and came up against the inconvenient resistance of the local blacks and the fact of drought. He had probably reached the point of no return by the time he launched into whaling and shipping and set his heart on putting his name on the map by building a port and town that would rival Sydney Town.

He had such grandiose plans for Conway Town, but by 1865 his grand vision was crumbling, much as his half-built sandstone buildings perched on the edge of the bay. Many who were unfortunate enough to become involved in his schemes thought he was at the height of his madness when he brought in Melanesian labour to work the wheels of his empire and omitted to pay them. He still had a way to go.

Of course at the time this was none of my concern – I was in my prime - hunting, raising litters when they came, and occasionally going out on the whaling boats with William Billyboy Davies. A century and a half of drifting has broadened my horizons somewhat.

Back then though Billyboy Davies was the most skilful whaler ever to hunt in Twofold Bay – that was what they all said. Like his father, and all his kin, going back in a long line. Generation after generation of black whalers who lived around that small cove hunted with the killer whales – the beowas. Billyboy was linked to his Beowa brothers; he said they had once been tribal warriors and were reborn to the sea. He called to them by thumping the water, and the killer whales did the

same in return when they had trapped a whale in the bay. They hunted all kinds – humpbacks, sperm, Southern right, minke – often females and their calves.

Billyboy went on the whaleboats with white men so that he could continue to hunt for whales with the Beowa. So many whaling operations had come to Twofold Bay, taking over the hunting grounds, and none knew how to work with the killer whales. Those white men who were smart enough could see the benefits of having Billyboy in their crew – nobody could work with the killer whales or find their way through the fog like he could. Nobody was so true with the harpoon.

I went with Billyboy when he called me to go, which was only sometimes, usually when the whale was being hauled back the day after a kill. With the haul there was no need for the stealth and silence that was a must for the hunt. It was a just matter of bringing the whale back the next day after the Beowa had taken the tongue – the law of the tongue it was called. It was the killer whales' part of the bargain, so the whale was allowed to sink to the depths after it was killed, the rope attached to a buoy to mark the spot. By the next day the massive body of the whale had become bloated and floated back to the surface – it was not hard to spot.

On the few occasions I was permitted to go on a hunt I liked to stand alongside Billyboy, my coat stiff with salt spray as he took aim with the harpoon. I was the only one of my kind he'd take, the only one quick enough to avoid getting tangled in the whale line once the whale was fastened. The rope would uncoil so fast from its tub that it would sing, running around the bollard at the stern and back up the middle of the boat between the oarsmen to the bow where it whirred through the notch in the timber with a high pitched whine. If the men were not quick to throw water on the rope as it rubbed against the boat's edge, singing and whistling on its way, it would become hot and begin to smoke. When that happened I would raise my head to the wind and whine in sympathy with the rope and the song it sang for the whale hunt.

The men didn't object to this duet as the whale was already fastened and silence was no longer a priority – they too let out great yells of relief and pent-up anxiety as the boat raced through the ocean behind the harpooned whale. To tell the truth I howled in sympathy with that creature as well, its moans of agony sending a quiver through my bones.

These were heady days and I didn't know that they were numbered. I was only

with William Billyboy Davies for a short while but it was a time when sounds were sharper and colours brighter. Trouble is you don't know at the time that things will never be this good again.

That was before that black creature Hui arrived in Twofold Bay and disrupted the flow of things. For me at least.

### **Twofold Bay 1865**

When Jimmy Quong arrived in the town of Eden there was no perceptible reaction from the locals. None that he could see anyway. Behind closed doors, though, there was plenty of talk about the odd Chinaman who had drifted into town with a stringy black dog.

Reg Brown the proprietor of the Whalers' Retreat Hotel heard many a strange anecdote about the Chink who'd been camped down near the river for a couple of days. Well sleeping there at least – all he seemed to have was a tiny swag that he unrolled to sleep on. According to Reg's regular clientele the Chinaman was everything from an escaped murderer, to a deranged opium addict, to a simpleton on the loose. One thing they all agreed on was that he was not to be trusted, particularly around the town's womenfolk.

It's not that they weren't used to Chinese in the area – there had been plenty traipsing through at the height of the gold rush up in Kiandra and some worked locally as stock hands and general labourers. They were nearly always in groups and this one was on his own. It was definitely peculiar.

So when Ah See came into the Whalers' Retreat to ask about work Reg braced himself for trouble. There was a murmur as the Chinaman walked up to the bar and then a stony silence enveloped the room. Jimmy nodded to Reg.

'Morning.'

Reg continued wiping the bar but when it became clear the Chinaman was waiting he stopped and looked up.

'I'm looking for work. Do you know if there's any going around here?'

Reg was stunned. He had never heard a Chinaman speak English so well. In fact, it was rare to hear such a clear statement from anyone inside these four walls.

'Ahhh, not sure what's goin' right now mate. Where've ya come from?'

'Down round Goulburn - fixing fences and before that the mountains.'

'Up Kiandra way?'

‘Yes a long time ago I was there.’

‘Right – so what brings ya down this way then?’

‘Just looking for work.’

Reg Brown scratched his head and cleared his throat. ‘So y’ron y’rown then?’

The Chinaman nodded.

‘Mate I’m not sure what’s goin’ in town. Not much I’m thinkin’ but ya could try out at the whalery – they’re always short out there. But I’ve heard things aren’t going so well these days. I can point ya in the direction though – bit of a hike. It’s across the other side ’a the bay so ya either swim or walk the long way round.

’Cept for those that got a boat.’

Later when Reg thought about this exchange it was hard to reconcile it with the gossip heard around town about the young Chinaman. He could have been chatting to one of the landholder’s sons – he had an air about him – sort of calm and confident. If he’d closed his eyes he wouldn’t have been able to pick him as a Chink – no doubt about it he was a strange one to place. And in Reg’s experience that always meant trouble.

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Jimmy set up a makeshift camp not far from the unused lighthouse tower. After talking to the publican in town he had headed off for the whalery. It had taken him the better part of two days, with various detours along the way when he lost his way and was forced to retrace his steps.

The whalery was a long distance from Eden, in a small bay on the southern edge of Twofold Bay. If he’d had access to a boat it would have taken him a fraction of the time. He enjoyed the journey, exploring the bays and headlands along the way, the stretches of dense tea-tree close to the coastline, and further inland the eucalypt forests, long tendrils of rusty bark curling back from smooth straight trunks of dusky grey, others twisted and gnarled, golden limbs covered in fine dark jagged lines as if a frenetic penman had run through the forest leaving his mark.

Hui was happy to be moving again and his joyful yaps filled the forest as he followed the scent of kangaroos into the scrub. But Jimmy was keen to reach a suitable campsite before dark so he whistled to the dog and when he reluctantly appeared, told him to stay at his side.

On the first night they had bedded down in the shelter of a small cove. The night was still and clear, the blue-black sky glinting with stars. He was woken by the sound of men's voices in the night – they seemed to be calling to each other – sharp retorts followed by an answering cry. It disoriented him as he thought the voices were coming from inside a narrow cave at the end of the cove, but as he lay there listening under the canopy of stars he realised they were coming from the sea. It felt to him as if they were the voice of the ocean itself – urgent and driven.

In the pale light of morning it could have been a dream. He set off early, the dog padding at his side, content after a small feed of dried beef.

When they finally reached the small settlement near the whalery the day was fading. There was not much to see – a few shacks strung out along the rise above the bay and a dirt track that wound up through the scrub towards the headland. Jimmy and Hui headed up the track – grooves worn into the dirt and plentiful horse dung indicated it was reasonably well travelled, although Jimmy found it surprising that carriages or carts came this way on a regular basis. It seemed a wild and lonely place.

After about five minutes the track broadened out and then entered a clearing. Just ahead was a large two storey stone house, broad verandahs on all sides. A few hundred yards beyond the house Jimmy could see the glint of the ocean. A stone archway and iron gates marked the entrance to a drive lined with an avenue of dark pine trees. A high cast metal fence surrounded the property. Jimmy breathed in the pungent odour of the resinous needles and stopped at the gate – a name was carved into the stonework – Conway 1852.

There was no movement to be seen and Jimmy did not feel inclined to try his luck at the house this late in the day. He stepped away from the metal gates and looked around the clearing – to the left of the property he saw that the track continued and he called softly to Hui to follow.

The path wound its way along the cliff top, at times dizzyingly close to the edge of the carved fluted walls of sandstone, at others through dense scrub that seemed to close in on them as they walked silently through the gloom. All the joyful spring in Hui's step had disappeared and he walked with tail down and nose to the ground. Jimmy felt a weight descend on him and he turned in his tracks to look behind – the feeling of being followed or watched was intense. But it was just the two of them in that tunnel of twisted branches. A seabird called out in a long mournful lament.

Jimmy quickened his step and spoke to Hui in reassuring tones. Suddenly the canopy of trees was gone and they were out onto a headland of tufty grass. He saw a tall brick tower ahead and he broke into a trot, eager to shake off his earlier feeling of dread. Beside the tower was a small patch of trees and a rocky outcrop. As he got close to the tower he could see other buildings down in the cove below. They were all built in the same sandstone blocks as the house they'd passed but it seemed that just a few were occupied – others seemed to be only partly constructed. He threw down his swag and bent to pat Hui – 'this will do tonight Hui. Good dog.' As he pressed his face to the dog's dusty coat he felt a strange sense of relief wash over him.

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As Arthur Conway came up over the rise near the jumble of buildings that made up the whalery compound a blast of rancid air laced with sea spray hit him full in the face. The world was a veiled thing and he moved through it with trepidation, aware of the cliffs not far from the path. He focused intently on the ground placing one boot after the other in a halting shuffle. He felt he was walking through cloud, the wisps of vapour drifting and undulating around him, a salt-laced veil draping him with its liquid embrace.

Normally he liked this walk. The path cut through a dense stand of melaleucas, the twisted flaky limbs leaning away from the ocean like tortured supplicants. Their leaf canopies locked together to form a solid mass, blocking out much of the light. From above, or from a distance, this canopy had the appearance of a lush grassy headland. Inside, the grey timbers reached skyward in a tangled confusion. On the forest floor outcrops of lichen-spotted rocks glowed in the gloom. It was the feeling of peace that really appealed to him. It usually descended on him as soon as he entered the forest, his boots progressing without echo on the soft path, the only other sounds the pounding of the sea against the cliff face, the sudden thumping of a wallaby in flight or the hiss of his breath in the morning air. This silent cathedral of grey timbers was a fitting preparation for the scene that awaited him during the height of the whaling season.

This morning, he experienced none of this. Instead he progressed like a blind man through the fog. It was foolish to have walked here in these conditions and he cursed his stupidity as he shuffled towards the compound. He could hear the

voices of the men as he approached the refinery and he used the sound to guide him the last few hundred yards. When he reached the steel door of the main refinery building he leaned against the door in relief. He reached up and rubbed his face, realising as he did that his hands had been clenched and were stiff with tension. He shook them roughly, adjusted his hat and jacket and entered the building.

The men were gathered around one of the fires, hunched against the cold and damp. Cigarette smoke rose in spirals. They looked up as Conway came in and the conversation came to a halt. Nobody had expected him to come out in this weather. But then they had learnt Arthur Conway never did what was expected.

Joseph Blakely saw his boss enter the try-works and groaned. It was not a good start to his day. He took a moment to compose himself, tucking in his shirt and brushing down his vest in case it had collected crumbs from his hurried breakfast. Then he put on his jacket, adjusted his collar and began his descent to the floor below, taking care not to slip on the metal steps, slippery from the morning fog and damp.

The men were standing, hats in hands, all of the earlier ease and murmured voices gone with the arrival of Arthur Conway. Jack O'Hara, the foreman, had separated himself from the group and had moved forward to greet Conway.

The tryworks were quiet and maintenance of the boats, a task that was carried out over the off-season had begun. The migration of the humpbacks south had pretty much come to an end and some of the men had left to go back to their seasonal work with the pastoralists. But the season had not completely finished – there was the chance there might be another big catch and the men were restless. The debacle of the previous night had set everyone on edge. Nobody was happy – the aborigines had up and left and that was most definitely not a good sign. Trouble was brewing and the weather was no help that was for sure.

Blakely looked around the group as he approached them. These men were the mainstay of the team, all locals, and all good reliable workers. He felt a twinge of pride, which took him by surprise – maybe he was starting to feel part of this place after all. Or maybe it was just recognition that his hard work had paid off and he finally had the makings of a successful operation here. That's if Conway's other activities didn't bring it all unstuck. The blacks were the real talent in the

actual hunting and he didn't like their chances of a successful hunt if another humpback came down the coast right now.

The men looked up as he entered their circle and there was a palpable easing of tension now that he had arrived to deal with Arthur Conway. The air was filled with the mist of their breath. Through the open door of the shed Blakely saw massive trunks of scribbly gums truncated by a thick wall of fog and he gave a slight shudder.

He stepped forward and held out his hand to Arthur Conway who looked for a moment as if he was unsure what to do with it but then he shook it peremptorily and nodded his head in the direction of Blakely's office.

'Just need a word with you over a matter that's come up,' he said, not looking at anyone in particular.

'Of course Mr Conway. Johnson make a fresh brew of coffee will you and bring it up.' A tall, lanky man at the back of the group nodded and walked across to a stove at the far side of the shed. Blakely motioned for Conway to walk ahead of him up the metal stairs.

'Just mind the steps sir. They can get a bit slippery on a morning like this. Must get the men to see to them, put some edges on them somehow. Especially if this weather continues – they'll need some extra jobs to keep them busy.'

Arthur Conway grunted. 'Yes, well that's one of the matters I've come to discuss as a matter of fact.'

The two men entered the small room at the top of the stairs and suddenly it seemed to Joseph Blakely as if the space that only five minutes ago had seemed so warm, such a haven of comfort on a morning such as this, was now dingy and oppressive, the worn mat under his broad oak desk, a scratchy, ugly thing. He moved an easy chair from under the window and placed it in front of his desk and moved around to the other side, waiting until Arthur Conway had sat down before sinking into his leather chair. It was his one luxury in this place.

Conway cleared his throat and looked around the room. Seagulls called to each other from the bay.

'I am expecting a shipment in the next few days and with this fog setting in we could have a disaster. Green Cape lighthouse is close to useless. Damn fool thing is in the wrong place – too far to the south. We can't risk another loss – all our new equipment for the season is on board – the new winch, furnace, supplies.'

‘It’s bad timing Sir, without a doubt. But not a lot we can do from what I understand.’

‘We must Blakely. I can’t have another loss. Not after the disasters of last season- as you know.’

Blakely did know only too well. Finances at the refinery were on a knife edge. He also knew that Arthur Conway was extravagant in his entertaining of politicians and the members of the local squatocracy and that funds that should have been put back into the business were being used to grease the wheels of social ambition. The ongoing drought and livestock losses had wiped out any profits from the land holdings – in fact they were deep in the red.

Then there were the problems of labour shortages – without the men to work in Arthur Conway’s ever expanding empire, it had begun to crumble. Conway’s grand plans to turn his fortunes around by bringing out Islanders to work at the whalery and on his farming ventures had backfired badly, the men leaving when they weren’t paid properly. Many had ended up in public houses in Sydney, causing a ruckus and bad-mouthing Joseph Conway to all who would listen. Blakely sighed and hunched forward in his chair.

‘What did you have in mind Mr Conway?’

Arthur Conway looked down at his hands, which were placed firmly on his thighs as if to brace himself against the trials of this place. He looked up and for the first time that morning made eye contact with Blakely.

‘I’ve given it a great deal of thought – as you pointed out yourself the men are idle right now –

‘Not exactly idle, Sir. Restless is what I said – I make sure they always have tasks to attend to. Repairs to the building, maintenance of the machinery and the like.’

‘That’s all well and good Blakely, but the fact is I’m paying them for doing damn little of any worth right now. On top of this the shipment is in danger of being dashed against those cursed cliffs. I will not just stand by and let that happen.’ A small vein on Conway’s temple stood out, purple against the greyness of his skin. Blakely suppressed a sigh and waited for his employer to reveal another of his paltry plans of management – probably the laying off of all the men to compensate for a doomed shipment.

‘I want some of the men to take the largest of the whaling boats out to guide the ship in through the fog.’ He held his hand up to silence Blakeley when he saw

the look of disbelief on his face. ‘They know the bay – I’m sure they could navigate it in their sleep. It’s a warning light the ship needs – we can place something in the tower but if the men can get closer to the heads it will help. And the black – Davies or whatever his name is – I’ve heard he’s the one who navigates in poor weather. He can lead the crew.’

Blakely took a moment to respond. ‘Well the blacks are not that easy to pin down right now. Davies comes and goes – they’ve been a bit unsettled of late.’ Specially since you’ve been at it with one of their girls, he thought bitterly.

‘Doesn’t mean they can’t be found. I know a lot of them are camped near the bay. Send someone out this morning Blakely – find him. Steamer’s due tomorrow.’

‘Even if he can be found, he’s not likely to jump at a job like this. You can’t force these buggers, they just slip off on you.’

‘Even the blacks have a price Blakely. You just have to work out what it is.’

Blakely felt a cramping in his bowels. Suddenly it felt as if the grey walls of his office were pressing in on him and he prayed Conway would leave before last night’s rabbit stew erupted from within him.

William Davies was dreaming. He lay on his side, hands clasped in front of him as if in prayer. In his dreams he was stroking the inner thighs of Mindi, his woman at the Pambula camp, the velvet of her skin miraculous against his calloused fingers. He could feel the tremors of her muscles beneath his hands and smell the sea in her body. In the world outside his dreams the voices of men were emerging from the white fog around his humpy. White men’s voices, trapped and muffled by the clouds.

These voices became part of his dreams and he dreamt they were spiriting Mindi away. She turned from him, her thighs closing against his fingers. He felt sadness descend on him and woke with a dry mouth and dashed hopes.

A dog barked somewhere in the distance. Closer, the sound of horses’ hooves on damp earth. William sat up. He heard the white men talking to some of the others in the camp and then his name was spoken. When he emerged from his shelter he saw three of the whalers standing by their horses in the clearing - the foreman O’Hara, the long stringy one called Johnson and another short stocky man he hadn’t seen before. He was surprised they had come out in the fog - it was treacherous for most men on the cliff path in this weather.

O'Hara raised his hand in greeting and William walked towards them. A murmuring rose from the scattering of humpies and lean-tos, heads poked through openings. The three men shuffled and scuffed like their horses, collars pulled up high against the fog. And while the men, black with white, circled the gulfs between them, they talked across the spaces about the craziness of taking a boat out into the bay in the worst sea fog in years.

They didn't cajole or threaten as Blakely had suggested – what, after all, could they threaten William with? He appeared at the whaling station with uncanny timing just before the first humpback arrived in the bay and was gone just as swiftly at season's end. When he arrived so did the killer whales, leaping and cavorting off the point - circling the humpbacks with an almost untiring glee. It was William and some of the other blacks who had shown the crew how to work with the killers, increasing their take of humpbacks dramatically. Before that they had pitted themselves against the creatures, chasing them from the bay, beating them with spades and oars when they followed the boats during a chase. The killers were the first to react when the humpbacks and sperm whales were nearing the coastline – they arrived in the bay leaping like jets from the water and pounding their tails on the surface, the sound echoing around the bay like the drums of war.

William had amused them with a pantomime of what the killers were after, holding his tongue between his fingers and shaking it savagely. Give them the humpback's tongue and they'll help with the hunt he told the crew.

They helped all right. Not only did they tell the whalers when the humpbacks had arrived, the killers hunted the great beasts like a pack of wolves, harrying them mercilessly and biting great chunks from them, driving the poor creatures crazy with pain and exhaustion until the whalers finished them off with the harpoon. Then the whale was allowed to sink to the ocean floor where the killer whales feasted on its tongue, leaving the rest of the carcass for the whalers to tow back to shore the next day.

On this morning William listened to the men and their crazy plan. He watched their discomfort as they stood amongst the flimsy dwellings of his people and he saw how they hunched against the weather. In the end it was not the power these men had over him, or even what they needed from him, that brought William Davies to his decision. When he nodded his acquiescence, his morning dream still

stirring his loins and his abrupt awakening souring his soul, William felt inclined to have these men in his thrall.

The whalers stumbled like blind men towards the sea, their only guide the rhythmic drumming of the waves on the shore. The boat had been prepared the day before and was ready on the slips, prow poised for the downward plunge into the foam below.

The fog had not shifted at all over the past three days. If anything it was thicker today, wrapping the men in its dampness as they shuffled towards the shore. William was at the head of the group, all sinew and tension, taut with the effort of listening. Of feeling on his skin the subtle changes in the air as it streamed across walls of sandstone cliff-face to their right, or wove its way through the scrub behind, or billowed from the open sea. Beside him was one of the dogs from the camp. Every now and then it ran ahead, brown pointed ears flicking and twitching, black nose to the ground.

Suddenly they were at the ramp and they stood, hunched in their jackets, sea rising and falling below them, distant sun masked in grey. They knew it was only just dawn, yet it could have been nightfall. William signalled to the dog to get into the boat and it crouched low, then leapt in a tight arc, landing neatly in the prow of the boat.

The men took their places and braced themselves for the launch. Salt-laced air whipped at them as the boat hit the water and they scrambled to grab the oars. Timber poles and men moved in one fluid motion, forward and back, forward and back, like a huge segmented insect. The boat dipped and rose with the swell, momentarily faltering in the strong shoreward pull, then lurched forward away from the rocks and into the wall of fog.

William and the dog leaned into the wind. Once past the protection of the bay the boat pitched in the swell. Walls of moist grey air pressed in on the men and the dog. They pulled at the oars, straining to get the boat out beyond the headlands. William and the dog were at the prow, William continually adjusting the direction of the boat with the pointing of his arm and a shrill call if the men were slow to respond. They didn't need to go out too far; the plan was to set up a warning light to direct any incoming ship away from the danger zone – the reef further along the coast, just beyond the entrance to the bay.

The brown dog crouched and swayed, weaving her body into the fabric of the storm. William shuddered and bowed his head. This was madness and he couldn't remember why he'd agreed to it. Behind him one of the men muttered savagely into the wind – 'fuckin' mad bastard Conway'.

William raised his face and saw that the sky had become lighter. He imagined the sun burning up there in its own world while down here they pitched and heaved in the semi darkness. A clammy gust of air caressed his face and he felt the chill of foreboding run through him.

Once clear of the bay's entrance the main danger was the risk of being dashed against the treacherous reefs that lay at the foot of the cliffs on both sides of the heads. The plan was to stay within a half mile range of the entrance and to use the foghorn and warning lamp to steer the Seafarer into the safety of the bay.

Then suddenly out of the fog came the sound of human cries. Voices rising and falling with the ocean's swell. The dog pointed its nose in one direction while the men all looked in another – it seemed as if the voices were coming from all around them – a yell from in front, a scream from behind and then a moaning which seemed to emanate straight from the grey vapour beside them.

'My god what is happenin' out there?' said Tom O'Hara. 'Can any of you get a fix on where we should be heading?'

William sat rigidly upright as if transfixed and then he pointed ahead and to the right.

He waved his arm in a sweeping motion. 'People.... in water.'

'What in bleedin' hell makes you sure about that? Can any of you others see anything out there?'

O'Hara cupped his hands around his mouth and called out.

'Hello..... are you there? His voiced seemed to evaporate into the fog.

There was an eery, muffled hush, the wind buffeting them and the swell rising like a mountain in front of them. Voices came at them out of the gloom. They heard splashing and the creaking of timbers and whimpering. A woman's voice screamed out.

'Oh please, in God's name help us. Help.'

Something bumped heavily against the boat and the dog stumbled in the prow, yelping in protest as it righted itself. A body, heavily clothed and face down, bobbed past and disappeared into the fog.

There it was, right in front of them, rearing up abruptly out of the fog – *the Seafarer*, its mighty timbers tipping at an impossible angle. A few forlorn figures were clinging to any available surface, the ocean pushing and pulling at them in its relentless movement.

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As she entered the clearing above the beach Hannah was struck by the stillness. She could hear the occasional bark of a dog and the breaking of the waves on the rocks below but it was as if the fog, when it lifted, took with it the world's voice. Behind her in the forest even the birds were silent, the only sound the trickling of water somewhere in the undergrowth.

The scene on the beach took her breath away. It seemed a battle had taken place and the victors departed, leaving their victims to rot amongst piles of seaweed, broken timbers and scattered debris. As she got closer she could see there were dozens of bodies – some were lying in a crumpled heap where the ocean had deposited them, others had been neatly laid out in rows by the men when they pulled them from the sea.

She looked out across the bay – all the boats from the town and the whalery were out. All she could see was one boat almost at the bay's entrance.

Her father had left as soon as the alarm was raised. She could not be sure what he would think about her being here but of late his behaviour was impossible to predict. She suspected that much of the time he was unaware of her activities. Since Mr Symonds and Miss Pringle had left six months earlier he had shown very little interest in Hannah's education or in fact her whereabouts. Once the couple announced their engagement they had sought her father's permission to set up lodgings somewhere nearby so they could remain in their positions but the discussions soon broke down. Hannah was not sure what had transpired, possibly it was related to her father's finances, but Miss Pringle had come to her in an obvious state of distress, announcing they would be leaving within the week. It was a blow to Hannah to lose Miss Pringle and she even felt some regret over the departure of Ben Symonds. Since his attachment to Miss Pringle he had been less severe in his lessons and had been generous with his time, accompanying them on excursions so that Hannah could paint and draw the local landscape and wildlife.

As she made her way down to the beach, she was struck by the realisation she missed his company – even his stiff manner would be welcome. The path down to the beach was slippery and strewn with fallen branches and she felt them scratch and scrape her legs as she scrambled over. By the time she got to the beach her clothes and skin were splattered with mud. That was nothing compared to the feeling of desolation uncurling inside her.

Although the air was still she could feel the fear, hear the sounds of crying and screaming and the roaring of waves and wind that had been. Hands grabbing and grasping, pieces of timber and metal bashing against heads and bodies.

She sat on the sand and covered her ears with her hands. Beside her on the beach was a woman's ebony hair comb, its row of fine pointed teeth stark against the white sand. There was a delicate pattern of whalebone inlay along its side and Hannah ran her hand along it, feeling the smoothness. Such a massive creature embedded in so tiny an object. Objects were scattered along the tideline – shoes, boxes, clothing, strung out along the sand like remainders of some riotous celebrations. Down at the water's edge a metal saucepan bobbed in a retreating wave, its handle dipping and rising like a waving hand.

Hannah sensed someone behind her and turned – a man was coming down the path, a brown dog running just ahead of him, nose to the ground, tail quivering. She was surprised to see it was a young Chinaman – that was clear from his features and his colouring, yet he was dressed in ordinary clothes and did not have the distinctive long plait of a coolie. She struggled to her feet, pulling at her dress and petticoats, which had become tangled around her ankles, and picked up the comb, studying it closely as he approached.

Then he was right in front of her and when she looked up he nodded his head so that all she could see was the gloss of his jet hair. Like the blue-black wings of a crow.

He murmured something and then raised his head – their eyes were level and Hannah couldn't suppress the smile she felt creeping across her face. She felt, oddly, as if she was simultaneously looking at her reflection and her opposite. Thick straight silky hair, almond shaped eyes and wide mouth – but where her hair was fair, his was black, her eyes pale grey and flinty, his liquid black.

She held out her hand but he nodded at her again and stepped back, lowering his gaze.

'Oh..... Sorry I didn't mean ....'

He had turned and was walking off down the beach towards the rows of bodies. His dog stood looking up at Hannah. She patted her side to call it to her. 'Come on boy.'

The dog cocked his head and then looked back at his companion.

'Oh come on don't you go away as well. Just come here so I can pat you.'

The dog relented and moved slowly towards her, tail down and head lowered.

She felt the beating of his heart as she ruffled his chest and she kneeled to rub her face on his tough coat. His tail flapped madly against her skirts. There was a whistle and he was suddenly all taut muscles. He licked her as if in apology and then raced off towards the young man, jets of sand flying in his wake.

Hannah was left standing, hair comb in hand, and she felt somehow bereft and acutely aware of the horror around her. But there was no time to reflect on this feeling as suddenly there was the splashing of oars and men were yelling out to each other as the boats erupted from the sea.

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The first boat neared the beach and the men tumbled from it, pulling it onto the sand beyond the breakers. Hannah recognised men from the whalery and held her breath waiting for her father to yell out to her. There was no sign of him amongst the group as they moved towards her, slumped down with the burden of waterlogged bodies. A brown dog jumped from the boat, leaping through the shallows in agile arcs.

The Chinaman moved back along the beach towards them, his dog zigzagging behind. He walked down to the boat and Hannah saw him buckle under the weight as one of the men passed a slumped form to him, its head hanging limply and arms dangling like twigs. The brown dog from the boat stopped in its tracks, one front leg poised as if in mid prance, and nose pointed towards the Chinaman's dog. Hannah wondered if they would fight but the brown dog approached cautiously, then sniffed at the new arrival's haunches, before bounding off towards the boat. The black dog hesitated then bounded off after her and soon they were leaping and cavorting in the shallows.

Hannah's boots sank in the wet sand as she walked towards the men but they barely acknowledged her when she reached them. One of her father's whaling crew, Jack O'Hara, nodded in her direction.

‘Mornin’ Miss, s’prised to see you down ’ere. Not the best place right now.’ She watched the Chinaman stagger up the beach with his burden, wet sand sucking at his boots.

‘How can I help?’

‘’fraid there’s not much you can ’elp with ’ere. All drowned far as we can see – bloody disaster, ’scuse me Miss.’

Hannah could smell the exhaustion of the men, see the despair in their creased faces and sagging shoulders. Another boat appeared rising up on a wave crest. The crew was yelling out and there was urgency and excitement in their voices. She suddenly felt superfluous, a bystander amongst the urgency. The women across the district will be preparing food and bringing blankets – was there no place for her in all of this?

The men were all waving madly - ‘We’ve got a live one – get Maloney’ and then they were on the beach and people were running everywhere and the town blacksmith, Vic Jones, walked towards her with a small boy attached to him like a limpet. When Vic turned for a moment to look back at the group of men, she saw the small pinched face pressed against his shoulder, eyes clamped shut against the horror.

Jack O’Hara called out to her and she turned away from the sight of the boy and his grief. ‘Miss Conway I wonder if you’d ask Josie if we might have some damper and tea. We’d be mighty grateful of somethin’ hot.’

Hannah knew she was being sent away and she could feel the anger building inside her. This was where she should be. She could feel her face burning - useless and discarded. She noticed the Chinaman was standing waiting near the boats – after initially allowing him to help the men were now ignoring him, bypassing him. He stood for a while, then turned to walk back up the beach. Him as well then, thought Hannah.

She stepped forward along the beach, her head held high and eyes narrowed. Damn her father, damn all these men who believe her to be fragile and irrelevant.

When she reached the bottom of the steep pathway she started the climb at a brisk pace. Behind her she could hear the Chinaman’s footsteps and the yipping of the dog as it left the beach. Her anger was propelling her forward and she had forgotten the difficulty of her earlier descent on the path.

She jumped across a fallen log and her foot slipped sideways in the mud, hurtling her towards the steep drop down to the beach. She grabbed at some shrubs lining the edge and felt the soft earth giving way as she slid.

Her wrist was suddenly grabbed and she was pulled to an abrupt stop. She had little time to assess what was happening but she heard dogs barking and then she is beside the Chinaman on the path. She rubbed her burning wrist and looked at him.

They were standing only a couple of feet apart and she could see he was much younger than she thought – maybe only slightly older than her. His skin was golden and smooth and his eyes a deep brown, not black. She could not read their expression and he quickly stepped away from her, moving up the path before she could speak. He waited where the path turned and stepped back so that she could pass. The dog had run ahead, barking in short, impatient yips and Hannah started off again, placing her feet firmly in the centre of the path and picking her way over fallen branches. The anger had dissipated and the cold was now seeping into her from her damp, muddy clothes.

When they were close to the house she stopped and turned to face the Chinaman.

‘If you’d like some food Josie will have something ready.’

There was no response and he was looking beyond her, towards the house.

‘It’s the least I can do. You stopped me falling.’

She didn’t feel any better having said it. Part of her resented him for the act.

‘Thankyou. I should go.’

It sounded abrupt and dismissive to Hannah. The kitchen door opened and Josie looked out. ‘Miss Hannah where’ve you been? I’ve been beside myself with worry.’ She saw the stranger and stepped out of the kitchen onto the cobbled path. ‘Who are you loiterin’ around the house? Shoo, shoo be off with you now, you yellow devil following our Hannah. And you too you mangy looking thing.’ She stamped her foot at the dog and it started but then stood its ground.

The young chinaman turned and walked off towards the bush, the brown dog at his side.

‘No, wait’ Hannah whistled the dog to her. He stopped and looked at her and then at his companion’s retreating back.

‘Come on, come boy, come here’, and she dropped to her haunches and reached out to him. He came back, wriggling his rump. The Chinaman stopped and looked at them.

‘Please wait. Josie was just surprised, that’s all.’ She stood up and pulled the dog along with her, holding onto the long fur at the scruff of his neck. Josie was standing by the door, hands on hips.

‘Josie, it’s all right. Jack O’Hara asked could you prepare some food for the men. These two need something as well. Could you just bring some food for us?’

Her voice was breaking and she could feel the pressure behind her eyes. Josie looked suspiciously at the man and the dog, sighed and turned to go inside. She stopped and looked back as she reached the doorway. ‘I hope you weren’t down there on ya’ own. You should come inside and sit by the stove luv – you’re looking a bit done in and your clothes are a right mess. You’d be better in here where you’re safe.’

Hannah shook her head and stayed where she was. She turned to look for the Chinaman – he was standing where she left him, snapping twigs in his fingers. The dog was whining to go back but she held him firmly. Before long Josie reappeared with a tray crowded with damper, roast mutton and cheese and put it down on the bench where Hannah often sat in the sun.

Hannah sat and waited for the Chinaman to come over. She was still gripping the dog tightly by the scruff of the neck and she grabbed a large meat covered bone and placed it on the ground. The dog looked at the food but didn’t move and then she heard the man behind them. He said something to the dog and it stood as if transfixed, watching the bone intently.

She handed the Chinaman some damper and meat and then offered him the jug of water. He nodded and drank from it and then knelt to unwrap his swag, taking a large cloth from it, which he wrapped around the food. Hannah gave him the rest of the meat and some cheese, which he accepted, wrapping the whole bundle up and placing it back in his swag. He made a sharp sound to the dog and it grabbed the meaty bone in its jaws. Then they both turned and headed off towards the gate.

Hannah called out to him. ‘Please, I don’t know your name.’

He turned and looked directly at her. ‘Ah See Quong. I am called Jimmy Quong.’

‘I’m Hannah.’ But he was a long way down the path and she was not sure he’d heard her. She could feel the familiar pressing heaviness behind her eyes and she saw he was lit from behind by tiny specks of dancing light.

That night a storm hit, the sea whipped into a frenzied churn and the tea-trees moaning and creaking as their limbs scraped against each other in the dense canopy of the forest. Massive waves rolled in from the Pacific Ocean and threw themselves at the honeycombed cliffs below the whale-sighting tower with what seemed to Jimmy Quong malevolent ferocity.

Jimmy’s flimsy shelter was no match for the fury of the wind and driving rain. When he crawled from it to check on the damage he was hit with the full force of the wind and it seemed to suck the ground from under him. He reached into the tent and grabbed Hui by the scruff of his neck, slung his swag over his shoulder and ran to the lighthouse, stumbling in the dark and groping the walls to find an opening into the building. When he found a handle in what must be a narrow door it seemed to be stuck fast – he pulled at it with all the strength he could summon but he felt the wind tearing at his legs and he thought he would surely be blown from the edge of this place into the thundering seas below.

Just as he thought his arms could take no more the door gave and flew back against the lighthouse wall. He felt for the dog and found him cowering at the base of the wall. He grabbed him roughly by the fur and shoved him in the narrow opening. With the door pulled shut it was as if they had entered a cocoon, the stillness and calm strange in its suddenness.

He sat and leaned back against the wall, the cold of the stones seeping into him. How did he come to be in this strange place? Such a journey it had been since he and his father had left their homeland – he could barely remember that distant land and anything he did recall he was sure was only because of the stories his father, and later Moo Choo, had told him. He felt disconnected from those tales – it was as if they were about other lives, shadowy figures who inhabited his dreams. Even his father was beginning to fade into this dream space.

He opened his swag and pulled out the faded jacket, burying his face into its folds and breathing the scent. Was it his father he smelt or just layers of memory from his years in Kiandra. James and Martha were real to him – he could see their faces if he closed his eyes. James’ long face as he’d seen it last was imprinted in his mind, the features settled into something like peace but it was really just death

– peace was not a concept relevant to the dead, only to those left behind who wished it to be so.

Jimmy took the other items from the swag and arranged them on the floor beside him – a small gold nugget, the awl for tent repairs that had once been his father's, James' mahogany pipe and copy of *On the Origin of Species*, the glossy seed of that lychee from so long ago, and a small white stone from Martha's garden. The events of his life were contained in this motley collection of objects.

Hui stirred beside him, nervous in this enclosed place. Jimmy patted him and murmured that all would be well – if only he could believe this himself. There was a bad feeling in this place – not the lighthouse so much as the whole settlement. After so many years of his life being grafted onto people and places where he did not belong he was attuned to the nuances of hatred and fear – this place was humming with both. He would wait for the storm to pass and then he would move on.

There was nothing for him here, thought Jimmy as he slid into sleep, Hui snuffling quietly beside him.

### **Forest dogs**

I had to wait until night time before I could entice that black dog to follow me. I waited by the watchtower where the two of them were camped and he came out eventually. And follow me he did. We ran those tracks in the sharp, cold moonlight, our shadows dancing in front of us as if to taunt us with their speed. Along the clifftops, through the tea tree forest and into the death adder scrub, our muscles buzzing with the thrill. We were invincible, running that first night.

He was only ever partly with me on those nights, the rest was back with Jimmy Quong. I knew what that meant - these forest paths and earth are my Jimmy Quong.

For a short while on those nights we would be as one, rutting under the moon, the muskiness of the forest floor mingling with the scent of our bodies. Then I would be off to hunt alone or to sleep near Billyboy's camp, while the black one went back to his human, asleep in the stone tower on the headland.

Four days after the shipwreck on a late spring day the bodies of those who had perished were buried in a small cemetery overlooking the now-calm waters of Twofold Bay. They had chosen to bury them close to where they had been pulled

ashore rather than in the main cemetery in Eden. That would have required transporting the bodies the twenty miles by road. A good number of people had made the trip from town to pay their respects.

So under a leaden sky forty-two people were laid to rest in a small clearing just south of the whalery and prayers were offered up for their souls.

Jimmy stood apart from the gathering of townspeople and gazed out at the bay. He was not sure why he was even there – he had no link to anyone here, dead or alive. Seagulls wheeled above and he thought about that other graveyard high in the mountains where his father and James lay in distinctly separate areas and where crows, not seabirds, kept watch. It was years since he had been there – two years of wandering from place to place, of being treated with varying degrees of suspicion and more often than not outright hostility. Sometimes he was accepted without question but that was the exception and as he looked out at the ocean that had taken these lives he realised how tired he was of his restless, rootless existence. He reached down and ruffled Hui's rough coat. The dog looked up at him in anticipation of movement and then got back to the business of snapping at flies when it was clear there was none to be had. He was no longer a young dog and the sun was warming his bones.

Jimmy was not one to dwell on thoughts of the past but the burial brought back a rush of memories and he felt strangely lightheaded. He had left Kiandra soon after James died, only seven months after the fire. The following winter was a particularly harsh one, the snow arriving early in the season, blizzards driving the drifts high up to the windows of the house. The cold was relentless, damp settling into the timbers and seeping into the bones of a person.

Jimmy had struggled to keep the fire going when the firewood became sodden and he watched helplessly as James slowly shrank away. It was smoke damage Moo Choo said – he just couldn't seem to shake off the hacking cough that tore at his ever-shrinking frame.

Jimmy wrapped him in blankets and brought him warm broth just as Martha would have but he was not Martha and the emptiness in the house developed a presence of its own. When James stopped breathing early one morning the sky was clear and the thaw had begun – Jimmy went out to the porch and felt nothing but relief that he would no longer have to listen to those ragged breaths. It was only after he left, and was heading down from the mountains into unknown territory that the tight knot in his chest began to unravel.

Both George Chee and Ping Kee had implored him to stay – there was plenty for him to do in town – the vegetable plot had grown into a market garden and was now thriving, supplying the locals with fresh produce almost year-round. Ping Kee could do with extra help running the small team he now employed. George Ah Chee was also keen for him to be involved in the store. But he needed to go, to explore what lay beyond the confines of the settlement – to see some of the things he'd only read about or heard from James and Moo Choo.

The town itself had dwindled once the gold ran thin and he felt there was little to hold him there. He had underestimated the difficulty of leaving though – his days were long and lonely, Hui his only companion for weeks on end, and many times he longed to be back with Pinkie amongst the vegetables or drinking green tea with George. Work was not so easy to come by – between the high plains and the coast there were few settlers, just shacks where people scratched out a meagre existence.

There were a few settlements that were in the business of timber felling – sometimes he got work there but mostly they sent him away. He encountered bullock-drawn wagons creaking and groaning under the weight of massive logs as they made the treacherous journey down the mountain track to the coast, where the timber was transferred to steamers for transport to Sydney and Melbourne. Many didn't make it, wagons, drivers and bullocks sliding into gullies where the steepness of the track and sharpness of the bends proved too much for them.

Jimmy came across such scenes – once he had dragged an injured wagon driver back to the road, leaving him there while he walked two hours to the nearest hut, where a logger and his family lived. At first they would not even come to the door to speak with him and it was only when he refused to leave the rickety porch, that a ruddy-faced man opened the door and regarded Jimmy with a look of contempt.

‘Get off m’ property chink or I’ll shoot ya.’

Jimmy moved back towards the stairs but then stood his ground.

‘Before you do that you might want to know about your driver – he’s back down the road a couple of miles with a crushed leg. Told him I’d get someone to pick him up if I could.’

The door opened wider and the man stepped out, the reek of his body odour drifting out ahead of him.

‘Who the fuck y’ think y’ are comin’ here with ya bullshit yarns and dressed like ya one of us? Ya think I’ll let you in so y’ can rob me and take m’ girl just because ya’ speak like and Englishman. Y’ lying slant eyed bastard. You and ya fuckin’ mongrel.’

Hui gave a low growl and Jimmy grabbed him by the scruff of his neck, then turned and walked down the steps. When he reached the bottom he turned and looked at the man.

‘Up to you but I reckon Mr Jones, your driver’s name I believe, won’t last too long in this heat. In a bit of shock I’d say, what with the crushed leg and the gash on his head. Says the load could be salvaged if some men came with ropes and bullocks.’

He left with Hui at his side and headed back down the mountainside – half an hour later he heard horses and the rattle of carts. He moved to the side of the road as two carts passed, followed by a man on foot driving a couple of bullocks with a stock whip. None acknowledged him and he covered his face as the dust billowed around him.

He had received a similar reaction from many he encountered in the years that followed and he’d learnt to speak less openly, to approach others with considerable reserve. He’d had his best luck when he headed for the pastoral properties where they were desperate for workers to fence off their massive land holdings and to guard the livestock against the blacks. He was happy to do the fencing, the rest he left to others – it was not a task he felt compelled to take up. He enjoyed the days out in the fields – the satisfaction of driving in the posts and setting the wires so they were taut and firm. The monotony of the work sent him into a trance, heat shimmering off the baked earth, Hui never far from his side. He became lean and muscular and his natural reserve became honed to a flinty introspection. Few were able to penetrate it.

He was brought back to the present by the sound of people murmuring in prayer. He thought how those being buried on this day were not from this place – they would lie in strange earth far from their kin just as his father did. Just as he would one day. He shook his head to remove the melancholy thoughts and looked around at the group of people gathered by the graves. He saw the girl he’d met the day of the shipwreck standing with an older woman. She was wearing a dress of the darkest green, like alpine moss, and strands of her hair had escaped from her

bonnet and were blowing against her face. He could not reconcile this person with the one he had met amongst all that wreckage – it seemed like a distant dream.

She looked up and caught his gaze – her face was pale and heart-shaped with a slightly pointed chin and high, defined cheekbones – a strange mix of soft and angular. She didn't look away but stared at him with frank and open appraisal, as she might an object on display. Or that was how it seemed to him. She didn't smile and he felt hers was not a face that would smile readily or simply to satisfy social niceties. He was the first to look away.

The burial service was coming to an end and handfuls of dirt were being thrown into the open graves, the soil raining down on the coffins with a dull thud. The crowd was moving away up the hill and Jimmy felt cut adrift. He watched as the girl and the woman left the cemetery, the girl reaching behind her impatiently when her dress caught on a shrub. She looked back at him then and he felt something pass between them – of what he was unsure. It was an acknowledgement of some kind and it left him feeling even more alone as the last of the townspeople disappeared back to their lives. Only the gravediggers remained. He sighed and stooped to pick up his bundle of belongings, a deep weariness suddenly overwhelming him. Maybe he would stay another few nights on the headland before moving on.

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In the days following the burials Hannah was restless. The house felt like a prison and she was aware of the comings and goings of men who arrived to meet with her father, sometimes on horseback, other times by carriage, the sounds of the horses hooves on the gravel drive drifting up to her room in the early morning. These meetings were held in her father's study and she could hear the voices, sometimes raised in heated discussion but mostly just a muted drone behind the heavy timber doors. The tension in the house was palpable.

She knew they were discussing the dire state of her father's finances. It was not just the whaling - that at least had been moderately profitable during the peak season. He had postponed his plans to bring in more men from the South Pacific – something she had heard him discussing with Mr Blakely. According to Mr Blakely it was an 'insane notion' that would send her father bankrupt 'faster than you can spit'.

‘You think the men here will tolerate that Mr Conway? You might think you’re short of hands right now but you bring in more of those Islanders in and you won’t see the blacks for dust. Without them we’ll be in strife, Sir.’

‘Blakely who’s to say these islanders aren’t superior whalers to the local blacks? You have personal knowledge of that do you? Well, speak up man.’

‘No I don’t Mr Conway – all I’m sayin’ is we can’t afford to take the risk. Last lot you brought in were trouble and they up and left anyway. The blacks know the waters and they’ve got us out of strife in bad weather more times than I could count. And then there’s the killer whales Sir.’

‘Yes and they disappear without notice when it takes their fancy. And what of the damn killers?’

‘You know as well as I do our success rate has been pretty near ninety percent—maybe even higher - since we worked with the killers the way they showed us – the blacks I mean. Before that we were losing half in the chase. Not to mention the number of men we lost.’

‘You know my thoughts on that. I’m not convinced we need either of them.’

Blakely had stood his ground, offering to bring his record keeping to prove his point. He had prevailed for the time being.

It seemed what had really undone Arthur Conway this time was his determination to expand into shipping, including a huge investment in the new steamer route between Eden and Sydney, as well as land holdings that stretched from southern New South Wales to Victoria. This past year the drought had been devastating with so many of the livestock perishing.

‘Livestock’ always made Hannah think of paddocks filled with rows of inanimate objects rather than the flesh and blood animals she had seen for herself. She had watched them as she passed the cleared lands on trips into town and on her longer journeys to Goulburn with her father. She had sketched them as she sat on the verandah sipping tea with the foreman’s wife on one of her father’s properties. Currawongs chortled in the trees behind the homestead and the heat shimmered on the horizon as she sketched and struggled to replicate the forms of those creatures, the sheep weighed down by their woollen coats, thick with dust and burrs, the cattle with their mournful gaze and powerful frames. She had watched them grazing when feed was plentiful and during droughts she had seen them wither to little more than walking skeletons, frail creatures in a brown land that stretched into the distance.

She had wondered then what it meant to be Miss Hannah Conway, daughter of Joseph Conway, entrepreneur, businessman, station owner, boss. She wondered even more now. How simple it was to change who you were in the world by simply donning another guise. She had managed it time and again, slipping out unnoticed to walk in the bush or to forage in bays and alcoves. She had sketched and dreamed and dug with her hands in soil and sand for hours on end. As long as she took care to be in the schoolroom for her lessons she was not missed. Even after she returned to the house signs of her wanderings, of her other self as she thought of it, met with little more than a murmur from Josie about the state of her hair and fingernails. Her place in this house appeared to be based on little more than appearance and clothing. Remove those things and she was another creature altogether, one that could disappear into the surrounding landscape.

She left the house in the full light of day dressed in the stable hand's britches and shirt and wearing a fisherman's cap to cover her hair. Josie was busy preparing food for the men in her father's study and there was nobody else, after all, who would even notice her absence. She felt the cool spring air envelop her as she walked along the path to the ocean.

Jimmy was standing on the rock platform below the sighting tower when he saw her walking towards him. He observed the figure in its boy's garb as it approached and he wondered briefly at the grace of the boy's gait. It was the sudden quickening of his pulse and a strange shifting sensation in his centre that made him sharpen his gaze. Hui was still for only a moment before springing from the rocks and sprinting along the sand to meet her. Jimmy did not call him back but watched as the girl stooped to embrace the dog. He heard her laughter and it sounded to him like the purest of songs. He waited for the two of them to come back to him.

**Each blade of grass has its spot on earth whence it draws its life, its strength; and so is man rooted to the land from which he draws his faith together with his life.**

**— Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim***

## **Part Four**

### **Shadow dog**

**T**he winter of 1865 was a tough one, temperatures dipping to bone-aching lows and storms lashing the camps. I sheltered with Billyboy when I could but I was distracted by that black dog much of the time, which meant I was out in the weather more often than not. That, and my strange yearning to be near the mongrel, began to take its toll. Food was not so plentiful that winter either, or maybe it was just that I was not hunting with my usual vigour.

All in all I was a shadow of my former self by the time I felt the stirrings in my belly that were the fruits of my nights in the forest with the black one. Of course I should have laid low then, built up my reserves but I barely acknowledged the changes inside me. I continued to run with Hui and to wait for him by the tower even when my stomach rumbled in emptiness.

Others too were ignoring the signs around them. Joseph Conway had begun to wander the forest paths on his own, many a time without a coat, his shirt and waistcoat adrift, as was his mind. I saw him often and I kept well out of his way. By the time he ordered the men to go out on that fateful whale haul he'd pretty much lost his faculties. On his way down he brought many with him, blundering around in his arrogant madness.

So deluded was he that he didn't see his daughter was running wild with a Chinaman. Dressed as a stable boy and walking off, bold as could be, to spend time with Jimmy Quong. Jimmy carried her drawing things for her and she took him food from the kitchen. They wandered high and low, seeking places where few but the Yuin went. It continued all through that winter and only the housekeeper seemed to care where the girl might be. But Josie was getting old and her mind was not as sharp as it once was so she let things slip. She had plenty on her mind already, trying to run a household on credit that had run dry, as the wolves began to circle and demand their dues.

Somehow I got tangled in that mess. Maybe the madness had infected the place, spreading its poison into the forests, seeping into the air that we breathed and the earth we walked on. I don't know now – all I can say is that I didn't see it coming and for a creature like me that is woeful. Woe is me. Or to be more precise, woe was me. Now I am free of it all.

### **Twofold Bay, winter 1865**

The whaling season was a difficult one that year, storms affecting the number of whales the men brought in. The mood in the settlement was also strange, a restlessness arriving with the winter winds. Hannah was not woken as often that winter but even so during the peak of the hunting season her nights were often filled by the sounds of the kill. The killer whales began the chase, rounding up the migrating whales as they passed the entrance to the bay and herding them into the shallower waters. Often it was a female with its offspring and she would listen to the calls back and forth between the creatures.

The killers would call to each other constantly - high pitched noises, interspersed with clicking or drumming sounds that reverberated around the cliffs like an eery war cry. Or so it seemed to Hannah, who came to associate these sounds with the savagery of the whale hunt that followed.

There was no escape from these drawn out battles - it was the lifeblood of this place and the men and the orcas worked together to bring down the whales, rich in blubber and the precious oil.

It was a morning after one of these long hunting nights that Hannah descended the stairs from her room to find her father deep in conversation with Joseph Blakely. Blakely had obviously just arrived as he was flushed and out of breath, hat clutched tightly in his hand.

They were standing just inside the entrance hallway, their figures washed in streaks of pink and blue thrown by the panels of stained glass in the large entrance door. Hannah paused on the landing, struck by the contrast of the soft light and the hard profiles of the two men.

She was shocked by her father's appearance – he was unshaven and dishevelled, his hair streaked with grey and his clothes creased, as if he had slept in them. She realised she rarely saw him, even though he was away in Sydney less frequently of late. Many days she heard him pacing in his study and once when she was foraging with Jimmy in rockpools close to the seal colony she had seen

him up above them on the headland, a lone figure staring out to sea. She had gripped Jimmy's arm in fright and pulled him towards the rock overhang where they were hidden from view. Now they sought places less exposed, where their most likely companions were raucous gangs of cockatoos or wallabies grazing on the tufty grasses. Sometimes they stumbled across an aboriginal camp and the voices of the women, busy with their daily tasks, would fall silent, until starting up again when they saw that it was only the Chinaman who talked like a white man and the girl who dressed like a boy.

The previous night she had heard noises from her father's room and she had lain there in silence, hating herself for her cowardice. She had tried to talk to Josie about Ellen but Josie had simply pursed her lips and looked away – 'It's the way of things Miss Hannah – it's not my place to interfere, even if your father would listen to me, which he does not.' She had turned away her face creased with worry.

Hannah stopped her descent of the stairs to listen to the men below.

'It's a problem Sir and there's no getting away from it. I've put the word out that they are to come back and finish the job but I'm not getting any co-operation.'

'What do you mean co-operation man? We're not in the business of bargaining with crew Blakely – they damn well won't be paid if they aren't back out there in the next hour. Tell them that.'

'Of course I would do that if I could Sir but they've just up and left. I sent Johnson out on one of the horses to see if he could track them down and he came back a while ago, saying he'd found some of them heading back to their camp. They're not saying much, and most of it in their own lingo so Johnson was struggling somewhat to make sense of it all.'

'So what is the problem then Blakely? He must have got something from them.'

'Not much I have to admit Sir. All he could make out was talk of something amiss with one of their women – one of the young gins it seems, Sir.'

Blakely looked down at his feet and clutched his crumpled hat more tightly. A silence descended on the two men and Hannah was unsure whether she should take this opportunity to walk down the rest of the staircase. She felt it unwise to let her father know she had been listening so she remained stranded on the landing.

Arthur Conway's voice was barely audible when he spoke again but his anger was palpable.

'Blakely I don't want to hear any more of this ridiculous diatribe. I'll give you two hours to get those boats manned and back out in the water. If you don't I will hold you personally responsible for the loss of the animal. And I don't have to remind you of just what that is worth – you will be paying for it out of your own pocket.'

Blakely looked up at his boss and Hannah could see the flash of something in his eyes.

'Mr Conway I will do my utmost to retrieve the situation. I do feel it incumbent upon me though, Sir, to point out to you that it is usual for the carcass to be left for a couple of days so that the killer whales can feed on the tongue. As you know I'm not from these parts but the men who are insist on this point. It is how it is done – a kind of arrangement with the natives – some sort of pact they believe they have with the killers – a sort of payment for their services, if you see what I mean, Sir.'

Arthur Conway had opened the front door and he pointed towards the bay.

'Just get back there and do your job Blakely. There's weather coming. The blacks and their pacts and their ridiculous tales can go to Hell.'

A small group of men were gathered outside the main shed when Jimmy and Hui arrived at the whalery early one morning. They fell silent as the Chinaman and the stringy black dog appeared. They knew he had been camping at the sighting tower these past weeks but nobody had bothered about it much, assuming he'd move on soon enough.

Jimmy stopped short of the group and took his swag from his back, lowering it slowly to the ground. He motioned for Hui to sit.

'Morning,' he said, nodding in the direction of the group.

The men shuffled uneasily and remained silent. Then one of them moved forward.

'You lookin' for anyone in particular mate?'

Jimmy shook his head. 'Just work.'

'Well you're out of luck. Nothin' goin' here.'

The men were looking at Jimmy with a mixture of surprise and wariness on their faces. He spoke like a white man, and an educated one at that, but he was clearly a chink, minus the pigtail and strange getup.

Just then Joseph Blakely appeared at the doorway to the shed and looked around at the group of men. He sighed and gestured for them to come in, stepping aside to let them through.

‘Jack, we’ll have to just take the one boat out as there’s not enough for the two. How the heck we’re going to pull the thing in I don’t know but we’ve got orders to do it before it sinks.’

He held up his hand to silence the men as they began to protest.

‘Yes I know. There’ll be trouble with the blacks. But these are my orders and we’re just going to have to manage without them if we have to. It’s out of my hands.’

He stopped short when he caught sight of the Chinaman and his skinny dog standing behind the group.

‘Morning – is there something I can do for you?’

Jimmy looked at the man’s large creased face, eyes bloodshot and drooping. He stepped forward and held out his hand. Blakely looked at the hand and then moved his gaze back to Jimmy’s face.

‘I’m in a hurry here – what’s the problem? What brings you here?’

Jimmy tucked his hand into the strap of his swag. ‘Just looking for work.’

‘There’s nothing here – only for those experienced with a boat and the business of whaling. Don’t suppose that’s up your alley?’

‘Not whaling as such but I have some boating experience, working on steamers.’

Blakely snorted. ‘That’s not going to help you much with bringing in a whale.’ He looked Jimmy up and down and then stood squinting for a moment. He thought of the whale and the price for him if he failed to bring it in. There was more bad weather on the way and with the blacks up and disappearing he had his back to the wall – one boat, with not even a full crew, was going to push the men to their limits. But a Chinaman? He assessed the man in front of him – young and lean for sure but strong looking despite his lack of bulk. Not your usual Chinaman that was for sure – a refinement to him and fluent English from what he’d heard. Strange. Beggars could not be choosers and this morning he was most definitely

feeling like a beggar. He stepped back and motioned to the Chinaman to enter the shed.

‘Ah what the heck. We’re a bit short on crew today as it happens so you may as well come in and give it a go. If you slip up or get in the way though I’m warning you that lot is likely to throw you overboard as quick as look at you. There’s no room for slackers.’

‘Thankyou.’ Jimmy moved towards the door with Hui beside him.

‘Not the mongrel – he can’t come in here.’

Jimmy stopped abruptly. ‘I don’t go anywhere without Hui Sir. He will not bother anyone I can promise you that.’

‘What do you bloody think this is – the circus? We can’t have dogs in here.’

Jimmy just stood there, face impassive. Blakely was about to insist but then shrugged and motioned him in. ‘All right, bring the mongrel in but if it so much as gets under my feet I’ll shoot the bloody thing. And drop the sir – it’s Mr Blakely.’

Jimmy reached down and touched the dog’s head. ‘Thank you – Hui will not cause you any trouble.’

The man and the dog stepped through the doorway into the rank odour of boiling whale flesh.

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When they got the boat out into the bay it was clear the wind was going to be a problem. The swell was up and the boat rose sharply with each foam-capped peak then plummeted into the troughs at a sickening angle. They had put Jimmy midway down the boat and he gripped the hard bench beneath him, doing his best not to look at the size of the waves ahead. He knew this was madness.

He was not expected to help with the rowing – they had taken him as an extra set of hands to help secure the whale to the boat. He’d deduced from the men’s talk that this was usually done the day following the hunt, giving the orcas time to feast on the tongue, which was the only part they were interested in, and allowing the carcass time to become bloated and rise to the surface. This made the towing easier and rewarded the killers for their part in the hunt. This time the boss was not waiting – too much risk of the weather washing both the buoy and whale out to sea, he said.

There was talk amongst the men before they set out that Conway had lost his mind – there had been worse weather than this before and they'd not lost a carcass. There was only twice in all the years commercial whaling had been going on in these parts that it happened and that was well before Conway's time here. On both occasions there had been mighty storms lasting for days. There were mutterings about his judgement.

Only Joseph Blakely knew the real extent of Conway's impaired judgement and this went far beyond poor decisions about weather. The financial backers were circling and they were much more ruthless than the killer whales. But he wasn't about to let these men know the extent of their boss's financial woes. Besides it was not just his poor money management that was the issue on this occasion – there were far more pressing concerns to do with his personal indiscretions. Blakely shuddered at the thought of where it all might lead. The blacks could well have their own ways of sorting these things out.

The hunt had taken place the night before and the whale had been attached to the buoy in the early hours, just at first light. It had been a long and strenuous hunt – two teams going at it all through the night. The whale had kept on running for hours after the harpoon had hit its mark and the lancing had been a long drawn out affair.

The killers had done their part, rounding up the huge humpback as it headed north for the winter and pushing it towards the shallower waters of the coastline before calling the men to the hunt with their leaping and slapping in the bay below Conway's house. It had been the usual group, each one known to the natives in the team by name and easily identified by the shape of their dorsal fin. The rest of the team had their names for them as well – they had named the leader of the pack Old Sam and it was this killer with his long bent fin that was always to be seen in the bay sounding out a warning to the men that there were whales to be had.

It was Old Sam they spotted first, long before they sighted the marker. He appeared beside the boat and then moved off, his fin disappearing from sight as the boat pitched into another deep trough.

The men were silent, the effort of the rowing and keeping the boat on course consuming their strength. Suddenly there was a cry 'Whale ahead'. Jimmy craned his neck to see and he could see nothing but the endless expanse of heaving water.

The rest of the crew were moving with a renewed purpose and a short nuggetty man with broad back and arms thick with muscle stood at the prow calling directions to the rowers.

Then they were there, alongside the marker and an anchor was thrown overboard, the rope whistling as it uncurled from the bottom of the boat. Jimmy imagined it coiling around his legs and taking him down into those churning depths. He pressed his legs tightly against the edge of the hard bench and waited for instructions from the men.

The man in front of him turned abruptly and thrust a long pole with a metal hook at the end into his hand. Jimmy felt panic clutch at his bowels and then he was on his feet reaching over the end to hook the rope that was attached to the floating marker. He could see the killer whales circling and leaping only feet from the boat. There were at least a dozen, their black fins weaving and zig zagging around the buoy.

The men were barking instructions at each other and moving along the boat with a measured intensity.

‘Make sure ya don’t make it jump around or y’ll tip us all overboard and there’ll be no-one to pull ya out. We’ve got no second boat,’ the man had said to him as he thrust the pole at him. ‘Just get the rope hooked at the buoy and keep it there till we’re ready to haul it in.’

It hadn’t been as difficult as Jimmy had feared – he moved carefully, making sure he didn’t make any sudden movement and leaned only as far as necessary to reach the buoy. After half a dozen attempts he managed to slide the hook behind the rope where it was threaded through a metal loop on the marker’s side. He called out ‘got it’ and one of the men moved alongside him with another pole. The others were busy keeping the boat in position, an almost impossible feat in these conditions.

While Jimmy kept pressure on the hook the other pole was used to snag the rope just under the water’s surface so they did not risk losing it once it was unhooked from the buoy.

Within minutes his muscles were aching with the effort of keeping his arms outstretched. With every movement of the boat his arms were wrenched in their sockets and he could feel he was slipping further forward towards the heaving ocean.

He gritted his teeth, willing himself to hang on and not to yell out with the pain. Below him, just beneath the water's surface, he could see the massive form of the humpback, where it was beginning to sink. He thought about the earlier conversation between the men.

'There'll be trouble with the blacks for sure,' a tall ginger man had muttered – Bluey the others called him. 'Last lot of whalers that set up in these parts, years back, tried huntin' without the killers - they barely got three humpbacks a winter I've heard. Thought the killers were nothin' but a nuisance. But the blacks started joining the crews and they'd always hunted with the killers - that's how we've been doin' it since.'

'Yeh well Mr Conway, educated man that he be, thinks it's all a load of hogwash,' another one had said.

'He's goin' to find out soon enough what's hogwash and what's not,' said Bluey. 'The killers should get their dues. And there'll be trouble with the blacks.'

'Could be the blacks are trouble whichever way you look at it,' said another. 'Who's to say they're not havin' us all on with this killer business and it'd work just as well without 'em'

'Oh yeh and who's to say you aint got rocks in that head of yours Bill O'Grady? 'Or maybe you 'ave a hidden skill for callin' the whales into the bay.'

In the end it was a fruitless conversation as Conway was the one paying their wages and he was not one for backing down.

Now, as Jimmy stood in the flimsy boat looking down at the largest creature he had ever seen, he thought these men and their plans were fragile things. It seemed a miracle to him they had managed to destroy this mighty animal with their wooden boats and sticks and knives.

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In the mayhem that followed when the men attached the whale to the boat and began hauling it to shore, none could recall exactly what triggered the killer whales' strange behaviour. They were unprepared for the determined acts of sabotage, having always experienced total co-operation from the animals.

For Jimmy it was all new and all he could say was that the killers had become frenzied in their movements once the boat began to move towards shore. Progress

had been slow enough, with the wind and the swell working against them at every stroke, but once the killer whales began pursuing them it was nigh on impossible.

The animals leapt from the water throwing their glistening bodies against the surface time and again. Several of them grabbed at the tow-rope and the men had to hit at them with the oars before they released it. But they kept coming back, harrying the men, some diving in front of the boat and others returning to grab at the rope. Old Sam could be seen amongst those trying to pull on the rope, his large bent dorsal fin clearly visible in the group.

Nobody could say who it was that had struck the fatal blow. In the end there was a blur of oars raining down on the animals as time and again they came back to the rope. With the waves pummelling the boat and the strain of hauling the whale carcass the men were desperate to get back to shore.

What was certain was that one of the killer whales was dead. They could see it bobbing behind them in the boat's wake and the rest of the killers had dropped back and were circling it. A silence descended on the group of men. Bluey was the first to speak.

'Lucky there's no blacks with us, that's all I can say.'

'We had no bloody choice in it,' Bill O'Grady muttered. 'If we'd lost the carcass we'd be have more than the blacks to worry about. Conway'd string us up I reckon.'

'Yeh well let's just hope it doesn't wash up in the bay.'

Somehow they managed to get the boat back in. Blakely was down at the slips waiting for them and he could see the exhaustion and grimness in their faces as they came ashore. The Chinaman looked as if he'd been to hell and back and Blakely had no doubt he had.

By the time they'd got the whale up onto the pulley the weather had closed in and an icy rain was blowing in from the sea. They secured the carcass and retreated to the shed, all of them shaking with cold and sheer exhaustion.

Jimmy went to the corner where Hui was pulling at his rope, tail beating madly against the metal post where he was tied up. It seemed impossible to Jimmy that he had left him here only four hours ago – it seemed an eternity. He knelt down and rubbed his face against the dog's warm body, relief washing over him. How good the solid ground felt under his feet. Even Hui's breath was welcome in his face after the briny stench of the men and the reek of the try works.

One of the men walked up and held out a metal beaker to Jimmy. 'Here, you might as well get that into ya – it'll warm you up a bit. Help ya get ya land legs back.'

Jimmy nodded his thanks and took a gulp, the harsh liquor burning a trail down his throat. When he glanced up again the men were all looking in his direction and Bluey beckoned to him. 'Come on mate. Let's drink to a job well done – we did all right I reckon - considering. And you were pretty steady for a Chinaman I'd say. Not bad all up.'

The men shuffled and made way for Jimmy to join the group.

'So here's to us,' said Bluey and they all lifted their ramekins in unison and downed their liquor. Jimmy felt dizzy with tiredness and grog but mostly he was light headed with the unaccustomed sense of camaraderie. He was aware something rare was happening but his gut told him it was a tenuous bond that joined these men, a bond built on shared apprehension and guilt.

The small cove below the sighting tower was proving bountiful for Jimmy. The fish and shellfish, together with the supplies Hannah brought him, meant he was surviving without too much trouble. Over the past week he had been making the most of the calm seas and fine weather to collect shellfish off the rocks in the narrow inlet. Rock platforms at both ends of the beach were abundant with oysters, pippis, sea snails and crabs.

The path down from the headland to the cove was steep and treacherous in places and on his first try he had had to pick his way with care, grabbing hold of stunted heathland from time to time to keep his balance. Hui was not keen and barked continuously, hanging back reluctantly in the scrub. Eventually they reached the small beach and Jimmy sat heavily on the sand, face turned to the morning sun in relief. On the cliffs above him nesting seabirds shuffled and squabbled. Since then he had found a better way – a path that was not immediately obvious as it wound down more gradually and started further along the headland. Once he discovered it his visits to the cove were much easier and more frequent.

That morning he'd managed to prise enough oysters and other small shellfish off the rock platform to give him a decent feed. He used some of his remaining ration of flour and salt to make damper - all in all a satisfying meal.

He now made the trek down the path every morning, Hui trailing along behind. They both grew less cautious as the path became more familiar.

Earlier that day he had disturbed a colony of penguins when he explored the rock platform at the southern end of the bay where it extended around to the next inlet, something that was only possible at low tide. He heard the birds before he saw them but a large chasm in the rocks formed a wide channel and prevented him reaching the area where they nested. The channel ran back some distance into the cliff-face. Even at low tide the swell was formidable, the water rushing into the crevice and then back out again, pulling at the seaweed-coated walls with a hollow sucking.

Despite the barrier that separated Jimmy and Hui from the penguins the birds squawked and yelped, swarming across the platform like a miniature waddling army. Hui was beside himself with excitement, running backwards and forwards along the edge of the rocks and yapping with frustration. Jimmy had to drag him away so that they could head back to the beach.

He planned to try his luck with some fishing later on using some gear that Jack O'Hara had lent him. Such generosity was a surprise to him but the men at the whalery, if not exactly welcoming him, seemed to tolerate his presence. Whaling was a world like no other that he had encountered - Chinese, Aboriginal, Irish, Scots, all thrown together, man pitted against beast and the elements. He had no illusions that such egalitarianism extended to life in the town.

When he'd returned to the whalery after the whale haul to check if there was more work, there were only a few men there, Jack O'Hara amongst them.

'Nah, nothin' goin' right now – right at the rear end of the season. Most 'a the crew's headin' off. Fencin' and the like. Some 'a the blacks stay around n' help out and a few of the other old timers. Not very good timin' rollin' up this time a the year.'

'I might stay a while. Do some fishing, rest up a bit.'

'You'll be needin' some good tackle down on them rocks, that's for sure. What are you intendin' to be usin'??'

'I'm not sure, to tell the truth. I've done a bit of ocean fishing but I have no equipment. I am more accustomed to river fishing, using flies for trout, or trapping and netting.'

'Are ya just – accustomed and all? Is that how coolies fish then? Nets won't be much use around here. Not if ya want a decent feed.'

Jimmy was not inclined to react – he'd been called worse. Much worse.

Jack O'Hara handed him a box of tackle and a long rod made from the finest spotted gum. He said it had the right strength with just the right amount of flex to pull in snapper, tailor and maybe even small sharks. These were all familiar to Jimmy from his short time on the steamers. In between trips up and down the coast, when the boats were in for maintenance, the crew would put in some time fishing, either from the shore or sometimes off rock outcrops. Jimmy liked the meditative effect of the repetition– throwing in the line, waiting, your mind drifting in time with the ebb and flow of the swell, the short burst of activity when something was hooked. Then back again – a long arc of reverie punctuated with peaks of excitement and the strident aroma of fish flesh. White underbellies flashing on mirrored sand.

Now as he headed along the beach he could hear voices. As he got further along he could see a group of aboriginal women and children busy on the rock platform at the northern end, baskets half filled with shells and small fish, their laughter and chatter loud in the narrow cove. As he approached they were pulling some kind of net from a large rock pool and he saw the glint of the trapped fish. A small child poked at the struggling creatures, his laughter stopping abruptly when he saw Jimmy walking towards the group. The women stood upright, calling the children to their sides and Jimmy came to a stop. He smiled and raised his hand in greeting. They watched him for some minutes and then went back to their activities, his presence seemingly judged of no particular consequence.

He was curious to see what they had caught, particularly as he needed guidance as to what exactly was edible and what he should avoid. In Kiandra he knew some of the local blacks – the few who traded with the miners - and he'd learnt some of their language. These were a different people and he couldn't decipher their words. He sat on the sand and watched from a distance – they ignored him and then as they were leaving the cove one of the women placed something on the rocks and called out in his direction, the words tumbling together in the morning air. He turned to watch them as they climbed the track back up to the headland, the children running ahead in a blur of ebony limbs.

Five small fish lay on the rocks and he gathered them up in his shirt, the clammy coolness of them seeping through the fabric. He felt his stomach contract in anticipation and it was only then that he realised how hungry he was. His diet had been sparse over the past week – he would need to take care to improve it,

particularly as he had no clear idea of what the future held and whether he would find work soon.

He cleaned and gutted the fish at the water's edge and took them up to the rear of the beach where he had built a fire in the dry sand under a rock overhang the previous day. He had tried to keep the embers going as he was low on flint and he now spent time building it back up, crouching beside it and blowing gently until a dull glow slowly emerged. When he was satisfied the fire would hold he sat and threaded the fish onto long green saplings, which he placed across the fire supported by rocks on either end. The saplings smouldered and smoked and he turned his head away when his eyes began to smart. He would suffer stinging eyes and more just to inhale the aroma. His stomach began to rumble and gurgle and he prodded the fish to see if they were ready. Almost but he should give them a bit more time – he wanted them to be perfect.

Jimmy's absorption in his task was interrupted by the arrival of someone on the beach. Hui was lying with his head on his paws, one eye on the cooking fish, when he suddenly lifted his head, ears pricked and eyes alert. Jimmy looked along the stretch of sand and saw a girl moving towards him. She wore a pale coloured dress, which dragged in the sand and as she got closer he could see that she was aboriginal. The contrast of her appearance with those others he had seen earlier was stark and he wondered if she came from Conway's house. Hannah had talked to him about the girl who helped in the house and when she did so there was a tightness in her voice.

The girl was not far from him now and he could hear that she was talking, stopping now and then to pull at her clothing and claw at her arms. Her distress was evident but he did not feel he could approach her without causing her even more harm. Hui whined softly and Jimmy put his hand on him to keep him still.

The girl began to rip at her dress, tearing it from her shoulders and then from her waist until it hung from her, revealing her breasts and swollen abdomen. She looked down at herself as if in a trance and then began to moan, rocking slowly from side to side. Jimmy felt stricken, as if he had stolen something from this girl by witnessing her grief. She stopped her moaning suddenly and looked towards Jimmy and Hui. For a moment he thought she might yell out in anger or alarm but she seemed to look through and beyond them to the sea. She turned then, stepping delicately from the dress and petticoats that were bundled around her ankles and walked away from them, her long legs, no longer encumbered, lithe and swift on

the sand. As she disappeared up the steep path, Jimmy hung his head and let out the breath that he only now realised he had been holding for some time.

The fish were ready and he settled back with Hui to enjoy them. Despite the emptiness of his stomach and the juiciness of the fish, he had difficulty swallowing the food, the image of the girl's rounded belly and the sound of her sorrow were embedded in him.

At the whalery Tom O'Hara was feeling decidedly jittery. Word was the aborigines were gathering down at the inlet – not just the locals but a much larger group, some from further up the coast around Pambula and Merimbula according to some of the lads. He didn't like it – there must be something up. He'd have to have a word with Blakely, let him know he thought trouble was brewing.

Ever since the crew had brought the whale in and had the tussle with the killers he had been waiting for some sort of reaction from the blacks. They had a system going that had been working well for years so why go and blow it to jiggery over one damn whale. He didn't claim to understand the way the killers worked with the crew, how they knew when to hang back and when to push forward after the whales, but he knew it worked, even if at times they got too close to the boat for his liking and risked tangling up the ropes. The fact was they didn't. All they expected was the tongue and the lips for their part of the chase and that seemed like a fair deal to him.

The local blacks thought of these animals as their brothers of the sea – Billyboy Davies had once told him the Beowas, as the blacks called them, had been warriors before they ended up in the sea as killer whales. Damn crazy sort of notion as far as he was concerned but he saw no good reason to object to it. Nobody could hunt with them like the blacks, there was no argument there. Everyone had been happy enough with the arrangement – it meant the crews killed a good number of the whales that came in close enough to the coast, the killers surrounding them and chasing them into the bay, pursuing them just like a pack of dogs would their prey. By the time the men joined the chase the animal was half dead from exhaustion and they just had to finish it off. Not to say this was an easy task but it was a damn lot easier than it would be otherwise. The killer whales got their feed and the men got their whale.

Since the crew had not only ignored the law of the tongue but also killed off one of the killers, there were bound to be repercussions. What exactly they would

be he had no idea. He did know the pack of killers had not been seen in the bay since – unusual for this time of the year. They were territorial creatures and they spent much of the season around the bay, only heading south in the summer months. If they went elsewhere it would be the death knell for whaling here. If the blacks jacked up as well Arthur Conway could kiss his meagre profits goodbye.

There was nothing else for it but to go down to the inlet and see what was happening. Tom pulled on his boots and then headed off down the track and had not gone far before he heard the sounds of voices rising in a mournful kind of lament and the sharp knocking of the wooden sticks the aborigines used in their ceremonies. The sounds seemed to pulsate through the air around him and into his chest.

He knew better than to go too close – he would not be welcomed. He followed the track until he was just above the inlet where river ran down to the ocean. The forest here was dense and he could see the beach clearly without risk of being observed. There was a large gathering of blacks down there and they were holding a ceremony of some kind – one of the old men was chanting and moving around the group with piece of bark or wood covered in smoking leaves and twigs. They were not far from the water's edge and he could see a large shape on the wet sand. He edged forward, trying to see more clearly – there were so many of them gathered around. He groaned as the realisation sunk in – the killer whale had washed ashore, or maybe the aborigines had brought it in. It would have to be rotting by now – it was over a week since the men had killed it. He watched silently as the keening drifted towards him and was surprised at the sense of loss that washed through him.

Josie was worried. She hadn't seen Hannah since she came down for breakfast and the girl Ellen had gone missing. There was no hiding the fact that the girl was with child and Josie was in no doubt who was responsible for that. The whole situation was far too much for her, what with Joseph Conway a law unto himself and Hannah disappearing all the time. She had nobody to help her now –at least when Miss Pringle and Mr Symonds had been here there had been some sense of order, of civilized behaviour. Now it was nothing but chaos and if it wasn't for Hannah she would have up and left herself. She'd had word from her sister in Goulburn that a position was going there for a housekeeper and she had been sorely tempted to get the next coach out. But she couldn't leave Hannah here with

that man. To make things worse she'd been expecting the delivery man to come with his horse and cart but the morning had stretched into afternoon and still no sign of him. She was beside herself with anxiety – there was barely a cup of flour left in the pantry and the sugar had run out the day before. She could see old Bill pottering around in the vegetable patch – it was a mystery to her why he kept turning up as she was sure he hadn't been paid in a long while. She dried her hands on her apron and went out through the scullery to the garden.

‘Afternoon Bill, how are you faring in this cold weather?’

Bill got to his feet and removed his hat, squinting into the afternoon sunlight.

‘Good day to ya Josie – I’m not too bad, few aches and pains but not too much to complain of. How would you be Josie?’

‘I’ve had better days Bill. I’m right worried about the supplies to tell you the truth. No sign of Dick Mahony and his cart all mornin’ and he was to be here with flour and salt and sugar. Oh and some mutton.’

Bill looked down at the ground and kicked at a clod of earth near the garden edge.

‘Well I don’t think he’s comin’ today Josie. Word is he might not be able to get out here for a while. I’ve got some cabbages here that are ready for you Josie – good and plump like.’

Josie felt the panic rising in her and she clenched her fists in tight balls against her apron, trying to keep the tears from coming.

‘Oh Bill, that’s good of you. Looks like it’ll have to be spuds and cabbage for dinner tonight. Would you like to join me for a cup of tea in the kitchen?’

‘Most kind of you Josie, I’ll just give myself a bit of a brush off and I’ll be right in. Dig these cabbages up for you while I’m at it.’

Josie went back to the kitchen and stood by the stove. There was nothing for it then, she'd just have to take Hannah with her if it came to that. The man wasn't fit to be her father anyway. But where was the girl? She didn't have the strength to keep track of her, what with the worries of keeping some sort of food on the table. It was more than she could do to manage the chores. She would have to find a way and maybe old Bill could help her – he had never let her down yet. She sighed and lifted the kettle to the hob, pushing it to the centre of the plate where the heat rose in quivering waves.

### **A creature's lament**

**I**t was a bleak day full of driving rain when my pains hit. I had prepared a place near Billboy's shelter but I was far from there when the time came. I was not ready but those creatures in my belly were keen to get out. So I sheltered where I could in a hollow in the tea tree scrub where the canopy was dense enough to keep the ground dry. It was only when I had been there for half a day that I heard the sound of that girl close by. By then it was too late for me to move.

She was in a bad way, that much was clear, her wails rising in a crescendo as the day wore on. I shivered in my hollow, unable to flee. It went on for so long that I lost sense of where we were and whether her cries were mine or my whimpers hers. When it was finally over with only the creaking of the tea trees' gnarled limbs to keep me company, I had pushed out five black pups, all of them silent and still in their slimy birth sacs, eyes closed tightly to the world. I was desperate then to make them breathe but they were resolute. Even as I licked them and pushed them with my snout until my tongue was raw and my heart all a quiver they refused to relent. Not one would open its mouth and breathe.

Did I bury them there amongst the leaves in my hollow? I can't be sure now – it has faded over time. I do know that I was filled with a kind of urgent sorrow when I stumbled across that newborn human, its tiny black body wrapped in a cloth, and left on the forest floor. I licked its face with my ravaged tongue and it mewled. So I knew then that it was mine to care for and I took the knot of that bundle in my mouth and headed back to the only place where I was sure there would be shelter and food. I trusted BillyBoy and had raised many a litter near his camp – this one would be raised there too.

The aboriginal gathering could be heard up and down the coast, the sound of the singing, the deep thrumming of the didgeridoo and the sharp knocking of clapping sticks bouncing off the sandstone cliffs and travelling out to the ocean where the killer whales had hunted. Now the killers were gone and the word was out amongst the whaling crew that the aborigines might up and leave as well. That's what Tom O'Hara had told the others after seeing BillyBoy Davies. Tom was of the opinion the blacks wanted revenge and while the men were full of bravado, none were keen to stand up to the local blacks. The death of the killer whale was an accident, one that would not have happened if it weren't for crazy Arthur

Conway and his schemes. Most of the men had packed their few belongings and were ready to go.

Joseph Blakely had retired to his cottage after meeting with the men. He was of the opinion not much could be done about the situation right now – best to leave the blacks to their ceremonies and hope that things settled down. But as he sat down to have some meagre supper he felt as if the walls of the cottage were pressing in on him. Outside the air was crisp and the night still. Mutton birds cried out to each other in what sounded to Blakely like a mournful lament. He knew in his bones that he would not be in this place for much longer and he was not sorry.

He was startled from his reverie by a sharp knocking on his door. When he pulled it open there was a group of whalers outside huddled together in the dark. Tom O’Hara stepped forward.

‘Sorry to disturb you Joe but there’s some trouble at the whalery. Some of the blacks have come over from the inlet and are setting up camp outside.’

‘They’ve done that before Tom.’

‘Not like this, they haven’t. There’s a lot of them and the feelin’ is not good, I have to say. They’ve brought spears and they want to get into the main shed – or that’s what I understood from BillyBoy – he’s with them.’

‘Did they ask for anything in particular Tom? What is it they said they want?’

‘They didn’t say, just want to get into the try works.’

‘Well what did you tell them.?’

‘Said I’d come an’ have a word with you – none of us felt there was much room for negotiatin’ with ’em – more than thirty of them and just a few of us. And it was BillyBoy so we backed off like.’

Blakely felt a great weariness dragging on him. He just didn’t have the energy to deal with this place any more but he should at least back up these men, so he told them to wait while he fetched his coat from the house. When he joined the group a few minutes later there was a tense conversation underway.

‘I’m not sayin’ I’m goin’ to help ’em but I just won’t get in their way Tom. It’s been comin’ for a long time and..’

The men fell silent as Blakely walked towards them. Tom O’Hara looked at him.

‘The lads here are not wantin’ to go back Joe – they’ve got their belongings with them already and want to keep movin’.

‘What about you Tom – what are your plans?’

‘Got no plans in particular Joe but I’m thinkin’ it’s not such a good idea to take the blacks on. None of us was too happy about what happened with the killers – seemed like we was forced into somethin’. Some things are best left.’

Blakely looked at the men in their thin clothing and scrappy coats and he could see their point.

‘I see. Tom if you could just walk a short distance with me so that we can at least take a look at what is going on over there, I’d be most grateful.’

He turned to the other four men. ‘Good luck lads.’

The men murmured their thanks and picked up their bundles. Tom O’Hara shook their hands and joined Blakely as he headed towards the whalery. As they got closer to the try works they could hear the sounds of the singing and wailing, and then there was another sound – the distinctive crackling of flames. Just seconds after the smell of smoke reached them Blakely and O’Hara watched as the tryworks, its timbers and machinery greasy with the oil of many whales, exploded in a ball of flame.

Hannah had just finished a meal of cabbage stew, which Josie served up with a grim face.

‘Sorry Hannah love but we’re very low on supplies. This should warm us up though.’

‘Josie it’s more than enough. You should not worry so much.’

‘If I didn’t worry so much there would be nought to eat at all my girl.’

Hannah was not listening. She and Jimmy had spent the day near the penguin colony and she had finished a painting that she finally felt was true to these birds. She had felt exhausted but happier than she could ever recall. As they were returning they had seen a large gathering of aborigines at the inlet just down from the whalery. It had startled her as she could sense they were witnessing something significant – the air seemed to crackle with the intensity of it.

Jimmy had not wanted her to walk the last part to the house on her own but she had insisted. ‘We don’t want to be seen together right now – I don’t know what would happen. My father seems indifferent to my activities but he is just as likely to send me away if he gets it into his head to do so. And I’m not sure where he is right now. I’ll be fine – I’ve done this walk a thousand times.’

Jimmy shook his head. ‘Today feels different. There’s something happening down there.’

She had put her hand to his face and left him standing at the edge of the clearing. ‘I will see you tomorrow. Don’t be late.’

She was about to go to her room when there was a banging at the front door and she looked at Josie in surprise. ‘Who could that be at this hour Josie?’

‘I’ve no idea Miss Hannah. I thought your father would have been here by now – not sure where he is – he returned from the city earlier on and then up and disappeared.’

When the banging continued Josie headed off up the hall towards the entrance, lamp in hand. When she opened the door Joseph Blakely and Tom O’Hara stood on the porch.

‘Sorry to alarm you Josie but we’ve got a bit of a situation down at the whalery and we wondered if Mr Conway was in.’

‘He’s not I’m afraid. I haven’t seen him since this morning. But that’s not unusual of late – I’m not sure where he’s off to – just vanishes he does.’

‘Oh, well that makes things a bit more difficult, but all the same I think we should get you and Miss Hannah away from here tonight. Not too safe right now.’

Hannah appeared in the hallway behind Josie. ‘What is it Mr Blakely? Has something happened to my father?’

‘No Miss Conway, not that we are aware. It’s the blacks Miss – there’s trouble at the whalery and we just think it might be best if you and Josie didn’t stay here tonight.’

‘But that is foolish Mr Blakely. My father must be around somewhere and he hasn’t warned us of any problems.’

Blakely looked down at his shoes and was silent for a moment. Then he seemed to come to a decision.

‘Miss Hannah, I don’t want to cause offence or speak out of turn but your father is not in the best state of mind of late and I’m not sure we can expect him to fix this situation. I feel that in his absence I should ensure you and Josie are safe.’

Hannah felt the colour rise to her face. It was true – her father was not to be relied upon. She had known this for some time but it had suited her to ignore the signs because that way she could spend her time as she wished. It had meant freedom to be with Jimmy and to roam wherever they cared to. Now she looked around her at the house and she saw that it was a shambles, the furniture shabby and the cold rooms dark and empty. How had she not noticed this before now? She looked at the two men on the porch. ‘Do you know where my father is?’

‘No Miss we don’t, but his horse is in the stable so he must be out on foot somewhere.’

‘Where would you have us go in the middle of the night?’

‘We thought it best if we took you in the cart to Doctor Morton’s in town.’

‘I won’t leave here until I know where my father is.’

‘Very well Miss Hannah. We would prefer it, though, if you would agree to Tom and I staying here with you just to keep an eye on things.’

‘Mr Blakely, I have no objection to that but I would really prefer it if someone could look for my father. As you can see, Josie and I are fine.’

Josie turned to her then and took her by the hand. ‘No we’re not Miss Hannah. We haven’t been fine in this household for a long time.’

Hannah looked back at Josie and saw that she was old and bent, her face marked with worry and her hands raw from hard work. She felt a deep shame then but even stronger than this was a steely determination not to leave. She turned back to the men.

‘If you could look for my father at first light, I’d be most grateful Mr Blakely.’

She went to her room to prepare her belongings. She would be gone before first light to find Jimmy and to leave this place. Maybe they would go back to the mountains – he talked often about the beauty of the place and his friends he had left behind there.

**A**nd so it was that I arrived back in the camp that fateful night, my precious bundle weighing heavily upon me. It was not the camp I had known before.

There was noise and fire and much anguish in the air. Many different clans had gathered there that night to pay respect to their slain brother. The killer whale lay in the shallows of the small inlet as the sounds of the farewell washed over it.

When I crept into the camp and lay my weary bones down on the pieces of debris that were my home, I did not understand that things had come to an end. I only knew that I had to look after the creature that had been given to me in place of those others I’d left behind in the forest. When I was at last able to rest I was not concerned with the flames that licked at the buildings on the edge of the bay or the shadows of men stretching and leaping towards me. I licked at the face beside me until it began to stir, its noises feeble at first and then louder as I warmed it against me, until it squalled and wailed with a strength that surprised me.

When they took it from me I snarled and attacked them with all the ferociousness I could muster. But it was not enough. They still took that tiny creature from me and hit me with their clubs until I was quiet. So I went that night, out across the bay and into the blackness of the sky. And as I went I saw what no other creature saw – a man standing high on the sandstone cliffs gazing down at the rocks below him. Or was it him I saw riding the waves in a whaling boat, its weathered prow following the watery path of the moon across the ocean? I can no longer tell you for sure – maybe it was both things that I saw. I do know they never found Arthur Conway.

Later when the dawn light was only just creeping across the bay I watched as the girl with hair the colour of straw strode across the headland towards the stone tower where she would find a boy with jet black hair asleep with his dog. They were long gone by the time anyone thought to look for Hannah Conway, heading off who knows where - a girl, a boy and a black dog, together on a crisp winter morning.

The End

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## **Introduction**

In this exegesis I will examine some of the themes of my creative thesis, a novel in which I explore the experience of the outsider and the concept of ‘otherness’. In my creative work the experience of otherness is many-faceted – it is the otherness that separates different races and cultures, that which separates white Australian settlers and Aborigines and, most extreme of all, the otherness that separates humans and other species. It is this last category that I will focus on in this dissertation as it is perhaps through the relationship between humans and animals that we experience most intensely a sense of otherness and, conversely, gain a better understanding of what it means to be human.

The human/animal relationship is a complex one, fraught with contradiction and inconsistency. Through the ages humans have fluctuated between revering and protecting animals and exploiting them mercilessly. This is largely because animals are integral to the lives of humans; they are our companions but they are also our medical research fodder and our food. And they are part of our creative psyche, looming large in our myths and legends and featuring in our art. We are both entranced by the behaviour of the creatures around us and driven to dominate them.

In short, humans are compelled to unravel the mystery of what it is to be another species, to be ‘other’ than us.

What is it that drives us to become impassioned about protecting some species yet allows us to turn our backs on the treatment of farmed animals? Why do we dominate other species, demonise and exploit them but also mythologise and revere them? Are these the same compulsions that motivate us when we fiercely protect our borders from those ‘others’, the immigrants that threaten to invade our shores and our culture? Or are these the paradoxes that define what it is to be human and ultimately allow us to accept and tolerate differences? These were some of the questions that I wanted to explore in my creative thesis.

Part I of this exegesis looks at some of these questions from a personal perspective through the prism of a dog-focused business, Café Bones, and also through the legal system as it relates to animals. Part II examines some of the ways that both writers and philosophers have tried to unravel the mystery of animals and their ‘otherness’

**“I have been studying the traits and dispositions of the ‘lower animals’ (so called) and contrasting them with the traits and dispositions of man. I find the result humiliating to me.”**

Mark Twain, *Letters from the Earth, Uncensored Writings*<sup>1</sup>

## **Part 1 – Posing the questions**

### **A personal perspective – the tale of Café Bones**

I began to seriously explore the questions posed by the human/animal relationship a decade ago when I established a dog-friendly café, Café Bones, in Sydney’s inner west. I wondered what was at the root of humans’ intense bond with animals as I observed at close hand the behaviour of our hundreds of clientele who came from far and wide to visit a place that not only focused on their relationship with their pets, but that gave them the freedom to share this bond with others.

The concept of the business was simple – it was to be an outdoor café located in an established dog-walking reserve where both people and dogs could relax together. But what had started as a simple idea aimed at creating a sense of community amongst dog walkers rapidly became a hotbed of canine/human interaction. We knew that research showed people with pets were healthier than non-pet owners, experiencing lower blood pressure, less depression, reduced insomnia and a higher level of fitness.<sup>2</sup> What we had not anticipated was the level of socialisation that would erupt between dogs and people: birthday parties for dogs complete with cake, romances between their owners, dogs on gourmet organic diets and dogs in designer clothes to match their owners.

Inevitably there were vast differences in the way people related to their own dogs and to those of other people and this occasionally led to conflict. Ironically, the question we were asked most often about our business was whether there were many dogfights. The answer of course was that there were far more fights

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<sup>1</sup> Twain, Mark, *Letters from the Earth Uncensored Writings*, edited by Bernard DeVoto, Perennial Classics, 2004. p.233

<sup>2</sup> Numerous studies show the physical benefits of pet ownership - Allen 2001, Anderson, Reid, & Jennings 1992, Bauman et al., 2001<sup>2</sup> Robinson, I.H., (ed) *The Waltham Book of Human-Animal Interaction: Benefits and Responsibilities of Pet Ownership*, Pergamon/Elsevier, Oxford, UK, 1995.

between people, and those nearly always involved differences in opinion over how their dogs should be disciplined or treated.

Interestingly, this is a theme explored by Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas in his acclaimed novel *The Slap*<sup>3</sup>, which centres on the slapping of a child at a social gathering and the reactions this provokes and the repercussions of the act. In both Tsiolkas' book and at Café Bones the discussion is less about the impact on the recipient of the discipline, albeit in one case a dog and in the other a child, than it is about accepted social norms. The act becomes imbued with moral dimensions and raises questions about what we deem acceptable in a particular social context.

American poet, philosopher and renowned animal trainer, Vicki Hearne, would have had much to say about some of our café customers and their behaviour. Hearne believed in the personhood of domesticated animals and of their capacity to enter into a reciprocal relationship with human beings, not just emotionally but also morally. She would have had little time for people who believed their dogs should eat at the table like humans and did not need disciplining.

In Hearne's opinion: "It is usually a diet of syrup, bribery, and choked rhetoric, rather than physical abuse, that creates character disorders such as viciousness and megalomania in a dog.... Biting is a response to incoherent authority."<sup>4</sup> Hearne also scorned animal rights advocates, claiming their activities were flawed because they are built on the concept that the origin of rights is in the avoidance of suffering rather than in the pursuit of happiness.<sup>5</sup> Happiness for animals such as dogs and horses, according to Hearne, was to be found in discipline. Pampering a dog was to her a form of cruelty as it leaves no room for moral choice.

Café Bones stirred up more than issues to do with animal discipline. It aroused some deep-seated attitudes to animals and wider responses to territory. The success of the business attracted controversy. While our customers were ardent supporters, others in the community saw the introduction of an animal-focused café as threatening. The fact that it was located in a park predominantly used for dog walking did not dampen this group's sense that something had gone awry and that their territory was being invaded. This manifested itself in attempts to have the park rezoned and tighter restrictions applied to dog walkers and their dogs.

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<sup>3</sup> Tsiolkas, Christos, *The Slap*, Penguin Books, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Hearne, Vicki., *Adam's Task*, Skyhorse Publishing, New York, 2007, p.45

<sup>5</sup> Hearne, Vicki., *What's Wrong with Animal Rights?* published in *The Best American Essays*, 3rd ed.,

Houghton Mifflin Co, Boston 2001, p.140

When the local council attempted to change the off-leash status of the park by designating certain sections as on-leash, (meaning that dogs are required to be on a leash instead of walking free), our customers and other dog walkers who used the park closed ranks. They rapidly formed a committee to campaign against the changes, collecting thousands of signatures in a petition and lobbying local politicians so that the proposed changes were dropped. Passions ran hot, with one group that was in favour of the changes employing both a barrister and consultant to prepare a case for them. Animals, it seems, can provoke strong feelings, particularly when perceived as a threat to human territory.

So what was happening at Café Bones? With hindsight I am able to see some patterns in the human behaviour that emerged. At the time we had little idea of the Pandora's box we were about to open. It was a box filled with people desperate for an outlet to express the affection they had for their non-human companions, often denied them elsewhere. It also contained disenfranchised, often lonely urban dwellers and their conflicting human needs, on the one hand for companionship and community, on the other to aggressively defend their territory.

We are a nation of dog and cat lovers and one of the most urbanised societies on the planet, yet we are also a culture rooted in stories of the bush and life on the land where dogs and men work hard together but play separately, and where animals have been our livelihood. I would contend that our national psyche has not caught up with the reality of our largely urban lives, one in which most of us are separated from the land and from other species. It seems we are still deeply suspicious of the strength of our bond with animals, often dismissing it as sentimental.

This ambivalence towards animals was reflected in the media attention our humble business received. The extent of this was surprising – we featured regularly in lifestyle television programs, in daily newspapers, magazines, documentaries, works of fiction (Melina Marchetta's novel, *Saving Francesca*) - even men's magazines. Overseas we appeared in a feature article in the British newspaper, *The Independent*<sup>6</sup>, on Irish radio and on Korean television news, after the film crew visited us when they were in Sydney for the 2000 Olympic Games.

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<sup>6</sup> Marks, Kathy., *In Foreign Parts: Welcome to Cafe Bones. Would you like dried liver on your, puppaccino? The Independent*, London, UK, May 5, 2001 <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-5164850.html>

Soon after the Korean news item, a dog day care centre and café sprang up in the capital, Seoul. Around the corner dogs were being sold as food.

Our ambivalent relationship with animals is perhaps most graphically illustrated by the contrast in our treatment of domestic pets and farmed or hunted animals. On the one hand we pamper those animals that we regard as close to us, often to the point of anthropomorphism, projecting onto them our own needs and desires. On the other hand we have an enormous capacity for persecuting, mistreating and exploiting other species, particularly those we choose to see as ‘others’, those that we regard as separate from us because we fear them, because they cause us inconvenience (as is the case with feral animals), or because we consume them as food. Sometimes it is all of these reasons. The contradictions abound.

The ambivalence was also there in the tone of the media coverage of Café Bones. The business, despite its obvious success, was regarded by many as a novelty - as a bit eccentric, and therefore not to be taken seriously. It was a business that brought to the surface all those behaviours and emotions many would prefer were kept under wraps - that is, sentimentality about animals and overt affection towards them. Many might show their pets affection privately but to do so publicly is somehow a little unseemly.

My business partner and I were often portrayed in media reports as two women indulging a whim, not really as serious business owners, despite winning business grants and awards for Café Bones. Newspaper articles carried titles such as “It’s a dogfight over pets”<sup>7</sup> and were smattered with child-like words such as “doggy”. Of course, one cannot assume this tone is purely a result of the nature of the business as there could well be other factors at play, not the least of which is the portrayal of women in business, but these are outside the scope of this exegesis.

As a writer I was interested in what was at work behind the Café Bones experience. Clearly the extent of our popularity and media coverage revealed something fundamental in human/animal relations and to a certain extent it crossed cultural boundaries. The reaction to our business would suggest the human bond with animals runs deep. Our business allowed people to focus on their relationship with animals, albeit a safe and familiar one.

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<sup>7</sup> Walker, Frank, *It’s a dogfight over pets*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 29 2003, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/06/28/1056683950905.html>

How to unravel the mysteries of the way we relate to animals? We have tried to do so through science, through philosophy and through literature for millennia. Science studies animal behaviour within the accepted framework of objective observation and collection of empirical data. Philosophers and writers are not so restricted but are still confined by their cultural conditioning.

In his book *The Philosopher's Dog*<sup>8</sup>, philosopher and writer Raimond Gaita suggests that humans are often suspicious of stories of animals, believing that they are polluted by sentimentality. He says:

“Our understanding of animals and of our relations to them are often shaped by stories. Science and philosophy have commonly assumed that if stories have anything to contribute to understanding of human beings and animals and our relationship to them, then the cognitive content of stories has to be subtracted from the story-telling form and assessed for its factual and conceptual value. This dogma, as I shall call it, of the need to separate genuine cognitive content from literary form, together with the assumption that we are spectators in the world, sure of the contents of our minds, but only inferentially aware of the contents of the minds of others, led to reductionism in the study of animals that has sometimes reached lunatic proportions.”<sup>9</sup>

This reductionism, says Gaita, has led to a paranoid fear of anthropomorphism, which has stifled discussion and made us overly suspicious of the role of stories in understanding how we relate to animals. As Gaita points out, some writers, like Eugene Linden in his book, *The Parrot's Lament*<sup>10</sup>, and Jeffrey Masson in *When Elephants Weep*<sup>11</sup>, have reacted against the reductionism of science and philosophy by writing books dense with anecdotes of animal behaviour. While he sympathises with their reaction against the scepticism of science, Linden and Masson's reactionary approach has just exacerbated the problem, says Gaita. They have succumbed to the listing of animal behaviour as an end in itself. “What is one to do with hundreds of uncorroborated accounts that animals can do this or that extraordinary thing – count, talk, grieve, show remorse?”, asks Gaita.<sup>12</sup>

The answer may lie in a friendly co-operation between science, philosophy and literature. It is largely through studying literature and the work of philosophers

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<sup>8</sup> Gaita, Raimond. *The Philosopher's Dog*, The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne, 2002

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.108

<sup>10</sup> Linden, Eugene, *The Parrot's Lament*, Dutton, New York, 1999

<sup>11</sup> Masson, Jeffrey & McCarthy, S. *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals*, Dell 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

that I have tried to unravel some of the mystery of the human-animal relationship, as I will discuss later in this exegetical essay. First it is enlightening to examine how the law deals with animals, since how the most vulnerable and those considered the most 'alien' in a society reveals much about its ethical and intellectual underpinnings.

**If a man aspires towards a righteous life, his first act of abstinence is from injury to animals.**

Leo Tolstoy, *The First Step*<sup>13</sup>

**An ethical perspective – Animals and the law**

The experience of Café Bones raised more questions than it answered regarding the place of animals in 21<sup>st</sup> century society. It certainly revealed much about humans' ambivalent and conflicting attitudes to domestic pets but for a wider view of attitudes to animals, particularly those used for commercial purposes, the legal system provides a useful barometer.

Many would argue that a society's laws reflect its ethical underpinnings. If this is true, then animal law, at least in the West, is signalling a fundamental change in attitudes to animals. Over the past decade the number of specialist animal law courses has proliferated in leading universities around the world. In the United States there are now more than 90 animal law courses, while in Australia animal law was taught at 10 universities in 2010.

At the legislative level, practices such as battery farming of hens and the use of restrictive sow pens for pigs are increasingly being banned. Consumer backlash is also forcing change; in the United Kingdom the country's largest supermarket chain, Sainsburys, has banned eggs produced by battery hens, as have other retailers such as Marks & Spencer, Waitrose and the Co-op.

But is this just a fad or is it a sign that we are becoming more compassionate towards non-human animals? The former President of the Australian Law Reform Commission, Professor David Weisbrot, has suggested that animal welfare is likely to become the next great social justice movement in Australia, observing that the treatment of animals is "increasingly becoming a social and legal issue, as well as an important economic one."<sup>14</sup>

In an interview for the magazine *Red*, Weisbrot described this rise in the importance of animal welfare worldwide as a perfect example of zeitgeist - the simultaneous appearance of an idea.

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<sup>13</sup> Tolstoy, Leo. *The First Step, An Essay On the Morals of Diet, to Which Are Added Two Stories*, Nabu Press, Charleston, South Carolina, 2010. p.21

<sup>14</sup> Weisbrot, David. *Australian Law Reform Commission, Reform Issue 91 Summer 2007/08 – Animals: Comment*

“It is an idea whose time has come,” says Weisbrot. “As we tackle social justice issues such as racial and sexual discrimination, and environmental action is well entrenched, we look at other areas and ask ‘what else will we be ashamed of in 20 to 30 years’? Animal welfare is next on the list.”<sup>15</sup>

While the law should ideally reflect the attitudes of society, in a country such as Australia with our deep agricultural roots, the law has not kept up with consumer demands for an overhaul of animal cruelty laws and labelling regulations. As a result, legal loopholes have protected the agricultural industry from real change.

The image of a nation that grew up on the sheep’s back still has a hold, says Weisbrot. But while we will continue to rely to some extent on agricultural products we will eventually have to become cleverer and move with community attitudes as “it is counter productive not to promote animal welfare.”<sup>16</sup>

A society where the legal profession is taking an ethical stance on animals is a very different one to that in my creative thesis, *A Creature’s Tale*. That is the Australia built on the sheep’s back and on the oil from whales, from which much of our contemporary ambivalence to animals stems.

Much of the story in *A Creature’s Tale* is set in a whaling community on the far south coast of NSW in the 1860s. Animals had no protection under the law in Australia in the 1800s. Colonial settlers arrived with their sheep and cattle and took over vast areas of land to use as grazing grounds for these animals. Whale oil was still the staple fuel for industrial and domestic use all over the globe, used for lighting and as a lubricant to power the machines of the industrial revolution, before being replaced by kerosene and petroleum by the late 1800s.

Baleen, the long keratin strips that hang from the top of whales' mouths, was used all over the world to make everything from whips and fishing poles to corset stays and dress hoops.

It is hardly surprising that animals were seen as commodities for exploitation in the nineteenth century. And after all, it was not only animals that were exploited for economics; there are numerous accounts of conflicts between Aboriginal Australians and white settlers over land, particularly where Aborigines inhabited land considered valuable to would-be graziers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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<sup>15</sup> Blundell, Lynne. *Animal Lore*, Red Magazine, Issue No. 3 May 2009. p. 23

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

While in theory the law regarded the killing of Aborigines as a crime, in reality killings were often overlooked or even condoned, as Mark McKenna points out in his book *Looking for Blackfellas' Point*. Their 'otherness' rendered Aborigines both a threat and a target. In countless instances, says McKenna, they were driven from the land, often through brutal or lethal methods, and they also retaliated.

McKenna talks of the "irrefutable evidence" that from the early period of frontier contact from 1788 to 1850 an "ongoing state of warfare existed in Eden-Monaro . . . . .The sealers with their dogs and guns, and the squatters who came with their sheep and cattle, together with their motley crew of armed stockmen and shepherds, killed hundreds of Aboriginal people in retaliation for Aboriginal attempts to defend their land."<sup>17</sup>

McKenna also says that "to tell the story of the dispossession of the Kudingal people of the far south coast and their neighbours on the Monaro, from the first contact with sealers in the early eighteenth century to the initial confrontation with squatters in the 1830s, does not mean that wanton violence was the only form of interaction. There were some settlers who tried to understand the feelings and rights of Aboriginal people. And there were examples of individual Aboriginal men and women and colonists being capable of wanton violence and extreme kindness in different contexts."<sup>18</sup>

Most of these stories of frontier brutality are embedded in the oral culture of the far south coast rather than in any formal historical record. They are many, too many to ignore. In both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal oral history there are similar stories of "Aboriginal people being pushed over cliff faces or their bodies being loaded in carts and thrown off coastal headlands into the sea."<sup>19</sup> There are many more stories of shootings, poisoning of whole Aboriginal families through flour supplies and water supplies and of massacres.

It was the very otherness of Australian Aborigines that rendered them both a threat and a target for exploitation. And if humans were powerless under the law in early colonial Australia, what then was the plight of other species? Whales, like sheep and cattle were commodities to be exploited for economic gain. That was the reality of the times and not much has changed since, particularly for sheep and cattle.

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<sup>17</sup> Mark, McKenna. *Looking for Blackfellas' Point, An Australian History of Place*, UNSW Press, 2002, p.44.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 43

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia's dependence on agricultural production has given way to other economic realities but the psychic connection to it is still strong and this is reflected in our laws and our ambivalence towards animals, argues David Weisbrot and others.

An Australian organisation, Voiceless, is attempting to change attitudes to animals through both the education and legal systems. A non-profit organisation, Voiceless was founded in 2004 by philanthropist Brian Sherman and his daughter Ondine. Through its grants system it has funded numerous education and research programs across the country and brought together a powerful network of barristers, solicitors, law graduates and law students.

Legal counsel for Voiceless, Katrina Sharman, believes the role of Voiceless is to raise awareness of animal rights on many fronts, including their protection under the legal system. She says the "inhumane treatment of millions of animals has become institutionalised and within the law" and that a "veil of secrecy operates to prevent the community from knowing about the situation of so many animals. But people want to know and lawyers need to think about how they can push these issues."<sup>20</sup>

Of course the Law does not operate in a vacuum. The education system plays a powerful role in moulding the belief system of a nation, a fact not lost on Voiceless and educators around Australia.

A project run jointly by Griffith University, Education Queensland, the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries Animal Welfare Unit, the RSPCA and the Animal Welfare League in 2006, aimed to help young people develop a culture of caring and compassion for animals as well as for the environment.

Called Learning to Care, Education for Compassion, the project was headed by Dr Gail Tulloch from Griffith University's Key Centre for Ethics, Law and Justice and involved surveying attitudes in a range of schools in urban Queensland. Tulloch said in a media interview that the results of the survey revealed both the power of underlying societal attitudes and the separation of scientific thought from other aspects of human characteristics such as compassion and empathy.

"The attitudes we encountered no doubt reflect those of the wider community," says Tulloch. "People's attitudes differed according to age, with younger people showing more compassion towards animals than older people; girls were more

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<sup>20</sup> Blundell, Lynne. *Animal Lore*, Red Magazine, Issue No 3 May 2009. p.24

compassionate than boys, on the whole, and those in science subjects were harder nosed, particularly the teachers.”<sup>21</sup>

Lecturer in law at Griffith University, Steven White, is more circumspect about the power of the legal system to change attitudes to animals. He pointed out during a symposium on animal ethics that despite the proliferation of animal law courses in the United States, change to laws that protect animals has been slow to follow suit. In Europe the reverse is true; the number of animal law courses can be counted on one hand but it is in Europe that the greatest progress has been made in animal protection laws.<sup>22</sup>

According to White, in regard to the teaching of legal ethics rather than animal law specifically, there is recent Australian research that suggests that law school has a limited effect on student values, with pre-existing values more highly influential. This research reinforces the importance of values education in primary and secondary schools, says White.<sup>23</sup>

Gail Tulloch would no doubt agree with this. She emphasises that in her survey of school students the education system was not designed to teach compassion for animals.

“Most teachers face problems in teaching their students to care for animals due to their own lack of knowledge of animal welfare and animal rights issues,” Dr Tulloch said.

“In an education system that prizes knowledge over values, they lack the skills to deal with the ethical nature of such values in a caring and professional way. There is a groundswell of change at the theoretical/philosophical, legal, curriculum, consumer and media fronts. Hopefully they are all intersecting.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid p.23

<sup>22</sup> Humane Education: A compassionate ethic for animals Symposium 5 – 6 October, 2007. Paper by

Steven White, *Animal Law: How, or will it help to bring about a compassionate society?* p.10

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Blundell, Lynne, *Animal Lore*, Red Magazine, Issue No 3 May 2009. p 24

**“From the oyster to the eagle, from the swine to the tiger, all animals are to be found in men and each of them exists in some man, sometimes several at the same time. Animals are nothing but the forms our virtues and vices take, trotting around before our very eyes, the visible phantoms of our souls.”**

Victor Hugo – *Les Misérables*, 1862<sup>25</sup>

## **Part II – Looking for answers**

### **Animals in literature**

The significance of the human/animal relationship and our quest to understand both this significance and the ‘otherness’ of animals is clearly apparent in the role that animals play in literature. Literature is littered with animals - as characters, as narrators, as symbols and as essential aspects of plot. Regardless of culture, animals play an important role in mythology, folklore and fairy tales where they have a dualistic role, both helping and harming humans.

The creatures in the fables of Greek slave and writer Aesop, who wrote his stories between 620 and 560 BC, are there to highlight the pitfalls of human experience and behaviour and to provide moral lessons. In Greek mythology animals were combined with humans to create fantastic new forms that had dominion over humans. The gods of Greek mythology also had the power to blur the boundaries between different classes of beings, as in Ovid’s narrative poem *Metamorphoses*, where the gods turn mortals into animals and plants.

In my creative thesis I have encountered the difficulties of incorporating animals into the plot of a story as well as attempting to write from an animal’s point of view. Writers who attempt to write from the point of view of people from other cultures are often accused of appropriation. How much more difficult then to successfully write from the point of view of another species? In my creative thesis I have used animals as characters, as narrator and also incorporated them into the fabric of the story. The narrator of the story is a dog, now deceased, who comments on aspects of life both in the white settler and Aboriginal communities of the 1860s and, at times, about events in the present. Another dog, Hui, is the

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<sup>25</sup> Hugo, Victor, *Les Misérables*, Random House, New York 2008 p.143

companion of one of the central characters, a Chinese immigrant, and plays an important role as a character in the story. Finally, whales are integral to the plot as the novel is set in a whaling community on the far south coast of NSW in the 1860s.

The challenges of doing this were numerous; researching historical details of whaling was essential for authenticity, the risk of sentimentality regarding animal feelings or behaviour was an ever-present danger and creating a convincing animal narrator proved difficult. Studying the approach of other writers was an integral part of the process.

In contemporary literature, both fiction and non-fiction, there is no shortage of writers tackling the subject of animal/human relations. J.M Coetzee, in his book *Elizabeth Costello*, deals with the subject of our treatment of animals by entering a hybrid zone of philosophy and fiction. He uses his central character Elizabeth Costello to deliver an address and to philosophise on the ill treatment of animals, drawing parallels with the treatment of Jews in Nazi concentration camps:

“Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them.”<sup>26</sup>

Just as the Nazis treated their fellow humans as if they were lice, refusing to empathise with their victims, so do humans distance themselves from their treatment of other species, says Elizabeth Costello. The horror, she says, is that the killers “refused to think themselves into the place of their victims”, closing their hearts. “The heart is the seat of a faculty, sympathy, that allows us to share at times the being of another.”<sup>27</sup>

Elizabeth’s address, *Lives of Animals*, was in fact the same address delivered by Coetzee himself at Princeton University as part of the Tanner series of lectures. Elizabeth speaks eloquently of the anthropocentric approach of scientists who design experiments to determine the intelligence of animals and those who assert that animals have no means with which to communicate. She cites the example of Albert Camus who watched as his grandmother cut the head from a hen. “The death cry of that hen imprinted itself on the boy’s memory so hauntingly that in

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<sup>26</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Elizabeth Costello*, Random House Australia, 2003, p.65

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p.79

1958 he wrote an impassioned attack on the guillotine.”<sup>28</sup> It was this polemic, says Elizabeth Costello, that was in part responsible for abolition of capital punishment in France.

Elizabeth goes on to dispute the idea that animals do not understand death:

“Anyone who says that life matters less to animals than it does to us has not held in his hands an animal fighting for its life. The whole of the being of the animal is thrown into that fight, without reserve. When you say that the fight lacks a dimension of intellectual or imaginative horror, I agree. It is not the mode of the being of animals to have an intellectual horror: their whole being is in the living flesh.”<sup>29</sup>

Despite the eloquence of Coetzee’s writing and the cleverness of his approach, it is another of his books, *Disgrace*<sup>30</sup>, that is more illuminating of human/animal relationships. The reason for this lies in the power of the story – where Elizabeth Costello appeals to our intellect, *Disgrace* speaks to that more primeval motivator, the emotions.

The powerful portrayal in *Disgrace* of a man’s compassion for stray dogs that are about to be killed throws light on what it means to be human. More importantly, Coetzee asks the reader to imagine what it is *not* to be human. Beautifully crafted narrative stripped of sentimentality but still resonating with emotion has the power to move and illuminate. Through this character’s interaction with animals the reader is given an insight into the nature of human compassion and also the power that humans have over the destiny of other creatures, in this case the power of life and death.

But the character, David Lurie, can only come to this place of compassion after a fall from grace, which brings him to a point where he is stripped of his arrogance and is in the end just another creature struggling for meaning and survival. When he has fled Cape Town for his daughter Lucy's remote farm, she tells him, "This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals."

The poignancy of the scene as David Lurie attempts to dignify the final disposal of the dogs that have been euthanised at the animal shelter where he works is deeply affecting:

“The morning after each killing session he drives the loaded kombi... to the incinerator, and there consigns the bodies in their black bags to the flames. It

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p.108

<sup>29</sup> Ibid p.110

<sup>30</sup> Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*, Penguin Books, New York, 2000.

would be simpler to cart the bags to the incinerator immediately after the session and leave them there for the incinerator crew to dispose of. But that would mean leaving them on the dump with the rest of the weekend's scourings; with waste from the hospital wards, carrion scooped up at the roadside, malodorous refuse from the tannery – a mixture both casual and terrible. He is not prepared to inflict such dishonour upon them.”<sup>31</sup>

Other writers have used satire to reflect on the human exploitation of animals. Kirsten Bakis in her novel *The Lives of the Monster Dogs*<sup>32</sup> creates a new race of dogs that have been genetically engineered to take on human characteristics, but have the characteristics of refugees from a town in Canada that has been isolated for more than a century. These ‘monster dogs’ retain the nineteenth century Prussian culture of their human creator, complete with top hats, tails and bustled skirts. They are a doomed race, persecuted and misunderstood when they arrive in New York in 2008.

Dutch writer Michael Faber, in his sinister Swiftian satire, *Under the skin*<sup>33</sup>, creates a world where human beings, referred to as vodsels, are corralled and fattened up for the kill by another species who are masquerading as humans in order to capture them. Isserley, the main protagonist, is one of these creatures who cruises the motorways of Scotland in her Toyota Corolla looking for well-muscled human victims. In one scene Isserley and one of her own species inspects the factory where the humans are kept and are confronted with the spectacle of one of them trying to communicate when ‘it’ scrawls MERCY in the dirt of the cage. The tongues of the humans are removed so they cannot speak. Isserley copes with any ethical confrontation over the treatment of the ‘vodsels’ by rendering them speechless and ‘alien’.

“The vodsel bent over the earth, erasing his wild companion’s scuffed footprints from it with the edge of one hand. His empty scrotal sac, still speckled with dried blood from his gelding, swung back and forth as he smoothed the soil and picked fragments of scattered straw out of it. Then he gathered a handful of long straws together, twisted and folded them to make a stiff wand, and began to draw in the dirt.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, chapter 16.

<sup>32</sup> Bakis, Kirsten. *Lives of the Monster Dogs*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1997

<sup>33</sup> Faber, Michel. *Under the skin*, Canongate Books, Edinburgh 2000.

<sup>34</sup> Faber, Michel. *Under the skin*, Canongate Books, Edinburgh 2000, p.171

Isserley's companion exclaims that he did not know that the creatures had a language, that he had always been told they were "vegetables on legs". Isserley dismisses the writing of the word MERCY as a meaningless scratching, rather than language.

The scene is confronting for the reader, who of course identifies with the helpless vodsel/human. It is through this identification with the victim, human as abused animal and food, that Michel Faber's satire, while far from subtle, has the power to move and to illuminate human/animal relations.

Mikhail Bulgakov in his biting satire, *The Heart of a Dog*<sup>35</sup>, has a comic and disarming dog as his central character. Widely interpreted as an allegory of the communist revolution in Russia and "the revolution's misguided attempt to radically transform mankind"<sup>36</sup>, *The Heart of a Dog* takes us into the mind of this dog as he is transformed gradually into a human being through some dubious and farcical scientific procedures. With the transformation come traits of pomposity and self-importance until the humanised dog wreaks havoc on all who come into contact with him. Unlike Faber's satire, Bulgakov's is humorous and wry, its message no less potent for that.

In a very different approach Japanese writer Haruki Murakami weaves animals throughout his surrealist tales, seemingly as signposts to the human psyche. In his book, *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*<sup>37</sup>, a missing cat becomes a metaphor for a disintegrating relationship and the quest to find it also the quest for truth for protagonist Toru Okada. In another of Murakami's books, *Kafka on the Shore*<sup>38</sup>, we are invited to explore a reality where talking cats appear normal and humans are capable of randomly torturing and killing animals. The world is turned on its head as cats behave like humans, fish tumble from the sky and humans turn to savagery. While on one level the novel appears to be a classic tale of quest, the animal motif is woven through the story alongside themes of deep social taboo such as incest and patricide.

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<sup>35</sup> Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Heart of a Dog*, London, Vintage 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Haber, Edythe C. (1998). Mikhail Bulgakov: *The Early Years*, Harvard University Press. pp. 216-17.

<sup>37</sup> Murakami, Haruki. *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, Vintage, 2003.

<sup>38</sup> Murakami, Haruki. *Kafka on the Shore*, London, Vintage, 2005.

Many writers have tried to get into the heads of animals through their fiction. American writer Paul Auster in his novelette *Timbuktu*<sup>39</sup> writes from the point of view of a homeless dog, attempting to fathom what it might feel for a dog to lose everything and to be at the mercy of the kindness, or more often the indifference, of humans. It is not an easy task, over-simplification, sentimentality and triteness just a few of the pitfalls a writer can fall prey to. Auster does succeed in bringing the reader close to imagining the bleakness of a stray animal's lot but at times walks a fine line in regard to such anthropomorphism and sentimentality.

Japanese writer Soseki Natsume, working at the turn of the century, used a cat as the narrator of his novel *I Am a Cat*. A satire on Japanese society in the time of the Meiji Emperor, the book is considered a masterpiece of its time, the supercilious feline narrator making witty and caustic observations on middle class Japanese life. The voice of the narrator, like Paul Auster's central animal character, Mr Bones, is very human but the technique is effective in providing an outsider's view of human foibles and behaviour. The reader, while conscious that the viewpoint is that of a human writer, is on another level forced to think and possibly even feel what it may be like to live the life of an animal. The narrator cat, who has no name other than cat, describes human behaviour from a cat's point of view, pointing out how self-obsessed humans are and how lacking in compassion are the majority of the species. He discusses the fact that humans do not understand the concept of proprietary rights:

“Among our kind it is taken for granted that he who first finds something, be it the head of a dried sardine or a gray mullet's navel, acquires thereby the right to eat it. And if this rule be flouted, one may well resort to violence. But human beings do not seem to understand the right of property. Every time we come on something good to eat, invariably they descend and take it from us. Relying on their naked strength, they coolly rob us of things which are rightly ours to eat..... I feel that life is not unreasonable so long as one can scrape along from day to day. For surely even human beings will not flourish forever. I think it best to wait in patience for the Day of the Cats.”<sup>40</sup>

Eva Hornung in her novel *Dog Boy*<sup>41</sup>, uses an interesting plot device to give some insight into the plight of stray dogs surviving in the urban environment.

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<sup>39</sup> Auster, Paul, *Timbuktu*, Picador, New York, 1999

<sup>40</sup> Natsume, Soseki. *I am a Cat*, Tuttle Publishing, Japan 1972, p.7

<sup>41</sup> Hornung, Eva. *Dog Boy*, Text Publishing, Melbourne 2009

Central to the plot is a boy who has been raised by a pack of dogs in a bleak setting in a Russian city. Abandoned by his family at the onset of winter, the four-year-old Romochka follows a stray dog to her lair and becomes part of her litter. Slowly he forgets his human existence and takes on the behaviour of the dogs, although retaining his human intelligence and so introducing new activities for the dogs such as building mazes with junk he finds in the warehouse.

Primarily the boy's social behaviour, along with his diet, is that of the dogs, and he learns to hunt with his canine siblings. In one particular scene Hornung describes the hunting and killing of a cat by the pack and Romochka's remorse over killing a creature he admires. "It fought with such feistiness, even when exhausted, that Ramochka wished it hadn't died."<sup>42</sup> He is torn between his human and dog inclinations and, gradually drawn into his world, so is the reader. Humans are essentially a threat to the dogs' existence but as Ramochka grows older he learns he can exploit his human-ness to help his dog family. He stops walking on all fours and sniffing the other dogs when around humans, instead taking on the role of "boy-owner".

"He didn't snarl unless he had to. He was known now as the boy asking for dog food, and some people from the apartment blocks sought him out to give him old cakes, bread, meat and bones. He collected so much good food that his family were shining and sleek – better looking than most strays and ferals."<sup>43</sup>

Hornung uses the conflicts that ensue when Ramochka's two worlds collide to provide an insight into the lives of animals that exist on the periphery of human settlements. Ramochka has a foot in both camps but never belongs entirely in either, so is in effect the conduit between the two.

It is through identifying traits common to both humans and other animals that writers most powerfully evoke compassion for those animals. The fascination for other animals is arguably a fascination with ourselves. One of the classics of American literature, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*<sup>44</sup>, exploits this quest for self-knowledge through the story of a crazed man seeking revenge and through descriptions of whalers' confrontations with their prey. Written at the peak of the American whaling industry and inspired by Melville's own experience as a whaler, *Moby Dick* embodies human exploration of unknown worlds, geographical and metaphysical. Melville uses symbolism and metaphor to explore

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.95

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.101

<sup>44</sup> Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*, Simon & Brown, Florida, 2011

concepts of class and social status, good and evil, and the place of humans in the universe.

Deep ocean whaling in Melville's time was the ultimate exploration of new worlds, men relentlessly pursuing the creatures across the oceans, leaving home for months, sometimes years at a stretch. Whalers were frequently killed in the hunt as they chased 80-ton creatures in 25-foot row boats, the massive creatures often smashing the flimsy boats as they struggled to escape the whalers. These animals were both magnificent and monstrous and they pushed humans to their limits of endurance.

In one of the most poignant descriptions of animals in literature, Melville describes nursing whales and their offspring. In the scene, the crew of the *Pequod* is coming through the Sunda Straits towards Java when they come upon a vast host of sperm whales and enter a clear lagoon where nursing whales suckle their young. Melville writes:

“There a sleek, pure calm reigns. There the females swam in peace, and the young whales came snuffing tamely at the boat, like dogs. And there the astonished seamen watched the love-making of these amazing monsters, mammals, now in rut far down in the sea. . . . But far beneath this wondrous world upon the surface, another and still stranger world met our eyes, as we gazed over the side. For, suspended in these watery vaults, floated the forms of the nursing mothers of the whales, and those that by their enormous girth seemed shortly to become mothers. The lake, as I have hinted, was to a considerable depth exceedingly transparent; and as human infants while sucking will calmly and fixedly gaze away from the breast, as if leading two different lives at a time; and while yet drawing moral nourishment, be still spiritually feasting upon some unearthly reminiscence, even so did the young of these whales seem looking up towards us, but not at us, as if we were but a bit of gulf-weed in their newborn sight. Floating on their sides, the mothers also seemed quietly eyeing us. - Some of the subtlest secrets of the seas seemed divulged to us in this enchanted pond.”<sup>45</sup>

The search for meaning of human existence through the lives of animals is embodied in this text. It is all the more powerful because the hunters recognise themselves and their own kind in those creatures they relentlessly hunt down. Melville, like so many other writers, has sought to explain what it is to be a

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<sup>45</sup> Melville, Herman, *Ibid*, p. 241.

human through his exploration of another species, in this case one that we hold in awe and that we have sought to conquer.

**“If a lion could talk we could not understand him.”**  
**Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>46</sup>**

## **Animals and philosophy**

The unfathomableness of animals is perhaps what drives our fascination with them and our quest to find meaning in our relationship with them through philosophy and literature. The meaning and ethical framework of the human-animal relationship have provided rich material for philosophers. Many have pondered whether the fascination with the differences and the similarities between humans and other animals is simply an extension of our desire to understand ourselves? Others contend that we are simply drawn to animals because they are us, or aspects of us and our lives are enhanced through their presence.

In his master/slave thesis 19<sup>th</sup> century German philosopher, G.W.F. Hegel<sup>47</sup>, proposed that the only way we can gain a sense of self is to look for validation in others, human and otherwise. It is that which cannot, will not be ‘me’ that gives the self an idea of its boundaries, said Hegel.

Another prominent philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who has had much to say on animals, Ludwig Wittgenstein, maintained that humans would never be able to truly understand animals, that there is no common language or point of view that allows us to really comprehend the actions or motivations of other species. He summed up this unreachable quality of animals in his famous quote “If a lion could talk we could not understand him.”<sup>48</sup>

Vicki Hearne, the American poet, philosopher and animal trainer, challenges this assumption, calling it in her book *Animal Happiness* “the most interesting mistake about animals I have come across.” She points to the obvious communication between lion trainers and lions and proposes that it is not the lion’s lack of a common language with humans that she finds so interesting in Wittgenstein’s statement, but the importance of how we face up to the fact of a consciousness beyond ours. It is this darkness or muteness of the animal other that is shown to be a problem for us rather than for the animal.

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<sup>46</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations, The German Text with a Revised English Translation*, Blackwell Publishing Oxford, Hardcover edition, 2003. p.241.

<sup>47</sup> Hegel, G.W.F. *On Art, Religion and the History of Philosophy: Introductory Lectures* [Paperback], Hackett Publishing Co Inc., USA 1997.

<sup>48</sup> Wittgenstein, op. cit.

“The reticence of this lion is not the reticence of absence, absence of consciousness, say, or knowledge, but rather of tremendous presence, of all consciousness that is beyond ours,” says Hearne.<sup>49</sup>

We are challenged by this unfathomable mind contends Hearne: “We are nervous of what it would be like to be emptied of our own consciousness and understanding.”<sup>50</sup>

It is this quest to understand, combined with our fear of the ‘other’ that seems to me to be at the heart of the human fascination with other animals. It is also what I believe was driving the attention that our Sydney dog café received. We are drawn to animals but fear their otherness and our inability to truly understand their inner world. In understanding them we hope to better understand ourselves.

Prominent Renaissance nobleman, writer and philosopher, Michel Eyquem Montaigne, seemed to have no problem looking at things from an animal’s point of view in his *Essays*, published in the sixteenth century. As Sarah Bakewell observes in her biography of Montaigne, *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer*, Montaigne told tales of animal cleverness and sensitivity to demonstrate that human abilities were far from exceptional. Despite this lack of qualities to distinguish us from other animals, says Bakewell, humans “persist in thinking of ourselves as separate from other creatures, closer to gods than to chameleons or parrotfish.” Yet for Montaigne, “it is enough to watch a dog dreaming to see that it must have an inner world like ours.”<sup>51</sup> Montaigne was unusually empathetic, feeling a visceral rapport with all other living things, regardless of species. He could not bear cruelty and abhorred hunting. Bakewell refers to Montaigne being struck, when speaking to Brazilian Indians in Rouen, by how they spoke of men as halves of one another, “wondering at the sight of rich Frenchmen gorging themselves while their ‘other halves’ starved on their doorstep.”<sup>52</sup> For Montaigne, says Bakewell, all humans share an element of their being, and so do all other living things. He takes this concept even further in his writings: “There is a certain respect, and a general duty of humanity, that attaches us not only to animals, who have life and feeling, but even to trees and plants. We owe justice to men, and mercy and kindness to other

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<sup>49</sup> Hearne, Vicki. *Animal Happiness*, New York, HarperCollins 1994, p.170

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.171

<sup>51</sup> Bakewell, Sarah. *How to Live: A Life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer*, London, Vintage 2011, p.135

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p.179

creatures that may be capable of receiving it. There is some relationship between them and us, and some mutual obligation.”<sup>53</sup> Montaigne indulges his own dog, playing with it when he wishes instead to read, because he can see its point of view, can feel its boredom and need for attention.

Bakewell points out that Montaigne influenced philosophers of his time and those who came after him but that 17th century philosophers such as Rene Descartes and Blaise Pascal considered his views subversive. Animals were of interest to Descartes, argues Blakewell, because they provided a contrast to humans – where humans could reflect on their experiences, animals could not, argued Descartes. This rendered them little more than machines, lacking souls.

Philosopher and writer Raimond Gaita likens the way humans see animals as ‘alien’ to the way we sometimes distrust the otherness of different belief systems, religions and cultural practices. He cites the case of a woman, who he refers to as M, who was grieving over her recently dead son. When she saw Vietnamese women on TV grieving over their sons killed by American bombing she commented, “It’s different for them – they can just have more.”<sup>54</sup> Gaita points out that James Isdell, protector of Aboriginal women in Western Australia, thought much the same about Aboriginal women whose children were taken away from them. “ ‘They soon forget their offspring,’ he said, explaining why he ‘would not hesitate for a moment to separate any half-caste from its Aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic her momentary grief might be.’ ”<sup>55</sup>

Isdell and M, says Gaita, “could not see that the victims of their racist denigration could be individuals in the sense in which we mean it when we say that all human beings are unique and irreplaceable. ‘Our’ children are irreplaceable, but ‘theirs’ are replaceable more or less as our pets are.”

This blindness to the common qualities of all humans is also reflected in the attitudes of white slave owners, says Gaita, who admonished other white slave owners for cruelty to their slaves while never recognising that “slavery itself constituted an injustice.”

If humans are able to cast other humans so easily as ‘others’ then animals are surely relegated to a profound class of otherness. Because of this, says Gaita, we cannot wrong animals as we do other humans. “And that is why we speak so

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Gaita, Raimond. *The Philosopher’s Dog*, The Text Publishing Company, 2002 p.167

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, Raimond Gaita quoting James Isdell, p.167

naturally of us and them, of human beings and animals, rather than human beings and other animals.”<sup>56</sup>

Cary Wolfe, a Professor of English studies, philosopher and writer on animal ethics, explores this theme in his essay *In the Shadow of Wittgenstein's Lion*, published in an anthology of essays, *Zoontologies*. Many philosophers writing on the subject of the human-animal relationship grapple with the ethics of dealing with other species that cannot, as Wittgenstein claimed, ever share a common language or set of values. However, it is not necessarily the quest to understand the other that drives philosophers dealing with the human-animal relationship, but instead the quest to define what knowledge actually is, says Wolfe. He quotes Stanley Cavell, American philosopher and Professor Emeritus of Aesthetics and the General Theory of Value at Harvard University, to highlight this concept:

“For Cavell, the philosophical false start that Wittgenstein wants to reroute is ‘the [skeptic’s] idea that the problem of the other is the problem of *knowing* the other’, when in fact one of the most valuable things about our encounter with the supposedly mute animal is that it ‘sooner makes us wonder what *we* conceive knowledge to be.’”<sup>57</sup> [emphasis added by Wolfe to Cavell’s text]

Philosopher and writer Mark Rowlands challenges the entire notion embodied in Wittgenstein’s lion statement. Rowlands shared his life with a full-blood wolf for 11 years and wrote a book about the experience called *The Philosopher and the Wolf*.<sup>58</sup> Rowlands says he learnt much from the wild wolf Brenin about integrity and the essential differences between humans and “non-human animals”. He dismisses Wittgenstein’s assertion that animals cannot “talk” and also the many aspects of humans that many philosophers and writers nominate as features that distinguish us from animals, such as our knowledge that we will die, our ability to distinguish between good and evil or our ability to create civilization. Instead, says Rowland “our uniqueness lies simply in the fact that we tell these stories – and, what’s more, we can actually get ourselves to believe them. If I wanted a one-sentence definition of human beings, this would do: humans are the animals that believe the stories they tell about themselves. Humans are credulous animals.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.170

<sup>57</sup> Wolfe, Cary. *In the Shadow of Wittgenstein's Lion*, published in *Zoontologies* anthology, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p.3

<sup>58</sup> Rowlands, Mark. *The Philosopher and the Wolf, Lessons from the Wild on Love, Death and Happiness*, Granta, 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p.2

Rowlands proposes that the wolf looms large in our myths and legends because of its animal integrity, its uncorruptable animalness. It is, if unfairly selected, “representative of the dark side of humanity”. This is particularly ironic, says Rowlands, because the Greek word for wolf is *lukos*, so close to the word for light, *leukos*, that the two were often associated. Apollo was regarded as both the god of the sun and of wolves.

“Think of the wolf as the clearing in the forest. In the bowels of the forest, it may be too dark to see the trees. The clearing is the place that allows what was hidden to be uncovered. The wolf, I shall try to show, is the clearing in the human soul. The wolf uncovers what is hidden in the stories we tell about ourselves – what those stories show but do not say.

“We stand in the shadow of the wolf. . . . .By the shadow of the wolf, I mean not the shadow cast by the wolf itself, but the shadows we cast from the light of the wolf. And staring back at us from these shadows is precisely what we don’t want to know about ourselves.”<sup>60</sup>

Rowlands speaks of the simian or ape-like thinking of humans as opposed to the wolf. The difference between the two is vast. Apes, says Rowlands, tend to understand the world in instrumental terms – “the value of everything is function of what it can do for the ape. . . . . The ape is the tendency to base relationships with others on a single principle, invariant and unyielding: what can you do for me, and how much will it cost me to get you to do it?” Sometimes, says Rowlands, it is necessary to let the wolf in us speak, to “silence the incessant chattering of the ape.”<sup>61</sup>

Such a theory would give credence to the idea that humans are drawn to those animals we feel we understand the most and which we feel display the most manageable and predictable behaviour that most resembles ours. Our dogs, cats and other domestic pets not only become members of our households, they become extensions of us. And even better, they rarely answer back, becoming willing participants in this narcissistic quest.

What of those other creatures who do not appeal so much to our sense of self? Some, like humpback whales, attract our attention because of their size and majesty and because of what they symbolise. Maybe there are also echoes of guilt in the enormous lengths we go to to protect whales – after all we once hunted

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p.3-4

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p.6

them to the brink of extinction. Now we find more value in protecting them, their sheer power and size both a reminder of human frailty and of our ingenuity, in that we learnt to conquer them.

Alphonso Lingis, professor of philosophy at Pennsylvania State University, writes of this attraction of animals and their ability to enhance human experience. In his essay 'Animal Body, Inhuman Face', Lingis writes poetically about the ways humans are linked to animals not through our purposive or goal-oriented movements, but by those rhythms that continue within us despite us:

“The pack of wolves, a cacophonous assemblage of starlings in a maple tree when evening falls, a whole marsh throbbing with frogs, a whole night scintillating with fireflies exert a primal fascination on us. What is fascinated in the pack, the gangs of the savannah and the night, the swarming, is the multiplicity in us – the human form and the nonhuman, vertebrate and invertebrate, animal and vegetable, conscious and unconscious movements and intensities in us that are not yoked to some conscious goal or purpose that is or can be justified in some capitalist program for economic growth or some transcendental or theological fantasy of object-constitution or creativity seated in us.”<sup>62</sup>

The “movements and intensities of our bodies” compose with the “movements and intensities of toucans and wolves, jellyfish and whales,” says Lingis. It is also through animal behaviour that we seek to validate and intensify our responses and emotions, often diluted through routine, repetition and urban living, asserts Lingis:

“Is it not animal emotions that make our feeling intelligible? The specifically human emotions are interlaced with practical, rational, utilitarian calculations which tend to neutralise them – to the point that the human parent no longer knows if she feel something like parental love, finding her time with the baby dosed out between personal and career interests, not knowing how much concern for her child is concern with her own image or her representative. It is when we see the parent bird attacking the cat, the mother elephant carrying her dead calf in grief for three days, that we believe in the reality of maternal love.”<sup>63</sup>

So once again, just as in literature, philosophers confirm that humans seek answers in the human/animal relationship not only to gain a better understanding

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<sup>62</sup> Lingis, Alphonso. 'Animal Body, Human Face', published in *Zoontologies* anthology, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, p.166

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p.169

of our place in the world, but also to amplify and illuminate our experiences. Through our relationships with creatures that are so obviously different to us we look for similarities and confirmation of our own creatureliness. And when we find those similarities, or maybe imagine them, we are offered choices – to exert power over these creatures, to seek to conquer them, to simply observe them, or to give full reign to our capacity for compassion and empathy. Through their otherness we seek the key to ourselves.

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