Cultivating *A Beggar’s Garden:*

A novel and exegesis

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SYNOPSIS

My novel, *A Beggar’s Garden*, and its accompanying exegesis, ‘Reading in *A Beggar’s Garden*: being without shadow’ are offered as sites of confluence where the political, the personal, the poetic and the polemic meet, blend, separate, reform and reconfigure. I hope the work rings with the ‘sociological poetics’ described by Paul Dawson – a poetics which recognises the ‘aesthetic or craft-based decisions of a writer are always the result … of ideological or political choice: the choice to employ social languages and the ideologies they embody … the choice to position a literary work in these languages, as an active intervention in the ideological work they perform’ (Dawson 2005: 211, emphasis in original). Critically and creatively I am telling stories that resonate in a contemporary register and with the tone and timbre of the language of affect which has here been derived from what Mark Davis describes as ‘the logic of affect since … this is the logic of contemporary politics and the public sphere’ (Davis 2007: 26-27). I use language as critique and explore through creative, critical and political idioms the intersections where these languages collide to produce the vernacular that positions, forms and informs subjectivity. The images, ideas, historiography and politics embedded in everyday languages are too often violent and proscriptive. I appropriate the violent tendencies laced through everyday languages and use them towards their opposite effect, towards compassion, belonging and dignity for the outcasts, outsiders and outriders of the community. My creative work is driven by my cultural politics and my critical work by a wish to intervene creatively into political discourses and how these discourses construct and outlaw the other who, in the contemporary socio-cultural order, can be found among the most vulnerable and neglected in the community – the very young and very old, the ‘coloured’, poor, ill and the broken. My work with and through language is designed to trouble and disrupt the processes that help to produce the other and, as a result of the outlawed subjectivity designated to them, deny that other even the smallest comforts of belonging, of being at home. In both a creative and critical sense I am unapologetically driven by the conviction that social justice is more than an idea and that fighting for it matters. I hold fast to a belief in the possibility of beauty and politics being embedded in the heart of fiction.
The novel in this submission is set in contemporary times in a city much like Brisbane; it focuses on the plight of a woman cast onto the streets with her two young children. The exegesis accompanying the novel provides an account of the research and thinking I undertook in writing the work.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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A Beggar’s Garden
The trick to riding a bike in Angel’s gear is to pick your line and commit to it before you let go of the handlebars. Speed matters. Too much and the bike will skid on the gravel at the bottom of the hill just as you’re taking the right hand turn. Miss that corner and it’s game over, you’re sprawled on the footpath on the other side of the T-intersection. Too little speed and you won’t have the power to get across the road and clear the path of any car that may or may not be coming over the rise. A blind corner on the crest of a hill, perfect spot for a game of chicken.
Charlie watches Sean’s approach to the corner. The guy is so smooth he could be on a surfboard. Hands hanging loose at his sides Sean uses his knees to sway the bike out into the middle of the road then tilts it in towards the corner. Picking up speed he leans back, brings his hands together behind his head, clears the gravel patch, coasts across the road and on down the other side of the hill.

Feet flat on the ground either side of his bike, Charlie contemplates his own line. He’s bigger and faster than his friend. He’ll go wide, come in to the corner low at a sharp angle and sail past Sean like he doesn’t know he’s there. But even as he’s imagining himself doing it he knows he’s not going to. Some days you’re too spooked for Angel’s gear.

Hands firm on the brakes Charlie pushes off and lets the bike roll down the hill. He stops at the give way sign. If he turns right he’ll end up calling his mum from Sean’s place to tell her he’s staying the night. Well, he’ll ask her and both of them will pretend it’s a genuine question because she still thinks he needs to ask her permission about that kind of thing. Sean’s mum will ask after the family.

‘And how’s that gorgeous little monster Lucy?’
‘Yeah, monstrous, thanks.’

When the questions move onto his mum and Carl, Charlie will duck under the cover of his adolescence. Other people’s mothers are more tolerant of the all-purpose grunt than his.

‘Apes grunt, Charlie, humans use words,’ she says, and gives him a play slap across the back of his head.

‘Yes ma’am.’
‘Until such time as you can form whole sentences again, you remain a Halfling, neither man nor child. As such, you are entirely subject to my rules, me, your loving mother and a far superior human being.’ Slap.

‘Yessah, ma’am. Me Halfling, you boss.’
‘Good boy. And do not play the dumb nigger with me.’ Slap.

One time some hippy overheard them playing a version of the ‘yes ma’am’ game in the supermarket line and tried having a go at her.
‘You really think that’s a good way to speak to him, Lady?’
Charlie kept his head down. His mum turned to face the poor old guy and gave him what Charlie calls her slice and dice look. It’s a quick, cold cut.

‘Oh please,’ she said, running her eyes from the guy’s socked and sandalled feet to his grey ponytail.

Outside she frothed at the mouth about the nerve of the guy but it didn’t last long. By the time they got to the car, Charlie yes ma’aming and grovelling and trying to wrestle the trolley out of her hands, she was having trouble keeping a straight face. When she lifted the bags to put them in the boot Charlie snatched at them.

‘Please, ma’am, let me help you.’

Between them they burst a bag full of fruit. Limbs flaying every which way, Charlie loped after the apples and mandarins but only managed to kick them further away.

‘Sorry, ma’am,’ he wailed, slapping both hands onto his cheeks. ‘So sorry, ma’am. I can do better.’

He crawled towards her on his knees, picking up one piece of fruit as another dropped out of his arms.

‘Can I peel you a mandarin, ma’am, please? Oh please, let me peel you a mandarin.’

He offered himself up for a beating and cowered away from her at the same time. She doubled over holding one hand into her side and wiping at tears with the other.

‘Please ma’am,’ he howled.

Eventually she straightened up and yelled, ‘Oh, fuck the fruit, Charlie,’ which set them both off again.

They don’t play in public anymore. They don’t play much at all. He can’t remember the last time they laughed until their stomachs hurt. Lately she grunts more than he does.

No shortage of words at Sean’s place. Everyone in that family has something to say about everything and they say it too. Dinner time at Sean’s place is a free for all and no subject is out of bounds, not religion, that’s a favourite, not politics, they pretty much all agree there anyway. They talk over the top of each other and nobody cares how loud the plates clatter or how much noise a chair makes being scraped back. If one of them
thumps the table to help argue a point, none of the others jump, they’re more likely to laugh. They get so caught up they forget to turn the telly on after dinner.

‘You coming?’ Sean calls to him.

He’d stayed so often last holidays, Sean’s mum set up a semi-permanent camp bed for him and he was given household chores with the rest of them. He didn’t mind. Sean didn’t get it but Charlie even liked doing the washing up over there, it meant he got to hang around the dinner talk longer.

If he goes with Sean tonight the two of them will stay up late bragging about things both of them know the other hasn’t done yet – touching girls and smoking dope, getting pissed and driving cars. Maybe Sean’s done some of that stuff, he talks it up pretty well, but Charlie doubts it.

When his friend is asleep Charlie will lie on the camp bed and lift the curtain just enough to peer out into the dark and because his bed is set up under the window the night will look like it’s upside down. He will wonder how things are going over at his place without him.

It’s getting dark. Charlie looks to his left.

‘Nah, see you tomorrow,’ he yells back to his friend.

He’s been counting. It’s the second Friday. Carl’s pay day. Time to go home.

‘Whatever,’ says Sean, not loud enough for Charlie to hear. He jerks his bike into motion. Charlie says no to everything these days.

When he knows he’s out of Sean’s sight Charlie pedals so fast he sets his chest on fire and he can hear the blood pounding through his skull. He can’t see the floodlights over the roadworks near his place but he knows they’re on already. The sky above the site is glowing, a brilliant white dome cupping the ground, cupped by a larger, paler dome sprinkled with the coloured lights of the city in the near distance. His own private light show. When the road home brings him alongside the freeway Charlie crouches over the handlebars and pushes himself and his bike to breakneck speed, his tyres slurp up the bitumen. The trucks on the freeway bear down on him. It’s boy against machine. He’s racing them to the corner where the road peels off before taking a dive under the freeway and emerging on the other side of it right on the lip of the roadworks.
His mum reckons living here is like living on the edge of a wasteland, she says so almost every time they drive through it. But Charlie thinks there’s something beautiful about this place. He thinks of it as a moonscape, or a crater left by a meteor, or a miniature version of those colossal mines out in the desert. At night the outsized machinery looks like it’s been abandoned instead of parked, it sits at dangerous angles in random spots all over the site. Cement retaining walls run in every direction. Three-metre-high wire fences only just stay upright. All traces of greenery have been removed. His mum says the smell of the stripped earth after rain is like ‘something rotten and ungodly’ which makes no sense to Charlie since he knows she couldn’t care less about god. There are temporary traffic lights. In the day men in hard hats make sure the unfinished on and off ramps are not mistaken for through roads. At night these live humans are replaced by automatons that wave. On top of mile-high steel poles the floodlights tremble constantly and reduce the whole area to two dimensions. Getting across here in a car requires off-road driving skills. If you didn’t know your way around you could find yourself up on the freeway going in the wrong direction.

Charlie slows his bike to crawling pace and glides through the centre of the crater. On the other side he pulls up to steady himself for home, too close now to pretend that’s not where he’s headed. He’s left it a bit late. The spindly gums around him have morphed into shadow creatures. A thin strip of pink and red light lays flat on the horizon and the tail end of peak hour on the freeway hums in his ears. The heat of the day is still rising from the road, he can feel it through the soles of his shoes. He takes a deep breath to settle his guts, straightens his back, squares his shoulders and rides out of the light.

At the top end of his street he cuts through the vacant lot to the dirt track that runs behind the line of ex-army houses. The track marks the outer edge of what was an army base. The temperature drops as soon as he’s on the dirt. It’s a mystery to him why they bothered to fence these houses at all because this side of the barracks backs onto open scrub. They might look pale and fleshy at this time of day but there’s nothing spindly about the gums back here, they’ve kept shade on the track most of the day. Charlie makes his gratitude for the cooling trees audible with a long aaahhhhh. He’d drop his bike and hug them if he didn’t know what a dick he’d look. His tyres whistle over the dirt as he rides down the long block.
He peers over the back fences of his neighbours. From the front these places look identical except for a pot of geraniums or a door painted bright red or a makeshift canvas carport squashed up beside the house. Some families with young kids live here, some old women whose husbands are long gone, but mostly these are bachelor pads where the men from the cement works live. From the back it’s easy to tell which houses don’t have a woman in them. The clotheslines are a giveaway, full of work clothes flung over the wire and not a peg in sight. One place has an old horse float parked diagonally across the yard and converted into a bedroom, another has two or three partly dismantled trucks in it that haven’t had any work done on them for years. In one place the back door, always the kitchen door, has been filled in and the beginnings of a veranda added. This looks especially weird because it’s a metre’s climb to the unfinished veranda and there’s no doorway from the house and no steps to get onto it anyway.

‘Sacrificial platform,’ his mum said.

She didn’t say what she thought was being sacrificed.

The sweat he worked up racing the trucks has dried to glue and stuck his schoolbag onto his back. His palms are greasy and slip off the handbrakes and he has to grab the neighbour’s fence to bring the bike to a stop. He lets the bike lean against the fence. He fiddles with the brake grips, looks down to check the chain, starts to run both hands over his head but stops halfway through the action, it’s something he’s seen Carl do a billion times. He pulls the collar of his tee shirt out and blows onto his chest. He doesn’t look in the direction of his yard but scans the bush beyond the fence. The underbrush is backlit by the last of daylight. Black as steel, the tree tops hang in the sky as though independent of their trunks.

When he and his mum first moved in with Carl, when she still laughed out loud, the two of them would sneak off to explore in the bush behind the house. He used to think they alone had created the maze of tracks that crisscross back and forward from here to the prison in one direction and out to the train station in the other. Back then the walks went on forever. Once they got as far as the prison fence. He stood close to her, her arm across the front of him like she did in the car when she had to brake fast. They stared up at the razor wire, so high above them he had to tilt his head back until his neck hurt. He asked her why the wire didn’t rust.
‘Don’t know,’ she said, turning him around by his shoulders and pushing him back into the cover of the trees.

On the way home that day their silence was broken only by the sound of the dry bush splintering under their feet. For a while after that walk he would lie on his bunk in the closed-in veranda that had become his bedroom and imagine escaped prisoners hunched low, running the tracks to the railway line. One or two might slip into the yard. He wouldn’t be scared. He’d give them food and water and point them in the direction of the station.

Some way into the bush, out of sight but within shouting distance of their back fence, a ring of ghost gums stands sentinel around a clearing. Even in the near dark Charlie can pick which trees mark the spot. It was early autumn when they first found it, the light had already changed from brutal to muted.

‘Feel that, Charlie? It’s like stepping into a pool,’ his mum whispered, even though there wasn’t a soul around to hear them.

Her whispering set the tone for all their visits. After Lucy was born and they couldn’t go bush bashing anymore the three of them spent whole afternoons in the clearing. A huge log, weathered smooth and tucked up against the edge of the trees served as back rest and picnic table. In the punishing summer months, when it was too hot to spend any real time in there anyway, the dirt turned powdery fine and the ghost gums looked like they were floating on it.

Carl doesn’t like them being out there. He says the sooner the whole area is cleared and has a proper suburb built on it the better. Reckons it’s a bloody snake pit that hasn’t been touched since the first fuckin’ fleet sailed in, and what do you do out there anyway? Hard to say what they do. They talk. One summer Charlie was obsessed with gladiators and took his plastic mask, sword and shield everywhere he went. The red-lined cloak flew out behind him while he slashed the air, sang his own soundtrack and dared whoever it was he thought he was fighting to show themselves. Somewhere buried under the mightiest of the gums there’s still a box of little boy treasure. They fussed with the baby – babies take a lot of fussing. They made up stupid songs to sing to her. His mum read, sometimes to him and Lucy, sometimes for herself. Lulled by the stillness and the heat and the occasional whip-bird call, it wasn’t unusual for the three of them to curl up
and go to sleep, only to be woken by the screech of dusk cicadas. Or Carl bellowing for them from the back fence. When that happened Charlie’s mum, her face creased and crumpled from sleep, loaded him up with the blanket, toys and bits and pieces from their picnic and sent him ahead to tell Carl they were on their way in.

‘You might be a bona fide jungle bunny, Charlie-boy, but you’re sister’s too young to be sleeping in a bloody snake pit.’

Charlie didn’t know what bona fide meant but even then he knew what Carl meant by jungle bunny. Same thing he meant by kaffir and coon.

Charlie’s hungry. He can’t tell whether his legs are wobbly from the ride or from lack of food. He should have gone to Sean’s. Pushing off from the fence the bike almost topples and he has to concentrate to stay upright. He doesn’t look over his fence. His thigh muscles burn on the down stroke and he gathers just enough momentum to get him into his front yard.

Rounding the corner his innards bottom out. Carl’s car is parked all wrong. He’s overshot the two strips of broken cement that pass as a driveway. The nose of the car is in the dirt and nudge up against the corner of the house, any closer and the front end would be in the lounge room. Careful not to scratch Carl’s precious car with his bike, Charlie leans out and puts his palm on the bonnet. The cold steel makes his toes curl. He should have come straight home. Carl’s been here for a while.

The bike rides itself into the back yard. He’s off it before it stops moving and lets it fall against the laundry wall so his mum will know he’s home. He pulls the dead weight of the school bag off his back and holds it against his chest. The house is a gigantic shadow in front of him, its outline traced black against the floodlights in the background. The open kitchen door and the window cast two strips of grey light across the back yard. Charlie wishes he was holding Lucy’s grimy hand. The two of them could make a game of following the light home. She could be Dorothy. He, the cowardly lion, of course. He stands still and listens to the house. *The Simpsons* are playing in the front room. Lucy will be sitting cross-legged on the floor, too close to the screen and staring at it with that vacant look she gets. She’ll be keeping herself small and quiet like he’s taught her to on nights like this when the walls of the house creak with the weight of its silence, when it’s
a whispering house, a house of whispers. Through the metallic taste that’s coated his throat he sings his way across the yard.

He sees them through the screen door. They might be dancing but Charlie knows they’re not. Carl has her pinned against the sink with one arm around her waist. He has her face in his other hand and his forehead pressed against her cheek forcing her mouth to hang slack. Her bottom half leans in towards him while her top half is bent away from him at an angle that shouldn’t be possible for a human body. It looks like her back is being broken in slow motion.

Charlie drops his bag, pulls open the screen door and steps inside. The smell of meat cooking makes his empty stomach spasm. Carl’s bottle of rum and a glass are on the table. The clock on the microwave says 7.28. The screen door slams shut behind him.

He opens his mouth to speak but the sound comes out a pissy squeak. Before he can draw a breath to try again, Carl has spun around and Charlie sees why his mum was standing at that warped angle. Carl has a handful of flesh from her back he’s forgotten to let go of. She’s whimpering. He’s dribbling. A stream of spittle swings from the corner of Carl’s mouth. For a moment Charlie doesn’t know which one of them he hates more.

‘I beg your pardon?’ says Carl.

At least that’s what Charlie thinks he’s tried to say. It came out, ‘A beggar’s garden?’

His mum’s trying to greet him, to smile. He wishes she wouldn’t. Her lips are the colour of the yellowing fridge door. A pot of potatoes boils on the stove, sausages spit in the pan. Bangers and mash. Happy family Friday night food. Kid’s food. She’s made it for him and Lucy but Charlie knows the pay day deal. His mother spends every second Friday planning the hours between three-thirty and midnight. Kid’s food is part of the plan, so him and Lucy will be cheerful, subdued. He’s over it. You’d never get bangers and mash at Sean’s place.

He already knows she’s been tiptoeing around Carl for hours wearing the look boxers get when they circle their opponent trying to catch every twitch of movement before it happens. She’ll have been agreeing with everything he’s said, smiling her dead-eyed smile, keeping Lucy quiet, placing the pots and pans so the steel doesn’t squeal when it scrapes across the stove. When things are good she likes to have the radio on in
the kitchen, she sings along, waves a tea towel above her head, dances with Lucy and chatters on about nothing much. Tonight the radio is off. Lucy is out of the way and his mother’s boxer’s grace has deserted her.

‘Charlie,’ she says.

Nothing. She’s deliberately saying nothing. Like his name is nothing. He knows she doesn’t mean it like that, it’s just part of the deal. If she can say nothing maybe Carl won’t notice she’s there. Charlie can’t look at her directly. It sounds like she’s begging and it makes him sick. His balls shrivel to the size of peanuts.

‘Carl. Stop.’

The words hover in the fatty air before he realises he’s said them out loud. All the nights he’s snuggled with Lucy in the other room and imagined himself getting right up in Carl’s face and saying something, anything, to make him stop. The voice he had imagined would send Carl running. But now the words are out they sound weak, stupid, a bleating whinge rather than the command he had imagined. A blush spreads from his chest to his neck and face. Not that Carl would notice. He doesn’t know how to read the colour of Charlie’s skin.

‘Charlie-boy!’

Carl makes a show of dropping his hand from her back. She staggers under the weight of her own body. The sound that comes out of her is the sound a dog makes when it’s been winded by a boot in the ribs.

‘Hear that, Megs?’ Carl says, not looking at her. ‘Kid’s finally found his balls.’

He takes a step to the side, clearing a path between him and Charlie. His mum shakes her head, mouths no behind Carl’s back. The crickets outside whir in chorus with the spitting sausages. In the lounge room Homer Simpson slaps his head, says, ‘D’oh’ and ushers in the theme song. Lucy’s turned the volume up.

‘It’s not right what you do, Carl,’ says Charlie.

Carl’s face rearranges itself, a wet skin being stretched tight across the rim of a drum. He takes a slug from the bottle, puts it back on the table.

‘Not your business what I do,’ he says.

Charlie’s body rattles. His mum is trying to make eye contact but he can’t look away from Carl.
‘Charlie,’ she says. ‘Go and sit with Lucy.’

She has used her best ever light and tinkly voice, the one that goes with the dead-eyed smile.

‘No,’ he says.

No insect squeak this time. His voice bounces back to him. He stands up taller. His mum steps out from behind Carl, trying to get between them. In a seamless set of moves, more ballet dancer than drunk, Carl grabs her by the hair and pulls her backwards. Her hands grab for things to keep her upright. She pulls a chair over, knocks the pot of boiling potatoes which collects the pan of sausages. The contents of the kitchen are flying in all directions. Including Carl.

Bone on bone, Charlie hears the pain before he feels it. Carl’s breath comes through his nose in rhythm with his fist. Three quick jabs to Charlie’s head. The third punch slams him back against the wall.

The racket has silenced the crickets outside. Carl stands panting in the middle of the airless room and rubs his knuckles. The television’s been turned off. The clock clicks over: 7.31.
Meg inches up to sitting and leans against the fridge, legs splayed out in front of her. Charlie hasn’t moved. They’re directly opposite each other. She holds his gaze for as long as he allows. She knows why he has to look away but doesn’t take her eyes off his face. When he glances at her and makes a move to get up she shakes her head, slowly, the action barely perceptible. Carl wouldn’t have noticed it even if he was looking straight at her. Meg and Charlie reach the tacit agreement that it’s better for the time being if nobody moves. She’ll have to get over to him soon enough. His face is bleeding but if the cut was bad it would be gushing already. Since it’s not, it will be easy to deal with. For now, for a couple more seconds, they need to stay down, stay still and stay quiet. Which they do. She listens to the fluorescent light buzz.
‘Jesus wept,’ says Carl.

He rights the chair that went over with Meg, takes another shot from the bottle and drags his hands through his hair.

‘Jesus bloody wept,’ he says and lowers himself onto the chair.

On the floor in front of the sink Meg sees a glint of gold, one of her earrings. He must have pulled it out when he yanked her hair. Carefully – she doesn’t want to startle Carl – she takes her hand up to her ear. There’s blood but not too much. She runs a check on the rest of her body. The spot where he’d grabbed his pound of flesh is throbbing. She closes her eyes and leans her head back against the fridge. Everything hurts. On the plus side, nothing appears to be broken. She would sigh but doesn’t dare disturb the silence.

Then, realising what the silent television means, she snaps her head around to scope the corridor that leads to the front of the house.

Lucy’s standing in the doorway. She’s dangling that wretched purple bunny from one hand and wearing a hideous old lime green tee shirt of Charlie’s that she insists on using as a nightie. Her blonde frizz springs out from her head in clumps. She looks like a demented Medusa in miniature. She stares at her father.

‘You hurt them,’ she says.

The expression on her face is piteous though it’s unclear who the pity is for. The tin roof groans a contraction as it cools in the night air and sends a shudder through the house. The noise is calamitous but, unlike her mother whose heart feels like it’s been given a jump start, Lucy doesn’t flinch. She’s waiting for an explanation. In four-year-old Lucy land all things are explicable. Carl sighs and opens his arms for his daughter to walk into. She doesn’t move.

‘I saw you,’ she says.

‘Lucy, my lovely,’ he purrs.

He tries to produce his most winning smile. Sober, it’s a smile that fells all before it, old, young, men, women, bank managers and bottle shop attendants. Drunk, it makes him look like a retarded ghoul. Meg suppresses a snigger at his expense. Her daughter will not be fobbed off so easily. Lucy stays steely.

‘Ah, fuck it,’ says Carl.
The declaration breaks the hiatus the four of them have been hanging in. Everybody moves at once. Lucy goes to her mother.

‘Blood, Mummy,’ she says, touching Meg’s neck.

‘I know, Baby, but it doesn’t hurt.’

Meg lets Lucy help her up though in truth she’s no help at all. Charlie wipes at the blood on his face and starts gathering his limbs back together. Carl hauls himself up off the chair and lurches over to Charlie.

‘Come on then, ya dumb cunt,’ he says, offering a hand to help Charlie to his feet. Charlie ignores it, uses the wall to steady himself to standing.

‘Right then,’ says Carl.

He kneels, scoops the potatoes off the floor with his hands and flicks them back into the pot.

‘You girls go clean yourselves up,’ he says. ‘Me and Charlie’ll finish dinner, won’t we, mate?’

Keeping one hand on Lucy, Meg pulls a bag of peas out of the freezer. The little bulbs wrap themselves around injured body parts better than a designer ice pack.

‘I said me and Charlie’ll do dinner.’ Carl’s protest comes out somewhere between a threat and a whine.

‘It’s for his eye, Carl,’ Meg says.

She winces at the singsong sound that’s come out of her mouth. It’s the aural equivalent of putting your fingers in your ears and rocking back and forward in a dark corner. When what she really wants to do is raze the house to the ground with a bloodless shriek, to disembowel Carl with her bare hands, shove his entrails into his mouth and force his jaw to chew on them. Instead she’s making cooing sounds and keeping her body between Carl and Lucy as she moves around the outer edges of the kitchen, sweating and shaking and trying to muster her children. She wets a tea towel at the sink, wrings it out and hobbles towards Charlie. Carl has opened the fridge door and peers blind at its meagre contents. She stands in a position she hopes will obscure his eye line to Charlie.

There’ll be no kissing this one better. The cut above Charlie’s brow is clean but deeper than she would have expected and still bleeding. His face is already swelling. She dabs at it with the tea towel.
‘Charlie?’

Lucy leans against her brother’s thigh. Stretched out to full length with her arms in the air she doesn’t reach as far as his hip. She tugs on his shirt tails like she wants to be picked up. He doesn’t look at her but he takes her hand.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Meg mouths.

His chin starts to dimple.

‘Don’t.’

Her whisper is a sharp rasp. Charlie might not forgive her if he cries now. She presses the peas too hard onto his brow. He recoils.

‘You have to hold it firm,’ she says, gently this time. He does. ‘And you have to breathe.’

The banality of the instruction amuses them both but the smiles they exchange are without mirth.

Carl slaps the makings of a salad onto the table. Meg composes her face into what she hopes will be the least offensive expression for him. She takes Charlie’s upper arm, pulls Lucy closer and starts to shepherd them out of the room.

Never underestimate the agility of a drunk. Her clear run to the front room is blocked by Carl who has stepped in front of them. That’s all. He just stepped in front of them. He made it from the fridge to the doorway before she got there. All this long afternoon she has bobbed and weaved and ducked and danced and now that he’s dropped his fists he lands the knockout blow without raising a finger. No cry of ‘havoc’ ringing in her head now. She’s been skinned.

‘Carl, please,’ she says.

She doesn’t even know what she wants to ask for. Would you mind reapplying my skin?

Charlie backs away from her, beginning to unravel the knot of sticky flesh the four of them have become in the doorway.

‘It’s okay, Mum,’ he says. ‘We’ll do dinner.’

He’s speaking to her in a code she can’t decipher. He’s telling her something that has nothing to do with the words he’s saying. Lucy’s in on it. She has both Meg’s hands in hers and, shuffling backwards, tries to tug her down the corridor.
‘Come on.’
Lucy throws all fourteen kilos of herself into dragging her mother away.
Carl’s sneer falters. They’re spreading out, sliding away from him like quicksilver from a broken thermometer. He’s bewildered by this turn of events.
‘Well, anyway,’ he says, as though it’s a definitive statement.
He follows Charlie back into the kitchen. Meg hears the glug, glug, glug of the rum pouring into a glass.
‘Ah, well,’ says Carl, somewhat less definitively.
Meg splashes tepid water from the cold tap on her face and neck and swipes at the bits of herself that have blood on them. She turns the tap to full and tries dunking her whole head but when she bends over the muscles in her back feel like they’re shredding. She can smell Carl coming off her. She uncurls herself to standing and watches her genetic material spin down the drain.

‘Oh, lovely,’ she mutters. She turns to face her daughter. ‘Want to have a bath with me, Lu?’

Trying to read Lucy is like trying to read Latin. The root of every familiar thing is in there somewhere, somehow, but it remains incomprehensible. Charlie would know how to deal with the fey creature standing in front of her but Meg is at a loss.
‘I already had my bath,’ says Lucy. ‘Don’t you remember?’

‘That’s right. You did,’ says Meg.

The floor is wet. Lucy’s day clothes are in a pile beside the bath. Moving like she’s a hundred years old Meg picks them up and puts them in the washing basket.

‘You can have another one with me if you like?’

She collects the bits of coloured plastic junk that are Lucy’s bath toys and lines them up on the shelf where they live. Back smarting, she uses her foot as a mop handle and gives the floor a quick pass with Lucy’s towel, which she then hangs to symmetrical perfection on the rail. She opens the window as far as it will go. She wouldn’t fit, but she could drop Lucy through it. Then what? The open window doesn’t bring any relief from the baking night. There’s no more air out of the house than there is in it.

The sink could do with a clean. In fact the whole bathroom needs to be scoured. Meg opens the cabinet to look for something to clean the basin with.

‘No, Mummy.’

The words are a lament strung across the space between them. There is a plaintive note in Lucy’s voice, a quality so tender it has the effect of paper cuts slicing the ends of Meg’s nerves. Lucy is singing a siren’s song. Meg can’t look at the singer for fear she’ll succumb. She wouldn’t cry. She would weep. Then she would weep some more and they would never get out of this rotten little box of a room.

The side of her face aches. She doesn’t need a song to weep by. What she needs are pain killers. She pokes her head further inside the cabinet looking for them though she knows there’s none there.

‘No what, Sweety?’

‘No, thank you, Mummy.’

Meg is flummoxed. She has her head in a cupboard looking for something she knows isn’t there while Lucy, having just witnessed a bloodletting, has summoned her ‘going out’ manners to address a question Meg can’t remember asking. The house and the heat muffle the sounds coming from the kitchen but Carl’s ‘mate’ this and ‘buddy’ that are unmistakable. Charlie emits the occasional practised grunt. They’ve all wandered onto the set of an absurdist sitcom. She has no idea what offer she has made that Lucy is politely declining. A guffaw threatens to rise from Meg’s solar plexus, which is also
starting to ache. She’s tempted to give in to hysteria, that or sleep. Either would do but neither are options.

“‘No, thank you, Mummy”, what, Lucy? I’m sorry, Baby, I don’t know what we’re talking about.’

‘I don’t want another bath. You look sick.’

Meg eases herself onto the floor beside Lucy and rests her back against the tiled wall. There is some comfort in the ceramic surface, cooler than the water from the cold tap and reassuringly not human. She reaches for Lucy who neither resists nor responds.

‘I’m not scared, Mummy.’

She looks terrified. Meg pulls her onto her lap and starts to rock.

‘I know,’ she says. ‘That’s good.’

Meg rocks, hums, strokes. She listens to the night begin, a city bound train, the neighbourhood dogs barking at the rising moon.

‘He hurt Charlie,’ says Lucy.

The scent of fresh-washed child makes Meg aware of her own smell. Her body is rancid with stale adrenaline.

‘Yes. He did,’ says Meg.

The familiar aftertaste of fear has lodged itself on the roof of her mouth. Lucy yawns.

‘Bedtime, hey?’

Lucy shakes her head. Something’s in the dirt close to, or under the house. Good thing she didn’t drop Lucy down there.

Years ago, so many years ago, Meg spent a couple of days in damp and humid mozzie-ridden bush where her friend Helen’s uncle had a shack. They were supposed to stay for a week but neither of them could cope with the creepy uncle. He was a war vet who’d taken one too many acid trips in Vietnam and never came back. Meg tried making small talk with him the day they arrived.

‘Ah, don’t bother, Love,’ he said, not unkindly. ‘I don’t talk much. I’m a walking corpse.’

The shack was a forty minute trek by foot from the end of an already long, weather-beaten-to-the-point-of-non-existent driveway. She and Helen slept on a high
platform under thick green plastic net. It wasn’t a room but a kind of tent pitched under a
corrugated iron lean-to with a roof and one wall. The net served as the other three walls.
They hardly slept. All night they tried to make sense of a shape moving above them in the
space between the green net and the iron roof. It squirmed and slapped and flapped
around. The sound was something viscous one second and gravel dry the next. It was so
bizarre they wondered if Uncle Creep had spiked their drinks with some of the Nam acid
he claimed he still had buried in the bush. In the morning, right on top of them, trailing
across the green net, an abandoned snake skin took translucent shape in the dawn light.
She and Helen left. Spines shuddering with fright, they crashed along the track back to
Helen’s bomb of a car. They were barely out of girlhood. Too old to be scared like that,
too young to know there were much more frightening things than the sounds of a snake
shedding its skin. Like watching your son get bashed in the head.

Meg decides the thing under the bathroom is a snake, a red-bellied black. She will
put it into Carl’s side of the bed. It will be slow and painful for him and she will be able
to feign innocence. But the investigating officer will know in his bones that, yes, she
killed the guy with a snake. As far as fantasies go, it’s pathetic. She’s not sure red-bellied
black venom is fatal and besides she wouldn’t know how to catch the snake in the first
place.

‘I’m hungry,’ says Lucy.

Hiding and humming and dreaming up murder is no way to spend a Friday night.
Nor will it get Lucy fed or to bed. Meg tries to lift the child off her lap but can’t manage.

‘Hop up, Honey,’ she says. ‘Let’s go see what Charlie’s doing.’

Lucy can’t reach the doorknob which is set at adult shoulder height. She stands
facing the door, certain an adult hand from above will open it, that all things will happen
as they should. Meg tucks a sprig of blonde frizz behind Lucy’s ear, it’s futile, the hair
springs straight back out. It was just an excuse for touch. Meg’s chest compresses. She
steals a glance at herself in the mirror. She looks deranged, visibly frayed at the edges.
She’s so thin her collar bones are a coat hanger for her lank skin. Her hair’s a mop of dull
mouse brown. From behind she’d look like a short pubescent boy. She straightens her
dress and hair and opens the door.
The kitchen sounds have shifted gear from pots and pans to plates and cutlery. Charlie’s a silhouette against the hard light in the kitchen behind him. The light falls across what should be the familiar planes of his face, except they’re not. His face is distorted. Meg’s joints ache. It’s longing. He’s only half a corridor away and she’s longing for him. He indicates that she should take Lucy to the front room.

‘I’m hungry, Charlie,’ Lucy says.

‘How ’bout I bring you dinner in front of the telly?’ he says.

They’re talking in code again. When did her children start doing this? Only weeks ago Charlie had shown Lucy the can and string trick. Lucy sat in the back yard with a tin can held to her ear, listening intently while he was in the front yard speaking into another can. When the string he’d run under the house connecting the cans delivered his words into her ear, Lucy’s face lit up.

‘It’s Charlie, Mummy,’ she squealed, and hugged the tin can to her shoulder. ‘I can hear you, Charlie,’ she yelled, ignoring the device and pitching her voice up and over the house.

Meg laughed at her daughter missing the point of the string and can. It wasn’t the primitive telephone that so delighted Lucy. It was that her brother had revealed himself to be a magician.

Now, like that day, Meg feels she’s eavesdropping on them. She’s an outsider to their communication. It doesn’t matter how Charlie has made himself understood, his instruction to Lucy is clear – don’t come in here.

‘Okay,’ says Lucy, and minces off down the corridor as only a four-year-old princess can. Meg limps after her.

On the couch with Lucy tucked up close Meg focuses her attention on the screen and scrolls through the stations. She can’t fathom any of it. Next week on *Home and Away* Sally and Jack have to pick up Sharon from the police station. Tom is leaving Summer Bay for Sydney, they all thought he was a moron but here he is with an apprenticeship as a carpenter. Yay. Shot of a party scene where red lemonade is the beverage of choice. Over on *Neighbours* a secret from Gordon’s past is coming ever closer. Will it break up his new blended family? Susan has found her long-lost father but he’s not sure he wants to know her. He’s conflicted, you can tell by his furrowed brow.
Somebody did some research and found that new-born babies settled when the *Neighbours* theme song came on. Their mothers had watched the show throughout their pregnancies and because it was quiet time in the womb the babies associated the song with sleep. Meg imagines row after row of incubating women with enormous bellies and glazed eyes. She switches the station. More crime scene investigations featuring mutilated children and teenage prostitutes, accompanied by moody saxophones. A middle-aged woman with botulism injected into her face comes on to sell a cream that guarantees Meg will be seventy-one per cent more radiant. That’s handy. You can’t have enough radiancy in your life and seventy-one per cent is impressive, botulism or not. Meg flicks the remote. A footballer has been seen drunk in a club. And another cholera epidemic has claimed hundreds of lives in some miserable half-starved African nation. It’s a cosmic obscenity that the people of a bone-dry country are dying from a waterborne disease. Luckily, the twenty-year-old Friday night family movie stars Bruce Willis who will be saving the world – again, or still, whichever. Maybe Bruce could organise some clean water for those folks in Africa. Bruce would be able to manage it because Bruce is good. Never mind he was already long in the tooth and bald to boot when the film was made, Meg has always drawn solace knowing Bruce is out there somewhere preventing Armageddon. He should hurry it up a bit.

She keeps flicking through the stations until she comes across a wildlife documentary with a solo cello underpinning the baritone voiceover. That will do. It’s not obscene. They’ll have to vacate the lounge soon anyway. Carl loves Bruce.

Charlie is standing in front of her. She gulps in breath as though swallowing the air will be more efficient than merely breathing it in. Under the dried blood his face is a ghastly yellow. If there was an opposite of the synthetic orange white people go when they overdo a spray tan, this would be it – spray pale for black people. It’s like he’s pulled on a second skin made of soot-coloured rubber.

He has a plate of food in his hand, burnt sausages, limp lettuce and a slice of bleeding tomato.

‘Yum, Charlie,’ she says. ‘But where’s the mash?’

Her attempt at humour fails.

‘I know,’ he says. ‘Mash didn’t work out. I could get you something else?’
Lucy has folded herself into the contours of Meg’s body. Every point of contact hums. Meg can’t tell if she’s asleep or just blissfully close to it.

‘No. Is she asleep?’

He bends down to check Lucy’s face, nods. He puts the plate of food on the low table in front of them.

‘Should we wake her?’

Meg shakes her head, takes him by the wrist.

‘I never thought he’d hit you,’ she says. ‘I never thought he would.’

Charlie withdraws his hand. He’s not being cruel, just alone. She swats tears off her cheek. He’s nowhere near tears. His face is a void.

‘He’s coming in to watch Bruce,’ says Charlie.

His voice is expressionless. He’s in shock. He needs sugar.

‘Have you eaten? You need to drink something, Charlie, something sweet.’

If he heard her he’s ignoring her.

‘He wants me to watch Bruce with him. A bonding session. Manly stuff.’

He’s too young for this kind of humour. *You lousy cunt, Carl.* She smiles at Charlie’s horrible joke, hoping for a response in kind. It doesn’t come.

Movement in the kitchen, the screen door slams. Carl’s gone to piss in the yard. He’s not quite past losing it again. Meg needs to get Lucy to bed.

‘I’m going to lie down with her. You don’t have to watch with him, you know.’

‘I know,’ he says. ‘But I’m okay. I’ll carry her.’

Of course he will carry her – barefoot over cut glass if he has to. He might have to. Lucy grumbles but flops over his shoulder without waking. As they file out of the room Ms Seventy-One Percent Botox comes on again and Carl’s steel-capped boots slap across the kitchen lino. Charlie lowers his sister onto the bed, sits beside her and pats her back.

‘Here’s Bruce, Charlie-boy,’ Carl calls.

The volume on the telly goes up. Charlie rolls his eyes. That’s standard, but there’s something more than contempt on his face. He’s skittish, got the jitters. Meg’s missed something.

‘Charlie,’ she says. ‘What’s going on?’
‘Like what?’ he says. ‘That wasn’t enough?’ It’s not a question. ‘You sure you
don’t want anything?’ He’s dismissed her.

‘Nah, I’ll get something when the gospel according to Bruce kicks in.’

Another feeble attempt but it raises a grim smile. She can’t hug him. He won’t let
her that close, not voluntarily. Two steps get her across the room. Before he can shrink
away she plants a loud kiss on top of his head which is sticky with blood, sweat and fear.
He couldn’t explain it if he was asked but he knows he’s been hoodwinked somehow,
outmanoeuvred. He gives her half a baffled smile. She is victorious. He is child enough
that her kiss can raise a smile. Her too tight chest gives a little.

When Bruce has *yippeekaiyay-ed* his way onto the screen, Meg tiptoes to the
kitchen where she drinks the kids’ juice straight from the bottle and downs a bowl of
cereal. Neither has any taste. She makes a chocolate milk and puts it in the fridge, if Lucy
wakes up hungry that should be enough to keep her quiet until morning. She surveys the
kitchen. Charlie’s mopped up as best he could. The rum bottle is gone. Carl must have it
with him. Meg turns off the light and goes to lie down with Lucy. She’ll shower later,
when Carl has passed out.

She wriggles Lucy over close to the wall and lies in front of her facing the door.
Her teeth hurt from clenching them for hours on end. The adrenaline has converted into a
fatigue that is epic. It’s too hot. Lucy’s snoring. Sounds of things blowing up. Carl
laughing. Nothing from Charlie. Next door is watching the same movie. She’s got it in
stereo. She’ll get the kids out early in the morning. Spend the day in the city. Stay out of
the way. Blood thrums in the parts of her body that hurt. Could the red-bellied black
snake be related to the red-back spider? Silly mutant thought.

Charlie will be alright now. Nothing else will happen tonight. The drift is lovely.
Someone is calling her. Someone is tugging on her arm. Some life force is dragging her back to consciousness. Too soon. She knows that before she opens her eyes. It’s too soon.

‘Mum?’

Charlie’s fuzzy head looms over her. From sleep to panic in zero seconds flat. Meg sits up with a start, ripping at the muscles in her back. It’s still dark outside. She couldn’t possibly have slept for twenty-four hours which means it’s the same night.

‘What? What time is it? What’s wrong?’

Without being given any signal her hand reaches out to touch Lucy. Warm. Breathing. There. Can’t be anything serious if they’re both here.

‘Something’s happened to Carl. You better come.’
He’s out of the room already. She sits on the edge of the bed, pulls the sheet back up over Lucy. Even her feet hurt. Her mouth feels like a sand pit. And she stinks. Her life is a second-rate country and western song she heard a long time ago. *My head hurts/My feet stink/And I don’t love Jesus.* And why is every light in the house on? It’s all too soon.

‘MUM!’

His voice tugs her off the bed. She falls out the doorway of Lucy’s room, across the hall and into the lounge.

Charlie’s wedged into the corner, looking like a column of sun-bleached cement. Carl’s slumped in his chair, his head dropped towards his chest at an angle that suggests it has been partially severed from his neck – which can’t be the case, if it were, Meg would be swimming in blood. Something is leaking out of his mouth, staining the front of his shirt. His chest is gurgling. He’s blue. She’s transfixed by the sound and the colour. He’s actually turning blue. He’s dying. The colour is arresting.

‘I gave him pills. I crushed them up and put them in the mash,’ says Charlie.

‘You what?’

Surely this is a joke. Meg can’t help herself, she’s laughing.

But Charlie is dying his own death over there in the corner.

‘I just wanted him to stop calling me mate,’ he says.

His voice is a tendril doubling back into, rather than out of him. He looks five years old. Trying to make the room look bigger, Meg had hung two mirrors facing each other on opposite walls. From where she’s standing she can see him reflected in both of them, he and his mangled face go on into infinity. The room tilts, tipping Meg off her axis and onto the lip of a crevasse.

Neither of them has moved. The gurgling in Carl’s chest is turning into a death rattle. The sound snatches mother and son back from their respective edges.

‘Do something, Mum.’

She goes and stands in front of Carl. It’s vomit on his chest. She kicks his foot. No response.

‘What pills and how many?’

‘From your top cupboard. All of them. Mum, do something.’

They’re both whispering. She’s so tired of whispering.
She only had a couple of pills left, half a dozen at most. Carl will be okay. With both hands she lifts his head up to straighten the crick in his neck but he doesn’t draw the breath she thought he would. She drops his head, repulsed by the feel of his skin.

Drunks choke to death on their own vomit all the time. She could do nothing.

‘Go shut Lucy’s door,’ she says.

She and Charlie will sit in companionable silence and watch Carl die. The blue is getting richer in tone. This shouldn’t take long.

When she looks up to see why Charlie hasn’t moved, the tremor of excitement she had allowed herself comes to an abrupt halt. She can’t let Carl die. Charlie wouldn’t survive it. Not intact.

She picks up one of Carl’s arms and pulls. It doesn’t budge him but the effort pummels her back and shoulder. She didn’t even know her shoulder was hurt.

‘Grab one of his hands,’ she says. Charlie still doesn’t move, he’s all trembling hands and boggling eyes. ‘I need some help here.’

Together they heave Carl towards the floor. When his body weight takes up the momentum of the fall, Meg and Charlie are left tugging on a slack line. They fall backwards, hard onto their bums. Carl lands on his side and coughs up a fresh batch of liquid. The stench makes Meg dry retch. Charlie yelps and scuttles belly-up and crab-like back into his corner. Carl’s body is trying to breathe but it’s not working, the breaths are too shallow and too slow.

‘Call triple O,’ she says.

‘But …’

‘He’ll be fine. It’ll be alright. Call the ambulance. Tell them he’s drunk a bottle of rum and taken half a dozen sleepers.’

‘But …’

‘Just fucking do it, Charlie.’

The television lashes at her. She turns it off and hurls the remote at the screen.

‘And close Lucy’s door. She doesn’t need to see this.’

Carl’s rattle has become a wheeze. He’s not as blue as he was in the chair but he’s not the colour of a viable human either. Charlie disappears round the corner to close Lucy’s door.
‘Spit it out, you prick,’ Meg says, kicking Carl on the chest with the flat of her foot. It doesn’t register. Charlie comes back with the phone to his ear, cups his hand over the mouth piece.

‘You have to clear the airway,’ he whispers. ‘We learnt it at swimming.’

Does he really think she doesn’t know she has to clear the bloody airway? She had been trying to avoid putting her hand anywhere near that mouth.

‘Tell them he’s unconscious. Do not tell them you gave him the pills. Understand?’

Groaning out loud to fortify herself she digs her fingers in the back of Carl’s throat and dislodges a piece of something, sausage by the look of it. Immediately he gobbles in a breath and colour floods his face, a luscious, ruddy pink. Instant life. To think that scrap of nourishment might have been enough to kill a burly bloke like Carl. Charlie’s giving the address.

‘Ask them how long they’ll be,’ she says, gags and bolts past him.

She takes the bleach from under the kitchen sink, tips it straight from the bottle over her hands and scrubs at herself with the dishrag. She’s Lady Macbeth without a kingdom to claim. ‘Out, damned vomit! Out, I say!’ The bleach burns. Can her body possibly accommodate any more rank smells? She turns the tap on and rubs furiously at her hands, then her forearms, upper arms, neck. She’s considering climbing into the sink and pouring the bottle of bleach over her head when someone appears on the other side of the window, a wild-eyed apparition keening and tearing at herself and choking on her own impotence. Meg turns the tap off, leans her elbows on the edge of the sink and puts her head in her hands. The woman in the window does the same.

The street is quiet, no dogs, no televisions. The sound of the bush out the back floats in the window. It’s a delicate sound, the bush at night. When Lucy was only weeks old Meg would put her ear against her daughter’s miniscule rib cage and listen to the million miles an hour heart, a fluttering muscle working overtime, all that energy circling under the surface and all for the sake of keeping that tiny chest rising and falling. The night chorus of the bush is like that, busy, like Lucy’s infant chest.

The dark is large and inviting. Meg sees herself out there running naked, roaring at the top of her lungs. Not like a New Ager wafting over the ground as though the earth
can’t tolerate a footfall. Scratch an ageing hippie and out pops an angry acid vet, an Uncle Creep or Aunty Airhead rabbiting on about becoming one with the goddess. Fuck the goddess. Meg will run at velocity, a human fireball with thunder rolling off her tongue. She will be Thor’s familiar. A minion let off the leash.

She pours Charlie a juice and goes back to the lounge room.

He’s crying. Not wracking sobs but quiet, private tears. He has a way of sucking his tears back into himself through his nose and the corners of his mouth. He’s done it all his life. Even as a toddler he looked a thousand years old when he cried. Next to his tempered sorrow Meg’s display at the kitchen sink looks like self-indulgence. He hasn’t noticed her come in. She has intruded on his grief.

He’s kneeling over Carl, one hand patting him on the shoulder. With his other hand he’s brushing Carl’s hair off his face. He’s murmuring but Meg can’t make out the words. Charlie should not be in possession of this kind of wisdom. The sight of him tending to Carl cleaves her heart in two. Her fantasies evaporate. She’s been focusing on the wrong man.

‘Charlie?’

He snatches his hand off Carl’s forehead. She kneels beside him, lifts his other hand off Carl’s shoulder and puts the juice into it. She wipes his tears away with the back of her fingers, licks them.

‘Drink,’ she says. He does. ‘How long did they say they’d be?’

‘Fifteen, twenty.’

The quiet moulds itself around them. They gaze at Carl’s twitching body which lets out a sound between a moan and a sigh. Perhaps his brain only just got the message he’s still alive. His face looks benign, hard to believe this is the same man who laid waste to his own home a couple of hours ago. He’ll have a bad head in the morning, a sore gut from the stomach pump he will no doubt receive but not much more than that.

She probably spent five minutes at the kitchen sink, maybe less but it could have been longer, safer to assume it’s been ten. At most they have ten minutes.

‘We’re leaving.’

She hadn’t quite formed that sentence before it came out, but there it is, said, the exact right words, even saying them is exhilarating.
‘I can’t stand this smell,’ she says. An aside, but she’s said it in such earnest
Charlie laughs at her, a delicious peal of sound into this ugly night. A sidelong glance
between them seals the pact. She nods.
‘We’re leaving,’ she says. ‘Now. Before the ambulance gets here.’
She takes a moment to savour the quiet, Charlie’s hope, and the bloody-minded
conspirators they have just become.
They stare at the wall opposite them.
‘Sick,’ says Charlie, punning in perfect deadpan.
‘Fully,’ says Meg, without missing a beat. ‘Smartarse.’
Giggling like lunatics they help each other’s wounded bodies stand up.
With the hall light off, the night outside comes into relief, oil-black and blood-warm. Charlie drops his backpack, stuffed to overflowing, on the front step. Meg’s bag and one for Lucy are already there.

‘I’m ready,’ he says.

Meg is not ready. She’s thinking about tomorrow but can’t find it. If she can’t see herself inside this tired hut-house then she can’t see herself at all. Tomorrow’s gone missing. She looks into the dark, stupefied by her lack of options. She can’t think of a single place they would be safe from interrogation, from Carl the morning after. Since the move to the wasteland, every time it looked like she was making a friend Carl found a reason to make a fist. A fist is more tangible than a friend. They have nowhere to go.
‘We need to think,’ she says.

With one eye closing fast from the swelling and the other watering in sympathy, Charlie lifts her hand and drops Carl’s car keys into her palm.

‘No we don’t,’ he says.

He thinks it’s simple, stay for more of the same or leave.

‘We can’t take his car,’ she says.

‘Yes we can,’ says Charlie. ‘Or what? We walk to the corner? We sleep in the bush? Come back in the morning? To that?’

He flicks a hand towards Carl but his bad eye has thrown him off balance and his hand hits the doorjamb. That sound again, flesh colliding with immovable object. Even without Carl’s help they’re hurting themselves on the edges of his house. Carl mewls on the floor. Meg puts the keys back in Charlie’s hand.

‘Put the bags in,’ she says.

Tonight she dances like a dervish, making a list as she spins: food, water, blanket, purse, phone, charger. She puts a couple of oranges, some muesli bars and a bottle of water into a save-the-planet shopping bag.

In the bathroom she pulls her dress off, balls it up and throws it out the window. She drags a pair of not too dirty pants out of the laundry basket and puts them on. Soap, moisturiser, a brush, toothbrushes, toothpaste, into the bag. She throws Carl’s toothbrush out the window. Not a big enough return. She sweeps his shelf clean of his shaving gear. The noise of his things clattering onto the bench and into the sink is satisfying but for good measure she gathers as much of it as she can and dumps it out the window. The dry dirt sighs on receipt of the goods.

‘I don’t think we have time to wreck the house.’

Charlie’s leaning in the doorway, arms crossed, face crooked from the swelling. He’s trying to smile but it doesn’t make a dent in the hot gloom.

‘What did you pack?’ she says.

‘Tee shirt, jocks, iPod. You know, running away from home stuff.’

Carl groans a smothered sound because he’s flat on his back. She should do something about that, get him onto his side. Doesn’t. She hands Charlie the last bag.

‘Car,’ she says.
She watches Carl for more movement but none comes. She takes a few steps towards him, toes twitching to kick him in the face. A blunt axe to stove in his head would work too.

When Charlie joins her they stare down at Carl listening to him wheeze until the tin roof cracks an alarm at them.

‘Let’s go,’ she says.

In Lucy’s room she puts a hand on Charlie’s shoulder to slow him down. Lucy grumbles. Lifting his sister hurts him. He hit the wall hard, at the wrong angle. Is there a right angle to slam into a wall when you’ve been punched across a room? She should have let him cry. They should both be blubbering in a corner but there’s no time.

‘It’s okay, Lu,’ Meg coos. ‘We’re just going for a drive.’

Stepping into the dark is like being steeped in balm. Who’d have thought the balmy night idea could apply to a night like this? The dark gives them ample cover but Meg’s panic breaks over and against her, the house, the car, her children. If they’re still here when the ambulance arrives she will be cornered, stuck dodging questions about how Carl ended up near terminal on the floor and why Charlie’s face looks like someone has taken a hammer to it. At the hospital the fluorescent lights in the emergency room will suck the colour out of them until they are the very least of themselves. The police will be called. A social worker will appear – female, schooled in vacant non-judgement. She will speak in a calming tone, first to Meg, then to the kids. Meg will be separated from her children. The children will be separated from each other. Lucy will cry. Charlie will clam up. Fear will rule.

If Carl wakes he will pull on his charm suit and swear blind his behaviour tonight was aberrant, a momentary lapse of reason. Compulsory appointments will be made, positive parenting programs for her, anger management classes for him, counselling for the children. They will be ‘treated’. For what? Familial dysfunction? Is that an illness, a condition, a syndrome? Welfare workers will come to the house on a regular basis. The details of their lives will be raked over, sifted through and put on a public but unreadable record somewhere in a bureaucratic backwater. The whole bloody circus will roll tank-like into their lives, an uninvited guest who never leaves. Charlie’s adolescence. Lucy’s childhood. Gone. Years will go by. The system will care. Her children will be lost.
Their bodies moving through the night don’t disturb anything. The kindly dark absorbs them.

Without turning the car lights on she backs onto the other side of the street and leaves the engine running.

‘Where’s the pill packet?’

Every night-bird call sounds like a siren.

‘In the pocket of my other pants,’ says Charlie.

‘Beep the horn when you see the ambulance.’ The temperature buoyed her when she steps out of the car. ‘It’s okay,’ she says to nobody.

‘Mum?’ He won’t look at his mad-eyed mother. ‘We’re not just going for a drive are we?’

‘No.’

She has eighty dollars in notes and some change in her purse, less than ten dollars in her account. They won’t get far on eighty something dollars.

‘Mum?’

‘What? Charlie, we have to go.’

She has to get the emergency fifty from her jewellery box. Charlie’s buckled the seat belt over him and Lucy who is now more or less awake. Her children are looking at her like they think she knows what she’s doing.

‘What if he doesn’t wake up?’ says Charlie.

Dew-damp and shining, the road warps in front of them.

‘He’s going to wake up,’ she says. ‘It’d take more than a few sleepers to put Carl down.’

Charlie whispers that it was more than a few. Meg runs. She ignores the lump of fetid flesh that is her husband. In Charlie’s room she retrieves the empty pill packet. She doesn’t know how many were left. Enough to kill a man? She picks Charlie’s hoodie off the floor. In the kitchen she gets the chocolate milk she made forever ago. She looks for the purple bunny in Lucy’s room but can’t see it. There’ll be hell to pay for that missing doll. She collects the emergency fifty, stuffs it into her bra. She leaves the lights on. All of them. Let them see us in all our gruesome glory.
In the lounge room she pauses, smooths her hair back. She’s spread blood, vomit and Carl’s venom through her hair. Nice. Grooming tips from the front line. Somewhere in his soaked brain Carl knows she’s close. He tries to speak but the sounds are nonsensical. She shouldn’t have called the ambulance. It would have been easier to let him die, easier to explain – suicide, stress at work, financial worries, a drunken dickhead.

Planting her bum and hands on the floor she uses her legs to roll him onto his side. If Carl doesn’t wake up, however merciful that might be for her and the kids, Charlie will be crippled, forever ruled by Carl, albeit from the grave.

She takes his wallet out of his back pocket. He knows someone is trying to swipe his money. Too slow, his hand moves towards his pocket but doesn’t make it that far, it stops mid-air and lingers. When she’s sure he’s not going to move again she takes his hand to put it back on the floor. His flesh is not at a temperature that will sustain life.

Where is the ambulance?

He has forty-five dollars in notes. She tucks it into her bra. One hundred and eighty dollars give or take. Rolling in it. She stands the empty rum bottle upright next to the pill packet. A bottle of rum, a packet of pills and a wallet, all empty. That’s all he’s worth.

The car horn sounds a polite beep. Meg leans into the stench surrounding Carl.

‘I’m taking Lucy,’ she says.

She fleet-foots it through the kitchen that smells of sausage fat and desecration. She closes the screen door behind her, carefully, so it doesn’t slam. She flattens herself against the laundry wall and waits for the medics to get inside. Red and blue lights bounce off the house and flash across the yard making the scrub beyond the fence glow purple. Meg will miss their secret garden, their patch of gnarled scrub under tall gums. Doors slam, two of them.

‘Hello?’

Female. They’re at the front door.

‘Anybody home?’

Male. Quick steps through the front room mean they’ve found Carl.
Meg had imagined herself aflame running naked through the bush but her jog to the car is not so grandiose. She is earthbound. The red and blue lights on her skin make her a moving bruise, not pretty like the now silent bush.

Awake but too stunned to stir, Lucy is attached to Charlie’s chest like a koala cub. She has the purple bunny in a headlock. Charlie remembered.

“Well?” he says.

“He’s fine,” says Meg.

Their speech at normal volume fills the car. It’s possible they’ve been semi-whispering for years.

All roads lead to the single exit from this subdivision. Just shy of the descent into the wasteland she stops the car. Floodlights burn the scene in front of them. The automaton worker waves its stubby hand and nods its mindless head. The freeway to their right rumbles with the occasional truck, the bush to their left has started up its night call again.

If they keep the car it will give them away. They’ll be too easy to find if they stay local. Meg does not want to be found. She will not recount the night’s events to a well-meaning stranger. She can’t answer the why questions and doesn’t want them put to her son or play acted to her four-year-old daughter. They need a couple of days. The city lights in the distance form a mirage of dubious promise.

She rolls through the worksite pretending she has to concentrate on driving because she doesn’t know how to look at her children, at Charlie with his maimed face and his injured heart. She weaves her way through the back street rat-runs that lead to the train station. Past the park where the toilets are always locked, even when a soccer match is on. Past the cement works. Under the railway line. Past the prison on Repatriation Drive. A sadistic town planner must have named the road in a spirit of mockery. Tonight, like every other night, the yards are lit by white light that turns the razor wire into a living thing.

It’s after midnight. The last train to the city comes through at roughly half past. They sit in silence in the carpark at the deserted station, all three looking over to the other side of the tracks where the new housing estate boasts row after row of unfinished McMansions plonked in the middle of dust bowl blocks.
It was her father who first called this place a wasteland. He hated the idea of her out here. He said it was no place for a girl like her. ‘It’s got no heart,’ he said. But they both knew it wasn’t the place he thought was heartless. Once she’d seen these bleak streets through her father’s eyes she couldn’t see them any other way. *Thanks, Dad.*

Lucy’s stretched out on the seat, her upper body against Charlie, her heels digging into Meg’s thigh. Meg lifts her daughter’s feet into her lap. How lovely to be wrapped in skin so unbroken.

‘Do you remember your Grandfather?’ says Meg.

‘Duh,’ Charlie grunts.

‘I don’t,’ says Lucy. Meg kisses the sole of her foot.

Charlie hurts himself sitting up too quickly. Then he forgets the state of his face and hurts himself again running his hand over it.

‘He read poetry, you know?’ Meg says.

It doesn’t matter how long or how hard Charlie stares across the car park, he won’t see anything out there tonight. Not that he needs to, he could find his way around here blindfolded, probably travelled the area on his bike this afternoon. Yesterday afternoon. Whenever it was. When he was a kid. And Carl was an okay guy. And pigs could fly. *There’s a poem for you, Dad.*

‘Grandpa said he was a smarmy bastard.’ Charlie’s tone is sardonic. It doesn’t suit him. He sounds like Carl. ‘Did you know that?’ he says.

Meg sighs. ‘Yes, Charlie, I did know that,’ she says.

She untangles herself from Lucy and drags their many bags out of the back seat. She empties Carl’s work bag into the boot, culls the load they’ve brought from home and repacks it. When she’s done, the kids have a backpack each, she has her handbag, Carl’s work bag stuffed full and a blanket. Too much to carry. She’ll have to cull again but the train is almost due.

The station is high enough to catch the breeze coming down the railway line. It’s slight but enough to make the skin on Meg’s shins and hands sting where the boiling water splashed on her. What if Lucy had been underfoot? She pulls Lucy close and slides a hand down her arm to her wrist, feels the pulse fast as hummingbird’s wings. Charlie stands on the edge of the platform with his back to them, hands in pockets, looking in the
direction of the city. The platform vibrates on the train’s approach but it can’t match the
trembling inside her that hasn’t stopped for hours, years.

Charlie’s smiling when he comes to help with the bags.

‘What’s funny?’ Meg says.

He doesn’t answer but the smile becomes a chuckle. The swelling above his eye is
doughy and seems to double in size every time he turns around. Meg should have brought
the bag of frozen peas.

‘The ambulance took him away,’ he says.

‘What’s funny about that?’ she says.

He slings the bags over his shoulder while Meg picks Lucy up.

‘Well,’ he says. ‘The house is empty and we’re here. You don’t think that’s

funny?’

‘No,’ says Meg.

Lifting the bags and laughing has pumped fresh blood to his face. He’s bleeding
again. When they’re seated in the otherwise empty carriage, Meg taps her own brow.

‘Your face,’ she says. He bunches the bottom of his shirt and presses it against the
cut. ‘He’ll be home in the morning anyway.’

Charlie spreads himself along the length of the seat opposite her, arms behind his
head, feet hanging off the end into the aisle.

‘I know,’ he says. ‘It’s okay. We done good.’

‘We did well,’ she says.

They’re trying, but the banter doesn’t comfort either of them. Lucy settles in
Meg’s lap for the train ride.

‘So, where’re we going?’ Charlie says.

Meg watches the suburbs rushing backwards.

‘The Valley,’ she says.

*Isn’t that where people like us wash up in times like these?* She’s unsure what sort
of people they are. Or, indeed, what times they are in.
Twice in one year fathers threw their children off one of the city’s bridges. The same year a mother tried it too but her child was old enough to resist. He saw her jump. They don’t always land in the water, but land or water, they all die.

The year of the three deaths Meg and Charlie were watching television when news of the second discarded child came on. She hadn’t been fast enough to change the channel and they were trapped in the compounding horror. Lucy was a baby, not yet able to sit up by herself, but close. She was asleep among the clean clothes in the washing basket on the floor. Carl wasn’t home but his presence was everywhere in the room. In the last summer of his boyhood eleven-year-old Charlie held Meg’s hand for the duration of the news story while Meg held her breath. The father had thrown his child off a bridge.
Meg and Charlie regularly walked under when they lived in the inner city. From the fancy parklands on the foreshore, a small girl in a blue party dress would have looked like a tissue falling and fluttering through all that sky.

‘Carl wouldn’t throw Lucy away like that, would he Mum?’ Charlie said.

Meg couldn’t answer, because she couldn’t say for sure. Later, she let Charlie carry Lucy to their spot in the bush. He wasn’t big enough to carry the plump baby that far but he insisted and Meg walked on ahead. She cleared a patch of ground under their favourite tree. It was autumn and the scrub was ablaze with burnt reds and golds which she wove into a wreath for the dead and set against the tree. They listened to Lucy burbling while the last of the dusk birds called down the tree.

Lucy stares at her mother’s reflection in the train window but when Meg smiles at her daughter she sees no sign of recognition. She looks for herself in the glass and wishes she hadn’t. No wonder Lucy can’t see her. Her face has been dug out.

She keeps watch for the river. She has her sights set on the moment the train will plough into the open space a bridge over water provides, though what she expects from that moment she doesn’t know. When it comes, it drags the night out of shape and pulls the lights from the riverbank walkway into and under the water. It’s decorative, nothing more. It changes nothing. She is still that woman on a late night train with her children and nowhere to go. She looks from one child to the other and back again, then into the black water.

Bits of her children are still hurtling along underground when the train spits itself out of a tunnel and screeches to a halt in the Valley.

‘Put this on,’ Meg says, tossing Charlie his hoodie.

He remembers to move slowly so he doesn’t hurt himself. Upright he looks like the undead. He takes all the bags while Meg lifts Lucy and tries to put the blanket around her and over her head at the same time. They fall onto the platform in a jumble of bags and blanket and panic.

You should leave from the Valley in the middle of the night, not arrive. The smell of damp clay pervades, the walls drip with the city’s runoff. On the platform every cream tile, chrome seat and shiny drink machine intensifies the glare of the lights. There are no
shadows to hide in. The few bodies draped around the platform look like they’ve been beached. No exit is apparent.

An insipid electronic orchestra backing a singer in full histrionic flight is selling Christmas cheer to the Valley’s after-midnight folk. The terrible singing is not state-sanctioned muzak piping through the station. It’s coming from an old fashioned CD player beside a large woman who’s staring straight at Meg. If nobody else has seen them for hours, this woman has nailed them in one glance.

Charlie nudges Meg from behind, whispers, ‘Focus, Mum.’

The warning comes too late. A thick set youth has made a bee-line for them. His hair is dyed a lurid orange and buzz-cut into geometric shapes on his skull. Six or seven others, all younger, fan out behind him. A girl with makeup caked on her face hangs off his shoulder. They’re close enough that Meg can smell them, unwashed flesh and greasy food. These children are stale. The large woman moves further along the platform.

‘What you got there, Missus?’ says the buzz-cut boy and pulls the blanket off Lucy.

Meg is back in thin light in the kitchen doing her soft shoe domestic shuffle around Carl. Sometimes it helped to babble, to keep up a running commentary about the goings on in the street, or badger him with questions about work, or endlessly embellish details of Lucy being cute. On good days the Scheherazade act kept him at bay until Charlie got home. On bad days every word Meg said made Carl’s knuckles whiter and she danced harder to keep physical objects between them, a chair or laundry basket. In summer when dusk dragged on for hours but never quite turned to twilight she stayed outside pretending to garden. She turned the same bit of dirt over and over and talked incessantly about the flowers she was going to plant that would transform their barren back yard into a fragrant wonderland. Some days nothing worked and if Carl got as close as this orange-haired boy is now, it was already too late. She clutches Lucy tighter, securing the load.

The boy’s arm is knocked aside and whacks the pancaked girl in the face.

‘Fuck off.’
Charlie steps in front of Meg. His voice has caught in his throat making him sound like a younger child. He should be in his room. Meg can’t make her thoughts correspond with her situation. The girl hanging off the boy’s shoulder plucks at his arm.

‘Troy,’ she says. ‘They’re scared.’

It’s hard to see through the makeup but the girl is so beautiful she is otherworldly. No wonder she wears the war paint, it must serve to anchor her here amongst the mortals.

‘You’re hurting me, Mummy.’

‘Sssshhh.’

Meg loosens her grip, tries to pat and jiggle Lucy with one hand while dragging Charlie back with the other. Neither move was ever going to work. She’s pulled the hoodie off Charlie’s head. A series of oohs and aahs comes from the stale children in response to the pulpy mess that is Charlie’s face.

‘Mate,’ says Troy, taking a step back – ‘Maaaaite.’ He puts both hands up in front of him, palms facing Charlie. ‘What happened to your face?’

By the set of his neck and shoulders it’s clear Charlie doesn’t know the threat, if it was ever there, has passed. He’s in the midst of a personal tempest that has nothing to do with the orange-haired boy in front of him. He’s all puffed up with nowhere to go, not without losing face and he’s lost enough of that for one night. Thick-set Troy gives the impression he’s never backed away from a fight in his life and his pale skin bares evidence he’s had plenty of them. What Meg sees in him is resignation. Troy will fight if he has too but he’d really rather not.

‘They won’t hurt you, Miss.’

An older man steps out of the non-existent shadows. His chest arrives before the rest of him. He’s mid-fifties, his long hair tied back in a neat ponytail. He’s over six foot, lopsided and skinny as string. In dress shoes, suit pants and black tee shirt he looks like a jazzman who’s lost his band. The kids make room for him.

‘They won’t hurt you,’ he says, this time to Charlie.

Troy raises his hand to slap the older man on the back but thinks better of it.

‘Nicka-time-ay-slop?’ he says.

If that was a sentence its meaning is lost on Meg. The beautiful woman-child gives Meg a smile and walks away, trailing the urchins behind her. Meg’s shins hurt, her
eyelids are like sandpaper and the weight of Lucy in her arms feels like she’s carrying a fridge. What she wouldn’t give to have a painted maiden lead her away. She hitches Lucy up and over to one hip.

‘No harm done, Miss?’

Troy’s valour is intact. She nods to him – apology accepted. He extends his hand to Charlie who’s still pulled taut but takes the hand and grunts something incoherent. With a nod to Troy and the older man, Meg takes Lucy towards the escalator. Above ground might be less fraught. Charlie falls in behind her.

‘Hey, Obama,’ Troy calls out. ‘We’ll see you round, eh?’

As the escalator takes them up Meg sees the tall man join the large woman. She’s turned up the volume of her dreadful Christmas hymns and has a hand raised to the heavens in prayer. She’s still looking at Meg. She couldn’t explain why, but Meg lifts her hand in a wave and gets a wink in return. Troy and his gang rollick around the platform, skylarking underground.

There are three exits from the station. As far as Meg can remember, out the back is car park as far as the eye can see. Not much use to them. She’s most familiar with the front entrance. The Italians used to run a coffee house across the road where her dad took her on weekends when she was little. They’d sit on the footpath on three-legged wooden stools at plastic tables covered with red and white checked sheets of nylon and adorned with pots of fake flowers. The only dish they served was spaghetti Bolognese with a generous dob of butter on top and a chunk of white bread on the side. Her dad said he went there for the coffee which, according to him, was the only real cup of coffee you could get for miles around. The old men smoked. Late in the afternoon the women cleared the tables and the men played cards and yelled a lot. Meg’s abiding memory is of loud talk, mostly in Italian, a curtain of smoke and the old women in black taking her out the back to the kitchen where they spoiled her with bucket-sized servings of gelato.

The afternoons dragged on late into evening. For a long time Meg thought she was related to the Italians but her dad said, no, it’s just they weren’t scared of a man bringing up a daughter alone. ‘Besides,’ he said, ‘I like that the men can cry.’ Once or twice when she peeked through the kitchen door she saw her dad sobbing with the old men. When she asked the women why he was crying she was squashed into a large soft
bosom. ‘Aaiiiee, poverina,’ the women cried. ‘Come away.’ The Italians, their coffee and their plump loud comfort are long gone.

Meg takes the side exit. They pass empty shop front after empty shop front, some boarded up. They’re running poverty’s gauntlet and it smells like piss. The sounds of Friday night drift up the broken escalator that leads down to street level – the dull thump of a live band, a yodel from a drunken girl, a car alarm, buses, restaurants, a siren. Meg’s trying to remember the layout of the area. There should be a pub nearby where they can get a room but she can’t think which direction to take once they’re on the street. Any direction will do. They can’t bed down here in the piss-smelling dark of the station.

Charlie has his backpack on his front and Lucy on his back. ‘Sit up,’ he tells her, for the second time. ‘Or you’ll have to walk.’

His voice is vacant. Lucy can’t hold her own weight and slumps over Charlie’s back. Watching them struggle, Meg wishes she believed in god. They could do with some divine intervention.

She leads them uphill towards the mall to the strip of cafes and bars where their senses are assaulted. They’re in the thick of Friday night’s human traffic. She has led her lambs to sensory slaughter. She yanks Lucy off Charlie’s back and tells him to cover his face.

Meg doesn’t recognize a single landmark. The pub on the corner is not the one she remembered. This one spews people and sound onto the street. Everyone’s screaming. It wasn’t one band she heard back in the relative peace of the station, it’s several and they’re all playing at once. Live jazz from a café, heavy metal from the pub’s jukebox, country blues twanging from a restaurant, soft cock rock simpering through the speakers of another. High heels click and clack back and forward, forward and back across the width of the mall. Police on bicycles ring their bells so they won’t mow down the women with the purple slashed mouths who are attached to the heels. Suited men at crowded tables shout instructions into their mobile phones while their companions squawk at each other over the top of them. Packs of drunken young men lurch around wearing a collective slobbering grin. In the middle of it all a struggling leopard tree has had a perfectly proportioned triangular structure attached to it and strung with slow blinking Christmas lights.
‘Christ,’ says Meg. ‘It’s Gomorrah.’

Divine intervention, come on down.

‘It’s what?’ says Charlie.

‘Never mind. We’re not going in there.’

Half a block away they’re at the Chinatown mall, identical in width and breadth to the one they’ve just left but they might as well have landed on a foreign shore. A young couple kiss on a bench, shift workers make use of the clear thoroughfare to the station, a few stragglers occupy the tables outside the restaurants but Chinatown is basically deserted. Red, gold and chrome light a path from one end of the mall to the other. Meg has miscalculated by a block. The pub where she thought they could get a room is at the other end of the mall.

Lucy indicates with her wriggling that she wants to be put down. She scampers off in one direction, Charlie meanders in the other. Meg traces their outlines and etches them against the garish backdrops of Chinatown, in front of the supermarket, car park, and cinema. Lovely blonde Lucy in her lime green and a Ching Chong Chinaman’s hat holding an Australia shaped ashtray and set against rows of miniature koala bears and kangaroos, Charlie in whiteface posing with a plastic boomerang, wearing a bushman’s slouch with one of the corks between his teeth and his I’ze jes a dumb nigga smile. The three of them huddled in a dank corner with a giant cardboard cut-out Carl looming over them winking for the camera and grinning his used car salesman grin.

They re-group at the far end of the mall. The pub is closed and by the look of it has been for years. It’s boarded up and papered with posters advertising bands she’s never heard of and a touring production of Macbeth. Eight oversized Macbeth posters cover an entire wall. A black and white photo of the chiselled young anti-hero and his equally stunning lady has had a cartoon graphic of a dagger dripping blood superimposed onto it. A single drop of blood falls, naturally, onto Lady M’s breast. It’s the only colour on the poster. The effect is a bit much. This is a Macbeth for the young diamonds and designer set. The production must be American because Macbeth is all square jaw and bleached teeth. Meg forgives him for that because his wife doesn’t look like the crazy neurotic she is usually portrayed as. This lady looks like an Amazon and the doomed King and his court should be very afraid. Meg would love to possess even a smattering of
that young woman’s bloodlust. But, no, she can’t even let a man die painlessly in a
comatose state, let alone wield a dagger to drench a royal family in gore. She would
laugh but the night has been too long.

Across five lanes of traffic in front of them is a small triangle of threadbare grass.
It’s not even a distant cousin to the plush rough of their secret garden but it will do. It has
a couple of park benches, a line of council bins define one of its borders, and a single tree
in the middle of it. The five lanes they cross are part of the maze of exits, entrances, side
roads, ramps and tunnels that snake out from the bridge spanning the river out of sight but
close behind them.

Carl’s handiwork on Meg’s body is making itself known again and her feet feel
like balloons full of gravel. But it’s the filth that bothers her most. The feeling she’s been
dipped in offal. Her skin drips with the smell of Carl which lingers in her mouth, if that’s
even possible. What physiology is in play that turns a smell into a taste? The mechanics
of it bend her already-addled brain. She’s heard that skin is considered a major organ, if
that’s the case then the filth is sending her into organ failure. Focusing on her body makes
it hurt more.

The lighting in the tiny park is mercifully dull. In the corner is a pedestrian tunnel
that gives safe passage to the office towers on the other side of the freeway. No point
going over there, to the concrete and glass and the thousand stairs down the steep cliff
that keeps the river contained. They’ll rest in the underpass.

Or they would if it were open. She couldn’t see in the faint light that the gate to
the tunnel is padlocked. All the technology at our disposal and we still padlock a gate.
Lucy whimpers through the bars blocking the empty tunnel. Charlie rattles the industrial
sized padlock. In three-quarter profile his face looks like a foreign object has been
implanted under his skin. The locked gate is one humiliation too far tonight. Tears might
be appropriate but Meg isn’t even close. Fuck them all, it’s only a locked gate.

They move as far into the darkest corner of the park as they can get without
tumbling down the concrete embankment onto one of the freeway’s off-ramps. She
arranges their blanket under a poinciana. The tree is in full and glorious bloom, which, in
the half-light of the park, is a rich vermillion. The colour and amount of blossom is so
incongruous it’s shocking. Meg gives a silent cheer for the tree’s defiance.
Charlie drops the purple bunny into Lucy’s lap and flops down beside her. Meg settles herself on the other side of her daughter. The light is kind to them, her children don’t look like their blood has been drained.

‘Can we go home?’ Lucy says.

She’s so tired she sounds twice her age, which would make her a wizened eight-year-old. Meg pulls a corner of the blanket over Lucy’s legs.

‘You can sleep here,’ she says, stroking Lucy’s forehead.

Charlie takes a long breath in, leans back and lets the breath out slowly.

‘Mum?’ he says.

Meg leans down until she can feel Lucy’s breath on her face. Of all the things in the world, the most fragile is this child’s breath. She takes it into herself, then sits up and drops her head back against the tree trunk. She grunts an acknowledgement to Charlie.

‘I thought you were going to let him die,’ he says.

Somewhere close, the river laps at the cliff face. The traffic on the bridge shakes the ground, making the poinciana quiver.

‘I was,’ she says.

She follows his gaze down through the Chinatown mall. The depth of the view is comforting. The Valley’s Friday night frenzy grinds on.

‘I’m gonna be sick,’ Charlie says.

He careers off towards the garbage bins and throws up into the gutter. He hasn’t eaten anything, he’ll be bringing up bile. Meg bangs the back of her head against the tree, does it again, harder. And again. Charlie splutters. She digs her hands into the ground either side of her. It’s been baked solid but she keeps digging. She should be able to fix this, him, instead she’s listening to the memory of the night carve itself into the lining of his stomach. She bangs her head. Let him purge in peace. Let him leave his hurt in the gutter and she will leave her fingernails here under the tree in vermillion bloom. The night sky through the tree is colourless, washed to neutral by the city lights. They have burnt out the stars.

Someone is approaching Charlie from behind. A figure is moving towards him, fast. Meg shakes her head to clear the vision but the figure is still there, closer now and leaning towards her son. Meg can’t get there in time.
‘Charlie, run.’
She tried to yell but the sound she’s produced is a high pitched squeal. Charlie can’t run with a convulsing stomach. He probably hasn’t even heard her. The figure has though, and veers away from Charlie towards her and Lucy in the dark corner. Meg all but throws Lucy off her lap trying to get to her feet before the figure gets to them.

‘I’m sorry,’ he says. ‘I didn’t mean to scare you.’
He stays some distance from her, a dark mass in shadow. She can’t see his face but she doesn’t have to, no denying the height or the lopsided stance.

‘Yeah, well, you did,’ says Meg.
Charlie comes towards them spitting and stumbling.

‘You can’t stay here, Miss,’ says the tall man. ‘It’s not safe.’

‘Mum?’
Charlie thinks she’s in trouble, that the stranger might hurt her. But nothing about this man suggests violence.

‘It’s alright,’ she says. ‘We’re okay.’

‘Mummy?’
Lucy tugs at her. Meg’s looking for the water bottle for Charlie. She can’t see it, kicks the tree trunk as though that will make the water appear.

‘Miss,’ says the stranger.

‘Stop calling me Miss,’ Meg snaps.

‘Sorry, Ma’am,’ he says.
Charlie spits, chokes on a laugh.

‘What the fuck!’ says Meg. ‘Miss. Ma’am. How about this? Don’t speak to me at all. Okay?’

‘Mummy.’

‘Lucy. Please. Give me a second.’
Charlie’s found the water. He uses the bottle to hide a smirk. Lucy takes his hand. They’re laughing at her.

‘Bloody ingrates,’ says Meg.

What she means is; I don’t mind you laughing at me. I’m an idiot. I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m frightened. Everything’s alright. I love you.
‘What did you want, Lucy?’ she says.
‘It’s the man from the station.’

Meg turns to the stranger. It’s clear his last apology wasn’t meant as a provocation, on the contrary, his demeanour is overly courteous.

‘So,’ she says. ‘Go on. Why can’t we stay here?’
‘The pub’s about to close and they come here to fight,’ he says.

He’s getting more agitated by the second. Meg can well believe the crowd from Gomorrah will make mayhem in these streets after closing time. She won’t stay anywhere near the vicinity of men who bash. She considers climbing down the thousand steps to the river bank but knows they wouldn’t make it in the dark. She looks from one child to the other. They look like refugees.

‘Okay,’ she says, and starts shoving things back into the bags.

She hands Lucy her bunny, tosses Charlie his knapsack. The stranger pats the trunk of the poinciana.

‘Thank you,’ Meg says, already walking.

‘You’re welcome,’ he says.
The street goes on and on. Their bouts of walking are getting shorter, their periods of rest longer. At this rate they’ll still be sitting in this alcove at dawn. Meg had thought when they got to the crest of the hill they’d see the park but she can’t even smell the river yet.

The park is home to a giant fig tree. Over decades its root system has spread high and wide enough to accommodate the rope ladders and bridges that have been nailed to it and lead to the wooden boardwalk built into its branches. If they can get there the boardwalk will accommodate them for the rest of the night.

When Charlie was a toddler the two of them caught the ferry across from the other side of the river. Before peak hour they left their one-bedroom flat with its ugly nylon lace curtains and the kitchen cupboards that stank of cockroaches, and spent whole days
in the park pretending they lived in the fig tree. Catching the ferry home Charlie dozed in her lap and Meg let the late afternoon sun on the water blind her until the only tangible in her world was the boy in her lap.

Their flat was on the ground floor of a red brick block of twelve built on a main road in a cut-price suburb and she hated it. Her front door opened straight onto the street. It was the noisiest dog-box on earth. Charlie was asleep by seven-thirty and Meg spent her nights staring through the lace covered in road grime and bracing herself against the drunken crowd that banged on her door and windows as they reeled to and from the pubs that bookended her street. While her friends stayed out until dawn, went to university and took the obligatory late teens, early twenties trip overseas, Meg hunkered down in her couple of square feet in the city and watched over her brown baby boy.

Charlie was the result of a wild weekend with a black South African who’d defected from a liberation army. She asked him why leaving the militia meant he had to leave the country. He laughed. ‘Because now everybody wants to kill me.’ But the election was years ago, she said. ‘Yes, and now my country is in flames and my people will kill me for my sneakers.’ She had no inkling of the sorrow that defines the exile’s daily existence.

Twenty years old with no skills to speak of, she lied to her father and everybody else about how well she was doing. Her friends fell away, all except Helen, and her father knew she was lying.

‘Me and my girl and you and your boy,’ he said. ‘It gets better, Megs. It does get better.’

\textit{When? When does it get better, Dad?}\\

The working girls in front of them mark their movements by the colour of the traffic lights in the distance in both directions. Most of the city’s streets wind along, across and between the ridges and spurs formed by the river over millennia. This street is unusual in that it runs in a straight, undulating line from the park on the river bank up to the mall in the Valley. When the stream of cars thickens and slows to a crawl the girls send their hips into overdrive as they swish and sashay around under the street lights. They fiddle with their clothing, such as it is, fling their scarves around themselves and toss their hair. They jangle the reams of costume jewellery on their wrists, throats, ankles
and earlobes, anything to catch the light. The youngest of them totters on ridiculous heels from one side of the street to the other depending on whether she’s seeing red or green lights in the distance. When there’s a break in the traffic the girls gather together away from the lights. The youngest takes off her shoes and leans against the wall of a fancy apartment block. She’s still visible in the dark, the sequins on her pink shorts continue to pick up the light. She leaves her seven inches of sparkling ruby heels abandoned on the footpath, a calling card while she rests, industrial ingenuity on a budget.

‘Pretty lady, Mummy,’ says Lucy.

Meg and the kids watch from the steps of their alcove. Meg in one corner, their bags piled in the middle, Charlie and Lucy under the blanket in the other corner.

‘She is,’ says Meg, equally mesmerised by the sea of shimmering lamé on the street.

Lucy’s lady must be all of seventeen. One of the older workers, say, mid-twenties, offered Meg a cigarette when they first sat down. The young one waved to Lucy and smiled at Charlie who squirmed. The other girls gave them a cursory glance then ignored them.

It’s unlikely you’d find instructions for this situation in a parenting book. How to Talk to Your Kids About Sex manuals probably don’t include the whys and wherefores of the dress sense of teenage prostitutes. Nor is it likely you’d find helpful hints about where and how to bathe when you find yourself bruised and bloodied on the street with your children in the early hours of the morning.

Charlie rests against the wall, his eyes on the awning that gives scant protection from the street lights. Meg draws shapes on the step with her fingertips.

A taxi pulls up. The girls wiggle their hips and jiggle their diamantes. Like them, Meg assumes the car is bringing business to the corner. She doesn’t pay any attention until a shadow falls across the alcove.

‘Excuse me, Ma’am?’

Meg doesn’t have to look up. She reaches over and pats Charlie’s leg.

‘Don’t move,’ she says. ‘And don’t speak either.’ She stands. ‘What are you doing?’ she hisses, stepping forward.

He’s left the taxi door open and bumps into it backing away from her.
‘How you doing, Slop?’ The girl in the spangling pink hot pants waves to him.

‘Nice night,’ she says, pointing to the sky.

Smiling and without the wriggling arse and the hard sex sell the girl looks and sounds twelve years old. He waves to her.

‘I’ve got you a cab,’ he says, quietly, reasonably, as though this was a plan he and Meg had made together, and why is she acting so surprised. Meg glances at the cabbie who raises a finger off the steering wheel by way of a greeting.

‘What am I going to do with a cab?’ Meg says.

‘You could go somewhere.’

The girls on the corner rattle their bits and pieces, letting it be known they’re not impressed with the scene playing out in their place of business.

‘Oh. Right. Of course,’ Meg says, putting her arms out wide to encompass the alcove, the working girls, the street and her children. ‘Because clearly I have some place to be.’

A passing car slows and toots its horn and the girls instantly switch to a collective shimmy. The older woman manages to give Meg a filthy look and the passing trade the come-on at the same time.

‘Why are you following us?’ Meg whispers.

She and the kids were perfectly alright in their alcove until he turned up and drew attention to them.

‘Because you don’t know where you’re going,’ he says.

His air of servility gives the impression a slight breeze would gut him, but his response is a surefooted riposte.

The young girl has scored a job and shakes her bum at the others as she climbs into the car. They jeer at her, part encouragement, part accusation. There’s a steady flow of traffic now and the girls redouble their efforts, popping their breasts up in their bras, grinding their hips around in a figure eight, the symbol of infinity. The feeling they’re spruiking on the corner changes from wet sex to something more sensual. In some ways their job would be easier without the virgin whore in their midst. In other ways it would be harder, of course. These are not pliable young girls. These are women, round and demanding. Meg feels guilty for thinking of them as girls.
‘Mum?’ says Charlie.

*The park. I haven’t failed you. I had a plan. We’re going to the park. We’re going to sleep in the boardwalk in the fig tree at the end of the street. In a few hours I’ll call Helen and she and I will figure something out.*

Charlie bypasses his dithering mother and offers the tall man his hand.

‘I’m Charlie,’ he says. ‘This is my sister, Lucy, and my Mum.’

Where, or when, did he learn the protocols of this skin to skin ritual? Meg’s seen men offer their hands to him, mostly in condescension, playing grownups with him, exerting their authority over him. Occasionally the hand has been given with respect, the soccer coach handing out awards, the orange-haired boy at the station. But she’s never seen Charlie offer his hand first.

‘Slop. Pleased to meet you, Charlie,’ he says. ‘I can take you somewhere you can sleep.’ To Meg he says, ‘It’s not free but it’s cheap.’

The stream of cars has thinned again. The eldest of the women looks to be leaving for the night. If she goes, Meg guesses the others won’t hang around for long. The alcove will be colourless without them.

‘Mum?’ says Charlie.

When she doesn’t reply or even acknowledge that he’s spoken, Charlie helps Lucy into the cab and gets in beside her. At least one of them is capable of making a decision. Meg crawls into the back seat.

The driver and Slop don’t discuss where they’re taking the family and they exclude Meg and her children from their conversation, if you could call it that. The cabbie is midway through a monologue about a holiday he took, alone it seems, bushwalking. He’s describing a dawn he’s seen under the canopy of a ‘forest on steroids’. Slop contributes the occasional monosyllable which is enough to keep the cabbie on track with his rant about truth, humility and ‘respect for the motherfucking mountain’.

It would have taken an age to walk the distance they cover in minutes in the car. The cabbie pulls up in front of a stone wall. When Meg leans towards the window to see what’s above the wall she bumps her head on the glass. Whatever’s out there hovers in the sky line. She and the kids get out of the taxi. Meg pulls the money wet with sweat out of her bra. She’s embarrassed but offers the cabbie a tenner anyway.
‘No way,’ he says, affronted. He softens when he looks at her face. ‘Don’t worry about it.’

A narrow staircase has been tacked diagonally across the front of what must have been a grand old house with wraparound verandas. Usually a section of the veranda from these old places remains open, built in with glass at most, but this one has been built shut and the whole house clad in iron. At the top of the stairs is a landing no bigger than a public telephone box. Yesterday’s heat pulses out from the iron. The house looks like a bunker that’s been slapped together in a hurry and stuck up on the crest of the hill for the sole purpose of inviting ridicule.

Slop tells them he’s going to ‘check in’ and takes the stairs two at a time. Lucy leans into Charlie who is slouched against the wall. Their pile of worldly possessions on the footpath looks like the boulder of Sisyphus. Squatting, Meg takes both Lucy’s hands in hers and kisses them.

‘We can sleep here, Baby,’ she says. Lucy falls onto the front of Meg and clamps her arms around her neck. ‘I can’t carry you, Lu.’

‘Then Charlie,’ says Lucy, close to tears.

‘No,’ says Meg. ‘Charlie’s too sore.’

‘Daddy did that,’ Lucy says.

She can turn on a tantrum with the best of them, but tears like these, from the deepest well of her four-year-old soul, are rare.

A door opens above them. No light spills from inside the house. Slop’s height gives the illusion he’s floating down the stairs.

‘You can stay,’ he says.

‘Lucy?’ says Meg, peeling Lucy’s arms from around her neck. ‘There’s a room for us to cry in up the stairs.’

‘But I don’t want to cry,’ Lucy sobs. She stutters on the inhale, moans on the exhale.

‘I know,’ says Meg. ‘I know.’

Meg murmurs that she’s so proud of her, she’s been so brave and she only has to be brave for a little longer until they get to the top of the stairs. Lucy’s tears upset Slop who’s making sounds – Meg thinks they’re involuntary – that echo Lucy’s exactly.
‘She’s only crying,’ Meg says. ‘She’s okay.’

The stairs wobble and creak. The proprietor waits for them on the landing which is higher than the street lights so the only detail Meg can see is the shine of his pate in the moonlight. He must have a deformity of some sort because his head is a peculiar shape.

‘Come on, come on, come on,’ he says, holding the door open. ‘I don’t want you waking the house.’

The house smells disgusting – cigarettes, alcohol, damp carpet and mould. Charlie brings up the rear banging the bags against the walls making the landlord ‘tsk’ repeatedly. Carrying Lucy, Meg does her best to keep up with him. He navigates the dark corridors with ease. He stops and fits a key from a full ring he’s carrying straight into a door Meg hadn’t even seen.

‘It’s not flash but it’s the only room I’ve got. I don’t like having females here. It upsets the place. Never had kids stay before so keep them quiet. Here you go.’

He opens the door, switches the light on and steps aside to let them through.

The room has a double bed, a sink, a hot plate and a wardrobe with one of the doors missing. A torn sheet has been tacked up over the window. Meg knows it’s a sheet because the pattern is the same as a set she had when she was a child. One of the glass panels in the old wooden window frame is broken. A shelf above the sink has an abundance of crockery and a pile of cutlery. There’s a jug on a makeshift bench, a frypan and a single pot, no lid. An old analogue television hangs from chains attached to the ceiling. Two rusted chrome chairs with torn seats help prop up half a round table that has been nailed directly into the wall. It has no legs and slopes towards the floor. Half the walls are panelled wood, the rest are painted baby-shit yellow. The carpet was an afterthought, transplanted from somewhere else and hasn’t been laid properly. Its whorls of dark red, green and blue curl up the walls. What looks like an orange plastic funnel is turned upside down on top of a bare light bulb hanging from the centre of the ceiling. The room stinks of years of aging men’s leaking bladders and loneliness.

‘Right,’ says the landlord. ‘Your bathroom’s at the end of this corridor. Easy on the hot water. Rooms ninety dollars a night, eighty-five if you pay upfront for two nights. You need to fix me up now. Had too many midnight runners. Come to the office. You kids stay here. I don’t want you running around the house, got that? Specially you,’ he
says, pointing to Charlie. ‘You’re the wrong colour and your face would give some of my old fellas a heart attack.’

‘Got it,’ says Charlie.

‘Come with me.’

Meg assumes the landlord is talking to her. He’s one of those men that can’t bring himself to address a woman directly, so far his speech has been aimed at her earlobe, her chin, her breasts, one shoulder and the floor.

She puts Lucy in Charlie’s arms, gives her a kiss and tells her she can go to sleep now. Lucy starts whimpering again. Meg grabs her handbag and runs after the landlord pulling money out of her bra as she goes. God only knows how he’d react to the sight of her with her hand down her front.

His office is one corner of a two-roomed flat at the back of the house. She can see his unmade bed through the front room. She stays at the door trying not to take in the details of his room. It’s much the same as the one he’s just given her. Only the air is deader, if there’s such a word: Dead, deader, deadest. You are the deadest, I am the deader, we are the dead.

‘I’ll take two nights,’ she says, handing him a hundred and ten dollars. He counts the money and sighs.

‘Bloody hell,’ he says.

‘That’s all I’ve got.’

His head looked deformed because he has a comb-over and the long side of his hair has gone feral and flies out at a right angle to his head.

‘Bloody hell.’

He closes the door in her face.

She feels her way back along the corridor.

Charlie’s at the window and doesn’t turn around when she comes in. Lucy’s splayed out on the bed, already asleep. The soles of her feet are black from their walk in the Valley.

‘I took her to the toilet,’ says Charlie.

‘Thanks,’ says Meg.
Lucy’s lips are pale, her cheeks wan from too little fluid, but apart from that she is unblemished. The bed has no sheets on it, not that Meg would have slept on them if it did. She spreads their blanket over Lucy.

Charlie’s pulled the curtain back and hooked it through the broken window. He’s squeezed himself into the space between the sink and the makeshift shelf and rests his head against the wall.

‘You can see the river through here,’ he says.

Standing close to him she sees only the red bricks of the neighbouring building. He vacates his position so she can take his place. Pressing her cheek against the wall she follows the sliver of open space between the buildings and sees a couple of square inches of river. The spot must be near a ferry station because the water is picking up red light.

‘The telly doesn’t work,’ he says, right behind her.

‘Wouldn’t be watching it anyway,’ she says.

She walks past without looking at him. He leans back into his spot to gaze at the red water. She finds the soap and her phone and puts both on the shelf beside him.

‘You need to get clean and sleep.’

‘I guess,’ he says.

The room has sucked the possibility of conversation out of them. On the street they had the space to talk but in here they don’t know how to look at each other. They don’t know how to cross the divide their bodies impose. She’s about to make that divide into an impassable chasm.

‘You can shower first,’ she says.

She sounds like someone who works in an office, efficient, professional, no task too small, no request too big. No soul to destroy.

‘But before you do, we need photos,’ she says.

‘Oh, fuck, Mum? Really?’

‘Don’t swear, it doesn’t become you.’

She leads him to the baby-shit yellow wall and positions him under the light without a shade that casts his swollen face into the realm of the grotesque. She stares at the screen on her phone, unable to reconcile the image with that of her son. He has two cuts above his left eye, not one. The blood has congealed over the cuts. The features of
his face are receding into the swelling, it will go down over the next few days but the bruising has hardly started.

He rode home on his bike. She was in the kitchen. The television was playing. It was Friday, early evening. Now it’s three in the morning, his face is a mask, the soles of his sister’s feet are black and they’re going to bed in a room moist with the bodily emissions of countless nameless men. She presses the OK button.

‘Side on,’ she says. She doesn’t look at the image this time except to square it in the lens, presses OK. ‘Let me see your shoulder.’

He takes his shirt off. His body has changed over the summer. He never was a concave-chested boy. For reasons that are probably racist she’s always thought of skinny white boys as sickly looking, beautiful in their frailty, but consumptive. Her boy was always sturdy and now the build of the man he will be is emerging and she is shy to even look. The bruising on his upper shoulder wouldn’t be obvious to the untrained eye of the average social worker or policeman. She presses OK.

‘My turn,’ she says, and hands him the camera. ‘Try not to look. Just point and click.’

She doesn’t want him participating in this sordid scene. He doesn’t want it either and hasn’t raised the phone to take the photo.

‘Why are we doing this?’ he says, chin dimpling.

A night bird caws one long melancholy note that hangs in the heat. Meg can’t tell which direction the call has come from but the only marker she can think of is the patch of red river through the broken window. She puts the bird there, flying low over the water, in sight, out of sight, in sight. Out of sight. He must have heard the bird too and looks towards the window.

‘We might need evidence,’ she says.

She picks his shirt off the ground and holds it out to him. She can’t watch him cry.

‘It’s alright,’ she says. ‘We can take the photos in the morning.’

He doesn’t take the shirt.

‘Let’s get it over with,’ he says.

She tries to look flat across the lens and not through it into his eyes. Side on to him she pulls her hair back off her neck so her torn earlobe is visible. She puts her hands
up on the wall and he moves in to get them in close up. Her lower legs hurt too but she can take those photos herself when he’s out of the room. She should strip to her underwear so he can get the bruise on her back but it will look worse in the morning anyway and it’s time they stopped looking at each other. She should be helping him cover up, not exposing him to her semi-naked and reeking self. It wasn’t that long ago she and her children could play under the hose in the back yard in their daggy underpants. She would never have imagined standing naked in front of them would be cruel. Carl has torn more than their skin. He has infused her with a shame thicker than blood.

She takes the phone off Charlie and hands him the soap. He gets clean clothes out of his bag.

‘By the way, your phone sucks,’ he says. ‘Ever thought of joining the revolution?’

On his way out she takes his chin in her hand, pulls his face close and kisses the cuts above his eye. He doesn’t flinch. He should have. It shouldn’t be normal for a mother to kiss her son’s wounds.

‘Shower,’ she says. ‘Go.’ She picks his bloodied shirt off the ground. ‘No towel, use this. We’ll leave it here. And be quick. We don’t want Fagin knocking on the door.’

She closes the door behind him.

Three o’clock and the birds are frantic. What do birds have to be so het up about at this time of the morning?

Lucy doesn’t budge when Meg sits down beside her, making the bed sag and creak with her weight. She keeps her back to her daughter and reaches around behind her until she finds a hand to hold.

‘Noisy birds, hey Lu?’

Her whisper sounds like a shout. Lucy’s hand is sticky with the heat. Meg pats instead of holds.

‘I’ll sort something out.’

Wings beat the air close to the window. The space between the buildings must operate as a runway to the river.

When the hour is decent she will call Helen. Her friend will greet her the way she always does, as though they haven’t spoken for months when they can and do talk for hours at a time several times a week. Helen will tell her to come to Sydney, she’s been
telling her for years. Four of them in a one-bedroom flat seven stories up in a city Meg doesn’t know?

She finds clean clothes for herself and stands in the middle of the room waiting for Charlie, waiting for dawn when the city will click and whirr its way to a regular Saturday morning. Waiting for it all to be better.

She smells soap before Charlie enters the room.

‘Well, you smell better anyway,’ she says.

She takes his dirty clothes and throws them into the sink. He moves Lucy over to make room for himself and flops on the bed.

‘You won’t like the bathroom,’ he says.

Meg turns the light off on her way out.

‘Sleep,’ she says.

Mould holds the bathroom together. The back of the mirror has mostly peeled away, there’s hair everywhere, the toilet bowl is predictably black, and years of taps leaking through ancient pipes have stained the sink and the bath with rust. Meg does her best to ignore it all, it’s not her who has to clean it. She opens the window as far as it will go. A wide view across water opens up. The river sparkles with the coloured lights of the city, the hills on the other side are lit by the moon, the odd boat bobs.

Standing under the shower she turns the heat up, then up again. Every time she touches the tap the house protests. She suspects the landlord would rather cut off his carefully cultivated comb-over than speak to a naked woman through a closed door. She turns the hot tap to full. The house has never been converted to water wise and the pressure is strong enough to hurt, it’s the right amount of pain. She’d turn it higher if she could. She lathers the soap in her hands and scrubs at herself with deliberate intent. This is no frenzy of self-flagellation. She’s paring herself back, peeling off strips of dead and dying skin, rehydrating the dried blood coming out of her hair and sending it down to infect the red river. The birds are confused, they’re singing their dawn songs but it’s too soon and the rhythm is disjointed. The birds are out of time. Meg will gather her discarded skin and lay it on the window sill for them. They can take it to their babies, build their nests with it, polish it with their beaks, hang it from their trees. Her skin will hang in the city’s trees, a story untold. Only the birds will know.
She sits on the edge of the bath to drip dry then turns the light off and says goodnight to the birds.

Charlie is crying. The sound seeps out from the room and swirls down the length of the corridor. She can’t bring herself to go in and stands at the door listening. He’s trying to be quiet but failing dismally. If he had the space he would be howling. He’s woken Lucy. ‘Ssshhh, Charlie, sssh,’ Lucy whispers, over and over. She’s not trying to silence him. It’s the same rhythm and metre Meg uses to soothe Lucy when she’s realised a favourite toy is broken. The sound of her children trying to cope without her is unbearable. Meg cannot endure it.

The room is lit dull grey. Meg sits on the edge of the bed. Charlie’s on his side with his back to Lucy who has spooned herself around him as best she can, one arm draped across her brother. He has a handful of their blanket scrunched up to his face. His attempt to hold himself together is excruciating to witness and Meg knows if she touches him he will come apart a little. It’s imperative that he does, if he coils into himself he may not be able to stretch out again. She puts one hand over both of his and rests the other on Lucy’s shoulder. She knows exactly what she’s holding onto. Charlie’s tears are terrible. He cries and cries, scorched tears of the betrayed.

‘I thought he liked me, Mum.’

Meg thinks about the mirror peeling itself from the inside out. Thinks about his father’s exile, that longing for a sanctuary that never was, where the soil evaporates on contact and home is a phantom that has always departed the day before you arrive.

When Charlie tips towards hysteria she pats and coos.

‘That’s enough now, Charlie,’ she says. ‘Sssshhhh, now, sssshhhh.’

She rocks in rhythm with her cooing. The birds are silent. Minutes go by, possibly hours. Who knows? Lucy’s breathing becomes even. Charlie cries himself to sleep.

When she’s sure they won’t wake again she sets one of the chrome chairs in the middle of the room. With her back to her children she faces the window. She flicks through the photos in her phone, listens to her children sleeping. Looks at the photos again. The dawn chorus begins. Her tears run cold. *Give me the daggers.*
Sunlight would shrivel the vines if it could get through the canopy, if she could only make her eyes open. The vines are thick as telegraph poles with thorns the size of meat hooks. The cabbie’s eyes have been gouged out. He’s still alive but only just. He’s trying to tell Meg he’s sorry. If she could open her eyes she would be on the squelching bed in the room damp with urine. The vines lash the room, looking for the children. Fagin wields the meat hooks, swings them above his head, rodeo style, a lasso. Charlie is stuck outside the window, hanging onto the broken glass by one hand, below him, a drop through nothing into nothing. When the sun rises the vines will tear into his flesh, carry him down to the river and drown him in the red water. Carl has Lucy, holding onto her by the hair, she dangles from his hand, the tips of her black-soled toes millimetres off the
ground. She looks dead already. It won’t be long. Her father is scalping her, pulling her face up and off her skull by her hair. If her toes could touch the ground she’d be alright. Carl teases Meg with the possibility. He stands knee-deep on the bed swinging his daughter by the hair from side to side, pendulum style. He’s fascinated by what he’s doing. The cabbie rolls himself in the vines, wants the meat hooks to sink into him. But the vines lay him gently over the window sill, on top of Charlie’s fingers, pressing the glass through the palm of his hand. The canopy drips. The vines don’t want the cabbie. They want the children. The first ray of sunrise hits Charlie on the back of his head, he’s burning. She keeps eye contact, he needs to not be alone. His fingers slip, he’s trying to be cheerful, to tell Meg he’s okay. They both know he’s not. Carl uses Lucy as a yo-yo, bounces her up and down by her hair. Her arms and legs are limp. She wants Meg to make him stop, can’t understand why she won’t stop him. Meg knows it will stop soon. Carl is going to throw Lucy into the vines. She will be dismembered. The vines will have her children. The sun cracks through the broken window. The cabbie sobs. Carl tosses Lucy into the air. Charlie falls.

Meg wakes up crying. She’s curled up on the end of the bed. The kids are breathing, not dangling or swinging. No vines come out of the walls. No Carl. No Fagin. No blinded cabbie. Her back bombards her with yesterday. She crawls up the bed and positions herself between her children. Facing the window she wraps her body around Lucy, drapes an arm over Charlie behind her. The house is quiet. Meg’s heart is not. Outside is black. There are things in the room with them, scuttled into the corners, shellac-backed beings that will creep if she sleeps. She holds onto her children, wills herself to doze but sleeps like the dead.

The next time she wakes, pale pink light is slicing a tear in the curtain. The house rumbles on its stumps, anticipating the heat of the coming day. Meg can feel it too, by eight o’clock the room will be in a swelter. No wonder it’s damp, it never cools, human bodies provide it with just the right amount of moisture to turn it into a hot house. She closes her eyes again, sinks further into the soggy mattress.

‘Mummy?’ Lucy’s standing next to the bed, whispering and shaking her mother’s shoulder. ‘Wake up.’
Charlie occupies most of the bed, Meg’s been pushed to the edge of it. She reaches out to pull Lucy up for a cuddle.

‘No, Mummy. I have to go to the toilet. I got dressed and everything.’

Lucy’s breath on Meg’s face is caramel sweet. How do kids manage that? To have breath so sweet first thing in the morning when everyone else’s smells like old potato peel. Meg reaches out and tucks Lucy’s bedhair behind her ear. She smells good but her eyes are puffy and the bluish bags under them reach most of the way down her cheeks. Even for Lucy it’s too early.

‘Bring me my phone, can you, Lu? On the chair there.’

Lucy has dressed herself in every piece of her clothing Meg brought with them. The contents of their bags are strewn around the room. The phone is the size of a brick in Lucy’s hand. Meg gets hold of her as she hands over the phone, pulls her up into her arms and pretends to munch on her cheek.

‘Delicious child,’ she says.

Lucy wriggles her way back onto the floor, puts her elbows on the edge of the bed and rests her chin in her hands.

‘When are we going home?’ she says.

‘Let me wake up a bit, Lu.’

Waking up is the second least desirable activity she can think of. The first is going home. It’s almost six. She rolls off the bed. The carpet sticks to her bare feet.

‘I’ll take you to the bathroom but then you have to sleep a bit more.’

The window’s still broken. They’re still here in the city’s wilderness, in this hospice for the living dead. Good. She pokes her head into the corridor to check for stray freaks.

‘We have to be quiet remember?’

Lucy nods. They tip-toe to the bathroom.

‘Yuk,’ says Lucy. She slumps on the seat and yawns.

‘Yep. It’s revolting alright.’

The river is a mass of buttery bronze folds and the hills on the other side are smudged with mist. Gold vapour rises from the water to meet the mist and the two blend, giving camouflage to the scavenging gulls. Thousands of birds are at crescendo. The
landscape is fantastical, like a painting by Van Gogh. Meg soaks her senses in the scene, breathes it in, listens to it, imagines she can touch and swallow the coppery mist. She’s the only woman on the planet seeing this vision from this window at this time of day. She’s in a state of grace. Or she might be delirious with lack of sleep.

She carries Lucy back to the room and settles her on the bed.

‘Go back to sleep. It’s too early to start the day yet. I’m going to go find us some breakfast. Wake Charlie if you get scared.’

Lucy snuggles up against Charlie. When Meg had moved him to his cave out the back of the house she was always finding Lucy in his bed in the mornings. On weekends Meg took her morning coffee to the back steps so she could listen to their chatter. She loved the sound of those early morning voices, as if speaking softly would bring a gentler day.

Back in the bathroom she’s not reckless with the taps. Her face is tender and looks odd in the peeling mirror, it’s out of shape where Carl ground his forehead into her cheek but the bruise won’t be visible. Smart bastard. Not last night though, not with Charlie. She dresses quickly. Van Gogh’s palette outside is piling its secret layers on top of each other in order to make an ordinary day.

Her sleeping children redeem the squalid room. They’ve moved away from each other on the bed, Charlie flat on his back with his arms out wide, Lucy on her side facing him. They’ll be safe here without her for an hour. As she leaves the room she rigs a booby trap by pulling a chair close behind the door so if anyone tries to get in, the door will bang against the chair and wake Charlie. That’s the theory. She fiddles the chair back, clicks the door shut and wishes again that she believed in something to pray to. The deities probably wouldn’t like it if she substituted Van Gogh’s morning for god.

She gropes her way through the corridors. In the dim light she can see prints of paintings and portraits that are straight off the walls of her childhood, Jesus and the Queen as they have hung in churches, hospitals and classrooms for generations. Blue-eyed Jesus smiles upon her, exposing his heart wrapped in barbed wire and looking down his white man’s nose at her. As if. Wherever did they get the idea he was a blue-eyed white man?
From the small landing at the top of the crooked stairs she can see the tree tops that mark the location of the park. They would have made it but they wouldn’t have slept and they wouldn’t have showered. Her brilliant idea to sleep in a fig tree was probably not the most inspired moment in her parenting history, but then neither was marrying Carl as it turns out. She had thought she was giving Charlie and herself security but Carl was sneering before the wedding cake went stale and had her cornered in isolation the day they moved to the wasteland.

There’s a cluster of shops at the end of the next block. She will hunt and gather there. She texts Helen as she walks, *Call u in 10?* Her friend will know all is not well in Meg’s world, there’s no other reason for making contact so early. Meg adjusts her face for public viewing.

Buckets filled with flowers line the footpath outside the newsagent: jonquils, lillies, paper daisies, carnations, roses and gerberas.

‘You okay?’ Helen skips the preamble.
‘Sort of. Not really. Yes.’
‘How “not really”?’ says Helen.

A youngish man brings more flowers to the buckets. Meg backs in under the awning of a nearby shop that’s not open yet.

‘He hit Charlie,’ she says. ‘It was bad.’

For the duration of the interstate silence that follows, Meg feels like she and Helen are in the same room.

‘Cunt,’ says Helen.
Nobody says the word quite the way Helen does.
‘Is Charlie alright?’
‘Physically, yes, he will be. But no, I don’t think he’s alright, you know?’
‘I do.’

Helen knows all about deadshit stepfathers. She has names for hers – The Smear, The Big Dick Swagger and The Toad.

‘Lucy?’ Helen says.
‘He didn’t touch her. She wants to go home.’
‘Where are you?’
'I left. We left,’ says Meg. ‘We’re in town, near the city. It’s a beautiful morning.’

‘Here too,’ says Helen.

Meg’s relief that they’re sharing the same morning is inordinate.

‘I’m not going back,’ she says.

She’s so parched her eyeballs are drying up.

‘You know you can come here?’

Meg sees Charlie on Helen’s tiny balcony, looking down seven floors onto the roofs of cars parked on the street. Even if Meg had the money to get them there it wouldn’t work for long. It’s not a solution.

‘I know,’ says Meg.

The flower guy looks tired but he smiles at Meg, an enigmatic kind of smile. He knows she’s not a local but he’s not holding it against her.

‘He’s a cunt, Megs,’ says Helen. ‘I’ll call you back. Give me five.’ She hangs up.

The smell of freshly-baked bread lodges in Meg’s empty stomach. She orders a coffee, buys water and a sticky pastry which she scoffs down while skimming the café’s courtesy newspapers. More slaughter in the Middle East, more famine in Africa, more falling dollars in fat, falling Empires. A superbug is gearing up to circle the globe and wipe out a third of the world’s population, or the entire third world population, whichever is more convenient depending on the paper’s editor. A local parliamentarian has been supplying pornographic material to a paedophile ring – images of his naked thirteen-year-old daughter.

When her coffee arrives Meg takes it to the car park behind the shops and sits on the gutter in the shade of an industrial bin to wait for Helen’s call.

Helen stopped coming to stay not long after Lucy was born. She still came north but she stayed at the local pub. Carl sat in his chair with the armrests shiny from his constant rubbing and scowled over the top of the fantasy novels he read and re-read. He staked the perimeters of his house with his scowl. Visitors were rare. The kids started to irritate him. Meg singing in the kitchen irritated him. He drank more, she started the dance. Lucy turned one. Meg got skinny. The phrase ‘fading away’ would be apt.
The last time she stayed Helen confronted him. Meg went to bed early with three-month-old Lucy and Helen and Carl stayed up. Helen was the only person Meg had ever seen who could keep up with his drinking.

‘I’ve got a few tricks,’ she said. ‘He only thinks we’re going drink for drink.’

The next morning she moved into the local pub.

‘It was a drunken argument, Meg,’ she said. ‘That’s all.’

Finally, because Meg was tormenting herself, imagining one worst thing after another, Helen told her. She’d asked Carl why he didn’t like Meg having friends. Carl got nasty. ‘And that’s about it,’ said Helen. She didn’t stay with them again.

‘I’m more use to you if I don’t,’ she said. ‘I’ll still be in your kitchen first thing in the morning and last thing at night. I’m not scared of him, Megs. I wish you weren’t.’

The sun hitting the bitumen and the cement walls move the car park in and out of perspective. Her phone ringing makes her jump, even though she’d been waiting for the sound.

‘So, what’s your plan?’

‘I’m not going back,’ says Meg.

‘Good plan.’

Meg tells her about Charlie trying to poison Carl.

‘Fantastic!’ says Helen. ‘Kiss that boy for me.’

‘Thing is, I’m not certain Carl’s okay. He’d drunk a lot before the pills.’

‘No great loss to humanity if he ends up dribbling into his jocks. Don’t worry about him.’

‘It’s not him I’m worried about.’

Meg doesn’t want to leave her friend. But she doesn’t want to talk any more either. Her face hurts.

‘I have to go. I have to get back to the kids,’ she says. ‘I took photos, just in case. I’ll send them to you.’

Helen knows the ‘just in case’ scenarios, police, welfare, courts, the whole occupying force that invades in hours and takes decades to dismantle.

‘Don’t go back,’ says Helen.

‘Not a chance.’
She buys bacon and egg rolls, fruit salad, juice and flavoured milk. Counting the coffee and pastry that made her feel sick, she’s spent over thirty dollars. They’ll need more money.

The sounds of the city fuse into white noise and the sun melts the black bitumen. She places her feet carefully. They will go to the park, they can’t stay in the boarding house all day and some time in a long ago yesterday she had planned to spend the day in the city anyway.

The house looks more derelict by daylight. It’s surrounded by workers’ cottages lovingly renovated. The owners of these houses must look at the decrepit dwelling with dismay. It couldn’t be doing the value of their properties any good. Precariously balanced in its prime position, Fagin’s is bringing down the neighbourhood. The figure sitting on the stone wall wouldn’t be helping either.

Slop stands as she gets nearer, his long form stretching to an exclamation mark at the base of the crumbling house.

‘Good morning,’ says Meg.

She semi-circles him so she’s not looking into the sun.

‘I saw you at the flowers,’ says Slop, as though that explains why he’s here.

She sits and they watch the traffic getting thicker.

‘Thank you for bringing us here,’ she says.

‘Did you get some sleep?’

‘Enough,’ she says.

Not nearly enough. She’d like to tell him about the vines and the red water and the peeling mirror, about the thousand-strong birdsong at five am, about sunrise on the river through a dead painter’s eye, about the state of grace the dawn bestowed on her. Slop’s presence has made the hour less daunting.

‘I’m Meg,’ she says.

The sun hits him in the eyes when he looks at her. His eyes are the palest green, a colour so delicate it has no business being in the centre of a face. She could tell him about the night’s visions, she knows she could. She adjusts her position so his face is in shadow but he’s looked away.

‘Well, okay then,’ she says.
‘Okay,’ says Slop.

The house has woken up since she’s been gone. Televisions and radios, and the smell of toast fill the corridors. Getting her children out into the light acquires urgency for her. She doesn’t want the house to stain them.

Lucy is sitting cross-legged in the doorway of their room. The door is wide open and the filtered light coming through the sheet washes her in orange. A man so old he surely has one foot in the grave is sitting on one of the chrome chairs in the middle of the corridor, one hand resting on a cane. Only old people’s eyes twinkle wet like his. Lucy has a vegemite jar of milk in her hand.

‘We’re having a milk picnic, Mummy,’ she says.

‘Inside,’ says Meg. ‘Now.’

Milk spills as she pushes Lucy into the room. The shape that is Charlie on the bed moves. At least he’s awake. Meg drops the plastic bag of food on the floor.

‘Good on you, Charlie,’ she says.

‘I was watching her,’ he mumbles.

The old man is having trouble getting up off the chair. Who put the chair in the corridor anyway? He doesn’t look like he’s capable of lifting it, or getting it through the door. Bloody Lucy. Meg helps him to his feet. He has the powdery smell of the aged, his skin ash thin to the touch. Dust to dust.

‘I’m sorry if she disturbed you,’ says Meg.

She’s doing everything wrong. The old guy tries to shake her off. He doesn’t want her help. The two of them dealing with the chair, the glass of milk in his hand, his cane – it’s all too much and Meg feels like she’s got five arms and three feet. She holds his glass while he reclaims his dignity.

‘On the contrary,’ he says.

Age has robbed him of ligaments and cartilage and left his voice box a dry chamber that rattles sound rather than speaks words. Nonetheless, he has a discernible accent that at one time would have been called ‘cultured’.

‘She’s delightful,’ he says. He tips an imaginary hat to Lucy. ‘A pleasure to meet you, young lady.’

Meg moves the chair out of the way so he’s got room to move.
‘A vision in a doorway,’ he says. ‘I thought she’d come to carry me across.’ He sighs, chuckles to himself. ‘I gave her the milk. I hope you don’t mind.’ He makes his way along the corridor. ‘Not today,’ he says. The dark engulfs him.

‘I told him I was waiting,’ says Lucy.

Meg closes the boarding house out and joins her children in the orange light.

‘It’s okay,’ she says.

Now would be a good time to have a stranger danger talk but Meg doesn’t have the heart to paint the world so wicked, to disillusion her daughter after her encounter with the stately old man.

‘You hungry?’ she says.

The smell of food has roused Charlie. She’s half prepared a verbal caning for him for being so careless with his sister but the sight of his face silences her. She knew it was going to be worse this morning but she wasn’t prepared for this. She feels it in her groin. It’s always been that way, her fear for the bodies of her children presents itself as a wrenching sensation in the birth canal. Half his face looks like it belongs to somebody else. Overnight he’s become a half-faced boy.

She sets the sloping table and wishes she had a bunch of flowers for a centrepiece. A single flower would do, a sprig of greenery, anything to draw attention from Charlie’s face. A meat hook on a vine scrapes at the glass on the window. *Fuck you*, she thinks. ‘Not today.’ She hadn’t meant to say it aloud and dodges Charlie’s look by shaking her head, *silly old me*. He hasn’t seen his face yet. He’s about to. He’s on his way to the bathroom. She can’t shield him from his own face.

‘Charlie? Don’t give yourself a fright. You look rough. Be quick, hey? So we can eat and get out of here.’

We’re not staying here another night, not for another hour. She picks at the fruit salad while she packs. *Fuck you, not today, silly old me and fiddle-dee-dee*. A dumb song but it takes up some space in her head that would otherwise be occupied shadowing Charlie in the bathroom. He’s going to see what Carl has done to the self of him.

Lucy eats, hums and swings her legs under the table, her toes swishing just above the ground.

‘Stop swinging, Lu.’
'Why?'

*Because I don’t like it. Because you will be scalped.*

‘Because I said so.’

She plugs the phone in to charge, thinking she’ll have to do better than that wherever they end up tonight, she’s left it too late to get fully charged.

‘We’re not going home today, Lucy,’ she says. *Fiddle-dee-dee.*

‘Why?’

‘Well, I need to think a bit and that could take a whole day.’

She’s sorting out what they can leave behind. She unpacks her handbag, superfluous thing, she can leave it here.

‘Charlie said that,’ says Lucy.

‘What? That I was going to think?’

She can just imagine Charlie explaining to Lucy that their mother is actually thick in the head and can’t think right. It might be true.

‘No, Mummy.’ Lucy rolls her eyes. ‘He was crying and I gave him Bunny and he said he wasn’t going home. Ever.’

The room cannot sully Lucy, shining in her orange light, drawing the half-mad out of their caves and the half-dead out of their beds and towards her.

‘I’m so sorry, Lucy, but we can’t go home. We might have to make a new home and that would be alright. Do you think?’

How to fathom the child? She eats, sings and swings at the same time.

‘I think it’s alright,’ Lucy says.

‘And Lucy? You can’t take any more drinks from strangers, okay? Or food. It’s not safe.’

‘Okay,’ says Lucy, vague. She’s on to the next thing, summoning her next subject. Doing whatever it is child sirens do.

Meg sets her pile of rejects neatly on the floor. She pulls the quilt up to square lines, fluffs the pillows up, this last a waste of effort. She empties and refills the water bottle and forces it into the top of the knapsack.

Charlie slinks into the room, head hung. He’s trying to take up as little space as possible. He won’t look at Meg and joins Lucy at the table. Lucy pats his hand and
pushes some of the food in front of him. Meg joins them. There’s a serious parental talk to be had but she doesn’t know where to begin. She picks at the food they are least interested in.

‘We have to hide,’ she says.

*If they see us they’ll take you away.*

‘Like hide and seek,’ says Lucy.

‘A bit,’ says Meg. ‘But together. The three of us. Not in the dark or anything. We have the whole city for a hiding place.’

‘So Daddy won’t find us.’

‘That’s right. Daddy or some other people Daddy might ask to help him look.’

Meg puts a hand over one of Charlie’s to stop him seething at the talk of ‘Daddy’. His hand is lifeless under hers. He keeps his eyes on the wall in front of him. He’s not avoiding looking at her as much as he’s trying not to be seen. She knows the technique and doesn’t demand his recognition.

‘Charlie,’ she says, quietly.

She doesn’t say that it’s only a broken face.

The food puts some colour into them, sets their nerves to work. While she brushes Lucy’s hair, Charlie squashes himself into the corner to have another look at the slice of river.

‘Come away from the window,’ she says. ‘You need to re-pack your bag, leave as much as you can.’

There’s a tap-tapping on the door. The distraction is welcome, otherwise Charlie would know she’s seen him slip his soccer boots and jersey out of his bag and in under the bed.

‘Everything alright here?’

Fagin’s wearing a toupee. The rug looks to be made of horse hair and isn’t on straight. Details of his features lost to the night before are crude in the murky daylight. He has a nicotine stain travelling up his face from the corner of his mouth.

‘What’s wrong with your hair?’ says Lucy, joining her mother at the door. Meg tells her to shoosh.

‘You should clear out for the day,’ says Fagin.
‘Actually, thanks for your hospitality, but we won’t be staying another night after all.’

‘Suit yourself,’ he says.

‘I was hoping I could get some kind of a refund.’ Please, Sir, I want some more. ‘I did pay for two nights.’

The landlord refuses her a refund. No matter how she bats her eyes, plays the helpless woman or tries to appeal to his better nature her efforts are fruitless. He doesn’t have a better nature.

‘I gotta make a living, Lady,’ he says. ‘Got a huge mortgage on this place.’

Meg suggests he could pay her to burn the house down so he could collect the insurance and she could have some of her much needed money back.

‘They call it a win-win,’ she says.

He tells her she’s got ten minutes to leave the premises and waddles back into his hovel. Fiddle-dee-fucking-dee.

‘Pig,’ says Meg. Then to the kids, ‘We ready? Last toilet stop.’

Stepping into the heat is like walking into lukewarm fat. The iron cladding groans a baritone note that flattens before it falls. The severity of the light makes their eyes water as they pick their way blind down the stairs and back to the street where Slop stands to greet them. Bumbling towards him, Meg pictures them from his perspective – three amphibious organisms caught in a dry dock, mouths agape, eyes popping, intelligence AWOL.

As far as Lucy’s concerned Slop’s presence requires no explanation. He was there last night, why wouldn’t he be there this morning? Charlie’s bemused but it’s clear he’d rather interact with Slop than with his mother in whom he sees only distress at the sight of his face. He hasn’t looked her in the eye since he saw himself in the mirror. He grunts a monosyllable to Slop.

‘I’ve got something for you,’ Slop says.

He pulls a peak cap out of his back pocket, slaps it on his leg to clean it and offers it to Charlie. The cap is frayed and faded red with the word virgin written in commercial strength embroidery across the top. Charlie’s thanks is a toneless grunt. He pulls the cap low over his eye. A virgin with a smashed up face – yes, sir, that’s my baby.
‘And something for you.’

Slop bends his long form over the top of the wall and pulls a folded stroller from among the waist-high weeds. It’s the most basic model available, not the sort of stroller you push your kid in while you go for your morning jog. This is a twenty-dollar K-mart special, couldn’t weigh more than a couple of kilos.

‘I found it in a car park,’ Slop says.

Unlike the monosyllabic Charlie, Lucy is a gracious recipient, beaming four-year-old joy at the sight of a rickety set of wheels. Meg’s shirt is stuck to her back already, her feet slip around in her cheap shoes. With its stained seat and torn top the second-hand stroller looks like a carriage made of gold. It’s already made her day easier. She lifts Lucy into the seat, tells her to be careful because the lap strap is missing and puts the stroller in front of Charlie.

‘To the fig tree park, Charlie,’ she says. ‘Lead on, Macduff.’

The stroller’s wheel alignment needs some attention. Charlie pushes and Slop places himself between the stroller and the street, nudging it back on course whenever it veers towards the gutter. Lucy’s winding up to babble mode. She asks Slop if he knows the old man she met ‘at home’ this morning. Slop says he might know him, he knows a lot of people around here and what was he like.

‘Old,’ says Lucy. ‘And he wanted me to carry him across the river and I said a person can’t walk on water and anyway there’s a bridge. And anyway, I had to have breakfast first because you shouldn’t carry people if you haven’t had any breakfast. Charlie carried me but he’s big and it was night.’

Slop says her friend was probably talking about a river called the Styx, and lots of old people look for ways to get across that river. Lucy thinks about that for a moment then says, ‘They should swim.’

Slop’s laugh is unguarded, but it doesn’t fit his body. It’s a sound that mourns the moment it celebrates.

Lucy says, well anyway, she told the old man they had to wait because that’s what she was doing.

‘He was sad to wait,’ she says, and adds that she wasn’t sad.

Slop tells her the old people usually end up on a ferry.
‘Why?’ Lucy says.

It’s best not to entertain Lucy’s ‘whys’ or you can get stuck talking in circles of ever decreasing clarity. Slop, however, is happy to be conversing with the Princess of All Things Good.

Charlie doesn’t know how to place himself, his arms and legs hang off his torso, appendages attached to the wrong body. Not being used to Saturday mornings in the inner city, he jumps at every unfamiliar sound, which is all of them. At home – Carl’s – these mornings have a predictable, if syncopated, rhythm and he knows how to fall in time. He knows the words that won’t fit in the rooms with them. He knows to close the screen door so it doesn’t slam, how long to keep Lucy out in the bush, how to stay out of Carl’s reach. He learned this rhythm over too many years. Before he’d learnt it he followed Meg around the house patting her, crawling over her when she sat down, crowding her. She’d spend days dodging his need of her, finding reasons to leave the room when he entered. Anything to keep him off her. He got wise.

One awful day when she thought he was settled in front of the telly she sat in the kitchen facing the back door watching the dusk come down grey across the back yard. The colour came from the dust that escaped the cement works. When the westerlies blew the street got covered in the dust and if she wasn’t quick enough the clothes on the line got caught in it and hung heavy like headless puppets. Charlie found her sitting at the table carving circles in the wood with a fork.

‘Don’t go, Mummy,’ he said.

She pulled him close. Her breasts were sore and swelling udders. They watched the changing light turn the dust-covered bush to ash.

‘I’m not going, my Baby,’ she’d said. ‘And if I do, you come too. Deal?’

‘Deal,’ he said.

Three months pregnant she wasn’t going anywhere. Carl’s puffed up king-of-the-barn-cocks chest only lasted a week or two. She didn’t see the turn coming. The night before he’d picked a fight because she’d left one of the kitchen cupboards open. She was peeling potatoes at the sink with her back to him and dismissed him with a flick of her hand. He swung the breadboard the way other men swing a cricket bat, the power gathering in sequence from his feet and hips through his shoulders and arms and
culminating in the crack of the board across her back. She didn’t retaliate. She didn’t take Charlie and run.

Later she lay on her back looking out the window while he grunted and rutted and ground away at her vacated body. She moved only enough to make sure he wouldn’t notice that she’d gone. She didn’t want to have to deal with him. She needn’t have worried. He didn’t notice her. She wondered if this would be considered consensual sex. The street light through the thin curtain looked like the moon had moved in close to the house to cast shadows on the walls and give her something to look at. She was grateful to the shadows but it was still a long night. She didn’t sleep. The shadows got weak. In the kitchen in the morning she didn’t turn her back to him. He kissed her on the lips, squeezed her arse in both his hands. He ruffled Charlie’s hair on the way out the door, said, ‘See ya, Buddy,’ and left for work.

Carving her circles in the wood she gave Charlie what she thought was a warm maternal smile. He’d reached up and rubbed her cheeks, beside her eyes, her lips. His hands worked on her face like a putty knife, smoothing the skin that drooped over the edges of her smile.

‘Don’t, Mummy,’ he said, hands searching for someone he might recognise.

The last of the daylight was sucked out of the room when Carl walked in.

Now, under an undiluted sky, Meg puts an arm around Charlie, gives him a quick squeeze. No grey puppets to haunt us here.

Tyres screech beside them. A carload of young men pull up centimetres from colliding with the car in front. Trying to get Lucy out of the way Charlie jerks the stroller around, it smacks into Slop who takes the handles relay style and pushes it against a fence. Lucy ends up with most of her body hanging out of the pram, not sure if she’s scared or if she should laugh. The black smoke of the burning rubber rolls over them.

Meg didn’t jump. She stepped out of the way. Lucy might have toppled out but she was never in any real danger, none of them were. She looks from Charlie to Slop and back again. Charlie’s turned yellow, the colour he goes when he’s sick. Fear appears as blotches on his already altered face. He looks like his skeleton might collapse in concertina folds until he is a flat-packed human on the footpath.

‘Sorry, Mum,’ he says, addressing the ground.
Yesterday he would have laughed and made a game of the unruly stroller. Today he’s forgotten how to laugh. He knows as well as Meg does that he’s not yesterday’s boy.

‘What for?’ she says.

Meg leads them onto a side street. Every minute of sleep she’s been deprived of weighs in against her. She feels like a teenager who’s pulled her first all-nighter, more ethereal being than body of blood and bone. She and Slop lag behind the kids. Or, she is involuntarily dragging her feet and Slop has stayed in step with her. He clears his throat.

‘You know where you’re going today?’ he says.

‘For now, yes,’ she says. ‘The park.’

Though they won’t be able to stay there long or Lucy will frizzle in the heat. The kids can hang around the fig tree while she finds somewhere for them to hole up for a couple of days. There are funds enough in the joint account she and Carl have been dribbling money into for years, supposed to be savings for the exotic holiday they’ve never taken, or the deposit on the house they’ve never bought, or the cash injection into the life they’ll never live.

She’ll find a place on the river front with a kitchen where she can make a decent meal, a bed each with clean sheets, a bath she can soak in, and cable television Charlie can numb himself with. She wants double glass doors that open onto a deck where they can lounge and watch the moon rise over the river. The interior will be pale, earth colours, cream tiled floors, stone bench tops, cupboards that fit flush and stay closed. The place will be beige and functional.

Slop stops walking which compels Meg to do the same.

‘Meg?’

He has an old school, if frazzled, chivalry about him. Coming from him, her name sounds like a formal address.

The kids stall up ahead of them. Charlie doesn’t stop walking so much as he runs out of steam and slutters to a standstill. He slumps onto a red brick fence, the cap pulled so low he can’t be seeing anything further than a foot away. He rocks the stroller back and forward with one of his feet.

‘If you were going to a shelter you would have gone by now,’ Slop says.

‘Correct?’
Meg, bristling, nods. She starts what she knows will turn into a longwinded and jumbled defence of herself and her decisions – or her indecision. Slop affects a stoop, hands deep in pockets. She follows his line of sight to the kids and peters out mid-sentence.

Lucy’s swinging her legs and talking to herself. She’ll be making up the world she’s in by telling herself stories about her place in it because that’s what Lucy does, all day, every day. She’s given up trying to get her absent brother’s attention. Charlie stops rocking the stroller, even that absent-minded activity demands too much of him. He is a study in defeat.

‘They need me,’ says Meg. ‘Not a team of social workers.’

Charlie looks up. She smiles and waves to him, everything’s alright. Everything is patently not alright. Her children look like chunks of soapstone being carved into shape by light so unforgiving it might shatter them.

‘I can’t lose him.’

She and Lucy will muddle through whatever happens the next couple of days, for Lucy it will become a vague memory, an adventure even. But Charlie needs time to peel the shame off him before it is permanently grafted on.

Slop nods. ‘I know,’ he says. ‘So, we’re improvising?’

‘That’s one way of looking at it,’ Meg says.

‘Right, then,’ he says. ‘A couple of things, it’s going to get to thirty-nine degrees today. Library’s a good place to be, air-conditioned, lots of space and they’ll leave you alone. Tonight, if you need it, there’s a soup kitchen at the neighbourhood centre across from the park.’

He’s addressed his speech to the street.

‘Sorry to be presumptuous,’ he says. ‘If you had other plans.’

Lucy picks gardenias from a hedge and gives them, one by one, accompanied by a tuneless song, to Charlie.

‘I think we’ll be alright,’ Meg says.

They move off at a languid pace.

‘You will be,’ Slop says.

‘You have this,’ Lucy says, holding a gardenia out for Slop.
He bows to her, deep and shy, then tucks the flower behind his ear.

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ he says, backing away.

‘See you, Slop,’ Charlie says. ‘Thanks for the cap.’

Slop raises a hand, turns quickly and goes back the way they came. They watch him walking close to the fences and shrubs, his knees scraping against them. Meg follows the smell of the mangrove mud to the park.
The fig tree is luscious, its scope lavish. Its branches filter the light and cast mottled shade over the boardwalks and surrounding park benches. Leaves of the darkest green give the area a marine feel. Insects buzz and hum, sprinkling the shade with auditory glitter. The boardwalks have been rebuilt since they were here last, they’re sturdier and closer to the ground, not as random as they used to be. Meg sees a younger Charlie tearing around the boardwalks playing pirates and gladiators in winter sun and running away from her when she calls him out of the branches for lunch. The vision confuses her. She doesn’t recognise the woman she was then.

Charlie looks like he would rather be anywhere than sitting next to his mother on a park bench, no matter how cool the shade.
‘You’re quiet,’ Meg says.

He shrugs, leans back, puts his face up to the sun and sighs. Keen to kick the weekend off to a healthy outdoors start, some family groups are gathering near the tree. They’re lugging eskies and baskets of food, fold-out chairs and children across the park towards them.

Lucy hit the ground running and has already staked her territory on the boardwalk. She’s made friends with a girl about the same age. The hovering mother smiles at Lucy and looks around for the blonde girl’s mother. She gives Meg the mother’s club smile, the one that says – what a beautiful child you have and aren’t we so lucky and so put upon to be the guardians of such beauty. When the woman looks to Charlie for further confirmation her mouth falls open. She takes her daughter by the arm. It’s a knee-jerk response, she’s been too rough, her grip hurts the child who she hurries away in the opposite direction. So much for the mother’s club.

Charlie tugs the cap lower, drops his hands between his knees and his head between his hands. Meg rubs his back, trying to iron out his skin before it shrivels off him.

‘Don’t let it get to you,’ she says.

It’s already got to him. She hands him the phone.

‘Can you send the photos to Helen with this?’

He doesn’t view the photos before he sends them. The heat roils around them.

‘Done,’ he says, handing her the phone. ‘You really should join the revolution you know. How long are we going to stay here?’

The sun is pushing the shade off them. Chasing the dappled shadow, they shuffle along the bench.

‘You know what a vortex is?’ Meg says.

‘Duh,’ he says.

‘I don’t want anyone interfering with us because I don’t know where we’ll end up if they do. If we go to the police or whatever, it’ll be like falling into a vortex. Who knows how long we’d be stuck, or where it’d spit us out?’

‘Uh, Mum?’ he says.

‘They might separate us. Then what? Years …’
'Mum!' He sits up tall. ‘It’s alright. I meant here as in the fig tree. I wasn’t talking about the rest of our lives.’

‘Oh,’ she says. ‘Right. Sorry.’

He shoves against her and she lets herself topple sideways onto the seat. He pulls her back up to sitting position.

‘Good talk, Mum,’ he says, patting her on the shoulder. ‘Good talk.’

‘Oh, piss off,’ she says.

Leaning in, she plants a kiss on his good cheek. He rubs the kiss away. It’s hardly ideal but she settles for the stilted play. At least he’s come up for air.

‘Go play with your sister,’ she says.

As he walks towards the tree she watches him recede again, colouring himself in with sepia tones.

Helen sends her response: Cunt.

Meg calls the bank and taps in the numbers of the joint account, long committed to memory. An automated voice tells her the money is there – less than Meg thought but that’s not a surprise, there’s always less money than Meg thinks – but it’s not available. Not a single cent.

Carl woke up somewhere this morning, at home, or in hospital, and set his pyre raging in the wasteland. He thought to cut off her line of supply. He bothered to do that.

The phone is cold in her hand. Of his arsenal of threat, nursing fury while he’s sober is the most menacing, silence from Carl suggests impending violence. It’s his most obscene weapon. He’s hoping to smoke her out.

Lucy’s dangling her legs over the side of the boardwalk. By the look on her face she’s telling Charlie something of dire import. Still as an archer with a crossbow drawn, Charlie leans against the tree pretending to listen but Meg knows he’s not hearing a word.

The park moves in waves, rearing up and rolling towards her. Carl has reached a hand into her chest, taken a handful of her lungs and squeezed. The bench cuts into her thighs and digs into her back. She wilts under the sun’s indifference. The humidity is at saturation level, she’s suffocating, fermenting in it. Drowning. No money. No crisp white sheets for Princess Lucy. No clean beige lines for Charlie. No moonlight lapping the river while they rest. No three wise men. No bright star. No fucking manger.
At least she can tell Charlie the bastard is alive.

The fig has shrunk, its luscious spread has thinned. The other children are more wholesome than Meg’s. Another hour and the park will be chock full of families. More yummy mummies will come with the precious progeny they probably don’t immunise because they live clean and eat well and therefore have immunity from the worst of what’s in the world – like the sight of a child with a mangled face. They will string Charlie up in the tree, a poster boy for the evils of careless coupling and broken homes. If Meg was that mother she’d run a mile from her and her kids too. She’d know something was amiss with the raggedy family hanging around the tree with their bags stacked in a wonky old stroller and their nerves stripped raw. They couldn’t be more conspicuous if they’d physically thrown everyone else off the tree and performed a vaudeville show on the boardwalk, theatre in the park, commedia dell’arte. Three weary wayfarers upon a tree did come … It’s all too perfect, the black boy beaten purple and blue, his wispy pale half-sister, and their deranged mother who keeps leading them into harm’s way. They tick every box. File them under cliché and take the children away.

‘Charlie!’ Meg yells, a banshee note in her voice. ‘Lucy!’

Charlie comes towards her sideways, shying away from the sun and bolstering Lucy along.

‘We’re going to the library,’ says Meg, already moving, pushing the stroller across resistant grass.

‘How?’ says Lucy.

‘On the ferry. We have to cross the river.’

‘Why?’

‘Lucy, I’m not playing the why game. If we stay here you’ll fry.’

There’s no breeze, the air solidifies the humidity. In the tree behind them the insects buzzing have turned into screaming drop saws.

Lucy skips circles around them as they cross the park, spinning a web with a discordant song and her spiralling legs. Blonde hair fanning out around her head, she is the image of a happy shiny girl-child going forth to spread her glory on all and sundry.

‘Carl’s alright,’ says Meg, stomping along at double time. ‘So you don’t have to worry. About the pills I mean.’
Charlie pulls a fisted hand in towards his body and whispers, ‘Yes!’, like he’s just scored a soccer goal. He thinks that’s the end of it.

‘But we can’t get any more money. I thought we could but we can’t. We might have to go to a shelter.’

‘What shelter? I thought you wanted to hide?’

‘I do,’ she says. What shelter indeed? ‘He’s blocked the bank account. Without money we’re fucked.’

‘Swearing doesn’t become you, Mother,’ he says.

She clips him across the back of the head. The heat takes up the space around them and turns the park into a series of one dimensional-planes, a kid’s drawing, one line of green for grass, one of blue for sky, and one line of grey for the river. They are stick figures in white-hot space. Their talk smacks flat up against one of the planes. Charlie scratches the back of his head.

‘How fucked?’ he says.

‘Fuckin’ fucked.’

He puts his hand on her arm. He’s still shaking inside, she can feel it through his palm on her bicep.

‘Seriously screwed?’ he says.

‘Royally rooted.’

Arms out wide, Lucy spins faster and faster until she’s too dizzy to stand, the four-year-old’s version of getting out of it. She falls to the ground and flat on her back, looks up at the sky scudding past and all around her.

There’s no one on the ferry to collect their fares. The other passengers register their journeys by swiping plastic cards in front of a machine that pings and tings. Meg and the kids don’t have cards to swipe. The noise of the engine overrides everything else, the humming air-con, the radio, the aural fuzz coming from dozens of iPods. Even if they were inclined to speak Meg and the kids wouldn’t be able to hear each other.

They take the seat closest to the back door. The kids face forward, Meg backwards. Gulls dive in and out of the ferry’s wake. She watches one of the idiot birds fly straight into the back window. The impact breaks its neck. It falls into the water. What is the sound of a bird drowning?
They shamble towards the library along the path beside the river, past the theatres, art gallery and conservatorium. All giant squat square structures, military in feel, Germanic. High summer burn bears down and reflects off water and glass.

They are three misshapen black dots in the library’s entrance. The details of the space are obliterated while their eyes adjust to the move from the searing light outside.

‘There’s a kid’s corner inside, Lucy,’ Meg says. ‘You’ll love it.’

Lucy’s colour has changed from pale to pallid. She doesn’t know it yet but she’s hungry. So is Meg. Eating here would use up the rest of the money. Fucken fucked.

Inside, through floor to ceiling glass on two sides, the river becomes, if not the walls themselves, then walls that feature running water.

* * *
Kid’s Corner overflows with tinsel and tacky baubles. A plastic tree flung with snowflake-shaped paper confetti. A white Christmas transported wholesale and out of season to a dry dirt land buckling under December heat. A young woman with a pinched face surfaces from the mess of easels, paints, butcher’s paper and fractious children. Poor woman signed up to work in the library, the hushed repository of highbrow thought, and ends up a child care worker. She looks harangued already and it’s not even midday. She doesn’t miss Charlie’s face but she has the decency to cover her response to it, she doesn’t drop her jaw or flash Meg the code look she’s been seeing all morning, the one that bypasses compassion in favour of accusation.

Meg whispers to Charlie that she’ll be back in ten then ducks around the corner before the pinched-faced worker can get across the room. It’s not only the accusation Meg can’t stomach, she’s just as insulted by the odd look of hangdog sympathy they’ve been given.

At the first vacant computer she comes to she types in ‘homeless women services’ and surfs the list that pops up. She selects at random, disregards most – too far out in the suburbs – skims others. None that she can see will take a boy-child over twelve and all mention a close working relationship with the police and welfare agencies. One site’s called ‘the domestic violence clearing house’. How does that work? Do homeless women and their children line up on a raised platform in crisp morning air and get auctioned off with a chunk of funding to the highest bidder? Meg in a thin sun-faded cotton dress, the light behind her exposing her body to the crowd, being poked and prodded to reveal the faults in her makeup, her weak bones, underworked muscles, hands too soft or too hard. Her chin grabbed and her mouth opened so the potential saviour can inspect her teeth. Lucy, holding a stranger’s hand, being dragged through the crowd away from her mother. Too old for charity kudos, Charlie will be taken back to the warehouse after the crowd has dispersed.

The statistics on the screen, the dry tone of definitions, information about saving the family pet – none of it tells her where she can find shelter. The clearing house has provided a helpful ‘to do’ list for the prospective homeless woman, things to take when you leave – birth certificates, social security information, school and medical records, unpaid bills, passports. The requirements stop short of proof of the blood type of your
first born. She scribbles some numbers on the scrap paper provided by the library, shoves the paper in her pocket then deletes her search from the screen.

She wanders the library, aimless amongst so much collective reason. In a stairwell leading up she leans against the floor-to-ceiling glass and watches the arterial freeway feed traffic to the city centre. The river is an insipid non-colour, a strip of slate set in glare. She should go back to the kids but has no news to take them.

She finds a reading room made up of nooks and crannies built off a central area. Its dark wooden surfaces and clusters of couches and chairs around low tables suggest a domestic rather than public space. It almost hits the homely mark. She’s already anticipating the largest of the chairs taking her weight, relieving her of the obligation to hold herself upright, when the sound of someone clearing their throat stops her mid-stride.

A large woman is stretched out on the opposite couch. She’s too long for the couch and her feet hang over the end. She’s wearing a billowing amount of dark brown material and has a billum stuffed with flowers resting on her stomach. Her long hair hangs over the end of the couch and is wrapped up in a man’s necktie, a gardenia pinned in the base of her ponytail. It’s the woman from the station who, with a single look stopped Meg from melting into the cracks in the ground and sliding onto the train tracks. She stays prostrate, arms crossed over her chest in corpse pose. Having made her presence felt she closes her eyes again.

‘Slop found you somewhere to sleep then?’ she says. ‘Kids alright?’

The voice has a whiskey scratch in it, a three-in-the-morning blue note. There’s a pile of newspapers on the floor next to her, all read by the look of them. The scent of gardenia is incongruous in this sterile imitation parlour room. Even so, it’s not enough to cover the other smells coming off the woman, not offensive but a rich mix, sweat, mothballs, perfume, alcohol and cigarettes. She smells of river mud. Since the woman has her eyes closed Meg risks a closer look. She might smell of the river but there’s nothing watery about her. The woman is lived in several times over, she’s grubby and scuffed. She opens one eye, turns it on Meg.

‘Seen enough, Pet?’ she says and closes the eye again.

Meg’s the kid caught with her hand in the biscuit tin.
'I’m sorry,’ she says.
The flowers smell saccharine sweet. The woman sits up, sighing.
‘I’m going to give you something useful,’ she says, digging around in the billum.
‘Because that’s the kind of girl I am.’
She pulls out a half bottle of vodka, takes a swig, wipes the top with her sleeve and offers it to Meg who declines.
‘Well, you could hold it for me, couldn’t you?’
Not wanting to get the woman off side, Meg takes the bottle.
‘That’s not the thing I’m giving you, by the way. Hang on.’ She digs some more.
‘Have some. You look like you could use a drink.’
Flowers spill everywhere. She makes no attempt to pick them up.
Meg takes a sip of the vodka, feels the warmth hit and takes a larger shot. The vodka trickles down her insides, spreads out from the centre of her chest and along the branches of her lungs, into her belly and tingles in her fingertips. Her face flushes from the alcohol, the top of her head pricks with it. The woman gives a self-satisfied smile.
‘Told you,’ she says. ‘Good.’
She goes back to hunting in her bag.
‘What’s your name?’ says Meg. The vodka’s already curdling in her empty guts.
‘What’s yours?’
Meg’s physical response isn’t in proportion to a single shot of booze. She wonders if the vodka’s been spiked. Panic like a chaser runs the same path as the vodka; mouth, chest, guts, fingertips. The room’s not spinning but the walls and floor are an extension of the motion of the river through glass. The room ripples.
‘Ah ha!’ The woman raises a triumphant fist above her head, looks to Meg to join the celebration. ‘Oh, shit,’ she says. ‘Sit, will you? Before you fall.’
She pulls Meg onto the seat beside her, takes a chug on the vodka, replaces the cap and drops the bottle into the billum.
‘Listen, Love, you need to harden up a bit.’
Meg can’t imagine what she’s done to make this woman so impatient with her.
‘Sorry,’ she says.
‘I’m Jude. Do not apologise to me again. That would be a good start.’
‘Meg. Okay. Sorry.’

Jude gives a *why do I bother* sigh. All her actions are played at three times the size they need to be, like an amateur actor making fun of the role she’s in, storming the fourth wall and tossing props into the audience. She checks the space for intruders and moves closer to Meg.

‘Now, Meg,’ she whispers. ‘We don’t have much time. Give me your hand.’

Time seems like the very thing Jude has most of – with the possible exception of flowers. Meg disturbed her dozing, it makes no sense that all of a sudden they’re running out of the one thing that is, assuming the world as we know it is not going to end in the next couple of decades, an endless commodity. Meg’s muscles are warm mush. She drops her hand into Jude’s lap.

‘Close your eyes.’

Meg complies. Jude places something on the palm of her hand, curls Meg’s fingers into a fist around the object. Then she closes her own hand over Meg’s and shakes their double fist, gently, up and down, side to side.

‘Mumbo, jumbo.’

Jude whispers in rhythm with the hand movement which she now turns to a circular motion, round and round on a flat plane, her alcohol breath hot on Meg’s face.

‘Double, bubble. Help this woman in her toil and trouble.’

As instructed, Meg has kept her eyes closed but she’s having some difficulty staying focused. Being administered to in bastardised Shakespeare by a half-drunk woman in a library had not figured in any way with her running away plans. On the other hand, it’s no more ridiculous than a ‘domestic violence clearing house’ and might turn out to be just as useful.

‘Gimme a hoodoo.’

Meg tries, and fails, not to giggle. She doesn’t want to insult Jude. And she’s curious to see what has been put in her hand. She gets an elbow in the ribs and opens her eyes. ‘Hello?’ says Jude. ‘I said, “Gimme a hoodoo”.’

‘Sorry?’ says Meg.

‘You’re a little slow, aren’t you? One – I told you to stop saying sorry. And, two – you’re supposed to repeat after me. Now – give me a hoodoo.’
‘Give me a hoodoo,’ says Meg.
She has, she thinks, copied Jude’s inflection precisely. Apparently not. Jude does her ham routine, raises her eyes to the ceiling.

‘Oh, God,’ she says, real pity in her voice. She pulls out the vodka, takes another swig and addresses the heavens. ‘We have an infidel situation here. I’m in need of some assistance. Could you please grant me the strength to deal with this poor woman.’ Then to Meg, ‘It’s alright, He and I are on good terms. We have an understanding. Now. You only say the hoodoo bit. It’s a prayer thing, same idea as a cheer squad, or the army, it only works as a call and response. I make the call, you respond. Shall we try it again?’

Meg nods with enthusiasm. Her life depends on getting this right.

‘Yes, please,’ she says.

‘Do you need another drink?’

‘I don’t think so,’ says Meg.

The woman gives Meg a skin-peeling look.

‘You don’t,’ she says. ‘I know these things. Sorry I asked. Now, with gusto. Give me a hoodoo.’

‘Hoodoo,’ says Meg, summoning gusto through the fog in her head.

‘Gimme a voodoo.’

‘Voodoo.’

Jude starts from the beginning again, ‘Mumbo, jumbo’. If Meg were standing she’d be wobbling from the booze. She repeats Jude’s phrases. Her commitment is flawless. She is slamming this prayer home.

‘A bit limp,’ Jude says at the end of the round. ‘We lost the momentum but you did okay. Ideally, we’d do it again so you could feel the rhythm and we’d do a bit of loose improvisation on the theme. But I can’t be bothered and, with respect, you’re not very good at it.’

Meg wants to feel the rhythm. She wants the Holy Spirit to move in her. She wants this woman’s god to like her. She opens her palm. Jude has given her a pendant, a small silver orb. The perfect sphere is attached to a string of leather so dry it no longer even suggests skin.
‘It’s a bell,’ says Jude. ‘To protect the child within. Though yours are without. In more ways than one.’ She slaps herself on the thigh in appreciation of her own joke, and has another drink. ‘I’m going to have to sleep soon.’

Meg cups her palm and rocks the orb around. The peal of every bell on the globe has been distilled into this miniscule tinkling object, its chime is a song complete. She thinks of Lucy, of Charlie and covers the little bell with her other hand.

‘There’s no need to cry, Love.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ says Meg.

‘No need to thank me either.’

‘Thank you.’

‘My pleasure,’ says Jude. ‘Now, go.’ She waves a dismissive hand in Meg’s general direction. ‘I need to sleep.’

With that, Jude resumes the corpse pose. Meg has an urge to lie down with her. She could stretch out on the floor beside her, use the bag of browning flowers for a pillow and let the scent transport her somewhere else. Having shrunk to give an echo to Jude’s prayers, the room now expands to remind Meg where she is. Vodka swills in her head, twists her perspective. She plots a path out of the nook and sets her feet to following that path while the walls of the library expand and contract around her. She hasn’t sorted anything out and the day is half gone. She hasn’t found anywhere to go, hasn’t managed to magic up any money and now she’s semi-sloshed as well. Not the most responsible mother around. She shouldn’t have had the alcohol. On a day she needs them about her, she has dimmed her wits. Stupid.

The furniture sways, the tip of her nose tickles and the carpet rises under her feet. She comes to a split staircase. The descending flight will take her back to street level where the kids are. She takes the ascending flight that leads to a red room, an amphitheatre built out over the river. The stage is suspended above the water which operates as a back drop because the entire back wall is glass. The seating, long unbroken benches like church pews, rakes back from the stage area at a steep angle. The muted red on the walls, seating and ceiling is not quite blood-coloured but it’s close enough and its blend with the mud brown of the river is seamless. She climbs the raked steps and takes a spectator’s position, middle of the top row. Best seat in the house. Nothing to see but the
river. The raked seating has been designed so that from where she’s sitting she can’t see
the city on the other side. All she can see is mud coloured water framed in glass.

Herself under mud-coloured water under glass. She uncurls her fingers from
around the silver bell. The lovely but tarnished thing must mean something. She puts it on
the bench beside her and looks at it. It doesn’t mean anything. It’s a bit of mischief
thrown into the mix. If she left it here on the bench would some catastrophe befall her
inner child? No, it wouldn’t. The bell is a pretty and a useless thing.

Her children are pretty too. And they have the added value of being useful –
Charlie can dance and Lucy scatters light for other people to walk in. Big futures, both of
them. If she left them here in the library would something catastrophic happen to them?
No, it wouldn’t. Just as someone would come by and pick up the tarnished bell, someone
will come by eventually and pick up her tainted children. She waves her hand over the
bell, whispers ‘mumbo jumbo, hoodoo voodoo,’ and waits for a puff of smoke. It doesn’t
come. If she had an inner child it would be pissed off right about now. She wasn’t after a
thunder-clap, but not even a puff of smoke? The bell is a snake-oiled charm.

She watches great volumes of water passing in front of her, envies the power and
the movement. Of course she could leave her children here. Or she could hunt out the
clearing house and drop them there. Sell them for the value of their organs. Pop them
with a cyanide capsule. Do a deal with the devil at the crossroads and write a song about
it. I hocked my pretty babies in lieu of my soul/didn’t know they were the same thing ‘til
after they’d gone/now I can’t get them back/and my sorrow won’t drown/and all I’ve got
left is this second-rate song. She rocks back and forward in time with the refrain, which
bleeds into another and then another until the song is a visitation from a blood-brown
battle field and Macduff is crying, ‘What? All my pretty ones?’

She picks up the bell to listen to its chime. She watches the river and wonders if it
ever ran clear. She puts her head in her hands and weeps.

‘Mum?’ says Charlie.

Lucy’s holding onto his hand with both of hers. She looks scared. They’re
standing in the centre of the stage made of water looking like they’re about to submerge.
With no reverence or regard for the library or the river or the red room, her children scale
the seating and sit either side of her.
‘You’re really loud, Mum,’ Charlie says. ‘We heard you from downstairs.’

‘Don’t cry, Mummy.’

Meg takes her daughter’s hand.

‘I don’t understand, Charlie,’ she says. She wipes her nose and face on the bottom of her tee shirt. ‘I’ve read Solzhenitsyn for god’s sake. Solzhe-bloody-nitsyn!’

She sobs all the more, allowing herself some licence for melodrama. Why not? Her face is streaked with snot, her head thumps with vodka and tears, but she still has her children.

‘Yeah, well,’ says Charlie. ‘I’ve read J.K. Rowling.’

They sit three in a row and watch the water.

‘I read Brown Bear,’ says Lucy.

‘No you didn’t. I read it to you,’ says Charlie.

‘I made you a present.’

Lucy puts something made of paper in Meg’s lap. What it is, Meg can’t tell. It’s been scribbled on with extra thick red and green texta so it must have something to do with Christmas.

‘It’s lovely, Lucy.’ Meg turns the thing around in her hand, inspecting it from this way and that. She can’t make head or tail of it. ‘What is it?’ she says.

‘It’s a lantern.’ Lucy has emphasised the word to show off an addition to her vocabulary, no doubt a result of the pinched-faced worker’s instruction. ‘So you can see.’

Meg cries all the more.

‘You want to get out of here?’ says Charlie.

Meg nods, puts the bell around her neck and wipes her snotty nose on her hand.

On the trek through the library Lucy recounts all the things Brown Bear can see. Charlie tells her to shoosh and reminds her she didn’t actually read the book.

‘Well I would’ve read it if I could read, Charlie,’ Lucy says.

With Meg bringing up the rear and still sniffing back tears, Charlie leads them in single file through the boroughs of the library and out into the blowtorch sunlight.

Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you see? I see a red bird looking at me.
It’s a short walk from the library to Southbank beach but it feels like a marathon. They’re not quite at growling-stomachs hunger but it won’t be long. Lucy’s drooped, her feet-swinging in the stroller is half-hearted at best, desultory at worst. Though the stroller is all but weightless, for the effort it takes Charlie to push it he might as well be pushing a car with the handbrake on. The stroller squeaks in intermittent bursts.

The beach at Southbank is a fake, built in the middle of the city on the banks of a river infused with industrial-strength backwash. Every weekend, especially this close to Christmas, bodies stream in from the outer suburbs to splash around in the urine-warmed and chlorinated saline solution that is supposed to mimic the sea. For years Meg has avoided coming here, the artifice made her feel the city was trying to dupe her. Today she hopes to disappear into the forgery, one sleight of hand to cover another.
The sky is singed to a cloudless white. On a patch of sand under a transplanted palm, Meg jingles Jude’s bell and watches bodies of all varieties crash in and out of the water – women with tiny babies, kids galore, not many fathers, lots of squealing girls. Barefoot adolescent boys push and shove each other on the water’s edge. Overweight women with ugly tattoos etched into their necks and calves. Meg tries to read the inscriptions but can’t. The smell of sunscreen lines her throat; her tonsils and tongue are thick with it.

Charlie and Lucy wade in the shallows. Skins glimmering in sunlight, they look like the favoured kin of a sub-class of gods. Meg told him to keep his face dry, if those cuts get infected he’ll look like he’s carrying plague. Not a chance playing with Lucy in water could Charlie keep his face dry. Anyway, there’d be so much chlorine in the fake sea the cuts are more likely to be cleansed. They’re playing crocodiles, Charlie rolls towards Lucy with only his eyes, nose and ears above water. Lucy squeals, jumps on his back and he dogpaddles out to deeper water, though deeper water here means thigh high. Charlie takes them into a deathroll. Black and white skins in a tangle, feet and hands thrashing and making froth out of the soupy water.

Meg stands ankle deep on the fake shore and calls them over. Lucy in her underpants rises in slow motion from Charlie’s back, water cascading off her. Meg can’t imagine that the blonde girl beckoning from the water tinged green has anything at all to do with her. Lucy, birthed by Venus in a public piss trough.

‘We’re not going are we?’ says Lucy.

‘Not yet,’ Meg says. *There’s nowhere to go.*

Face down, Charlie keeps half his body in the water and rests his head on his forearms. He lets the water rock his feet and legs side to side. Lucy copies him. Meg considers flopping fully clothed into the water and lying down beside them. Like castaways, they could stay like that for hours. Someone might come to save them, or perform a ritual of baptism and redemption. But bathing in other people’s piss doesn’t appeal to Meg. No holy man of any persuasion is going to emerge from this crowd to anoint her and dignify her situation. They don’t need redemption.

‘You want food?’ she says.
Charlie doesn’t lift his head but says, or grunts, ‘Food good.’ He flops an arm over Lucy and tucks her into him and commando crawls backwards into the water. ‘Bring food, Mother,’ he says.

Meg claims the Virgin cap and counts the money. Less than thirty dollars. By anyone’s books it’s bugger all.

‘Watch the bags,’ she says. ‘And stay in each other’s sight.’

Pre-Christmas activity for the city’s underprivileged dominates the foreshore. Anonymity envelops her. Meg is the other half, one among many of the great unwashed. She’s a blurred figure in the background of other people’s business. She moves through the crowd like she’s being pulled along on a dolly on a film set. Way back when, her father made a trolley for her. He couldn’t think what else to do with her when she was little, younger than Lucy is now. His trolley rig was something like a go-cart but smaller, a rectangular plastic tub on wheels attached to a rigid pole with a hook on the end that he tucked into the back of his belt. He walked. He walked for miles, and for years, dragging her behind him through the inner city streets. She learnt to read in that trolley. She read to him out loud, anything they could find. Books the wives of his friends gave her, pamphlets they picked up along the way, menus, fairy tales. She learnt to see in that trolley too, watching the bottom of her father’s shoes rise and fall as he trudged around the city, tiring himself beyond the reach of his own grief.

Ten days until Christmas and the city has begun its countdown. *My True Love Gave to Me*. Nothing.

Meg passes a group of drummers, their instruments made of calibrated steel so they make melody as well as rhythm. They’ve gathered a decent crowd, mostly swimmers and so semi-naked, their dancing makes it apparent that the song of the drums is joyous. Meg doesn’t feel it that way; the bass notes pounding on the walls of her chest make her nauseous. She moves on. A tired-looking woman dressed in layers of purple nylon petticoats sits sweating on a milk crate. A hand-written cardboard sign in front of her says, Face Painting, $5.00. Perhaps she could disguise Charlie’s face with her paints, apply a mask to him. Then again, someone who wears layers of nylon in this heat doesn’t know much about the value of an organic blend.
Meg joins a small crowd in front of a living statue, like everyone else, she’s drawn in by his stillness. Sweat flows off him, streams down from under his hat. Every visible part of him is painted silver as is his three-piece suit, including the flower in the lapel, the old-fashioned cardboard suitcase at his feet, his hat and the miniature set of feathered wings sticking out the top of it. He has a handful of metallic coloured balloons, bronze, gold and silver in one hand, and an oversized hanky in the other which he moves in slow motion to pat at the sweat on his brow. The paint must replicate skin because the sweat doesn’t budge it, which shouldn’t be possible. Meg puzzles over the mute clown while the drums in the distance try to open her chest and the dancers shake the ground with their stamping. She tinkles Jude’s bell next to her ear, its quiet voodoo suits her and the silver statue better than drums that play melody.

In slow motion the statue beckons her closer. She inches forward. You’d think a clown couldn’t possibly flourish a move in slow motion but he does. Meg hasn’t imagined it. She knows this because the modest crowd applaud. His flourish has produced a yellow paper flower with purple string tied in a bow around the base of it, the colour iridescent against the silvery grey. He holds the flower out to Meg.

Some of the crowd awww. They think the flower giving is sweet. But when Meg looks into the clown’s eyes she flushes cold. He can see her. And she can see him. There are only the two of them in this circle and there’s not a lot to awww about. He’s mid-forties, a person with a past who’s painted himself silver-grey and stuck feathers in his hat, trying to earn a buck at the beginning of the school holidays. Sweat seeps through the makeup, dribbles down his neck and settles at the collar of his shirt. He is pathos personified and he can see her in yesterday’s clothes with a story she can’t tell. He moves his hand away from Meg, retracting his offer and smiles when he gives the flower to a child standing next to her. Then he puts the hand open palmed onto his chest and bows to Meg, recognition. No shame in being seen.

In character he holds his hat out to collect money from the crowd but withdraws it when it gets to Meg. He won’t take her dollar. She’s not insulted. She claps with the rest of the crowd, moves on to look for food.

The best she can find, that she can afford, is dry white bread sandwiches with slimy ham and plastic cheese, an apple for each of them and a bottle of water to share.
Money’s almost gone. They’ll eat tonight at the neighbourhood centre, sleep at Fagin’s boarding house, she’s paid for two nights after all. The bastard owes her.

The living statue is gone when she passes on her way back to the kids but he’s left his bunch of balloons tied to a railing on the back of a bench. The trace of the shape of his suitcase is visible on the ground. The faint grey spray from his paint is not more than a smudge on the cement but his absence in the centre of the outline is profound. A whole person, his earthbound form made opaque by silver paint, he was already more shadow than matter, and he’s gone.

After her sobs in the library’s red room Meg wouldn’t have thought she had any tears left, she’d have thought the heat, the alcohol and her already-shed tears would have left her body dry. But, no. She sits on the bench beside the balloons and lets the tears spill down her cheeks. It’s the right thing to do. She cries and congratulates herself that her humanity appears to be intact. The tears don’t last, they’re nothing much, she’s only crying because she can, because crying for a clown that isn’t there is somehow more humane than the alternative which, today, would be sitting at her kitchen table in the suburbs shedding tears in secret, mourning the spirit of a boy-child that flew out the window when his body flew across the room.

The kids are drip drying flat on their backs, heads together under the palm. She can tell by the way they’re lying, arms and legs flung out to star shape, that they’ve entered the exclusion zone. Behind them the river runs its primeval path, whittling deeper into the stone cliffs on its bends. It’s impervious to the city, to the freeways that skim its surface, to the children on its banks. It shows Southbank beach to be the artless construction it is – a puddle of piss for the underclass to splash in.

Meg counts what’s left of their money. If they can evade the fare for the ferry again, they have enough for an ice cream. She stands slowly, not because she’s nursing her body through its sore spots, but so she can gauge her posture. It’s important to stand up straight. The sound of the crowd pushes against her, buoys her along.

They’re listening to Charlie’s iPod, an earpiece each, both have their eyes closed. ‘Good swimming?’ They give no sign they’ve heard her. ‘I know you’re awake. I’ve got food.’

Charlie can’t hide his disappointment at the quality of sustenance she’s brought.
‘It’s all I could find,’ she says.

*It’s all we could afford.* They don’t eat the food as much as they inhale the tasteless stodge. The water, though, is manna. Charlie finishes off Lucy’s sandwich, gobbles the apple down.

‘That it?’ he says, far from sated.

The neighbourhood centre will need to have something more satisfying than the slim pickings she’s just fed them. Charlie leans against the palm.

‘We can get ice cream on the way to the ferry,’ she says.

Meg lies down, tipping the scene in front of her on its side, the palms, the benches, the isolated body parts of the unwashed, tattooed ankles and chipped toenail polish. The empty food, Jude’s tincture, the sound of the crowd and the water in front and behind her, all collapse into a narcotic haze. Lucy positions herself in the crook of Meg’s body. For both of them the slouch towards sleep is intractable. Her daughter’s heart beats its double time through her back. Meg’s chest is a membrane for the rhythm to sound against, a tempo more exact than a metronome.

Someone has nicked the bunch of metallic coloured balloons the feathered clown left behind, it moves through and above the crowds.

‘Charlie? I don’t think I can stay awake. Can you?’

‘Yep,’ he says.

‘Stay close,’ says Meg. ‘Watch Lu.’

‘She’s already gone, Mum.’

Lucy’s weight against her is Meg’s anchor. She puts an arm around her, pulls the blanket up and over as much of her as she can cover, wet knickers and a dose of December sun could give her the chills.

Meg slides around the edge of sleep, sees things, has imaginary conversations, thinks Carl is behind her, watches Lucy fly above the city with the bunch of metallic coloured balloons, incants over a cauldron with Jude, sits on Helen’s two-by-two veranda and throws the bell over it, watches it burst into a crimson-tailed phoenix that is Charlie, buries a not-yet-dead Carl in the clearing and plants a poinciana on top of him, puts Lucy in a go-cart and walks the cliffs above the river bank, stalks the fake beach with a pair of
daggers unsheathed, watches Lucy rise from a bucket of piss and transform into a Venus proper in a pearly half shell, bathes her children in the blood-brown water.

She wakes up hung over, without Lucy, and craving salt and water in equal measure. One side of her face is on fire. Charlie has his back to her, sitting cross-legged in the shallow water with Lucy in his lap. Lucy’s feet, pink with sunburn, dangle over Charlie’s knee. Meg croaks but they don’t hear her. They’re clapping hands, playing a school yard game, when one of them misses the rhythm of the clap or the rhyme of whatever they’re chanting, they both laugh.

Sitting up hurts Meg’s head, the light is a wrecking ball on the back of her eyes. She can’t guess the time, hopes it’s late afternoon and wishes she could hear what her children are talking about. She remembers the hand-clapping game. She doesn’t remember being young.

Much later, when they’re changing into dry clothes and gathering their belongings, Meg sees the living statue, suitcase in hand, he’s not performing but he is standing still. He must have been watching them for a while, but he’s too far away for her to be sure. She shakes out the blanket and rolls it up. When she looks to the opposite shore the statue has put his hand up in a wave. He’s gathering some of the dwindling crowd. He’s on show again. Meg waves back.

On the free ferry ride their ice creams melt and drip onto their hands and wrists. They don’t speak, Meg discourages it. She wants the last few hours to settle into memory. The day after we left Carl we went swimming, ate ice cream and laughed.
For the second time Meg dials the number and for the second time hangs up before the phone rings. She dials again, fingers shaking over the key pad. If he doesn’t answer by the fourth ring she’ll hang up. Carl picks up on the sixth, says ‘Yes?’ Meg’s stomach turns to lava.

‘It’s me,’ she says.

Of course he knows it’s her. Caller ID. He draws a pained breath. The television burbling in the background means he’s in the front room. At this time of day he’ll have the lights off. He’ll be polishing the fabric on the arm rests with his obsessive rubbing. Polishing his rage. Walking in there when he’s alone in the early evening is like walking into a festering wound. She hears the fizzling sound the faulty television makes when it’s turned off, a thousand insects scuttling across glass.
‘Megs …’ he says.
She knows the play, the ploy. This is his pre-coital purr, his *I’ve got a big dick and I know you want it* machismo. It’s his version of seduction. Not the response she was expecting.

‘How are you?’ she says. * Bloody brilliant opener.*
Across the road people are gathering for the free food. She looks for the vertical line that is Slop but doesn’t see him.

‘How do you think I am?’
That’d be right. The sex is over, as usual, before it began. Why go through the hard work of sex when you can have the post-event misery for free?

‘We need money. The kids need it.’
They’re where she left them, huddled together on the ground, exposed to the elements, not even parked under a tree. *Good going, girl, you’re on fire tonight.*

‘Bring them home then.’
He’s sober. Meg can be sure of his physical location because she’s got him on the landline but it doesn’t stop her doing a speed check on her surroundings, a habit born of reading his signs. She moves further away from the kids so they won’t sense his rejection of them and they won’t see the fear he has jammed down her throat and packed into her groin with his fist.

She’s on the levy wall, any further away from the children and she’d be walking in the mangrove mud which is exposed by the low tide and smells repugnant. The river has drained all the colour it can from the fading day, it’s been through gold and cerise. Now it’s matte black. Without any breeze skimming the surface it looks stagnant.

‘Two hundred would do it,’ she says.
It would buy them a night of comfort and a couple of decent meals.

His laugh is malevolent, designed to sever her wind pipe. She breathes a lungful of the mud smell and imagines it congealing in her chest.

‘Bring Lucy home,’ he says.
His tone makes his penchant for obscenity graphic. His lust has been wetted and won’t abate, she knows from experience, until he acts it out. Even if she had an AVO it
would be as effective on Carl as a water pistol against his fists. Meg looks at Charlie playing with a stick in the dirt.

Calling was dumb. Carl was never going to yield. Why would she have thought otherwise? But she didn’t think otherwise. Not thinking would be the operative thought there. Humiliation rings like cymbals in her head, sharp and brassy. She doesn’t need him boxing her ears when she can do it herself by making a phone call. You don’t know how redundant you are, Carl.

More than miasma, less than flesh, shapes are forming on the flat black water. A chorus of dead women and children, their faces smooth as the surface of the river. Some are more whole than others. There’s the girl in the blue party dress with the woman who didn’t take her son. Not kin on land, they are in water. They’ve come to see Meg, to let Meg see them. They’ve come to give evidence about the usefulness of Apprehended Violence Orders. They are the evidence.

She hears Carl pacing the house, thinks from the change in the quality of background sounds that he’s moved to the kitchen. The screen door slams. He’s out the back, looking towards the bush. The birdsong will be taunting him and dropping the dark over her disappearing act. Carl’s breath slides over the back of her neck, his voice low, tongue forked.

‘You really are a dumb cunt, aren’t you, Meg?’

Not knowing where they are has compressed his rage, stroked and stoked it. She would not have believed him capable of such control. If they went anywhere near him tonight one of them wouldn’t see morning.

She looks at the women on the water, all connected in some way to the children, an arm draped over a shoulder, hand in hand, clutching the back of a collar. Meg looks at her own kids. Charlie’s moved them in under a tree. He’s looking right at her. He knows she’s talking to Carl.

Carl is a novice at control whereas Meg is well practised. She tightens her grip on the phone, sees Carl pacing the back fence. The bush is inhospitable to him, it’s not his realm.

‘You’re looking at the bush aren’t you?’ Meg says. He doesn’t respond. ‘We’re not out there, Carl.’
The river’s dead send a pulse out over the water. There are scores of them now and more appearing all the time. They have let go of the children who come closer to the shore. The women make Meg bold. She sees Carl’s fury and raises it.

‘Maybe I am dumb,’ she says. She lowers her voice to a whisper and purrs at him. ‘But you don’t know how to find us, do you, Carl?’

Arm stretched to full length she holds the phone up so the women can hear his spluttering rage. They are her witness, her fist in the air. Carl bellows that he’s called the police and if she thinks this is … She hangs up and turns the phone off.

The women take their children back into the water, sending the gentlest breeze across the park. There’s not enough force in it to rustle anything but it makes the hair on Meg’s arms stand up. We won’t be joining you.

A regiment of the homeless have gathered at the neighbourhood centre where Christmas lights are strung across the veranda and wound in the only tree in the courtyard, trestle tables on the forecourt, candles lit and stuck in the top of empty bottles, music plays. The activity looks like a party to which they haven’t been invited. Meg feels the exclusion as much as her children do. They don’t speak it though, all three too hungry and too tired for words. They’ve been watching the crowd gather for an hour. Meg expected twenty or thirty people but there are three times that number. The line-up has spilled from inside the centre onto the footpath and down the block. If Slop’s over there she wouldn’t be able to pick him among the crowd anyway. She stands, brushes the dirt off her clothes. If she doesn’t get over there they’ll miss out on the food. There are no small children in the line.

‘I’m going to get us dinner,’ she says. ‘Stay here.’
‘Why can’t we come?’ Charlie says.
‘We’re hiding.’

If Meg were looking for a runaway woman and her children it wouldn’t take long before she started scouting around neighbourhood centres at meal times. When the police in the suburbs have exhausted the local haunts, they’ll start looking in the city. She has a couple of day’s grace. One of which she’s squandered.

‘I don’t want to hide anymore,’ Lucy says.
She’s chewing on Bunny’s ear. Disgusting thing, that rabbit. Meg should put it in a palm frond and send it out into the river. Someone out there will appreciate it.

Meg feels about as nondescript as it’s possible to be, a sand-coloured human among many. Lucy is just another pretty blonde white girl. But Charlie’s colour and his brutalised face make them conspicuous. Meg’s eyelids grate on her eyes, her head thumps from heat and hunger. Charlie’s barely spoken since they got off the ferry and Lucy hasn’t stopped scratching at herself since they swam in the piss trough. Meg has nothing to say to them and walks away.

She’s expecting the crowd to be an unruly rabble, a live demonstration of how the fittest survive. She resolves to be among them. Shoulders back, head up, she joins the queue and tries not to listen in on lives she doesn’t want to imagine. Frank has been hit by a car and is in hospital. Damo got a commission place. Bernie’s been thrown out of hers. Lizzie got a hotshot and they found her practically dead in the toilets at the station. The ‘fuckin’ coppers kicked Kev in the head’ and left him in the watch-house for two days without charging him. Bree’s gone back to her bloke and left her kids with ‘the department’. ‘She’ll lose them kids’. Some are going to a meeting after dinner. Meg hears Slop’s name but can’t see him.

‘Hey, Missus.’ Troy sidles up beside her. ‘Survived the day then?’

The lovely painted maiden takes up position on the other side of Meg, giving her a not especially gentle nudge. Their familiarity would be an affront if it wasn’t so welcome. Their presence holds Meg in place, they’re body splints for her. They still smell stale, not even barbeque sausages can cover that.

‘Where’s your boy?’ the girl asks.
Meg indicates the park across the road.
‘Seen Slop?’ says Troy.
He’s like an exuberant puppy. He and the girl are crackling with the adolescent energy that has evaporated in Charlie. Meg shakes her head.

‘He’ll be round the back with his Blackfella mate,’ says Troy. He leans in closer to Meg. ‘Weird guy. Never speaks.’

The girl laughs. ‘Wes speaks, alright,’ she says. ‘Just not to you. Cos you’re a fuckin’ idiot.’
"Silent Night" plays, synthetic strings and a voice so auto-tuned it no longer sounds human. All is calm/all is bright.

‘I’m gonna get Slop,’ says Troy. ‘Grab us a plate.’ He bounds off around the corner.

The food’s a deflating sight, old army-style aluminium pots of stews and savoury mince muck, mashed potato more powdery than creamy, boiled-up peas and an oversized barbeque full of burnt onion and sausages. On the accompaniment table are bottles of tomato sauce and foot high stacks of white bread spread with yellow margarine. More stodge.

‘Where’s the little one you had with you?’ says Meg, to break the silence.

It’s not the lovely girl who is uncomfortable. Meg feels like she’s wearing her jeans back to front.

‘My sister. Put her on the train home.’

She’s says the word ‘home’ like she’s got a mouthful of live spider. The girl pulls the sleeve of her tee shirt up and points to a tattoo on her upper arm. The writing is a flowery, illegible script.

‘That’s her,’ says the girl. ‘Phoebe.’

Under the name is another, equally illegible, and under that, a more recent and obviously homemade tattoo, a puckering scar that reads, RIP.

‘That’s my brother, Joel.’

She pats the place where the names are carved then tugs her sleeve down.

Meg needn’t have worried about bringing Charlie over here. There are plenty of scars on injured limbs.

‘Anyway, I’m Daisy.’

‘Meg.’

The plastic plates are unruly, they’re too soft. Meg can’t figure out how to carry three plates, knows there’s a simple solution to the problem but can’t puzzle it through. It doesn’t occur to her to ask for help.

‘Alright?’

Slop takes one of the plates from her. He’s already holding one. He and Daisy exchange a smile. He’s arrived with an Aboriginal man whose presence in the all-white
line-up is intimidating. People further back complain about the ‘queue jumpers’. The black man gives a death stare that silences the grumbling.

‘Hey, Wes,’ says Daisy. ‘This is Meg.’

Wes gives Meg a greeting though she couldn’t say how since he hasn’t looked at her or addressed her in any discernible way. He also has a plate in each hand. In the long seconds it takes her to catch on to what these strangers are doing, the line reaches the food and the moment she might have thanked them has passed.

The two older women serving the stodge greet everyone by name, ask about their children, how their doctor’s appointments have gone, about their court cases, ask after those that are absent. They titter when they’re serving Wes and pile his plates with more food than the others. Wes could be the first black person they’ve ever spoken to. He’s polite in the face of their fussing, but he’s not forthcoming. The women ask Daisy about her sister. Daisy doesn’t know it but she and her sister have kin in the river.

Charlie has claimed a picnic table close to the street so it has some light for them to eat by. He’s laid their blanket out for a tablecloth. Homemaking homeless style.

Troy claims a seat opposite Charlie, says, ‘Peace, brother,’ and immediately threatens the goodwill greeting by blurting, ‘Gis a look at your face.’

Charlie’s a peacemaker by nature but that nature has taken a flogging over the last twenty-four hours. For years Meg’s tried to keep a semblance of normality in the family. Her deceit has left him stranded on planet adolescence trying to manage the unmanageable on his own. He’s been coping the flogging for half his life and if he stands up now and smacks Troy’s toady mouth she would understand.

Wes moves through the centre of the impasse, puts a plate in front of Charlie and sits beside him. He keeps his head down, says something the others don’t hear and starts eating. Whatever he’s said makes Charlie grin. He and Wes – though Wes is at least trying to stay pokerfaced – are laughing at Troy. They’re not being snide, there’s no cruelty in their smiles but they won’t share the joke either. Meg’s seen this before with Charlie and other black people. She’s asked him about these moments, invariably quick and quiet, but he says, with mock reverence, ‘It’s a black thing, Mum, you wouldn’t understand,’ or he’ll put a finger to his lips and whisper, ‘Shh, Mother. Secret, black people’s business.’ To which she typically responds with a few curt words about not
living your life according to tee shirt philosophy. But tonight he can, he will, live his life according to any philosophy he likes. Her mix of pretence and bald deception hasn’t served him too well.

Fruitless day. Dead peers. Meg’s plummeting fast. The sloppy sentiment about her good fortune in running into the fair maiden and her feckless consort hardens. Coloured lights and comfort food won’t appease the river’s dead.

Charlie takes the Virgin cap off, puts it on the table and bats his eyes at Troy. Troy whistles, talks in teenage boy mumble which Meg roughly translates to mean ‘awesome’. Charlie isn’t listening; his attention doesn’t even stay with Troy until the end of his unintelligible speech. He’s riveted by Daisy.

"Look, my son, I have brought you a pretty maiden to look upon." Mother as pimp.

The meal passes, if not in conviviality – the group is too awkward for that, the silences too long, the food too heavy – then at least in a spirit of respite, a recognition that while not exactly friends, neither are they each other’s enemy. They are under no immediate threat and regardless of the company there is comfort in that. They’re a band of unarmed combatants having a pre-Christmas meal in no-man’s land.

Meg catches snippets of conversation from the teenagers at the end of the table. Charlie makes fun of Daisy’s taste in music – tells her the music she likes is white-trash. She calls him a wannabe gangster. Troy looks like he would benefit from a sedative, he scratches his head, stands, sits, changes position, puts his arm around Daisy, drops it, tries on Charlie’s cap, puts it on Lucy’s head, who gives it to Daisy. Slop and Wes might as well be discussing the stock market for all the sense Meg can make of their talk. They speak quietly, to her ears it’s stilted until she realises they’re not bothering to finish their sentences because they don’t need to. Economy matters in this circumstance and, evidently, they’ve known each other a long time.

Meg’s grateful for the company, glad her children are distracted, both of them, by the maiden – Lucy easily as enamoured as her brother but unhappy about his attention being elsewhere. But these are not Meg’s people. Her own children are not her people tonight. Meg’s people are in the river.

Every last mouthful of food is consumed. Across the road the crowd has thinned. The birds are well into their evensong. Silence falls at the table, no one rushes to fill it.
Routine would dictate that Lucy with a bellyful will start looking for a bed, already she’s angling to get herself onto Charlie’s lap. If Meg has to wake her from even ten minutes sleep the next hour will be impossible because the distress of an overtired Lucy will be like acid dripping onto an open sore. Spending another night at Fagin’s is about as inviting as sleeping on barbed wire and probably as restful. But they’ve paid already and they have nowhere else to go. Before Lucy can settle Meg takes her off Charlie’s lap, tells him they need to move and to gather their things.

The teenagers clear the table in seconds flat. Under cover of the activity Wes says goodnight to the collective and leaves not by the street but via the centre of the park.

Operating on the theory that if she can keep Lucy moving she will be less likely to throw a tantrum, Meg takes her daughter’s hand and leads her away from the table.

‘Where are we going?’ Lucy says.

‘To sleep, my girl.’ Perchance to dream.

‘But where?’

‘Same place as last night,’ Meg says.

‘I don’t like that place.’

_I don’t like the place either you little shit but I don’t know where else to go and we’ve paid the money and we don’t have any more and don’t even think about telling me you want to go home to Daddy because Daddy is an arsehole who thinks you’re collateral and didn’t even ask about you and he’ll end up breaking your heart if not your bones so don’t give me your four-year-old attitude because you’re not the only one who needs a sleep and if I lose it with you I may not find my way back and then where do you think you’d be?_

‘Oh, it’s an alright place,’ Meg says.

_If you fancy sleeping in a sewer and bathing in a bog._

‘No, it’s not. I’m not going there. I want to go home. I want … ’

‘Don’t, Lucy. Just don’t.’

On the corner Meg hangs back from the full force of the street lights to wait for Charlie. Troy’s pushing the stroller with their bags in it and talking to Slop while Charlie and Daisy walk in step behind them. Jealousy roars in Meg, not for the girl’s ease, not for her beauty – Meg’s as appreciative of that as everybody else. The roaring is for
something woefully impossible. Meg wants her girlhood back. She wants to stroll through a park in the early evening with a shy and wounded handsome boy.

‘Sorry I snapped at you, Lu,’ she says.

Lucy harrumphs and tosses her head. In thirty seconds she’ll forget why she’s angry.

The only thing worse than the idea of spending the night at Fagin’s is knowing that while the kids are asleep she’ll be keeping watch, all night, on guard for the moment the portal between sleep and dream becomes waking nightmare.

The teenagers don’t step into the light either. Their goodbyes are shy. Not shy enough. Daisy kisses Charlie on the cheek, on the bad side of his face. Troy’s head swells. He thinks Daisy’s his. Poor dumb kid. She’s nobody’s. Charlie’s body releases a rush of hormones Meg can smell and that make her blush.

‘Fuck,’ she says, and looks away.

Slop steps up beside her. ‘Daisy’s a good girl,’ he says.

He has his own response to the chaste kiss planted on Charlie’s broken face. Slop has no buffer zone. He survives everyone else’s feelings by fashioning himself a place outside the ordinary. If she thought her jealousy had the capacity to rent and roar, it’s nothing compared to how Slop encounters every loaded moment of his days. He sees, thinks and feels in the same instant, the three are a single rolling event inside him. He is without defence, poignant pierces him, sorrow is like quicksand, and joy might make him spontaneously combust.

‘You know where you’re going tonight?’ he says.

Daisy calls a goodbye as she and Troy take the side street. Meg waves, Lucy turns away.

‘The boarding house,’ says Meg.

She distributes the bags, one to Charlie, one on the handles of the stroller. Lucy sags into the seat and sucks on Bunny’s ear. She won’t be awake in five minutes and Meg doesn’t have the heart to keep prodding her.

Like friends would, Meg and Slop step off at exactly the same moment.
The uphill trek to Fagin’s is long and silent, the degree of the slope double what it was this morning. When the house finally comes into view, with the moon rising in the background, it looks even more Addams family than it did before.

‘Wait here,’ she says.

Into the black hole. She stops and listens to the house while her eyes adjust. Not a single live human voice. Before she gets to the landlord’s door he steps out of a concealed compartment set back in the wall.

‘What’re you doing here, Love?’ he says.

Jesus grins at them both from his spot on the wall. His expression is supposed to convey calm but he looks like a hippie who got stoned and stuck in 1974. The look was out of date then, now in the dark corridor Meg expects the portrait to transform Dorian Gray-style. Jesus in decay.

‘We need the room again.’

The corridor and the toupee-wearing, nicotine-stained Fagin swallow her voice.

‘Can’t help you there.’

‘But I’ve already paid.’

‘Can’t help you. Room’s gone.’

‘What do you mean, gone?’

‘Rented.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘Besides, Lady,’ says Fagin, rising to the standoff. ‘You threatened to burn my place down.’

He will not be moved. He’s dug in to win his arid patch.

‘That was an offer, not a threat,’ she says.

She’s hoping to make him laugh, butter him up. There was a time she was quite good at that. He shrugs. On top of all her other mistakes, being argumentative with this buffoon is threatening her and her children’s shelter for the night. She drops the charade.

‘We have nowhere to go,’ she says.

‘Can’t help you.’

‘But you took my money.’

He laughs. ‘Door’s that way,’ he says, pointing towards the street.
The world is not how she thought it was. The word *please* sits like a nail on the back of her tongue. She doesn’t use it. In her experience, begging turns a mean man meaner.

Back on the street. Charlie sees he won’t be lugging their bags and his sister up the stairs. They’re in the same spot they were in at two in the morning only this time they can’t close a door behind them and cry. Meg drops onto the rock wall.

‘No room at the inn, huh?’ Slop says.

This is an ugly part of the street, in winter it would be desolate, unprotected from the elements, battered by wind, the trees stripped of their protective layer of growth. Meg turns away from Charlie’s disappointment.

‘There’s a place I go when the weather’s bad,’ says Slop.

Meg finds the texture of the footpath fascinating.

‘It’s not a boarding house is it?’ she says.

Charlie angles Lucy’s stroller against the wall so it won’t roll down the hill. He sits beside Meg and takes her hand. She watches his dark hand playing with her pale one.

‘Does it matter?’ he says.

Keeping hold of her, he stands, pulls her up and places her hands on the stroller.

‘It’s not far,’ says Slop.
Behind a fence weighed down by a plentiful spread of jasmine the building looks like the opening image of a horror film, spire sinister against the rising moon, stained glass features opulent in the pale sandstone. The heavy wooden door is closed tight against them. On the wrong side of the gate, Meg fails to stop the weird spool of associations the church calls up: Quasimodo, Frankenstein, gay men dressed as nuns at Mardi Gras, a hunchback in stockings and suspenders, children locked in confessional with lecherous men in frocks. The old-fashioned idea of sanctuary flits by her. It doesn’t hold.

‘We’re going to sleep in a church?’

‘In the hall out the back,’ says Slop.
Of course the gate squeaks. The stroller labours over the cobbled path, the wonky wheels heralding their arrival. Meg lifts Lucy into her arms and tells Charlie to carry the stroller. Behind the church proper and hidden in a dip at the end of a steep driveway the hall hails from a different era. It’s a middle-suburb pre-fabricated red brick and tile monster. No wonder they hid it from view. The double doors are wide open. Inside, a large group of people sit in a circle.

‘Good. They’re still here,’ says Slop.
They’ve paused in the shadow of the sandstone.
‘What denomination are we joining?’ Meg whispers.
They’re on the edge of a garden that’s been tended with obsessive care, the borders cut clean, garden beds immaculate, bushes pruned and shaped to a pristine harmony.

‘Twelve Step,’ says Slop.
‘Never heard of it.’
‘Alcoholics Anonymous,’ he says.
Fifty Carls in the same room? This is Slop’s idea of shelter? Charlie’s response is the same as Meg’s. They’ve visibly stiffened.

‘It’s okay,’ says Slop. ‘They’re sober.’

Meg and Charlie shrink further into the dark. She’d rather be in the bush at home than this close to a room full of drinkers. She gives Charlie’s sweaty hand a squeeze, supposed to be code for, *I won’t put you in any more danger*, but even she doesn’t believe that. Charlie shakes her off, the rejection a blunt object pressed hard on the back of her head.

‘They’re alright,’ says Slop. ‘When they’re not trying to save you.’

He leads his obedient flock down a narrow path to a sheltered courtyard at the back of the hall. Whatever denomination the church belongs to, they know about creating spaces in which to sit and contemplate. A round wrought iron table with two matching chairs is set in the centre of a circular area in front of a fountain housing the Virgin Mary. She holds her baby in her arms and smiles her frozen calm over a garden of fragrant and orderly blossoms under a sky streaked red by another poinciana in bloom. Water clean enough to bathe in trickles over her feet. The expression on the baby’s face is identical to
his mother’s. No wonder the young woman looks magnanimous, she’s the centrepiece of a theme park designed to honour her.

Slop goes to ‘make arrangements’. Meg and Lucy forgo the iron chairs to sit on the edge of the Virgin’s pool and paddle their hands in the water.

Somewhere between the boarding house and arriving in the garden, Charlie has taken a shunt to the side of himself. He leans against the back wall of the church pulling flowers off a hedge. Meg had tried growing the same plant along the back fence at home – at Carl’s. She wanted the scent of the flowers to float across the yard but the seedlings had died in the never-ending drought.

‘You OK, Charlie?’

Dumb question. Charlie rolls the flowers between his fingers and tosses the remnants into the dark. Meg always thought the plant was called morning, noon and night because the purple and white flowers don’t close at sunset but the guy at the nursery laughed at her. They’re called yesterday, today and tomorrow.

‘Peachy, Mum,’ he says.

The blunt object pressed against the back of her skull grinds its way towards the bones. For years Carl held a monopoly on rage and belittled Charlie for the slightest show of little-boy anger. If Carl’s was a seething fury never off the boil, Charlie’s is turning to dry ice that will burn him from the inside out. The garden’s too small to contain him, and too small to hold the years’ worth of apologies Meg owes him. She’s about to say something trite. ‘It’s okay to be angry.’ ‘None of this is your fault.’ But whatever is going on in the church comes to an abrupt end.

The group inside say, or rather shout, a collective prayer. Noise erupts, chairs scrape over bare floor, conversations are yelled not spoken, water runs and women squeal. The crowd spill onto the forecourt and make their way in pairs and small groups up to the street. Slop with his unruly gait slips around the corner onto the path.

The man who follows Slop into the garden isn’t like the other people they’ve met. He’s clean-cut, well-fed and well-slept. His skin is dewy pink, his teeth newsreader white. Next to her and her children he glows with balanced health. His presence violates Meg’s newly-learned laws about who belongs in which world and when. She and Charlie stand to attention.
'This is Nick,’ Slop says.

If Nick expects Slop to give their names he doesn’t show it. He nods to Meg, takes in Lucy, tiny with her chin in her hands on the edge of the fountain, and doesn’t bother to hide his reaction to Charlie’s face. Meg likes him.

‘Nice shiner you got there, kid,’ says Nick. ‘Walk into a door, did you?’

‘No,’ says Charlie.

His refusal to play along with the tired old cover-up is delivered as a challenge. He’s rejecting Meg’s method, the stock pile of euphemisms she’s been pulling out since Lucy was born. Yes, walked into a door, slipped on a stair, burnt it on the iron, tripped over the dog. But we don’t have a dog Mum? Shh, Charlie. Ha, ha, ha.

‘Okay,’ says Nick.

He runs a spiel about sleeping in the church, tells them there’s a shower, towels, tea and biscuits.

‘They know I let people sleep here sometimes. They don’t like it but as long as you’re quiet they won’t come and throw you out. Keep the lights out as much as possible. Don’t leave a mess. Slop will show you how it all works.’

He speaks like an army sergeant, clipped and forthright, a man with a plan.

‘Nick!’

The high-pitched bark bounces towards them. The outline of a woman with her hands on her hips blocks the light at the end of the path.

‘Oh, shit,’ says Nick.

The woman stamps towards them. She moves like a construction worker, flatfooted, long strides. Branches of trees move out of her way.

‘You’ll be alright here for the night. Just be discreet,’ says Nick, backing away.

‘Nick, for fuck’s sake.’

Fear has pulled anchor on Meg’s organs.

‘Take care,’ Nick says.

He turns to go but he’s too late. The woman is upon them in the garden. She makes it crowded. She is a crowd.

‘What’s going on here?’ she says.
She has the ecstatic look of the religious fanatic. Meg can pick a drunk at fifty paces and this one reminds her of Carl on the first drink of a bender. Slop shuffles forward. Charlie moves closer to Meg, the spike in his mood blunted by the woman’s presence. He and Meg close ranks around Lucy.

‘It’s okay, Cynthia,’ Nick says.
He takes her by the upper arm but she shrugs him off.
‘Hi, Slop,’ says Cynthia.
The skin on her face slides around until it forms a smile that has no discernible spark. She’s not looking at Slop. Her face is dog-like, long and handsome. She’s looking at Lucy.

‘Well, hello Sweetheart,’ says Cynthia, her voice a barbed and slippery croon.
‘What’s Mummy doing keeping you out here at this time of night?’
The Virgin tightens her hold on her baby. That won’t do either of you any good, Meg thinks. You’re damned and he’s doomed.
‘Mummy’s taking care of her, that’s what,’ she says.
Cynthia’s face settles on an approximation of horror at the sight of Charlie’s beaten face. He returns her insincerity with a bitter dumb nigger smile. Meg winces. Cynthia doesn’t notice. She turns her breakable smile on Meg.
‘Can we call someone for you?’ she says.
Charlie pulls Lucy to her feet and in behind him. If the Virgin could get mobile, she’d come closer too.
‘We’re fine,’ Meg says.
‘Really?’ says Cynthia. ‘You don’t look fine.’
‘They’re alright,’ Nick says. He takes Cynthia by the arm. ‘Give it a minute,’ he says to Slop.

Cynthia’s talk jabs at the night as Nick drags her away. Meg’s liver is somewhere in her upper chest. Water tinkles over the Virgin’s feet. She has loosened her grip on her child but Meg is not so easily comforted. Neither is Slop. He frowns, picks at an imaginary thread on the hem of his shirt. The Virgin is not the only frozen soul in the garden and if someone doesn’t break the freeze soon a doddering old priest will come out for his morning prayers and find five statues instead of one.
‘We doing this break and enter, Slop?’ Charlie says.
He’s meant the question as a joke but Meg can’t raise a smile. It’s one thing to reject her euphemisms but taunting her with delinquency is another. Slop pulls his focus off the ground and onto Charlie.
‘Come with me,’ he says.
Lucy’s hand is weightless in Meg’s. They watch Charlie and Slop move fast through the dark. They don’t move for the longest time. Meg stares down the cobbled path until the heat lifts the stones and sways them in the still night and though she hasn’t moved, she feels like she’s lost her footing. The Virgin rocks her baby side to side. Like the grin of the Cheshire cat in Wonderland, Cynthia’s smile hangs disembodied over the garden.
‘I have to sit down a minute, Lu,’ she says.
Lucy leads her to a chair and guides her to sitting by tugging on her hand. She leans into Meg, strokes her hand and hums. Of all the prayers said in this garden Meg hopes there’s one spare for her daughter. When Lucy asks what’s wrong Meg tells her she’s just tired because she doesn’t know how to tell a four-year-old her head is caving in with a fear so palpable it’s moved the ground. She focuses on the Virgin’s face and is relieved to see it doesn’t move. She listens to the water running. Charlie and Slop are talking quietly while they move things around in the hall. Lucy resumes her tune, it’s so pretty, so Lucy. Meg stays still and quiet until Charlie comes to get them.

The hall is a large empty room with a separate kitchen at the front and what Meg assumes is at least one bathroom out the back. Judging by the contents it’s a hub for community activity: gym mats stacked against a wall, boxes of craft materials, a ballet barre, an old steel filing cabinet with books spilling out of it, children’s paintings of the nativity scene are hung on string lines crisscrossing the walls.

Under a fake Christmas tree in the far corner Charlie’s made a bed out of gym mats and spread their blanket on top. Candles already alight are placed around the tree. Slop’s leaning against the wall outside the kitchen.
‘Watch this, Lu,’ says Charlie. ‘Okay, Slop.’
Slop turns the lights off. It takes a moment for Meg’s eyes to adjust to the change. As though the main lights and the candles are both on dimmer switches, one fades out
while the other fades in. In slow motion the area around the Christmas tree is cordoned off by the candlelight and becomes room-sized. The ceiling fans on low flutter the flames so the tinsel and decorations on the plastic tree pick up the candlelight and send red, blue and green tentacles climbing up and down the wall and across the bed.

‘Good, huh?’ says Charlie.

He steps in close to Meg until their bodies touch. She has a hold of Lucy’s gritty hand.

‘Sanctuary,’ Charlie whispers. Meg laughs. ‘Slop told me,’ he says. He’s defensive of his new found knowledge. ‘If you claim sanctuary in a church they have to let you stay.’

‘I wasn’t laughing at you, Charlie,’ she says.

They’re in a hall the size of a tennis court and they’re crowded into a single ball of flesh in the centre of it. All this space to occupy and they huddle into a scrum. She pushes the kids away from her, gently, tells Charlie to show Lucy the tree, find a book to read to her. *Stretch your man-child limbs*. She’s aware of their body heat fading off her skin as they move away.

There’ll be no creatures creeping out of corners and circling them while they sleep tonight. No need for Meg to patrol the portal between worlds. She gives silent thanks to the young Virgin for letting them share her manger.

The clock in the kitchen says 9.30 but it feels like three in the morning. Charlie and Lucy are in the shower, making a lot of noise about being quiet. Meg could have showered with Lucy but doesn’t want to be so exposed to either of her children. For twenty-four hours every cell in her body has been fused to theirs. She’s letting the umbilical go slack, even if her jaw keeps clenching and she’s still jumping at nothing, for a full ten minutes she hasn’t tried to read Charlie’s mind, or clutched at Lucy like she’s a sheet of thin glass mid-fall, or berated herself for some imagined slight she’s inflicted on the world by being in it.

When she stripped Lucy for the shower Slop backed into the kitchen and hasn’t stopped moving since. He’s lit extra candles, found the makings for tea. Not just any old cup of tea. Slop is making a pot. Who does that anymore? Who turns the pot three times clockwise and taps the lid with a teaspoon? For years the only person Meg has shared a
pot with is Helen. Years. What sort of a woman only drinks tea with a friend once a year? Some of the women from the neighbourhood have invited her, Sean’s mum fairly regularly, but somewhere along the line Meg turned into that woman that says she’ll turn up and doesn’t. Or does, but sits in a corner shaking for ten minutes then makes an excuse and leaves. She didn’t use to be a woman birdlike with fragility.

Slop moves around the kitchen with ease, his long arms reaching for things are balletic in the candlelight, the shadows they cast long, loose strokes from a painter’s brush.

Looking for clothes for Lucy, Meg finds Jude’s bell at the bottom of the bag and wraps its weathered leather around her wrist. She pulls the phone and charger out, does an awkward move around Slop, thinks it will be a while before she can glide around a kitchen again, and plugs her phone in. But doesn’t turn it on. If Carl decides to break his silence, she doesn’t want to know about it.

The kids are finished in the shower and telling each other to be quiet between fits of giggles about something. Other than that most hallowed of human sounds, there is nothing Meg has to listen for, no steel caps on hard floor, no eggshells laid out for her and the kids not to crack.

In clean skin and clean shorts, Charlie has Lucy wrapped in a towel in his arms and held against his bare chest. Crossing the empty space, his back and shoulders are square, his frame oblivious to the weight of Lucy who looks like a damp version of one of Raphael’s cherubs. Meg’s jaw unwires itself.

‘You’ll like this shower, Mum,’ Charlie says, and deposits Lucy in front of her.

Lucy naked is an edible morsel. Meg dresses her near the tree on the edge of the cordoned-off dark.

‘Did you find a book to read her?’

‘Hansel and Gretel,’ Charlie says.


Meg hangs the bell on a branch above Lucy’s head and tells her to jiggle it if she gets scared or forgets where she is. The bell trills its spell over the sleepy child.
Sitting on the floor outside the kitchen where she can maintain a sightline to the kids, Meg and Slop listen to Charlie reading *Hansel and Gretel*. It’s a simplified version but Lucy makes it tough going for him. She won’t let him get a paragraph out without asking questions. She can’t understand why the father agrees with the stepmother’s plan to leave the children in the forest. She wants to know why the father and kids don’t leave the wicked woman out there to starve. She is scornful about the children being able to follow a bird flying through the bush.

‘Well, is it night?’ she says. ‘They wouldn’t be able to see the bird at night.’

Charlie says it’s a white bird and probably glows in the dark. Lucy says birds don’t glow in the dark. He ends up telling a story barely related to the one he’s reading. There’s no wicked stepmother, no dark lonely night in a forest, no wicked witch in a house made of ginger bread and definitely no glowing birds. His story is for Meg’s benefit. The stepfather is wicked, the mother too scared of him to protect the children, the bird is black, perched on a city bridge and doesn’t sing. The kids get to swim in a lake and eat ice cream though, and the brother ends up saving his mother and sister by poisoning the stepfather who doesn’t die but lives out the rest of his days hungry and alone in a house made of garbage. The end.

‘Who made the house of garbage?’ Lucy asks. ‘Charlie, your story isn’t good.’

‘Well, you should have let me read you the proper one then. Go to sleep.’

He blows out all but one of the candles.

‘Good cuppa,’ Meg says, raising her cup in honour of Slop’s old-school skills. ‘You’re welcome,’ he whispers.

Charlie hums to Lucy in a rhythm as simple as rhythm gets. Lucy doesn’t stand a chance of staying awake.

‘House made of garbage?’ says Slop.

Meg shrugs. ‘Slugs and snails,’ she says. ‘Don’t be fooled by Lucy though, she’s not sugar and spice. My friend Helen says she’s a wolf in child’s clothing.’

The candle light moves unknowable shapes around the room.

‘Where’s your friend?’

‘Sydney.’
A trace of Charlie’s form makes exploratory forays out into the empty space and back in under the tree. He’s fiddling around with something over there. The tinny sound of his music through his earphones spills into the hall.

‘You’re a peculiar fellow, Slop,’ says Meg.

He flinches. Trying to place his tea on the floor too quickly he knocks it over. She lifts her hand to touch his arm in apology but withdraws it quickly. She hasn’t seen him touch anyone, or anyone touch him.

‘Sorry,’ she says. ‘I didn’t mean any insult.’

But she’s misread him. He tried to put the cup down so it wouldn’t spill while he laughed. At her. *Bloody easily entertained.*

‘It’s just … you’re obviously educated, you know? “No room at the inn?”’

This might have gone better if she had a shovel to dig herself out of the shit. She hangs her head.

‘You think being able to refer to the Bible equals educated?’

Charlie snorts from his corner. ‘Yeah, Mum,’ he whispers.

‘Shut up, you,’ Meg says. ‘Go to sleep.’

‘Yessah, boss. Me sleeping, you snob.’

Watching him mop up the spilled tea, Meg wonders how many nights Slop has spent here. The hall would be a deathly lonely place to be out of the weather. Too big and too empty. Too much room for your demons to occupy, they’d multiply in the high corners and swell in the dark pockets.

‘Are you asking me why I live like this?’ he says.

Meg shuts the door between the kitchen and the hall so the sounds of her and Slop cleaning up won’t wake Lucy. Not that she gets an opportunity to help with the clean-up, her efforts are ineffectual next to Slop’s familiarity in the space. She ends up sitting on the bench in the corner, playing with a candle.

‘To be fair,’ he says, running their cups under the tap, ‘I am educated.’

There’s no invitation in the delivery that Meg is called to respond to. In the long silence that follows he travels a distance that takes him beyond the bounds of the church kitchen.

‘I was a lawyer,’ he says.
He fills the pot with water and swishes it around in circles to collect the tea leaves then empties it into the sink. He rests it on the dish rack and stops moving. Meg knows that stillness, she does it herself at her own kitchen sink. It’s a prelude to a story that runs constantly on an internal loop, it usually only suggests a telling. But Slop is going to speak. Listening isn’t much to offer. She cringes at her own cowardice. She wants him to remain the stranger without a story that he’s been the last few days, his lopsided walk a quirk of his height and nothing more. She dreamed about vines and a barbarous Carl. Slop doesn’t have the shelter of sleep.

‘My daughter started walking two days before,’ he says.

He wipes the area behind the taps then the window sill, wrings the dishcloth out and hangs it over the tap.

‘There was a fire.’

He runs the water and splashes the tea leaves towards the drain. Meg tries to breathe shallow so she won’t disturb him. He turns the tap off.

‘I couldn’t get through the smoke.’

He moves the cups around on the rack, placing them so they make no sound.

‘She burned.’

He turns the tap on low so the water is a constant stream. He leaves it running while he wipes the sink out again.

‘I heard her burn.’

He turns the tap off again.

Meg feels no compulsion to try and comfort him. He’s not slumped over the sink, not using it to keep himself upright, there’s no suggestion he will ‘break’ into tears, or any other form of collapse. He is not fractured by his story. He is as whole as she could ever imagine him being. She tries to mirror his stillness so he can have, if not company, then a second of sorts, a witness.

‘The fire got her before the smoke,’ he says. ‘That’s unusual.’

Sharing Slop’s stillness is as close to a prayer as Meg has ever come.

‘It was better when she stopped screaming.’

Slop’s long lines in shadow on the walls are looking for a way out.
‘I got drunk for a few years. Forgot my name. I met Nick, don’t remember the circumstances. He’s the one who called me Slop. He took me to some of the meetings but they weren’t for me. They thought I was diseased.’


‘I wasn’t diseased,’ Slop says. ‘I was sad.’

In her whole life the word sad has never held the weight Slop has given it now.

He checks his work at the sink, makes sure the window above it is still locked.

‘It wasn’t right to live in a house any more,’ he says.

He looks towards but not at Meg. Direct contact would be too much for both of them but both need to know the other is still standing.

‘I best get going,’ he says.

As she opens the kitchen door she catches Charlie travelling the last couple of metres back to Lucy under the tree. She watches him tuck his sister in, bumping the branches and ringing the bell.

‘Sunday tomorrow,’ Slop says. Meg moves aside for him. ‘Best day of the week down here. Quiet.’

She follows him to the front door. She will go to the makeshift bed to sleep with her girl-child who is perfectly safe with her overprotective brother and a mad woman’s token. Slop will go back to the street. He calls goodnight to the kids.

‘Night, Slop,’ says Charlie.

Slop buries his hands in his pockets and pulls on the lopsided stoop that’s supposed to protect him from having to tell his story.

‘Goodnight, Meg,’ he says, from the dark beyond the doorway.

In the garden the Virgin sighs.
Meg swings down the street towards the church. She has procured breakfast for less than half what she paid yesterday. Three apples, three bananas, three mandarins, a loaf of pull apart bread and a litre of cold orange juice. The total was more than she had but the Italian Mama softened at Meg’s poor use of her language, and softened more when Meg said, ‘My children are hungry.’

She closes the squeaking gate behind her, clears the rise hiding the hall’s entrance and stops.

Cynthia has a hand clamped on Lucy’s wrist and is leading her away. She stretches her seal-skinned smile from mid-cheek towards the back of her head, making the lower half of her face a lipless cavern.
‘We were just coming up to meet you,’ she says.
She’s lying. She was going to let Meg come back to find Lucy gone.
‘Lucinda,’ Meg says. ‘Come to me. Now.’
Lucy tries to pull away but Cynthia tightens her grip.
‘We should talk,’ says Cynthia.
‘Where’s Charlie, Lu?’
‘He went outside. I want to stay with you, Mummy.’
Meg takes a few steps forward. Her peripheral is in blackout.
‘She shouldn’t be sleeping in a church,’ says Cynthia. At least she has the grace to look nervous. ‘There are people who can help you. I saw your son’s face last night. He is your son, right?’
Charlie saunters around the corner from the direction of the fountain.
‘Nah,’ he says. ‘I jumped out of a packet of cornflakes.’
Humour is a foreign concept to Cynthia. She’s searching for a frame of reference in which to dump the coloured boy with the disfigured face.
‘Well, you’re old enough to take care of yourself. But this one isn’t,’ she says, tugging on Lucy’s arm for emphasis.
‘Stop pulling at my daughter,’ Meg says.
Lucy looks to Charlie for help, who looks to Meg for instructions.
‘Get the bags,’ Meg says. ‘Now.’
‘Look,’ says Cynthia. ‘I’ve called an organisation who’ll keep her safe while you sort yourself out.’
She thinks she’s going to save Meg’s children, or rather, Meg’s girl-child. Charlie doesn’t register on Cynthia’s sliding scale of humans worth saving.
‘I want my bell back,’ says Lucy, looking up at the woman.
‘Don’t look at her, Lucy,’ Meg snaps.
*She will turn you to stone.*
‘She took the bell. I want my bell back,’ Lucy says.
Meg takes a step forward. One more and she and Cynthia will be nose to nose.
‘Let go of my daughter.’
When he still thought it was other men she needed protection from, Carl taught Meg how to punch.

‘Don’t aim for the face,’ he said. ‘Aim for the back of the head. Your fist is the least of it. Punch from the hip and the shoulder.’

‘You need to be reasonable …’ Cynthia says.

Cynthia loves the sound of her own voice and believes there are a great many things Meg ‘needs’ to do, or ‘understand’, or ‘consider’. And, apparently, there’s no need for Meg to feel ashamed.

‘Cynthia, isn’t it?’ Meg interrupts her. ‘You’re upsetting my daughter.’

Meg could grab Lucy but she won’t participate in a King Solomon contest, tug of warring with the body of her own daughter. Charlie comes with their bags. Meg indicates he should stand behind her. Lucy tries to twist her wrist free. The effort hurts her. Lucy is getting hurt. Her twisting becomes a whole body movement that forces Cynthia’s arm out at a right angle from her body.

Meg stabs her straightened fingers into Cynthia’s ribs. It’s a Carl move, fast, painful and never expected. The reflex reaction makes Cynthia drop Lucy’s hand. Meg would have let it go at that but the cry Cynthia lets out is fake. Meg’s been on the receiving end of the rib-stab more times than she can count. It makes you recoil, maybe with sound, but nothing like the protracted cry Cynthia has just performed. Hamming up her hurt has put Cynthia off balance.

Meg lets the move build from the ground up, feet, hips, gut, shoulders. She smashes the balls of both hands high on Cynthia’s chest. Cynthia lands on her arse, legs spread, face ludicrous.

Charlie and Lucy are dumbstruck, gaping at their mother.

‘If she has called someone we have to go,’ Meg says. ‘Now.’

Meg snatches the bell out of Cynthia’s hand. Lucy stares at her mother with saucer eyes. Charlie’s mouth has fallen open.

‘She did call,’ says Lucy. ‘I heard her.’

Cynthia simpers.

‘RUN!’ Meg yells.
They do. Meg’s pumped with the violence, elated. Her palms tingle with the memory of the contact. With the bag of food she was so proud of banging against her knee, Meg drags Lucy by the hand. Loaded up like a pack horse, Charlie runs behind them, laughing.

‘You’re a hero, Mum,’ he yells.

‘I’m an idiot,’ she shouts back. ‘And stop yelling, you’ll open your face again.’

Their words are lost in the running and laughing. She doesn’t know what street they’re on but they’re moving downhill, which has to lead them to the park on the river banks. On a corner they stop to catch their breath. A block away is a cluster of shops. Sunday or not, there will be more people there. More people who will see Charlie’s face like a mulberry muffin, Princess Lucy in the bad company of her pugilist mother and Meg, huge with mania. She swaps burdens with Charlie. He piggybacks Lucy. Meg has the stroller under one arm, a knapsack on her back and another bag hugged to her chest. Lucy takes the blanket and bag of food. They take off again at a trot, in the opposite direction of the shops, down a one way lane with no footpaths and the building opening right onto the road. Charlie labours under the weight of Lucy who’s being jostled too hard to be able to sit up straight.

‘Hold yourself up, Lu,’ says Charlie.

‘I’m trying, Charlie,’ she says. ‘I am.’

Meg tears around a corner and smacks into something hard. Close behind her Charlie breaks her fall or the force of the collision would have thrown her to the ground.

‘Jesus, Missus,’ says Troy. ‘Good morning to you too.’ He helps to steady Meg, gives Charlie a nod. ‘Obama,’ he says.

They’re outside a drop-in centre. Inside a dreadlocked white man is striding towards the door to see what the fuss is about. Despite the rat’s nest on his head, he looks officious. Meg’s not up for more ‘help’ from a social worker type. He’s too old for the dreadlock look. White people in dreadlocks look silly anyway. Wiggers, Charlie calls them. White niggers. ‘Try hards, Mum,’ he says.

He’s babbling to Troy about Cynthia the social worker Meg ‘put on her arse’. As soon as Troy hears the words ‘social worker’ he takes the bags from Meg.

‘In for a penny,’ he says. The old-fashioned phrase trips off his tongue.
Daisy takes the food and blanket from Lucy and they all set off at a pace, following Troy through hidden public walkways that run between domestic dwellings here, through dead ends there. Troy moves like an athlete, fast and fearless. The group slows to a ramble for a block or more before ducking under a *Keep Out* sign hammered into a tree in a patch of unkempt city scrub. Through the scrub Meg can see the fig tree and hear a crowd of kids running on the board walk. They emerge at a corner of the loading dock that serves the Powerhouse museum.

If the theatres at Southbank serve the well-to-do with comfortable seating and operas and orchestras and Italian lovers who persist in stabbing each other and themselves, then the converted theatre in the old Powerhouse is a space for bread and circuses. Meg and her mongrel crew are the carnival folk milling around killing time until they can set up their sideshow in the foyer. They drop their props on the exposed forecourt, the size of a football field.

Charlie regales his audience with the story of his mother who knocked a woman to the ground with one shove. His mimicry of Cynthia is parody at its most mocking, he presents her as a limping hunchback with a serpentine hiss and evil on her mind who tried to lure Lucy away with promises of sweet treats and clothes made of pink feathers.

‘She did not, Charlie,’ says Lucy. ‘And I don’t like pink!’

Troy and Daisy are an excellent audience, attentive and encouraging. Charlie ends his tale by falling to his knees in front of Meg and bowing his forehead to the ground.

‘Oh, great mother,’ he chants.

The pleasure of smacking someone down hasn’t survived the run down the hill. If anything, Meg wants to go back and apologise to the unfortunate woman.

‘That’s enough, Charlie,’ she says.

They’re against the sheer face of a sandstone wall twenty metres tall, flecked with red, stained in curious greens and rich ochres. Bits of what must be quartz sparkle in the stone. If it looks this good midmorning, it must be stunning at sunset. Meg and her children and a couple of strays. Up against the wall.

Sweat drips through her hairline, from behind her ears and the back of her knees. They can do better than sitting on warming cement in the all-but-empty space of this oversized forecourt.
‘Let’s go over to the river,’ she says.

Before they’re off the cement block Meg feels the breeze coming off the water. By the time they’ve cleared the sparkling wall the breeze has turned into a welcoming song. Lucy chatters about the lady at the church. She was going to take her somewhere she could have her own bed and some new toys and there’d be other girls she could play with. She says she was nice before Meg came back.

‘But she said Charlie couldn’t come. I didn’t like that.’

Meg offers the occasional ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘maybe’. She spreads their blanket on soft dirt under a tree in the path of the breeze and distributes the food which is not nearly as appetising as she had imagined. The bread’s been flattened and the bananas squashed. The drink is still cold though. Troy and Daisy have eaten at the drop-in centre and fared much better than Charlie and Lucy. Charlie looks stricken when Daisy tells him she’s had bacon and eggs for breakfast. He gobbles the food down, looks around for more.

Letting her hair fall across her face Daisy leans in towards him and touches his bruised temple. She says it looks worse than yesterday. He’s dizzy with enchantment. ‘Can’t even feel it,’ he says.

Buffeted by the pheromones and feeling the exclusion from Charlie’s affections, Lucy crawls into his lap, hangs an arm around his neck and turns a stony stare on Daisy who has the good sense to look chastised and attempts to placate Lucy by giving out a free and bewitching smile. Meg can’t help but laugh. Lucy is all over that smile, not taken in for a second.

From what she’s seen of Troy, Meg thought he wouldn’t notice the flirtation going on between his girl and Charlie but, like so much else, she’s been wrong about Troy. He will do anything for this girl. The look he gives Meg equalises them; he’s got his story, Meg has hers. He won’t ask questions of her if she doesn’t ask questions of him. Like Slop with his stoop for cover, Troy’s puppy dog persona is camouflage. There wouldn’t be much Troy doesn’t see. Daisy is more fragile. She can and does use her beauty to her advantage, but she can’t pull it on and off to suit any given moment. Troy’s only a couple of years older than Charlie but there is nothing of the child left in him.

He picks up the juice and toasts Meg. She takes the bottle he’s holding out to her, raises it.
‘And to you,’ she says, quietly.

Charlie’s too dizzy to have noticed. For all that Carl’s inflicted on him, Charlie remains an innocent. Not quite the innocent he was before the night in the kitchen but not transformed and brimming with insight either. Watching his efforts to flirt with Daisy, he is every bit of him a fourteen-year-old boy. Necessity has made him bolder but his inner cogs keep jamming. The flirtation with Daisy hasn’t produced the dizziness, it has just brought it to the fore, given it a centre to orbit around. He is in a state of bewilderment. He’s reeling.

‘Have more to drink, Lucy,’ says Meg, handing her the bottle. ‘You too, Charlie.’

Meg had thought they’d have some of the fruit for later, but it’s all gone. Never mind. Money’s all gone too. Never mind. No home neither.

She shoves the rubbish from breakfast into the plastic bag, keeps the empty juice bottle for water. The teenagers wander to the levy wall.

They are in the painting she saw from the window of the boarding house only its secrets have been flushed out and hang in the heat with all their mystery sapped. The water is pale and depthless. The teenagers stand three in a line with their backs to the park, Daisy leans into Troy who drapes an arm around her. Charlie stands ramrod straight. Lucy wants to go to the swings, for a swim, she wants ice cream, for Charlie to wheel her around in the stroller. Her talk is incessant. She climbs into her mother’s lap facing her, jiggles around, tugs on her body parts. She tries tucking Meg’s hair behind her ear, picks up her hand and plays with the wedding ring, a habit formed in the long speechless hours in front of the television before bed. Charlie tosses bits of debris into the water, every twig, stone and empty seed pod he throws sends the sucker gulls into frenzy. He does it again. They take off squawking again. Idiot birds.

Meg has Lucy’s wrists, staying the child’s hands to stop them petting and picking at her. Charlie did the same thing when he was younger, young. The mother cannot disappear and the child will try to hold her back physically.

‘Just let me sit for a bit, Lu,’ she says.

A stranger had her daughter by the wrist and was leading her away. Meg laughs a terse and strangled sound and drops one of Lucy’s wrists in favour of nursing her own which is smarting from the poor technique of her push. She has been so careless.
She kisses the top of Lucy’s head. Lucy follows her mother’s gaze to the teenagers and the white water beyond. They watch Charlie throwing things into the water. Lucy puts her hands on Meg’s cheeks.

‘You’re sad, Mummy.’

‘You think I’m sad?’

‘I think so.’

A ferry passing in the middle of the river sends its wake against the levy bank and consuming the ripples Charlie’s empty offerings have made. Meg stands Lucy on her feet and marches her over to Charlie.

‘I have to make some calls. Don’t let her out of your sight.’

She wanders downriver until she’s sure her children can’t see or hear her. She passes in front of the restaurants, past children in their Sunday best crawling on sculptures and chasing gulls while their parents feast and keep their loving eyes on their charges. She smiles at one of the mothers who looks away too quickly. Does Meg look that bad? What is she telegraphing that would cause a fellow mother to pretend she hasn’t seen her? Meg doesn’t know and it doesn’t matter, at least she can still be seen. She is still visible despite the sensation that she is gradually losing her physical form, dematerialising like something from a kid’s story, a thought bubble that will drift out over the river and pop into nothingness.

She turns her phone on. Still nothing from Carl. She dials Helen but doesn’t press the call button. She sends a text instead. All OK, will call later. She finds out there’s only one train to Sydney a day and they’ve missed it. It was a half-hearted attempt at information gathering anyway.

She listens to the bland tones of the answering machines at some of the domestic violence services. In an emergency she’s instructed to call the police. An older sounding woman answers a hotline. Meg hangs up, dials again, lets a silence stretch, then asks if there’s somewhere she can take a four-year-old girl and a fourteen-year-old boy. The woman doesn’t offer sympathy, nor is she of the Cynthia school of help by random attack on a person’s autonomy. She does repeat what Meg already knows from her hunt in the library; there is only one shelter in the whole city that will take a boy-child over twelve.

‘Would you like me to call them?’
‘Maybe,’ says Meg. ‘Yes. No. I don’t know.’

The woman starts asking questions which Meg sometimes answers but mostly doesn’t. She doesn’t give her name, or the names of the kids. She doesn’t say where they are or how long they’ve been out of the house. Meg asks if they could get into the place that will take an older boy today.

‘If there are beds available. They’ll ask a lot of questions. They’ll insist on knowing your name and the names of your kids.’

‘I could lie,’ Meg says.

‘You wouldn’t be the first.’

‘What happened to them?’

‘The ones that lied?’

‘Yes,’ says Meg.

‘I don’t know.’

No. Nobody knows. Nobody could. Women without names are not knowable.

Perhaps they’re in the river.

Meg won’t be pursuing the refuge option, not today. Having made the decision she starts talking, because she can, she can tell someone, anyone, what happened. The woman listens while Meg tells her about the punch so hard it sent a not-small fourteen-year-old boy flying across a room and his four-year old sister saw it and the three of them left the house in the middle of the night and the girl didn’t have a shower for two days and her skin was itching and they have no money and nowhere to go and she’s afraid that sooner or later she will be separated from her children if she goes to a refuge.

‘What’s your name?’ Meg asks.

‘Denise.’

‘If I tell you my name, do you have to write it down?’

‘No.’

‘But you’ll remember it?’

‘I’ll remember,’ says Denise.

‘I’m Meg. My children are Charlie and Lucy.’

And we won’t be going into the river with the others and Sundays were my favourite day of the week because they’re so quiet in our street it’s as if everyone’s
signed an agreement about the noise level and if the men have to bash around in their cars or start grinding metal they wait until mid-morning and finish early in the afternoon.

When the weather is cooler but before autumn we go to the bush out the back and play in the shade and listen to the summer insects going ballistic at dusk.

‘I probably won’t call you back,’ she says.

‘It’s up to you, Meg.’

Meg likes the way Denise says her name.

‘Yes. It is.’

Meg has circled the perimeter of the Powerhouse while she talked. She’s back on the forecourt. In the midst of the adrenaline charge earlier, she hadn’t noticed the poster above the main entrance. Five metres of Macbeth sways against the sparkling wall. He occupies the foreground of the image, in full battle vestments on his knees in a scarred landscape with his head bowed to sleeting rain while a chasm spitting apocalyptic rage opens up the earth behind him. Macbeth leans on the daggers he’s driven into the soil, which, in keeping with the other poster, seep a stream of blood that turns into the caption: Untie the winds.

The breeze Meg walks into is not a harbinger of the apocalypse. The river runs as it should, in the right direction, at the right pace. The water could be bluer but you can’t have everything.

The kids are some distance from where she left them. The blanket she’d spread on the ground has been trampled. It’s an act of vandalism. She looks to where the kids are, scopes the area around them for a pile on the ground. She circles the tree. Nothing.

‘Charlie.’

Already too long on hyper alert, he sprints towards her. The closer he gets the clearer she can see his panic. He thinks something’s happened to her.

‘Where are the bags?’ she says.

He looks at the trashed blanket, looks at her.

‘Where are the fucking bags, Charlie?’

Lucy’s caught up and hides behind him. Troy and Daisy come closer.

‘Mum,’ he says.
‘How hard could it be?’ says Meg. ‘And don’t tell me you just didn’t think because I don’t need to be told the fucking obvious.’

Daisy squirms as though Meg is accusing her. Troy is implacable. His armour is without chinks. He leads Daisy back to the water’s edge.

‘Lucy ran off. What did you expect me to do?’ says Charlie.

It’s not an apology. He’s not taking his cues.

‘Evidently what I expect and what you’re capable of are worlds apart. Silly me.’

‘Mum,’ says Lucy.

‘Shut up, Lucy,’ Meg yells.

Lucy tears up. Meg doesn’t care. Rage pools in her joints, she wants to bash their heads together. Charlie’s not going to fold.

‘There’s no money anyway,’ he says.

‘It’s not the money. What’s wrong with you?’

‘Really?’ he shouts. ‘You’re asking me that?’ He points to his eye. ‘Now?’

_Tou-bloody-che._

‘Whatever,’ he says, and walks away. Lucy glowers at Meg and follows him.

‘Lucy, come back here.’

Lucy doesn’t turn around. Joining them, Daisy takes Lucy’s hand, pats Charlie on the shoulder. Troy picks up the blanket, shakes it and hands it to Meg.

‘We’re going to the station to see Daisy’s sister,’ he says. ‘We’ll be a while. I’ll bring them back.’

If she had any authority in this young man’s eyes, she’s lost every shred of it.

‘But Lucy?’ she says.

‘She’ll be right. Me and Daze have been out here for years.’

Meg watches them leave the park.

Everything they had was in the bags. None of it would be any use to anyone else, unless someone was looking to identify them, in which case they’d have everything they need – photos of the kids, Meg’s licence, bank, Medicare and Social Security cards. Everything that could corroborate who they are is gone. She and her children are officially nameless. The bastard thieves even took the water bottle.
She goes to commune with the women in the water. The stroller Slop got for Lucy floats upside down in front of her.
The morning turns to afternoon, the river the colour of a saltpan, and her children don’t come back. Pacing from the shade under the trees to the edge of the water and back, Meg rehearses, again, the conversation she will have with the kids. I will say, then Charlie will say, then Lucy will … Those conversations never happen the way they’re rehearsed but she runs it over while beating her path back and forward until the conversation she’s invented becomes a two-word soliloquy spoken out loud, ‘Come back. Come back. Come back’. They don’t.

In an overflowing rubbish bin Meg finds a large bottle and fills it with water in the public toilet block foul with the stench of human waste. As if there isn’t a tap somewhere less repulsive than inside a well-used public toilet block. She’d been too
frantic to do more than pick at the food earlier. She’s so hungry it hurts. She guzzles water until her stomach is distended. She splashes her arms, shoulders and face. She doesn’t look in the mirror in case she isn’t there. She fails at thinking. Incoherent images loop in front of her, individual body parts of her children, Charlie’s brown foot, Lucy’s pale shoulder. Cynthia’s lipless smile. Outside, Meg looks for Carl and sees him everywhere.

By the time the kids come towards her the afternoon heat has hi-jacked the breeze. The group Slop’s leading are a boisterous lot. She picks out the red cap and blonde frizz, her children’s distinguishing features. Carl’s not behind the group. Her laugh is a sob of relief.

Lucy runs towards her and jumps into her arms. The smell of her fills the space where the hunger was. There’s something on Lucy’s back making it hard for Meg to hold onto her.

‘What you got there?’ she says, putting her on the ground.

She tugs at the flimsy material, light green mesh shedding green glitter. Lucy does a graceless pirouette, stops with her back to Meg and gives a four-year-old’s version of a come-hither look.

‘Wings,’ she says. She jumps up and down to make them flap. ‘Charlie got me them.’

She skips in a circle flapping her arms.

‘We’re playing soccer,’ Lucy says, and runs off to join the crowd.

Hands behind his back Charlie approaches Meg like she’s a rabid dog only temporarily calmed. The bruise sliding down his face looks like badly applied stage makeup that’s melting. He leans into Meg’s hug. Unlike Lucy, he does not smell good. He reeks of fourteen-year-old boy.

‘Green fairy wings?’ she says.

‘Pink wouldn’t suit her,’ he says. He breaks the embrace. ‘I’m sorry about the bags.’

She leads him to the relative cool of the shade.

‘It’s just stuff,’ she says.

‘But we don’t have any other stuff,’ he says.
‘Doesn’t mean the stuff that’s gone matters.’

The crowd he and Lucy turned up with wait for him to join them. Troy’s trying to dribble a soccer ball and gesturing to Charlie to hurry up.

‘We’re playing five-a-side. Slop’s the ref,’ says Charlie. ‘I got you something.’

From behind his back he produces a plump, ripe mango which he drops into her open hands. Every early summer Meg paid an exorbitant amount for their first ripe mango. She divided it into three, two sides and the seed. They tried to rotate who got which bit but they always lost track. The three of them sat on the back step with mango juice dribbling down their faces onto their feet. Invariably, Meg would declare the fruit the best thing she had ever eaten. Ever. ‘Fruit of the gods,’ she said. Every time.

‘But you didn’t have any money,’ she says.

He starts to explain but she interrupts him.

‘Don’t tell me. I don’t want to know.’

Her mouth is filled with saliva.

‘This is the best mango I’ve ever seen. Ever.’

‘Fruit of the gods, right?’ he says.

He’s champing at the bit to show off his skills with a soccer ball.

‘Go,’ she says.

He runs to join the game, turns, and jogging backwards, calls, ‘We ate.’

Clutching the mango to her chest, she leans against the tree. She has no compulsion to bash her head against it. Charlie’s light steps come back towards her.

‘Go away,’ she calls. She puts the mango behind her back. ‘You’re not getting any.’

‘Mum?’ he says.

‘No,’ she says. ‘You said you’ve eaten.’

‘It’s okay, you know?’ he says. ‘Being out here.’

He looks around the park, at the river and the group of kids waiting for him to come and play.

‘Not at Carl’s. It’s Christmas holidays. Me and Lucy are good.’

The young crowd give a collective groan as Slop, pitching to the left, leaves them to visit her under the tree.
‘Lucy and I are fine,’ she says.

‘Anyway,’ Charlie says, already on the run. ‘It’s Sunday.’

Last night’s conversation is tender and unspeakable by daylight. It echoes in the shade between Meg and Slop. They watch gulls play behind a departing ferry.

‘I heard there was trouble at the church this morning,’ he says.

The kids have produced a whistle from somewhere and Lucy runs around blowing long shrill notes.

‘Will Cynthia call the police?’

‘She might,’ says Slop. ‘She’d be trying to help. She thinks she can save people.’

‘We don’t need saving.’

The afternoon shadows stretch long towards and behind them.

‘I know you don’t,’ Slop says. ‘Maybe a little help though? I brought you this.’

He hands her a plastic container. ‘Not to save you or anything.’

He backs away before she has time to look at his offering. The kids swarm him, all talking at once.

Meg peels back the lid of the container. Colour – greens, oranges, reds, deep purples, yellow. She moves it around with her fingers, discovers brown olives and chunks of white fetta. Slop did not get this salad from a franchise or a buffet in a third rate cafe. It hasn’t sat in a giant bowl soaking in cheap vinegar and oil since 5.00am. She will share the mango but not this. She shovels it in to her mouth with her fingers. Her brain pops and fizzes with the sustenance.

The kids fan out over a wide area making a soccer field of this section of the park. Troy, Daisy, Charlie and another black youth a few years older form one team with half an extra player in the shape of the green-winged, blonde fairy who runs around behind Charlie shouting instructions. Meg recognises one of the players on the other team from their first night on the street. The virgin whore who wore the seven-inch ruby heels is barefoot, dressed in oversized boy’s board shorts and a collared shirt that hangs on her and makes her the shape of a box. The rest of her team are better dressed and better fed than Charlie’s team, their steps more sprightly, spines straighter, their yelling less raucous, but they don’t have the wiles of Charlie’s team.
Meg knows the rules of soccer from years of watching Charlie play, but the rules of this game are arbitrary. The other team has a mascot-sized player as well who doesn’t know the difference between football and soccer and who picks up the ball and starts running in the wrong direction. His team yell at him to ‘run the other way, THE OTHER WAY, Robert.’ But Robert keeps running in the wrong direction. Charlie runs beside him, the black youth on his other side, both pushing the other players off when they get too close. Charlie yells, ‘Run, Robert. Run!’ High fives all round when Robert touches the soccer ball to the ground. There follows a heated debate about which team has scored. Slop adjudicates, amid much discontent, and half a point is awarded to each team. After that it’s a free-for-all. Lucy bails up the virgin whore to tell her why it’s her turn to have the ball. The virgin surrenders the ball. No sooner does Lucy have it in her hands, with no sign she’s going to do anything as logical as play the game with it, than Charlie scoops her up and takes off with her tucked under his arm. He runs the full length of the field, dangles her close to the ground and yells at her to touch the ball to the ground. ‘Quick, Lu. Now.’ Another argument ensues as to whether this represents a point and if it’s fair play.

‘Fair go, ref, Sir,’ Charlie says. ‘She’s got wings. It’s gotta be our point.’

Slop concurs. The game resumes.

There’s too much accidental touching between Charlie and the virgin. He expertly dribbles the ball from foot to foot, dances it around the young girl. His performance creates an optical illusion, when you’re sure the ball is going in one direction it spins back towards itself and he jumps over it again. The others are impatient with his showing off and yell at him to pass the ball. Eventually, Daisy pushes him hard on the chest and while he stumbles she picks up the ball and hands it to Troy.

Meg rubs at her sore wrist, stares at it as though it will reveal something she hasn’t thought of. It doesn’t. There’s nothing she can do about planting Cynthia on her arse. She replays the push, rewinds the vision and plays it again. She shares Charlie’s awe that she’s knocked a woman down but she cannot revel in it. Worse than the remorse is her certainty that Cynthia has called the police. Meg could get in first. Now that the children are back she could call Denise.
Lucy’s lost interest in the game. She and Daisy chat in the centre of the field, stepping out of the way whenever the ball flies past. Charlie and his wingman hog the ball. They’re too good for the other players. Occasionally Slop confiscates the ball and hands it to another player. Everyone gets a go. Whether he’s got the ball or not, Charlie doesn’t stop running.

If the shelters won’t take boys over twelve, where do they go? It’s unthinkable Charlie would be left to his own devices tonight while she watches over Lucy sleeping and wonders where he’s ended up and if she will ever be able to undo the damage of leaving him to fend for himself. Even if they were only separated for a night, the split in his world view would be with him for life. Meg won’t call Denise.

ID or not, tomorrow she’ll go to the bank and get money. She doesn’t remember the terms of the agreement she signed but it can’t be right that she’s not able to get into an account she’s been contributing to for seven years. Unless a bag of money drops into her hands there’s not much she can do about anything at all.

Wings clipped by the heat, Lucy tires of the game and joins Meg under the tree.

‘Are you winning, Baby?’

‘It’s not a winning game,’ says Lucy. She sidles into Meg’s lap.

‘Probably not,’ says Meg.

Lucy’s wings reflect the light into a green tinted frame for her face, making her hair sparkle, dusting her red cheeks brighter. The effect should give her a sallow pallor but it doesn’t. Only Lucy could be lit in green and not look sick. They link fingers, making shapes with their hands until Lucy’s grip gets weak and she rests her head against Meg’s chest. Lucy hasn’t napped in the afternoon for a year but then she’s never slept overnight in a church or been the ball in a soccer game without rules either.

They sink into the soporific afternoon. A cool change comes through, sending a breeze across the water and in under the tree. In case she is tempted to doze, Meg works a hand in under the elastic holding Lucy’s wings in place, so she’ll wake if Lucy decides to wander. Charlie’s laughing. She should call out to him. To say what? They have nothing left to steal. They’re as safe asleep out here in the open as anywhere else. Safe as houses. The breeze swaddles her and Lucy, fixes them in place while the rest of the world passes in a time-lapsed soundscape.
Thirst forces her to open her eyes. Her legs are numb from the weight of Lucy’s sleeping form. Meg’s back and bum are sore from the unyielding gum and earth. It’s late afternoon, the heat has abated, the breeze gone and the soccer game long finished. All the players from the opposing team have left, except the child prostitute who’s sitting with Charlie on the levy wall. Troy and Daisy lie in each other’s arms on the grass. Lucy stirring jogs the anxiety in Meg’s chest and stomach, a dread that brushes everything and everyone with foreboding. Dark is only hours away. They have nowhere to sleep.

The glitter is shedding from Lucy’s shapeless wings, her arms and legs are sprinkled green. Mixed with her sweat, the glitter will scratch before long. Meg tries to reshape the wire and brush the glitter off.

‘I’m hungry,’ Lucy says.

Meg puts her on her feet, gives her the water bottle and checks their surroundings, looking for Carl. She shakes the blanket and wraps the mango in it. She should have saved the salad. A third of a mango does not constitute an evening meal. What sort of a mother eats all the salad when she knows the food supply is compromised? Her fear ratchets up a notch as she walks Lucy over to Charlie.

The teenager’s bravado has slipped. They look like much younger children who should be at home with late Sunday afternoon television playing Southpark re-runs while their mothers knock up leftovers and scold them about their holiday sunburn. Charlie stands on Meg’s approach.

‘You okay, Mum?’ he says.

She will cry if he is too kind.

‘Lucy’s hungry,’ she says. ‘Where’s Slop?’

‘Up the Valley,’ says Charlie. ‘This is April.’

Meg looks April up and down. Up close, the box-shaped shirt does nothing to obscure the ripeness of her. Her fingernails are painted neon blue, her toenails orange. She and Charlie are flushed in the face, lips full and red. There’s her son’s body getting in the way again. If only there wasn’t so much of him, his now-flawed face, his colour, his natty hair.

‘Hi, April,’ Meg says. ‘We saw you on the street a few nights ago, didn’t we?’

The poor girl’s smile is like a polio-twisted limb.
'I was Eve then,' says April, and swishes her hair back.
She tries to put on her street face but isn’t quick enough to hide the hurt.
‘Nice one, Mum,’ Charlie says.
Meg pushes Lucy towards him.
‘Take her, will you?’ she says. She puts the blanket on the ground. ‘And be careful of this, it has the mango in it.’
She takes a few steps, changes her mind, and goes back to April.
‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘It’s nice to meet you April.’
April can’t have had many apologies in her life. Meg doesn’t deserve the smile she’s given.
‘It’s okay,’ says April.
Meg walks towards the river with her head hung.
The city’s sketched in black lines against a darkening sky, the river’s the same colour and ink-thick. She checks the phone’s charge, miniscule. Helen picks up on the second ring.
‘You alright?’
‘Yes,’ Meg says. ‘But my phone’s about to run out of battery and some god-botherer called Child Protection on us, but, yeah, we’re okay. Oh, and our bags got stolen.’
‘MARGS,’ Helen says, ‘I get paid tomorrow night. I’ll buy your train tickets. You can pick them up from the station.’
Lucy’s turning circles, flapping her tired wings.
‘Our ID was in the bags,’ Meg says. ‘I can’t get the tickets without ID.’
‘We’ll work something out,’ says Helen. ‘It can’t be that hard. I’ll get them to put a note on the booking or something. You have to get out of there.’
Meg stares into the river. If she fell into the black water she wouldn’t make a splash. Without a sound, the women would pull her under.
‘I keep seeing things in the river.’
‘What?’ Helen says. ‘Are you stoned?’
It feels weird to smile, like the muscles don’t know if they’re setting up for laughter or tears. They’re her muscles, but Meg doesn’t know which way they’ll go either. There’s no twilight tonight, the day is on a slow fade to black.

‘I’m scared,’ she says.

‘You should be,’ says Helen.

The phone goes dead. Meg shakes the useless thing, as though that will give it a bit more charge. She watches the water.

‘I know,’ she says.

When she gets back the teenagers are indolent and milking the quiet park for every birdcall and wisp of breeze and tinkle of the river. Daisy leans into Troy. Charlie and April sit close. They have an enormous pile of hot chips between them.

‘April got us dinner,’ Lucy says, through a mouthful of food.

Meg takes a handful of chips, the salt scratches her fingers. It’s empty food, fast burning; they’ll be hungry again within the hour and have the added discomfort of a thirst brought on by an overdose of salt. She gives Lucy the water bottle and tells her to pass it along.

‘Hey, Missus,’ Troy says, ‘we know where you can sleep tonight.’
The Empire’s boarded up, it’s been dark for a long time. The theatre occupies a corner block between the park and the Valley. Square-jawed Macbeth is absent. There’s not a single bill poster, or a rock and roll band selling a tour, not even a *Sybil was here* on the bare boards blockading the front doors. This does not bode well.

They hack through overgrown scrub down the side of the building, Troy laughing and declaring he should stay here more often or they’ll lose their way in. Hand to throat, Meg watches Troy and Charlie scale the theatre’s side wall using drainpipes and bits of the crumbling structure for hand and foot holds.

‘Don’t worry,’ Daisy says, close beside Meg. ‘Troy’s climbed it a billion times. He used to stay here a lot.’
Charlie’s feet are the last thing to fall over the edge of the wall and onto the roof. He and Troy stick their heads over the side and wave down to the rest of the group.

‘Stage door,’ says Troy.

Daisy pulls back a corner of a badly constructed fence made of chicken wire, crawls through and holds the wire up for Meg, Lucy and April to crawl under. When they’re through, she weights the wire down with a half brick.

The day’s last hoorah falls on the courtyard, an overgrown L-shaped area overflowing with scrap materials and an old toilet in the far corner. Rows of theatre seats are stacked against the wall. Three of them, three seats apiece, have been positioned around a blackened circle of bricks with more chicken wire folded over and laid flat to make a grate of sorts. Someone has cooked on that grate. The courtyard is hidden from the street by the high walls which would give protection from the worst of the sun in summer and the biting winds of winter.

Meg pulls at the heads of the thigh-high weeds lending colour to the courtyard, blue busy Lizzie, pink and yellow lantana flowers. Someone has tossed a sprig of white geranium, the poor man’s rose, into a broken sink on the theatre’s back wall. Dexterous hands have shaped intricate objects out of wire – a high-heeled shoe, a car, an airplane and an old-fashioned pram, and hung them in a random pattern on the wall. The sculptures have been here a while, rust stains streak the wall below them. Meg imagines a father has made the objects in memory of his absent children. An older man, alone, bending the wire to hold and keep his memories in shape. Meg straightens the pram so it’s travelling on a flat path.

‘Does anyone else come here?’ she says.

If Lucy took a few steps into the overgrown courtyard she’d disappear in the weeds.

‘Nah,’ says Daisy. ‘Just us.’ She gives that a moment’s thought then says, ‘Not that I know of, anyway.’

Meg doesn’t voice her misgivings. She listens for Troy and Charlie inside but hears nothing. It takes two of them to wrestle the stage door open enough to come through it sideways, one at a time. Charlie’s good eye waters with mischief.

‘Wait ’til you see this, Mum,’ he says.
Troy passes a tin bucket through to Charlie then squeezes his way into the courtyard. The pale dark making her more ethereal by the second, Daisy hugs Meg’s arm to her.

‘Treasure,’ she whispers.

Lucy’s already digging in the bucket.

‘Conditions are excellent,’ says Troy. ‘I reckon we’ve got ten minutes.’

They’re on the outer rim of a black hole. Apart from a swathe of grey cutting through the black, Meg can’t see anything inside. This is young teenage heaven. They’re on the set of a D-grade horror film. The rest of them gather at the door to follow Troy but Meg would rather stay outside and enjoy the flowering wild weeds.

‘It’s not what you think, Mum,’ Charlie says. ‘You’ll like it. Troy says he kind of lived here for a while.’

Does he imagine that will comfort her?

‘We’ll miss it if we don’t move,’ Troy says, and squeezes through the door.

They’re on a prosenium arch stage. The theatre stinks of dust from the ages. Unwanted images rush at Meg, ghoulish clowns that will cut off her head, flying things that will torture her with games of catch and kill the human. Troy snaps on a torch and her heart rate drops to a rhythm less life threatening. She’s never got over her fear of the dark and she never remembers it is fear of the dark until someone turns a light on.

Troy and Daisy lead them across the empty stage and down the few steps to what would have been the front row. Charlie and April hold hands.

The auditorium’s been stripped of its seating so the group forms an orderly row on the floor. Nimble in the dark, Troy disappears through the back of the auditorium and into the theatre’s entrails. Meg snuggles Lucy close, her daughter’s eyes glisten with anticipation. This is the real thing for Lucy, her first experience of a proper theatre, as opposed to the Cineplex or the local RSL club draped with black and red velvet to simulate high theatre where Meg had taken her to see a working-class version of The Wiggles – the Hi-Fiver’s or something. The Have Nots.

Above and behind them Troy issues a drum roll, sticks pattering on the balcony. A clattering sound and a thin spear of light falls across the stage. Troy moves to the
opposite side of the balcony, way back there with the gods. Another spear of light gives an eerie depth to the empty stage. More drum roll.

‘Ladies and Gentlemen,’ Troy shouts.

Lucy jumps and giggles. Extended drum roll, then a creaking quiet.

‘Behold!’

A sound like corrugated iron rattling in wind, and the stage is flooded with light, reds and blues of every hue and streaks of yellow. Daisy whoops and cheers and stamps her feet on the wooden floor. April’s laugh is relief made audible. Meg hears her own relief in it and knows that the virgin Eve is every bit as afraid of the dark as she is. Charlie shouts something unintelligible but the tone is cynical. He finds the display underwhelming.

‘Be quiet, Charlie,’ Meg says. ‘Just look.’

Dust mites drift and tumble through the colours. The group falls silent, except Troy who gives a self-satisfied sigh. He is a benevolent master of ceremonies well pleased with his efforts in delivering entertainment to the people.

‘We’re under water, Mummy,’ Lucy whispers.

Her assessment is astute. The light show is made by the sun setting through stained glass, some of it broken. The effect is a moving image that swirls and oozes in the black. The stage is a living thing, a discrete ecological system. They watch until the Home Brand pyrotechnics fade and the colours dull and stretch towards the wall then sink to the floor. On an evening that will have no twilight, inside this dark house turns burnt orange.

‘That’s all, folks,’ says Troy.

Hot tears rise in Meg. Tears for Troy because he was fourteen once and left to his own devices and discovered he could make a light show from the discards of other people’s pleasure. Meg stumbles behind the others back to the courtyard.

Troy and Daisy find enough paper and wood scraps to start a fire. They enlist Lucy to gather anything dead. Charlie and April carry armloads of fence palings from a pile in the weeds. Meg expects the fire won’t last long, until Troy brings a couple of substantial logs. Meg guesses they’re some kind of hardwood, a mighty species felled for its density.
She retreats to a couch propped against the wall. She’s superfluous among this activity, a token adult who’s become invisible to the teenagers. She’s intrigued by Troy’s fire-building technique. He doesn’t make the pyramid shape. He places two sturdy pieces parallel to each other to form the base, then another two parallel on top and at right angles to the base, then another two on top of that. He stuffs the cavity inside with tinder and lights it.

The teenagers claim the three-seaters angled around the fire. Daisy keeps Lucy close to her, relieving Meg of her duties. With a familiar pain niggling in her chest she watches Charlie interacting with April. The pain started when she was pregnant with Lucy and has come and gone ever since. She’d thought something was wrong with her heart or lungs, that she was on the verge of having a stroke but the doctor told her, no. It was stress. She’d laughed with the doctor and cried alone on the way back to Carl.

Charlie’s closing the distance between him and April. It’s a sour thought Meg both reprimands and amuses herself with – the practice, probably more an older man’s fantasy than actual, of sending young boys to prostitutes for their first sexual encounter. She tries to size April up but can’t see the girl for the story – a parade of red-faced, hairy-handed men stinking of drink that have poked and prodded and humped and pounded and dribbled on her and believed they were fucking The First Woman, Eve. April’s ripe but she’s a tiny girl, thin armed and narrow-hipped. She doesn’t have the careless abundance that makes grown men gape at adolescent girls in school uniforms. Her body hasn’t plumped out yet and may not. Physically, she might always look pre-pubescent. Helen says the reason some men have a preference for sex with this body type is because it’s as close to having sex with a boy-child as they can get while dicing with paedophilia and keeping their heterosexuality intact. Helen can be unduly cynical.

‘Hey, Troy,’ Meg says. ‘Where’d you learn to build a fire like that?’

‘Watched Wes in the park one night. Good, hey?’

The better part of Meg, the part that’s supposed to house reason, higher functioning thought, problem solving, all the skills that distinguish modern Homo sapiens from their Neanderthal brethren, that part of her brain has been vacated and replaced by hunger and an adolescent penchant for the magical thinking that keeps suggesting she and the kids needn’t get on the train, they can suspend time and stay out here indefinitely.
Cross-legged with her chin resting on her palm and leaning against Daisy, Lucy stares into the fire. Little girl lost, her light diminishing, Lucy needs sleep to replenish. Meg calls Troy over.

‘Is there anything inside I can use to make Lucy a bed?’ she says.

He considers the question as though contemplating a complexity of some magnitude, says, ‘Gimme a sec,’ and goes into the theatre. Meg imagines him flitting through hidden passages like the theatre ghosts of legend. Troy, the ghost of the Empire. He comes back hauling the thin and shedding remains of a single foam mattress, any covering it had is long gone. Looking at it makes Meg’s skin itch. He also has an old yoga mat.

‘Better than floor boards,’ he says and shrugs.

Meg puts the mattress on the stage with the blanket. The mango’s still firm and she sets it aside for the morning. She spreads the yoga mat for Charlie. On her way outside she pauses centre stage and dares herself to face down the dark. She strains to see anything beyond the stage, can’t, and backs out the door. She unpeels Lucy from Daisy’s side and settles with her on the couch behind the others. They’re far enough from the fire to be in the dark, but close enough to hear the teenagers’ talk.

April tells a story about her mother going to a parent teacher interview so drunk she tried to kiss the teacher and fell over when he rejected her after which she screamed in the school’s playground that he was a cunt. ‘I was six.’ Her mother was even more drunk at a school talent night where April wore a plastic cowboy hat and danced in a boot-scoot line up. Talking afterwards at the table piled with cordial and cake, her mother flirted with and was rejected again by the same teacher. She accused him of tampering with her daughter then screamed that April probably asked for it anyway the way she did with her stepfather who she was lucky to have in her life because didn’t he take her on special outings to the pub on Saturday afternoons and stop to play in the park on the way home?

‘Didn’t he what,’ April says. ‘I was eight.’

The hardwood log burns a blue flame. It won’t last, there isn’t enough heat in the embers to sustain it.
The teenagers’ talk, begun with due solemnity, deteriorates into high farce. Back in MC mode, Troy soothes the more gut-wrenching elements of their stories by playing all the parts including a blockhead cop who tells his drunken father to ‘go outside and breathe deep’ next time he wants to ‘touch up’ his wife.

‘Touch up!’ says Troy. ‘The woman was in hospital!’

Daisy talks about finding her mother for the umpteenth time slumped over with a needle in the crook of her elbow and an eviction notice on the table. She and Troy laugh until tears stream down their faces when Daisy tells about leaving the house with her mother dressed in a man’s tee shirt, no underpants, and carrying her cat in a cardboard box under one arm and a cask of wine under the other.

‘That was us moving house,’ Daisy says.

Their stories are drawn from a deep well. They could tell them all night and never repeat themselves. Or endlessly repeat themselves. They’re tales of hapless parents, idiot teachers and stupid police. But they reserve their most damning scorn for the social and welfare workers. Troy and Daisy have developed a routine in which they lacerate useless social workers who talk endlessly about how stressed for time they are, how overworked with their case loads. Troy mimes looking at a wrist watch.

‘Time’s up,’ he says. He’s playing an effeminate and sincere social worker. ‘Your week okay, Troy?’

It’s a white trash revivalist meeting. They cover for each other, nobody lets the subtext settle, they don’t, won’t, let the undertows sweep them away. When it all gets too close to real, especially where Daisy is concerned, Troy turns more clown than satirist. His need to protect her stronger than their need to laugh.

‘Hey, Miss Meg?’ he says.

Meg could kiss him for the honorific. She doubts there is a mother alive less entitled to Missshood than she is.

‘Whatever you do,’ says Troy. ‘Don’t go to the fuck and filers. They fuck you up, file you away, and forget your name. Now,’ he says, back in dumb cop parody, ‘you.’ He points at Charlie with a straight arm. ‘Tell us about your face.’

But Charlie is too raw, too shy in front of the girls. He mumbles to the ground. It’s too soon for him to laugh. Before his declining to play can embarrass him, Troy pulls
the focus back on himself. He starts to wind down the storytelling. Charlie and April lean into each other. Daisy, pensive, stares into the fire. The hardwood didn’t take after all. They quieten, out of respect for the stories, their own and each other’s.

Troy joins Meg on the couch, whispers so he won’t wake Lucy.

‘You’ll be alright here for the night?’

Meg nods. ‘Where will you sleep?’ she says.

‘Ah,’ he says. ‘We take the train to the end of the line. Our streetcar named desire. You know that story?’

‘Stellaaaa …’

He beams, in part because Meg knows the line but more so, she suspects, because he fancies himself a bit of a Stanley.

‘How do you know that story?’ Meg says.

‘*Simpsons*, of course. Nah, joking, our class saw the play. Only good thing in ten years of school. That was before home went to shit.’

Of course he would remember. He would have seen not himself but his father in the dirt-poor drunken ape from the arse end of post-war New Orleans.

‘What’s at the end of the line for you?’ Meg says.

‘It’s safer for the girls at night. We’ve got some stuff in a storage bin. You know those things?’ She thinks he’s talking about a shipping container. She nods. ‘It’s okay,’ he says. ‘Nobody bothers us. Not like in here.’

By ‘in here’ he means the city. Troy’s ‘in here’. Charlie’s ‘out here’. Slop’s ‘down here’. Meg’s starting to think of it as the ‘not here’.

Standing with Lucy in her arms she whispers goodnight. Charlie asks if he can walk with the others to the station.

‘Not tonight,’ she says.

She doesn’t want to be alone in the dark with the sleeping Lucy and she couldn’t count the minutes until he got back, couldn’t do that twice in one day.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says.

The apology was unnecessary. He looks relieved. He’s ricocheting between selves – yesterday’s child, today’s half-faced boy, tomorrow’s youth. He and Troy punch each other in the shoulder. The girls say goodnight. Meg tells them to take care and means it.
On the mattress beside Lucy, Meg sings in a whisper to keep the dark at bay. She listens to Charlie saying goodnight, and below that, to the last of the fire spitting and hissing. Charlie stays outside for a long time. Meg’s aware of him coming in and moving the yoga mat further away from her and Lucy.

Meg wakes hungry and sweaty with a mouth full of dust, and pinned to the ground by something crushing her chest. The Empire groans, whole slabs of its foundations shift and resettle. She doesn’t remember where she is or how she got here. Her body has seized. Her jaw and neck ache. She has to send deliberate commands to her muscles to relax. She directs her shoulders to drop and her toes to uncurl. Some body part of Lucy’s digs into her ribs. Meg gasps for air, sucks in the smell of the ancient dark and listens to her overwrought heart smashing around in her chest until memory moves the succubus off her. She knows where she is. The story of their running away begins on its loop but keeps jagging on the same spot, the ineptitude that has her children sleeping in the shell of a theatre long dark.

Not dark enough. She is in otherworldly light. She hedges her way to sitting. Leaning against the wall she watches weird, luminous light infiltrate the stage. It’s coming from the same place as the setting sun last night. The light is disconcerting. She checks herself. She is awake. She thinks so. The house should be a dense black but it’s not. The strip of light bleeding through the dark is so pale it’s lilac, like the skin of white infants. It’s not flood lights, or a standard street light. It’s a light sublime. She follows it through the stained glass to its source. Dust mites glow in the lilac beams. The moon can’t be in the right place.

‘What are you doing there?’ she whispers, as if the quivering sphere through broken glass is a frightened animal and not the lunar superpower that turns the tides. If the sunset lightshow was all gaudy razzle-dazzle, this one speaks of stealth and cunning. Anyway, who is she to say the moon is in the wrong place at the wrong time doing the wrong thing? So is she.

The light moves across the stage onto Lucy’s feet, making her skin glow a space-age purple. Lucy would be impressed. It suits her to be sleeping in purple moonlight. She picks a clump of curls off Lucy’s cheek.
She cannot take this child back to the forgotten suburb to be forgotten, can’t sit her in front of the television in the pokey house-shack, or listen to her afternoon chatter as if they’re not waiting for Carl to come home. As if they’re not trying to second guess him and they never had this time in the city and he never bashed Charlie.

They can’t go back. They can’t stay here.

‘I’m awake.’

Charlie’s whisper is so slight his breath doesn’t disturb the dust mites in front of his face but Meg still has to wait for her heart to quiet before she responds.

‘Are you seeing this?’

She knows he is.

‘I heard you talking to it,’ says Charlie.

They never even whispered this quietly when Carl was in the house. They listen to the beginning of the city’s climb towards morning. The baker’s shift has started. Must be after four. Predawn steals in through the cracks and holes in the wall behind Charlie. No stained glass there to trick the light.

‘I don’t know what to do,’ she says.

She wishes on the moon for some of its tide-turning power.

‘I know you don’t,’ says Charlie. ‘It’s okay.’

His stomach gives an elongated rumble that sounds painful. When they were babes in arms and screaming with hunger, Meg thought time and again of all the women on the planet who couldn’t feed their children and had to listen to that pitch of distress for days and maybe weeks until their starving children were too weak to scream. She couldn’t contemplate what it would mean when their infants at last fell silent. She hasn’t thought about those women for years, or their children with the faces of cadavers. More dead children.

‘How’s your face?’

‘Sore,’ says Charlie. ‘But okay. Better than yesterday.’

How many horrors can he make okay? How many can she?

‘Come and watch the sunrise?’

The heads of the wild weeds are three-quarters open and turned towards the rising sun. Meg and Charlie look for food in Troy’s bucket of treasure. These are little boy’s
sacred objects, not unlike what Charlie buried under the gum in the bush: a miniature hammer, a tin with stones inside, a rusted can opener and knife, broken sunglasses, a lighter that doesn’t work. But no food. Meg scouts the overgrown mess looking for a tap. There’s always a tap in these old yards.

‘I rang some shelters yesterday,’ she says.
Charlie snorts.
‘They won’t take me, right?’ he says. ‘Too old. Troy told me.’

He holds a broken cowrie shell to his ear. Shakes it, tries to use it as an eyeglass to look at the rising sun then drops it back into the bucket.

‘I won’t go without you,’ Meg says.
He kicks at the weeds, looking more like an oversized ten-year-old than fourteen.
‘I’d be alright,’ he says.

They watch the sky change into a rolling gold sea.
‘We stay together,’ she says.
She’s found a dripping tap on the theatre’s back wall.
‘We could go to Sydney, to Helen?’ she says.
‘That’d be okay,’ Charlie says.

Water isn’t food but it will fool their stomachs for an hour. She drinks deep, wets her head and scrubs at her face. She’d kill for a toothbrush and toothpaste.

‘Come and wash your face,’ she says.
She moves aside so he can drink and wash. She inspects the cuts on his face. No signs of infection, healing well. His colouring disguises the worst of the bruising, it’s still horrible, just not as obvious. The sun sneaks up over the wall.

‘Any ideas for breakfast?’
‘Yep,’ he says.

They sit either side of the blackened grate while he tells her his plan – shoplifting.
‘That’s how I got Lucy’s wings and the mango,’ he says. ‘Slop showed me how to do it.’

‘Of course he did.’
She doesn’t bother to suppress her laugh.
She sneaks inside to get the mango, retrieves the knife from Troy’s treasure. Delivery trucks grind through their gears. Lucy appears in her rags, dangling her wings from one hand.

‘Hungry,’ she says.

Meg divides the mango, a side each for the kids, the seed for herself.
More comfortable in the dark, by daylight Gomorrah’s inhabitants huddle in corners and cluster around doorways, putting themselves in the path of the blasts of cold from air-conditioned interiors that are foreign to them.

The pock-marked bank teller’s wearing the wreckage of his weekend all over him, eyes blood shot, hair greasy, and there’s dirt on the collar of his badly-fitted shirt.

‘But I am one of the joints in the joint account and I need money. Today. Now,’ says Meg.

‘Well, you’ll need to talk to your husband about that.’

‘I’ve already told you, that’s not possible,’ she says.

‘And I’ve already told you, with or without ID,’ says the sanctimonious shit, ‘there’s nothing I can do.’
They’ve been wading around in the same bureaucratic quagmire for five minutes. He seems to think its logic is self-evident. Meg steps aside so he can see Charlie and Lucy out in the mall.

‘See those kids out there,’ she says. ‘They’re mine. They haven’t had a decent meal in two days, or a wash or a sleep for three nights.’

She had given them instructions not to come into the bank but waves Charlie to come in. He tucks the rolled blanket under one arm and pulls Lucy to her feet.

‘I suggest you go to the Salvation Army. Or, there’s a City Mission near the station that might help you.’

There is no kindness in this young man. Even Lucy, looking like her skin is wearing her rather than the other way round, doesn’t register with him.

‘I don’t want to go to the Mission. I want some of my money.’

‘Lady, I see this all the time. Wives who spend too much …’

The only hint of some substance in him, beyond the bureaucrat’s ink that stands in for his blood, is spite. Charlie and Lucy are either side of her. Charlie leans an elbow on the counter, turns his head away from the teller and gives Meg a wink while the teller continues to impart what he thinks is his superior knowledge of all things husbands, wives, children and money.

‘And,’ Meg interrupts him, ‘you have a wife and children, do you?’

Charlie smiles a warning at the teller, shakes his head in sympathy.

‘I don’t, Lady,’ says the ink blot.

Charlie takes a step back from the counter. Lucy gives the teller her most condescending look.

‘In which case,’ Meg says. ‘You can take your infantile opinion and shove it up your airtight arse.’

Let him spend the next twenty years looking down his nose at his customers while he enacts the foreclosing of their loans. Let him never learn the value of a shortcut, or a loophole or a kindness. Let him procreate with a tight-lipped company woman and produce offspring whose mouths will never unfurl. His face variegates through a dozen shades of red but Meg’s seen better in the dawns and dusks of the last few days.

‘You,’ she says, ‘are a shit-for-brains pustule on a slime ball.’
Charlie gives the teller a grin and shrugs.

Meg storms out of the bank. Or tries to. It’s hard to storm out of automatic doors, you can’t swing them open in a full dramatic sweep. Stymied by the technology, her storming turns into hot air while she waits for the doors to open.

In Gomorrah’s town square harassed waiters roll their eyes behind the backs of their customers. Junkies shiver and scratch and huddle together for warmth as though the Valley’s mall is an arctic basin of cold and not an open air oven. At the station end, police loiter near a paddy wagon. Meg leads the kids in the opposite direction, out of the mall towards the City Mission. Charlie imitates her performance in the bank, to Lucy’s great amusement.

The Mission occupies a shop front at the bottom of the broken escalator leading from the train station’s upper floors. The shop front is packed with casualties who’ve crawled out of the steamy badlands of a weekend in the Valley without money, food or shelter. By the look of the crowd, she and the kids haven’t done too badly.

A large trestle table is laid out with sausage rolls, pies and white bread rolls at one end, fruit, bottles of water and plastic cups of red and orange cordial at the other.

‘Take Lucy back to the mall,’ she says to Charlie. ‘Find some shade. I’ll bring food.’

She watches their retreating backs. Charlie wobbles with hunger. Lucy’s feet don’t break contact with the ground, her clothes are grubby to the point of decomposing, one of her fairy wings is bent out of shape and hangs over her bum. She lifts her hand for Charlie to take which he does, without looking down. Peripheral vision would have guided each one’s hand into the familiar fit with the other but Lucy’s hand in the air like that is atavistic, an organism obeying its imperative to survive.

In the line-up for food, the smell of sweat is as prominent as the smell of sausage roll. Meg’s wondering how she’s going to get away with stacking enough food for three of them, how she’s going to carry the piled-up plastic plates and three bottles of water. She’s taking a fourth sausage roll, one extra for Charlie, when someone behind her pinches the flesh on her lower ribs hard enough to hurt, and close enough to the bruise Carl has left to make her jump.

‘Jesus Christ,’ she says, spinning around to yell at whoever has pinched her.
‘Praise His name,’ says Jude.

She’s dressed in an oversized khaki safari suit, the shorts held up with a biker’s belt, snakes wrap around a rose on the buckle. Her shirt has what looks like the chain of a fob watch pinned through a button hole and fed into one of the lower pockets. She’s wearing knee-high purple socks and patent red shoes, the shine bright as polished copper. Her billum is overflowing with flowers and slung across her front.

‘Heard you were still around,’ says Jude. ‘Kids okay?’

‘You hurt me.’

‘Rubbish,’ says Jude. She pulls a handful of frangipanis from her billum. ‘I already told you, you need to harden up. How’re the little children? Suffering, I presume?’

Jude’s arranging the flowers in the centre of the table.

‘Hungry, dirty and tired,’ says Meg.

She begins an exaggerated rubbing of the spot where Jude pinched her, she’s after sympathy but it reminds her of Cynthia’s faked howl and she stops.

‘Like I said, suffering,’ says Jude. ‘And you? Not that it matters. You’re only the mother.’

She doesn’t look the same as she did in the library. Her face is bloated and wet with sweat. When she isn’t talking she’s biting her fingernails, tearing at them. Meg should feel angry about the pinch so hard it hurt, but a more compassionate response would be to take Jude to a cool, dark place and speak to her about mundane matters in a lilting tone.

‘I’m alright,’ Meg says.

‘I’m alright too, thanks for asking.’

When she’s not gnawing at her nails, Jude’s hands flutter up to her cheeks, and in and out of the many pockets of the safari suit. On the violet side of blue, her eyes are swollen and weepy, the colour glossed cloudy.

‘You sure?’ says Meg.

‘I’m okay, Pet,’ Jude says. ‘I just need a drink.’

She wraps some sausage rolls in a wad of paper serviettes and buries them in her billum, along with a couple of water bottles.
‘Here, they won’t let you take that much food.’

She snatches one of the plates out of Meg’s hand, though her own are shaking so much the food might slide off onto the ground.

While Jude makes small talk with the young man bringing the food from out the back, Meg picks at the plastic tablecloth and tries to look more pathetic than she feels. It’s not a stretch. Her clothes are as filthy as Lucy’s, her mouth feels like it’s stuffed with fur balls. She checks the table one more time for anything else they might be able to use, sees nothing worth carrying and backs out the door.

On their way back to the kids an ambulance with its siren wailing cuts them off by pulling onto the footpath outside the Mission. By some shared instinct of the displaced she and Jude flatten against the nearest wall, trying to make themselves invisible to the paramedics. The sirens are off but the red and blue lights keep flashing. The crowd that was outside the Mission, squatting on the ground to eat their rations or leaning against the glass for a gossip, have scattered so fast and so comprehensively they may have gone up in smoke. Meg doesn’t remember any of them actually moving away. There was a crowd one moment, then a siren and flashing lights, then no crowd.

Jude leans against the wall, chewing on her nails and watching with studied disinterest while the paramedics unload a stretcher and wheel it into the alley beside the mission. Meg is as far from disinterested as it’s possible to be, the ambulance makes her nervous. Jude tells her to settle and let the paid Samaritans do what they’ve come to do.

‘Bring out your dead,’ she yells, while scratching in her billum.

She scatters a few handfuls of frangipanis on the street and footpath behind the ambulance.

The mission’s clientele crawl out of the cracks in the walls and footpaths and regroup like a swarm of flies that had been shooed off a pile of dung. From threat the ambulance has become entertainment. Everybody indulges in conjecture about who will be on the trolley and why. A consensus is reached: overdose. They shrink and hush again when the trolley is wheeled back with an obstreperous woman on board issuing a stream of abuse. She’s everything Meg thought a junkie to be, leopard-print leggings, hot green high heels, one on a foot and one beside her. Probably supposed to be strawberry blonde, her hair is a brassy yellow the texture of straw with a black stripe of re-growth down the
centre of her head. She has a lit cigarette hanging out of her mouth and another in her hand. She’s skeletal. One of her front teeth is missing. Rummaging in her orange handbag she looks just like a mangy old dog.

‘I’ll fuckin’ smoke if I want to,’ she yells. ‘I didn’t fuckin’ arks youse to come. I didn’t arks for your fuckin’ Narcan. Where’d you think I’m gonna get the money for another fuckin’ hit?’

The paramedics fill in papers and call emergency departments. The junkie tosses the lit cigarette on the ground and lights the fresh one.

‘Fuckin’ cunts,’ she says.

Jude laughs. ‘Hey, princess,’ she calls. ‘A bit of gratitude might be in order, don’t you think?’

‘Go fuck yourself, Jude. Have another drink.’

The crowd disperse. Nothing to see here. Just another junkie on a trolley. Meg strides off.

‘She’s right,’ says Jude, jogging to keep up. ‘I do need a drink. No point asking you for a loan?’ Meg scoffs. ‘Didn’t think so.’

The kids are under the leopard tree which has had some of its honour restored by the daylight. The Monday morning café set double take on Jude as she passes. Her safari suit, the flowers spilling from her bag, her constant hand gestures, knee-high purple socks and her sheer bulk – everything about her suggests clown. It’s an artful assemblage and, like Slop’s stooped shuffle and Troy’s puppy persona, is designed to shield her. Meg considers what character she could adopt that would give the same sort of protection, something to keep do-gooders like Cynthia away while allowing recognition by the likes of Slop. She sees herself playing up the abused woman, pitiful, simpering and irrevocably wounded. She abandons the idea.

Jude softens when Lucy smiles. Charlie stands, brushes his hand on his shorts and offers it to Jude.

‘Ah,’ says Jude. ‘A Princeling. How marvellous.’

Charlie gives Meg a ‘where’d you find this one’ look but he’s chuffed and does a Slop bow to Jude.

‘Enchanting,’ says Jude.
They sit four in a line devouring the food. Charlie vacuums up two sausage rolls and washes them down with a bottle of water before pausing for breath. Without saying anything, or looking at him, Jude hands him two of the rolls she’d buried in her billum. He splutters his thanks through a fresh mouthful of food. He hasn’t looked at Jude. They’ve known each other two seconds but there is an ease between them that suggests a lifetime. Either Charlie’s flattened her with his charm or they are familiars.

‘Nice job on your face,’ says Jude. ‘Step-father?’

Charlie grunts in the affirmative and starts on his fourth sausage roll.

Exactly nothing in the last ten seconds has changed. The café set are still eating their butter-rich scrambled eggs, their double shot decaf skinny soy lattes are still lukewarm, the paddy wagon’s still parked across the end of the mall and the leopard tree still has its spots and Charlie’s black and blue face is still so obvious a stranger can put their story together in less time than it takes to eat a sausage roll. Peachy-pink from food, Lucy’s chasing pigeons around the mall. The concrete sends the heat off the glass and bitumen and into Meg’s skin, a billion needles jabbing fast between her ribs.

‘We need to get out of here,’ she says.

Before Cynthia’s organisation, or the police, tap her on the shoulder.

‘Yes, and I need a drink,’ Jude says.

Meg and Charlie laugh at her commitment to the statement.

‘And,’ she yells, ‘you need to get clean.’ She fans her fingers in front of her nose. ‘Cleanliness being next to godliness, it is a matter of some urgency. Follow me.’

She leads them down alley ways so tight they’re forced to walk in single file. They slip through the service doors of the train station, over a loading dock, through the bowels of a car park and along narrow footpaths to the Cat Society Thrift Shop. The shop is housed in an old worker’s cottage. Once upon a time it would have been a standard two bedrooms and a kitchen with a lean-to laundry and a drop dunny out the back.

Jude barges in, setting off the bell hanging above the door. She storms the counter at the back of the shop where a skinny young woman was reading and now gapes open-mouthed at Jude.

‘I know Flo’s out the back. Go and get her will you, Pet? These people need her help.’
Being indoors doesn’t suit Jude. She’s not capable of speaking at a normal volume, the only setting she has is loud. The young woman scarpers.

Jude leans towards Lucy and in her version of a whisper, shouts; ‘Do not fret, young one. My wings are like a shield of steel. You know that cartoon?’

Lucy deadpans up at Jude and shakes her head, slowly.

‘God, I’m old,’ Jude says. ‘Well, never mind then.’

A woman shrunken with age pokes her head around the corner, sighs heavily and says, ‘Oh. It’s you, Jude.’

‘Flo. Can’t stop. You need to help this woman and her children.’

‘Do I now?’ says Flo.

‘You do,’ Jude bellows. ‘I’ll be back in half an hour. I must find vodka.’

She marches off. Charlie, Meg and Lucy look from one to the other and back again. Lucy moves down the line of trinkets and knick-knacks on the counter, coloured glass beads, plaster cats and kittens, sunglasses, a bowl full of gloves, including a fingerless pair of green lace which she pilfers. Flo doesn’t object.

Jude pulls the door open, clanging the bell, and stomps back towards them. Her re-entrance rattles the glass in the front window. She wraps her fingers around Meg’s upper arm.

‘Wait here for me,’ she says and replays her exit. From the door she yells, ‘I only did that to hear the bell toll again. I love a bell. Let’s God know exactly where you are.’

When the cottage has settled back on its stumps, Flo tells the skinny reader to take an hour for lunch.

‘Now,’ she says, addressing Meg. ‘Come and let’s see what we can do for you.’

Flo’s workshop is tiny and cluttered, but ship-shape. In the original house it would have been the kitchen. Her workstation fills one corner, a sewing table with its accompanying tools arranged on a shelf above the machine, on the floor on one side of the table a basket overflows with what Meg knows is the ‘to do’ pile, on the other side, an ironing board with stacks of finished work, garments washed, ironed, folded and sorted into categories according to size. Outside is an equally cluttered courtyard and a dirt path leading to a standalone toilet in the far corner. Almost certainly illegal, an improvised
structure has been tacked onto the back wall and houses a washing machine, dryer and double oversized cement sinks.

Even if one of them is half-sized, four people are too many for the space. Flo’s used to manoeuvring around her piles of work but Meg, and Charlie in particular, are spare wheels in the cramped space. Lucy’s already found a basket full of Barbies, Bratz, and teddy bears. Flo clucks around her, retrieves from somewhere on her shelves a tin of miniature shoes and handbags and gives them to Lucy.

‘Can I fix your wings, little one?’ she says.

She doesn’t wait for a reply but eases Lucy’s arms out of the elastic straps and holds the wings up for inspection.

‘Ah, yes,’ she says. ‘I can make these good as new. A touch more glitter and some ribbon. Would you like to help me choose the colours?’

‘They’re new already,’ Lucy says. ‘Charlie got me them.’

Anything Charlie gets, a bone from the bush, a piece of string, a rock from the side of the road, if he’s given it to Lucy then it’s brand spanking shiny new.

‘I like purple,’ Lucy says.

‘Purple it is,’ says Flo. She busies herself at the drawers on her sewing table.

‘Now, I don’t want Jude coming back in here yelling at me,’ she says to Meg. ‘So what can I do for you, dear? You need clean clothes, that much is plain. You’ll have to choose from these stacks here. Everything in the shop is already itemised.’

Small talk is called for but it’s beyond Meg’s capacity.

‘I don’t have any money,’ she says.

‘Not to worry,’ says Flo. Then to Lucy, ‘Would you like me to add some buttons? I have some pretty buttons.’

‘Maybe,’ says Lucy.

Charlie has claimed an upside-down milk crate outside the back door. He’s radiating discomfort, sighing and fidgeting and bouncing one foot on the ground in a frenetic rhythm.

‘Charlie, please,’ Meg says under her breath. His fidgeting makes him seem ungrateful. ‘What’s going on with you?’

‘Nothing,’ he says, and fails to cover another sigh. ‘It’s just … ’
His sighing is chronic.

‘It’s just?’ Meg says.

‘Nothing. I said I’d meet Troy and them. It’s not like we’re doing anything, or going anywhere.’

‘When? Anyway, we might have gone to Sydney this morning.’

His foot stops thumping.

‘But we didn’t,’ he says.

Lucy brings Meg a handful of treasure, beads and sparkles. Meg gives her stock absent-minded reply. ‘Hmm, Lucy. Aren’t they lovely?’ Lucy rolls her eyes and goes back to join Flo who is much more fun.

‘They said they’d be at the station ’til midday, that’s all. They just said that’s where they’d be.’

‘By “they” you mean April, don’t you?’

She sounds like a jealous harpy. He glares at her. A few days ago he was a boy speeding along on a bike two sizes too small. Nothing like an encounter with a child prostitute to shift the interests of an adolescent man-child.

‘You could run yourselves a sink of warm water,’ says Flo. ‘There’s soap and wash cloths on the shelf. I’ve got plenty of towels.’

Flo waits for a response from Meg, but whatever she thinks is appropriate Meg has missed. Exasperated, Flo turns to Charlie.

‘You come with me,’ she says. ‘We’ll find you something in the shop.’

Meg wonders at the ingenuity of the city’s architects building their superstructures around this dogged little house. Jammed in from three sides by buildings several stories high, the courtyard is degrees hotter than the mall. The air back here hasn’t moved for centuries. Perspiration sticks Meg’s clothes to her like a crust on a sore. She’s one big sore. She gets up to investigate the ablutions block.

Filling a sink she looks at her reflection fracturing and turning in on itself. Charlie clears his throat behind her. He has a bundle of clothes under one arm. If he were a girl who’d expressed her first interest in a boy, Meg would be out buying her a new dress, or shoes or her first bottle of perfume. She’d be talking about a curfew and drumming into her how to say ‘no’.
‘Go see the girl,’ Meg says. ‘Be good. Be careful. Meet us outside the bank at five. Deal?’

‘Will you and Lucy be alright?’

She pulls him over to the sink, wets and soaps the cloth and unnecessarily cleans the cuts above his eye. A splash of water from a drinking fountain would do the same job. Not quite the same. The soft cloth and warm water are the kissing-it-better moment they couldn’t afford when his face was ashen and bleeding and Carl swayed with menace in the doorway.

‘We will be destitute without you,’ she says.

She dabs his brow. As a badge of honour to wear when he meets the girl, his bruise is kaleidoscopic and fully functional. She digs the cloth into his ear.

‘Of course we’ll be alright,’ she says.

She wrings the excess water out of the cloth, runs it across the back of his neck and drops it into his hand.

‘Honestly, you smell,’ she says. ‘You need to strip and give yourself a proper wash.’

She goes to find clothes for her and Lucy. Or, more likely, to discover what piece of nylon frippery her Princess has deemed appropriate for a day in the city. Meg just wants clean teeth and clean knickers, in that order. In a billion long nights she would never have dreamed that the prospect of a pair of second-hand knickers, laundered by Flo in the Cat Society Thrift shop would represent the pinnacle of wish fulfilment. She finds a pair in a pile on a shelf above the sewing machine and feels triumphant.

As expected, Lucy has chosen a basket full of fancy dress clothes. She comes through the door carrying her selection, she’s hardly able to see over the top of her pile of spangling costumes. With a satisfied grin, Flo trails behind her.

‘We have done wonderfully well, haven’t we, Lucy?’

‘Wonderful well,’ says Lucy, handing her hoard to Meg. ‘Where’s Charlie gone?’

‘Nowhere, Lu,’ he calls. ‘I’m here.’

He steps around the corner, self-conscious and dressed in black, long board shorts, tight tee shirt. Meg’s never bought him anything in all black. It’s clear he wants her
approval but equally clear he doesn’t need it. He’s even oiled his hair. Meg’s never seen him do that. Flo gives a wistful sigh.

‘Well, don’t you look handsome,’ she says. ‘I feel ten years younger just looking at you.’

Harpy to the fore, Meg thinks that would make her a sprightly seventy.

‘What are you doing, Charlie?’

Lucy knows something is gone from her brother, but unlike Meg, she still imagines whatever has been lost can be retrieved because she wishes it so.

‘Going out,’ says Charlie.

‘But we’re already out,’ says Lucy.

‘Stay with Mum, Lu,’ he says. ‘You know what she’s like.’

The implication is, ‘useless’. Lucy looks from one to the other, suspicious. She’s not at all amenable to his plan.

‘Go,’ says Meg, hoisting Lucy up. ‘Five o’clock. Don’t be late.’

Charlie doesn’t need any more prompting. He’s had quite enough of three generations of women gawping at him. He says thanks to Flo and kisses Meg on the cheek. He never does that.

‘Five,’ he calls.

The bell jangles his departure. Meg and Flo sigh in unison.

‘Lovely boy,’ says Flo.

Meg tries to head Lucy’s tantrum off by taking her to the laundry for a wash, chattering all the time about the wardrobe she has picked out and won’t Jude like it and what a treat it will be to have some girly time with her. Lucy won’t settle for Meg, carries on about Charlie leaving, whines that she wants Daddy and tells Meg how terrible she looks.

‘I’m too little to look after you,’ Lucy says. ‘And I want Bunny.’

‘Bunny’s bloody gone, Lu,’ Meg says. ‘Everything’s gone.’

Flo waves Meg away and calms Lucy with the promise of more tins of sparkly things to play with. Meg watches the old woman’s technique with the washcloth, firm enough to remove grease. In less than two minutes Lucy is exfoliated and dressed in
clean clothes. When she’s on the floor next to the sewing machine Flo tells Meg to ‘get a wriggle on’.

‘Jude will be late but if she’s said she’ll come back she will and I don’t want her in the shop too long. There’s too much of her. She frightens people.’

On the top shelf in the laundry are half a dozen cans of shaving cream, clean razors, miniature soaps, shampoos and conditioners, several bottles of baby oil and a box of new toothbrushes. Under the sink Meg finds a basket of thick, zip lock plastic bags, all with the same content – soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, razor, wash cloth and a sample sized bottle of moisturizer. Some of the bags are named. One of them has four toothbrushes and belongs to ‘Olivia & sons’. Poor Olivia, on the streets with three boys. One well-used bag belongs to Slop.

Meg runs a clean sink and dunks her head, surfaces, takes a breath and dunks again. The silence when her head is underwater is blessed; she can’t hear the relentless city. She takes off every stitch of her stinking clothes. She’s fast but thorough, working Flo’s technique on her skin until it stings. She stands naked in a shaft of sunlight in Flo’s community bath house and buries her face in a towel that smells of fabric softener and an old woman’s good heart. She lathers herself with the cheap moisturiser.

Flo has brewed tea for them in a china pot and served it in matching cups and saucers, and laid out a plate of biscuits. Meg and Lucy watch her hands fly around Lucy’s wings, tugging at invisible threads, brushing off excess glitter. Inspecting the elastic straps Flo is unimpressed with the inferior workmanship.

‘Cheap,’ she says, snapping the elastic. ‘Thoughtless.’

She attaches ribbons of thick maroon velvet instead, the speed and the rhythm of her hand stitching is like watching a card sharp. Around the line of wire which makes the frame for the wings she stitches red and white gingham. She ties off the thread, holds the wings up against the light to check her handiwork.

‘Done,’ she says. ‘Finest wings in all the land.’

She ties them to Lucy’s back and tells her to go out the back to try them out. While barefoot Lucy in her magnificent wings runs up and down the length of the dirt path, Flo speaks fast to Meg.
‘Jude’s heart is close to the right place,’ she says. She waves to Lucy who has found something to amuse her at the fence line. ‘She does good work and we’re all very fond of her.’

Lucy holds something up from the dirt for Meg and Flo to ooh and ahh at, which they do.

‘She’ll come back here with a half bottle of vodka wanting to show you this or that — in god’s name, of course.’ She checks Meg for a response to the mention of god. Meg has none. God is easy. ‘She would never do anything to hurt a child. But she turns on people. It’s the drink. She can turn on a sixpence. You keep your eye out. Before she finishes her bottle you take your little one and go.’

Lucy launches herself into the air in the general direction of her mother, certain she will be caught mid-flight. The bundle of limbs is like a bag of sticks thrown against Meg’s body.

The bell tolls. The op shop trembles. More effusive than before, Jude is barking orders. Lucy squeals with pleasure. Her feet barely touch the ground before she’s circling Jude.

‘Oh, excellent,’ Jude hollers. ‘Great acts of cleanliness have been committed. Wings have been fastened. Flo, you have surpassed yourself. We are well pleased. Make haste, young mother, there are still urgent matters to attend to. I cannot relieve your weariness, but I can provide your soul with sustenance and who gets enough of that these days. Away!’

Lucy trails her out the door. Meg starts to collect the clothes the three of them have shed.

‘Leave them,’ says Flo. ‘I don’t imagine you’ll want to be carrying them. I’ll wash them and keep them for a few days. If you don’t come back I’ll put them in the shop. Now, I have some things for you.’

Outside, Jude is gesticulating madly while Lucy jumps up and down in front of her. Jude’s voice booms. Lucy sounds like a chipmunk.

The stroller Flo wheels around from behind the counter is in better nick than the last one. Whatever condition goods are in when they arrive here, they would always leave in better shape. Flo has hung a backpack over the handles of the stroller.
‘I’ve packed you a couple of things,’ says Flo. ‘Clothes mostly, for all of you. Your daughter can’t be wearing that plastic all day in the heat. Jude’s in fine form, so no need to worry about that for a few hours. Off you go, now.’

She starts to clear away the makings of their tea party. Meg wants to tell Flo she’s not like Olivia and the others who come in here for her biscuits and seamstress skills.

‘I’m not …’ she says, but can’t get the embarrassing sentence out.

Flo pauses in her chores.

‘Oh, I know you’re not, Dear,’ she says.

‘I’m just …’ says Meg. ‘I’m not …’ The second attempt is worse than the first.

‘You’ll be alright,’ says Flo. ‘I know it. I’ve been here a long time. Now, I hope you won’t be insulted if I ask you to leave.’

Before she goes back to her workstation she shoots Meg a look that tells her, yes, she is. She is just like Olivia.
Meg declines the vodka she’s offered. Jude shrugs and takes another slug. She checks her imaginary fob watch, tucks it back into a pocket and yells that they’re ‘late for a very important date’.

‘I’m assuming, young one,’ she says to Lucy, ‘that you know to which famous character from literature I am referring. Yes?’

Lucy’s mouth hangs open. Meg’s read her an abridged version of the story, it’s a favourite of Lucy’s, along with Henny Penny and the falling sky, but Jude’s way of speaking would sound like gobbledygook to Lucy. She’s more used to communicating in half-speak with Charlie. In Lucy land, language is something you use to keep secrets secret. Jude gives Meg a look of admonishment.
‘Remiss of you,’ she says, and marches off.

‘You do know it, Lu,’ Meg says. She straps Lucy into the stroller and hurries after Jude. ‘Want me to give you a hint?’

‘No,’ says Lucy, already preoccupied with solving the riddle for herself.

When they catch up with her Jude is talking to herself, muttering about the order of things and the great many sights she has to show ‘the infidel and the innocent’ in order that their souls might be restored. Waiting for the traffic lights to change, she looks Meg up and down. She’s not happy with what she sees.

‘You need art!’ she yells. ‘To realize your perfection.’ She takes a drink. ‘Oscar Wilde. You know him?’

‘Not much,’ says Meg. *All men kill the thing they love.*

‘What’s the good of you then?’ Jude says.

Jude steps out onto the road where impatient city drivers running the orange light blast their horns at her. She stops in the middle of the crossing, forcing people first to notice her, then step around her. She holds her arms in the air, palms up.

‘Yea, though I walk through the VALLEY of the shadow of death,’ she shouts, swaying in supplication to whatever deity she is calling on. ‘I will fear no evil.’

Meg expects her to drop to her knees in the middle of the street, to lay herself out on the heat-sticky bitumen and wait for a beam of light to teleport her up to heaven. Jude laughs at her own joke, looks for signs in Meg that she has understood it. Meg rolls her eyes, walks past Jude like she’s never seen her before and waits for her from the safety of the footpath. Lucy swings her legs in her stroller. If she can’t run, or jump or skip, the least she can do is swing her legs. Meg has to hold tight to the stroller to keep it from becoming a runaway carriage.

‘I know,’ Lucy yells. She’s decided the only way to be heard by Jude is to out-yell her.

‘What do you know, young Persephone?’

‘I know you’re not a rabbit,’ Lucy shouts.

‘True fact!’ Jude’s decibels are at maximum. ‘I am indeed not a rabbit!’
The inanity and the energy with which it is delivered make Meg giddy. She wishes Charlie hadn’t gone off. He would serve as an antidote to the sledgehammer that is Jude, might make her company less exhausting.

Jude keeps up a running commentary on everything they pass, every smell, sight and sound is subject to an analysis driven by her scattergun of influences, from the Bible to the banal lyrics from the latest boyband, to ‘my two Bobs’ – Marley and Dylan. When a barefoot and dribbling man hands them a pamphlet extolling the wonders of what awaits the born again when they get to Heaven, Jude sings Bob Marley in his face.

‘If you know what life is worth,’ she sings, loud and out of tune. ‘You will look for yours on earth.’

She takes Meg and Lucy to a frangipani in bloom, picks dozens of the flowers, stashes some in her billum and scatters some around Lucy in the stroller. ‘For poor mad, sad Ophelia’, she says and launches into a rant on the spiritual and artistic significance of women picking flowers. Meg can’t follow the convoluted logic. Doesn’t want to. Ophelia drowned.

They shuffle around the block to a wall of graffiti, old-fashioned tagging layered over years so no name is recognisable, no sentiment readable, just a giant blur of colour on the external wall of a carpark. It makes the grey of the surroundings more prominent but less imposing, it takes the piss out of the authority of the city’s monoliths.

‘It’s a relief, isn’t it?’ says Meg.

‘Exactly,’ says Jude. ‘Humanity asserts itself in a concrete bowl. Hoorah!’

Jude’s slurring her words, her eyes have an all too familiar sheen, wet and losing focus. Meg wonders what Charlie’s doing.

‘One more before I go find you lunch, which will be my privilege by the way.’

In a back lane someone has written, Pathetic, isn’t it? Amongst the oversized writing of the city’s signs – streets, shops, billboards – the phrase looks like it’s been written with a standard ink pen which makes the words hit harder. The graffiti gives Jude genuine pleasure, she stands a bit straighter.

‘A-bloody-men,’ she says, raising her bottle in toast to the sentiment.

Meg trudges behind Jude who’s pushing the stroller and gibbering to Lucy about art. They stop in the same triangular park where Meg had bashed her head against the
poinciana. With great reverence Jude puts some of her frangipanis in the mouth of her empty vodka bottle and places it just so against the tree trunk. An offering to Dionysus, she says.

‘I will return with loaves and fishes.’

She weaves a drunken way across the triangle of green. Meg parks Lucy in the shade and empties the contents of Flo’s backpack onto the ground. It’s a clever care package containing what Meg would have packed in the first place had she been thinking clearly, one of the zip locked bags with three toothbrushes, a soap, toothpaste and a facecloth, several pairs of knickers and two shirts each for her and Charlie, pyjamas and a bundle of soft cotton clothes for Lucy and a bottle of water. Flo’s one extravagance is a tailored red cotton dress. It’s a beautiful piece of clothing, the fall of the fabric would flatter the lumpiest woman.

While the noise of the city rings in her ears Meg paces the length and breadth of the park, trying to counter the circles they have been walking in for days.

‘Mummy?’

Sometimes Lucy abandons her cloistered Princess-at-the-centre-of-the-universe pose and casts her gaze beyond the version of herself she sees in other people’s response to her. Meg would hide from her daughter’s all-knowing eyes if she could. She starts to re-pack the bag.

‘Yes, my love.’

Lucy toys with one of Jude’s flowers.

‘Are we lost?’

Meg pulls her out of the stroller and lies on the ground. The weight of Lucy on top of her earths her.

‘Not lost, Baby,’ Meg says. ‘Hiding, remember?’

She wraps both arms around Lucy and holds her tight to the spot where their hearts drum a syncopated rhythm.

‘I think we are.’

Lucy’s skin is sticky under the suffocating nylon.

‘You think we’re what, Lu?’

‘Lost.’
Jude comes back brandishing another half bottle of vodka. Meg sees Carl, the same tilt in the walk, the curled lip. The same hunt for an argument.

‘Sorry,’ Jude hollers. ‘Got caught up with the Scientologists. Had to cut them off at the knees. Spawned by an alien race! Dumb fuckin’ aliens if you ask me. If they needed a host to make a master race they’d have picked a more intelligent species than one that’s about to self-destruct. We got five hundred years, tops. Make hay, I say. Sun won’t be shining long.’

She pulls brown cardboard take-away cartons from her bottomless billum.

‘Eat. It’s come from the Krishnas so it’s good,’ she says.

It is – vegetables, rice balls, salads, pita breads stuffed with falafel, apples, mandarins, and a bag of plums. More than the three of them can consume in one sitting. Jude has produced this mountain of food but she doesn’t eat. ‘Not my thing,’ she says when Meg asks her why. ‘Not at this time of day.’

‘But we can’t eat all this,’ Meg says.

So Lucy won’t be overwhelmed by the amount, Meg tears the top off one of the cartons and dishes out a child-sized portion.

‘Save it for your Princeling then,’ Jude yells. ‘I don’t give a rat’s arse. Don’t be ungrateful.’

Turns on a sixpence. Meg pats Lucy, gives her a wink, tries to gauge what the four-year-old can see or sense. Lucy winks back. A winning thing, Lucy winking, both eyes squeezed shut, then opening extra wide.

‘Thank you,’ Meg says, for Jude’s benefit but keeping her eyes on Lucy.

‘You’re welcome,’ says Jude, more spit than speak.

While Lucy and Meg eat, Jude holds forth. Her gestures get sloppier and her face longer as the spirit level of the bottle goes down. Talking keeps her occupied and her focus off Meg. Good. Meg can feign listening until the cows come home, until the drunk falls off the sixpence. She nods and murmurs when she senses some input is required.

‘I’m sorry I snapped at you. I get a bit cranky sometimes,’ Jude says.

Lucy runs around the triangle of grass, jet-propelled by the clean food. The sparks flying off her wings are an antidote to Jude’s increasingly morose musings.
‘I try to love God,’ Jude says. ‘But I know why people feel abandoned.’ She waves the bottle in Meg’s face. ‘Have a drink with me.’

Meg lets the vodka burn her closed lips and hands it back.

‘Do you have the bell I gave you?’

Meg nods, but the bell is gone with the bags. Lucy waves to the passing traffic.

‘Good,’ Jude says. ‘It will serve as a talisman. Not to be mistaken for a false idol. God likes a talisman. And He likes card tricks. And runes. It’s all play, you know? Poor old God, no one plays with Him. People forget He has a sense of humour.’ Her laugh is a cold cackle. ‘Obviously.’ She takes another drink. ‘He made us, and we’re hysterical.’ She looks like she might cry.

Shadows from the city’s buildings move across their oasis, robbing Lucy of light to prance in, and laying the ground for Jude’s miserable ramblings about her loving god. Meg packs what she can of the food into the knapsack and looks helplessly at the rest of it. Not entirely beyond perception, Jude sees the dilemma, pulls a plastic bag from the billum, stacks the food in it and hands it to Meg.

‘Take it for later,’ she says. ‘There’s one more thing you need to see. It’s not far.’

Jude stops in the middle of a block that is part of the outlet for the tunnel disgorging traffic from the freeway. It’s noisy. There’s nothing to dampen the sound bouncing off bare walls, bitumen and concrete. A B-double truck slams through its gears, air brakes trumpeting. It sounds like the stream of traffic is airborne, spiralling out of the mouth of the tunnel. Lucy whimpers and clutches Meg’s hand with both of hers.

There are no features on the side of the single building that occupies the whole block, no steps, windows, alcoves or awnings. There’s hardly enough room on the footpath for Lucy and Meg to walk side by side. Meg picks her up, swings her onto one hip and pushes the stroller with her free hand. Ahead of them Jude waves for them to hurry. No problem. Being on the barren block makes them too vulnerable. Meg expects a car to spin off from the five lanes of traffic mere feet away and pin her and Lucy to the surface of the city.

Jude leans against the wall. A car horn blasts, a man yells out the window.

‘Fuck?’
A door hidden by the wall’s uniformity reveals itself. It’s at an awkward height above the footpath but has no step to accommodate a climb down or up. The door hasn’t been opened for years, the handle has been removed. It’s a sad little doorway, and Jude, on tiptoes and spread starfish style in front of it, the sad keeper of its keys. Meg’s dripping sweat again, in part from carrying Lucy and pushing the stroller, in part because of the furnace blast coming out of the tunnel behind her. But mostly out of fright. She’s not willing to put Lucy down for fear the city will take her.

‘Here she is,’ says Jude.

She takes a large and, given her size and state of sobriety, elegant sideways step while sweeping her hand the full length of the door, the way a bikini-clad woman on a television game show reveals a prize.

‘A touch of magic for your grey, grey life,’ says Jude.

Meg sees a dirty door.

‘Look harder,’ says Jude.

Lucy leans her head against Meg’s chest.

‘It’s us, Mummy,’ she says.

Meg’s trying, if only for Lucy’s sake, to see what she and Jude are seeing, but it’s just a door.

‘Look harder.’

For the first time all day, Jude isn’t yelling.

Streaks of muck ripple across the door, smudges of cooked-on grease from the deep fryer that is the Valley, lines drawn in the yellow of tobacco stain, all mutate on the door until they form a legible image. Mountains in the background, a squalling black sky, thatched huts with straw roofs in the middle distance. In the foreground, a woman dressed in peasant garb, her face obscured by a wide-brimmed triangular hat. She’s leaning into the wind, one arm reaching towards the painted-on handle. She holds a baby close to her chest with her other arm, another child behind her holds onto her skirt. They’re running.

‘Uh huh,’ says Jude. ‘You can see why I like her.’

Meg has a great need for the woman to reach the door-handle. She brushes at the false handle, trying to clear some of the road grime. If it’s easier to see, it will be easier
for her to reach. Jude smiles and leans into Meg, breathing vodka fumes onto the side of her face.

‘I think she gets away,’ says Jude. ‘You?’

‘We already got away,’ says Meg.

‘I meant – what do you think?’ Jude yells, smacking her open palm on the door for emphasis. ‘You’re thick as two planks, aren’t you? But since you’ve brought it up – no, you didn’t get away. You didn’t get anywhere. This isn’t a place. You’re nowhere, and nowhere is no place for children. Purgatory should not be your aspiration.’

The traffic has come to a standstill, backed up deep into the tunnel behind them and in an unbroken line in front of them. The lights on the corner have changed but cars trying to cheat them have blocked the crossroad. Horns beep, radios blare, people shout out their windows. A bus stuck in the middle of the road opens its doors to let people off. The smell of exhaust is sickening. Meg puts Lucy into the stroller.

‘We have to meet Charlie,’ she says. ‘Thank you for today.’

‘No use getting shitty with me. I’m just the messenger. Peace be upon you.’

Jude steps out into the stalled traffic. Midway across she turns and holds her empty bottle aloft.

‘On poetry, on wine, or on virtue!’ she yells and smashes the bottle on the ground. Lucy laughs.

‘What’s she saying?’

‘I don’t know, Sweet,’ says Meg. ‘She’s loony.’

Jude has a captive audience and starts haranguing the people stuck in their cars.

‘Well, I like her,’ says Lucy.

‘I like her too,’ Meg says.
Late afternoon shadows leech the life out of the mall. Monday after hours isn’t prime time for any kind of business in this district. Meg and Lucy join the day-shifters trudging towards the station. They’re late. Dusk will settle within the hour and they’ll be stuck in purgatory for another night, though, to use Jude’s parlance, in the general order of things, purgatory is at least a step up from hell. You’d think.

In the centre of the mall Troy and his posse of interchangeable youths that now includes Charlie have taken up prime position on the raised outdoor stage. A bass beat booms from a speaker no bigger than a tennis ball. The miniature piece of technology sits on the lid of a garbage bin. The posse have pulled a crowd that forms a loose circle around the stage where Troy is dancing. He dances like he runs, fast and fearless, but he lacks finesse. He’s got no flow.

* * *
Slop and Wes lean against the glass wall of an empty shop front. Hands in pockets, postures identical, a breathing yin yang symbol. They nod in time to the music, feet tapping in rhythm. When he sees her and Lucy, Slop beams a welcome like they’re long-lost wanderers who’ve just come into view on the edge of town. He waves them over but to get to Slop Meg would have to push the stroller through the crowd. After hedging around Jude all afternoon, Meg doesn’t have the energy to fake the belonging she’d need to cut that path. She waves to Slop and wheels Lucy in under the cover the leopard tree provides, which isn’t much. The Christmas lights are on but they don’t stand a chance against the fading daylight. The dusk and the coloured lights cancel each other out.

The crowd is made up of night-shifters who’ve stopped for light entertainment on their way to jobs that can’t involve a lot of that. Too many of the faces are familiar. On a bench outside the bank Slop’s cabbie friend gobbles a takeaway. The young black man who’d taken wing position to Charlie in the soccer game is on the outer edge of the circle. The woman who’d offered Meg a cigarette while working her corner their first night in the city looks haggard. She’s not in her working girl clothes but she is in work clothes, a shapeless overshirt with a company name on the pocket, it might be a cleaner’s outfit, or she could be dressed for a shift as a check-out chick in a chain store. Without the strategically draped satin she looks like a younger but sicklier version of herself. She’s about the same age as Meg. Two dog-tired women, one of them has found a way to be in the world. Meg has not. Meg averts her eyes so she won’t have to look into her own future, working two jobs, out of one ill-fitting uniform and into another, stealing single hours in the mornings and evenings to spend time with her children.

Familiar or not, with one exception, every face in the crowd is drawn in shades of grey, the same tone as the darkening sky. Even Daisy’s beauty has a worn look about it this early evening. Eyes glued to Charlie, bare-faced April holds the iPod waiting for her cue. She’s not in her work clothes and she’s dispensed with the twelve-year-old-boy look she was sporting yesterday. She’s not Eve or the virgin whore tonight. She’s a coquette in flat shoes and a green silk dress that catches the best of the changing light and works it to her advantage. Her presence in the semi-circle makes the rest of them look less like zombies. When Troy leaves the ring, Charlie takes centre stage. He hasn’t seen Meg.
Most people have to hear a beat before they can move in time to it. Charlie and the beat begin at the same moment and for the rest of the dance he doesn’t land on it once, but he doesn’t miss it either. He moves around the beat, takes it with him wherever he likes. He’s not trying to bend time, doesn’t need to exert authority over it. Charlie and the rhythm are in collusion, elemental to each other. He’s picked an instrumental with a lazy beat, not the rutting-rabbit pace of white boy rock and roll, or the super-slicked cool of the gangster rap he mimics for other people’s amusement. He dances in a metre suggested rather than played and makes space where there isn’t any. He takes the crowd with him, unshackles them from regular time.

Meg’s seen this magic trick before. It’s all smoke and mirrors. Charlie can dance to a phone ringing. He’s not dancing for the crowd or for April. He’s not dancing with bravado or abandon or for show. His moves are small and precise, loose and controlled. He stays close to the ground, bears down on the beat. The aim of this dance is the opposite of losing himself. Charlie is telling himself a story, not shaking one off. He’s dancing himself into place, trying to land somewhere, anywhere will do.

He finishes facing Meg and salutes her. He knew she was there the whole time.

Hands above his head, Slop’s applause is especially enthusiastic. But Wes is watching Meg, his expression pointed. He knows what Charlie has danced. His slow clap is an expression of grief, for the lost boy who couldn’t dance himself into place. All Meg’s weariness descends at once.

Cool by association with the black boy, Troy collects the crowd’s offerings by passing around the Virgin cap. The audience leaves, lighter for the entertainment, but each more alone than they were before. That’s the down side of watching a dancer, the fall back to earth spinning in ordinary time. The working woman comes toward Meg. She’s on her mobile, her tone suggests she’s talking to a child. Meg smiles at her, hoping to convey respect. The woman acknowledges Meg but there is no warmth. A master of smoke and mirrors herself, she wasn’t transported by Charlie’s dance either. It was just a welcome distraction on her way to another mindless job.

Lucy frees herself from the stroller and flings herself at Charlie who turns circles with her in his arms. Her stream of chatter fades in and out of Meg’s earshot depending on which way he’s facing. He turns slower and slower until he comes to a standstill.
facing April. She hands him the cap. While Meg and Lucy were with Jude, Charlie set his sights, honed his charms and got the girl.

The young people’s presence in the centre of the mall mark it as sacred ground, for the initiated only, for children who needed to be put in their place and have tried to do so of their own accord. For every moment they’re in purgatory, her children are finding their way while Meg loses hers.

She pulls out the bag of plums and contemplates their next move. She won’t stay in the theatre again, the kids might be able to tolerate it for one more night but Meg won’t. She can’t subject herself to that black hole. The church is out of the question because of Cynthia. She has no money to pay Fagin for another night even if she were prepared to sleep in his stinking swamp. The police in position at the end of the mall must have noticed the woman and the black boy with the mashed face and the white girl-child in fairy wings who have been hanging around in varying states of disarray for three days. They can’t keep travelling the same ground and ending up in the same place.

Any minute the sun will drop behind the Spring Hill ridge, sinking the mall further into the dead hour of dusk, the hour of veiled threat, a blank that can’t be filled. Dusk has never been kind to Meg. All it brings is evidence of the broken promises of dawn, the day that was going to be better, the mother she hadn’t been, the coward she had, the wife she wished she wasn’t.

Slop joins her on the bench. Meg looks for Wes and sees him with a hand on the black youth’s shoulder steering him right in front of the paddy wagon, eyes front. She offers Slop the Krishna’s by now warm plums.

‘Alright?’ he says.

‘Not really.’

Charlie comes to tell her he’s going to the station with the others to put the young ones on the train. Lucy follows the big kids. She doesn’t reach for his hand. She knows how to walk the streets without a hand to hold. Meg swallows the seed of a plum.

‘Don’t be long,’ she calls. ‘We need to be out of here by dark.’

For three nights she hasn’t thought beyond the next hour. Her reaching has all been backwards and now for the fourth night in a row she has put herself and her children at the mercy of the elements and the creatures that inhabit them. Jude’s bashed her over
the head with it. Charlie’s danced it. Her fingernails in the dirt under a tree reiterate it. The women in the river have sung it to her in her restless sleep. Even the birds knew. They have to get out of the city.

  Slop helps himself to another plum.

  ‘Know anywhere we can sleep tonight?’ Meg says.
They could have caught the bus to the ferry but cashed-up Charlie insisted they take a cab.

‘We’re livin’ large, Mum,’ he said.

He’s ostentatious with his money counting, plucking one and two dollar coins from the Virgin cap like he’s choosing diamonds from a silk pouch. He and Troy split their takings and both walked away with what they agreed was a respectable amount of money for twenty minutes of dancing. Watching them divvy up the cash Meg knew she was witnessing the beginnings of what might have been an enduring friendship. If she and the kids were staying out here. They’re not.
Slop’s cabbie mate accepts a token six dollars for the ride out of the Valley and down to the ferry. While Charlie counts out his gold and silver, the cabbie gives Meg a wink that makes her blush. No one’s flirted with her for so long it crosses her mind that he might be a simpleton. Transaction completed, Charlie shakes the cabbie’s hand.

‘Pleasure doing business with you,’ he says.

‘And you, Sir.’

Meg turns away before the cabbie can remind her she used to be a woman a decent man would flirt with.

The last of a white-gold sunset ghosts across the water. Gulls play in the slipstreams above the ferry. High tide has buried the stinking mangrove mud and the city’s more unmentionable debris. The river sluices at the sides of the ferry. A breeze skims a layer off the heat of what remains of the day and carries it away. Meg is impervious. Her blood and bones have fused. Deprivation has her atrophied.

On the front deck Charlie rests his chin on his hand and sighs repeatedly. He’s left most of himself behind with April who, he said with melancholy remorse, had to work. Lucy takes Jude’s dying flowers and talking all the while – whether to herself, the flowers or the river is unclear – stands on tiptoes, pulls the petals off one at a time and tosses them into the water. Occasionally she holds a flower up for Slop’s inspection. He gives her whatever response he thinks she wants and resumes his guard over her. The ferry churns up the mud-brown water.

Passing into the shadow of the Story Bridge it feels like they’re drifting rudderless. By the day’s standard the shadow the bridge casts is slight but it’s enough to turn the breeze into a wet breath that congeals around Meg and wracks her fused spine with a chill. She tilts her head back, watches the structure glide by above and hopes the women in the water are keeping watch as well. They would want to stay out of the shadow of this bridge, their number already bloated by the live offerings they’ve been obliged to receive. Lucy abandons her flowers, climbs into Meg’s lap and burrows into her.

‘I’m cold.’

Lucy’s warm body does not thaw Meg’s.

‘Shhh, Lu,’ Meg says. ‘Shh.’
She wraps her arms around Lucy and keeps her eyes on the underbelly of the bridge.

‘It’s just a shadow,’ she says. ‘It’ll pass.’

No brilliant light blinds them when they come out from under the shadow.

On the jetty Lucy won’t get in the stroller and whines for Charlie to carry her. She wants him to notice her, in any way, cranky, loving, teasing, Lucy wouldn’t care. She’s not the only one resenting his absence. His love-struck Romeo act is farcical, since, like that poor boy Montague, his affections are so easily swayed. The slap Meg wants to give him isn’t playful.

‘Take the bag, Charlie,’ she says. ‘And enough with the sighing. We get it already. Lucy, you get in the stroller or you walk.’

Lucy walks. No one holds hands.

Slop had said tonight would be a good night for sleeping out. No chance of rain and a waning but still full moon means it won’t be too dark. Being Monday, most people will be indoors licking their weekend wounds. No one looks for trouble on a Monday night. Slop had been jaunty with his assurance but this can’t be where he meant to bring them. Meg knows this park. She and Charlie crossed it on their way to and from their horrible flat in the second-hand end of town. The park is a remnant of the old city, the one before the World Expo that ate up the cheap inner city housing and turned a blind eye to this eastern corner where the poor and the blacks and the lunatics had roamed for a century or more. During the Expo upgrade the city gave the park a superficial once-over, tidied it for the aspirational class who bought up the workers’ cottages that line the river.

They tramp through the badly lit commuter’s car park and into the park. They pass the children’s playground and the toilet block the local junkies commandeered that was so filthy mothers sent their kids behind a tree to wee so they wouldn’t have to walk on the carpet of broken bottles, used condoms and dirty needles. The half-hearted rebuild never did disguise the air of neglect and, as far as Meg can see, hasn’t provided anything that can be used as shelter.

Slop leaves the path that follows the ridge and waits for them on the edge of a steep slope rolling back down towards the river. They’ve walked a semi-circle around the remains of a derelict and fenced-off building on the river bank. The building had been a
restaurant but was damaged beyond repair in the last flood and no one has bothered to
demolish it. It will dissolve into the water with the rest of the city’s waste.

Meg’s never ventured off the path, didn’t even know there was more park beyond
the derelict restaurant. Below them is a thick grove of trees, figs and melaleucas. She can
see the unmistakable lines of willows weeping. Charlie and Lucy get down the slope
easily but it’s tough going for Meg getting the stroller down the hill in the dark. She will
throw the bloody thing in the river with the other one if she has to walk it any further
tonight. They pause at the bottom of the slope.

‘All right,’ says Slop. ‘Let me do the talking. They’re friends of mine but they can be … blunt.’

Meg doesn’t care what they are. He ducks into the grove. She lumbers after him
and the kids, part throwing the stroller over the root systems of the trees.

‘Shit! Slop! Where’d you come from?’

The male voice is guttural, the consonants hit with precision, the vowels hard and
fast but the whole together is round and resonant. It’s language but it sounds like a drum.

They’re in a clearing that opens onto the river. It’s not dissimilar to their hideout
in the bush but it’s five times the size and better appointed. A fire burns in the centre,
beyond it the river sparkles with the city lights. Three black men lounge on the ground
under the trees on one side of the clearing. Opposite them, a black woman is on her back
on a couch in prime position facing the river. Among the grove’s features, a stand-up
lamp has Christmas tinsel wound around its stem and an oversized plastic palm leaf
sticking out where a lampshade should be.

‘Why’d you bring them here, Slop?

The woman’s voice is dry as a drought-country bone. She hasn’t sat up or looked
around. Meg stays out of the firelight, Charlie in front of her, Lucy behind.

‘Excuse me, Ma’am,’ Slop says.

‘You’re bringing trouble,’ says the woman on the couch. ‘Again.’

The men laugh. Meg imagines climbing back up the slope dragging anvils the
exact size and shape of her children hanging from chains on iron cuffs clamped to her
wrists and ankles.
Slop takes the woman’s bark as permission to approach. He pulls a milk crate to the end of the couch and plants himself beside her.

‘Len,’ calls one of the men. ‘There’s kids here.’

‘What am I, blind?’

More laughter from the men. One of them waves Lucy closer but she buries her face in Meg’s thigh. Lucy’s burning up, the heat radiates through Meg’s clothes. She drops a hand to Lucy’s forehead. Don’t you get sick. You can’t get sick now. How long since they’ve had water? Meg’s feet and knees hurt from pounding on concrete and bitumen. The top of her head feels like it’s been split by one neat blow from a machete and her skin is being pulled off her from the feet up in one unbroken piece, a full body scalping that will leave her alive but skinless crisping by the fire. She strokes Lucy’s damp and burning cheek.

Len sits up. Meg guesses she’s around sixty. She looks Meg up and down, bores into her. Any other time Meg would be terrified.

‘Ah, fuck,’ says Len.

When she’s taken a long look at Charlie, Len tsks. She’s the only person in days who’s hardened at the sight of Lucy. The men are silent. Whatever Len says goes. Meg’s prepared to grovel.

‘You can sleep over there.’

Len indicates the other side of the fire, a cleared spot under a willow.

‘Thank you,’ says Meg. She sounds like a twelve-year-old.

‘Don’t own the park, do we? Got a blanket?’

‘Yes,’ says Meg.

‘You’ll need it.’

Len lies down again.

The spot they’ve been designated has a view over the fire to the river. When she’s changed Lucy into the pyjamas Flo packed, Meg asks if they could have some water.

‘Ah, fuck,’ says Len, and waves a hand towards the men. ‘Malcolm.’

The oldest of the men moves closer to tend the fire.

‘Help yourself, Bub,’ he says.
The Krishna’s food is soggy but there’s plenty of it. When she’s fed and watered the kids, Meg sends Charlie forward with the leftovers, enough for the three men to have a few mouthfuls. Len declines.

Wes arrives with bottles of booze, one of which Len claims for herself, the others are passed around. Neither Wes nor Slop partakes. Charlie does. The first time he takes too much and spits most of it out. The second time he takes less and neighs like a horse through the after-burn. Must be spirits. Meg laughs with the rest of them then hangs her head.

She hasn’t found the moment to tell Charlie they’re leaving in the morning. She expects he will object, possibly strenuously. He’s having the time of his life. He doesn’t know it will come to define him. Since he dressed in black and oiled his hair this long ago morning, he’s worn his bruised face, if not with ease – and certainly not with pride – then with less shame. He’s made a friend in Troy, dazzled a girl, and danced for his supper. He might want to stay out here without Meg and Lucy. Having nothing better to offer, she wouldn’t blame him. In the circle with the men and traced by firelight he’s made three-dimensional by the river behind him and animated further by the rising moon. Each element – flesh, fire, water, moon – draws the eye but none can be seen or understood except in relation to each other. Charlie is in perfect proportion with his surroundings.

Two boys about Charlie’s age, one dark, one lighter-skinned, crash through the wall of greenery behind Len. They light up the clearing with the boundless energy that really is wasted on the young. It’s the energy older people will co-opt just for the pleasure of remembering what it was to be so beautiful and so alive. The youths gag themselves when they see the white woman. Wes says a few words in the language Meg doesn’t understand, after which the boys ignore her and continue their tale about their night at the pub playing pool and the cops coming in and the cheek they gave and running away from the red and blue flashing lights. The men by the fire think it’s hysterical. Len clears her throat.

‘Ah, come on Mum,’ says the light-skinned boy.

‘It was like Christmas morning,’ says the other.

The police wanted them to leave the pub because they’re underage even though they were with Uncle Francis who told the police to fuck off and how come those skinny
white girls were allowed to stay when they don’t look a day over twelve and why didn’t the fuck-knuckles ask them for ID.

‘Should’ve seen him, Wes,’ says the light skinned boy.
‘Glad I didn’t,’ Wes says. ‘Where is he?’
‘On his way here.’
More laughter while the youths tell the last of their tale. Len stares at the river.
‘Man of the hour,’ Wes says when Francis arrives.

Chastised, Francis takes a place behind Wes. He’s given no outward sign that he’s seen Meg and Lucy but he greets Charlie by name, clearly pleased to see him there in the circle. Meg observes the wordless exchange between Wes and Francis. It dawns on her that they’ve been tailing him for days. Francis had his flank in the soccer match, was his silent cheer squad when he danced. Meg sighs. She gleans no pleasure from the divide in the ever-widening circle. Slop is an intimate here. Lucy’s age makes her colorless. But Meg is and can only be the white woman outside the circle. She’s lonely for Helen.

If she hadn’t seen the miniscule gesture Len used to call Francis to her, Meg would think she had summoned him telepathically. If Charlie could hear her thoughts his ridicule would be merciless. He has no patience for white people’s nonsense – black people have mystical power, a sharpened sixth sense, voodoo that works, the ability to swing in from the trees unseen. The older he gets the more clearly Meg sees, or is aware she’s missed, the language black people use to communicate with him – a forefinger raised from a resting hand as they pass in the street, glances of such brevity Meg only knows they’ve been given by Charlie’s self-satisfied grin.

Francis squats in front of her. She’d thought he was older. He’s built like a wrestler but he can’t be a day over nineteen.

‘Mum says I gotta dig your holes,’ he says.
‘You going to bury us, then?’ Meg says.
‘Just the bones.’ The riposte sharper for the shyness he’s hurdled to deliver it.

‘Watch out,’ he says.

Meg shuffles sideways with Lucy on her lap. Francis scoops a groove in the dirt.

‘Hip,’ he says. He scoops out a second indent. ‘Shoulder.’

The two holes are proportioned for Lucy’s form exactly.
‘You can do your own later?’ says Francis.

‘Thank you,’ says Meg.

She meant it as much for Len who, Meg’s sure, has heard her though the older woman hasn’t moved. Meg’s happy not to be acknowledged. An overt show of gratitude would embarrass both women. There is no appropriate way to gush with fellow feeling about a thing so modest as holes dug in dirt for a child without a home.

‘Are we sleeping here?’ Lucy says.

‘For tonight, yes. Alright?’

Lucy’s so far gone she’d sleep on a fence. Stroking her bony shoulder Meg marvels at the effect of food and water. The temperature Lucy was running is gone. So much for so little. Meg thinks of the cadaver faces of the children she had forgotten, and of the girl in the blue party dress in the river, only metres away, who she has never been able to forget. When she knows the news won’t jar Lucy awake, she whispers to her in a sing-song patter that early tomorrow morning they’ll be on the train to Sydney to stay with Helen. Lucy slides easily into sleep, much less bothered by her sleeping arrangements than anyone could expect from a four-year-old Princess.

Slop was right. The night is made for sleeping out. Moonlight plays in the ruffled surface of the river. Meg listens to the men murmuring around the fire. Len’s on her lounge thinking her thoughts to the water.

Later, when she’s dug her holes and snuggled up to Lucy, she watches Charlie trying to teach the still-laughing youths some dance moves. For a while the youths feign a lack of coordination. Then Charlie is resoundingly trumped. He’s not the only dancer on the river bank. The other boys are so light-footed they could be dancing on the water. They are younger brothers to the women below the surface and they are dancing remembrance. Charlie persuades Slop to have a go but everyone, Len included, laugh him down to sitting because even in silhouette against the forgiving river it’s obvious he’s hopeless. Slop, as Charlie informs him, couldn’t dance his way out of a wet paper bag.

Later still, when Charlie is dozing behind her, Meg drifts in and out of sleep to the sound of the others singing country and western. Not a favourite of Meg’s. She can’t stand *lost my car/my dog/and my wife* songs. The song they’re singing is infectious, a defiant *Nothin’s all I got/and I’m alright Jack* kind of a song. But it’s not the song that
holds Meg on the cusp of sleep. It’s the harmony. The tune is imperfect, the rhythm erratic, entire lines of words are forgotten and scatted over amid much merriment but the harmony is sung in a collective voice so pure the river moves to it and the ground hums.

Charlie is asleep. Lucy’s curled against Meg’s stomach. One more time the singing calls her to the surface. Through the willow the sky is indigo deep and bottomless as a sea. Len’s on her side, staring into the fire. In the open space between Meg and the kids and the circle of singers, Slop lies on his back, hands linked behind his head, feet crossed, staring into the clear night. The Blackfellas sing in their own language. Charlie should hear this, he’d love it. Meg decides against waking him, he needs the sleep. She pulls Lucy close and lays a hand on Charlie behind her. She hopes in an idle way that he’s dug holes for his bones.

Hopes he will understand why she couldn’t, she just couldn’t tell him they’re getting on the train in the morning, tomorrow. *Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.*
The willow’s on fire. Flames tear the sky. Someone’s screeching on the other side of the clearing. Len’s on her feet, flapping and shouting in a language that isn’t round anymore. Droning loud, Malcolm swishes a branch half his size backwards and forwards above the fire, spraying the clearing with embers and choking smoke. The two youths, neither upright nor on all fours, pull each other’s bent bodies towards the river. Len’s screeching at a shattering pitch. Someone’s shaking Meg hard, digging her hip and shoulder further into the ground. With both hands, Malcolm raises the branch above his head. Behind him the dancing boys swerve out of the path of the river and dive over the back of Len’s couch. Before the white men in dark blue can follow them, Len, fifteen feet tall, blocks their path, shoves at them and shouts in their faces.
‘Get up, Mum.’

There’s terror in Charlie’s broken eye. He’s trying to untangle her from the blanket. Acid panic floods Meg. Carl has found them.

Len is yelling at jackhammer speed. The branch comes down on the fire sending cinders and dirt gusting across the ground and into the unquiet night.

‘Get up, Mum.’

Charlie’s crying fear.

‘Where is he?’ Meg says.

Lucy is snatched out of her arms. Lucy is ripped away from her. Meg’s tangled in the blanket. Lucy’s limbs are gathered together, folded into a smaller package. Her eyes are wide with fright, her mouth open to scream. A hand, black, claps over Lucy’s mouth. Wes. Charlie pulls at Meg.

‘Police,’ he says. ‘Mum, please.’

He tries to drag her to her feet. Meg reaches for her daughter hanging over Wes’s arm. Lucy’s skinny bum and bare feet hang at her eye line for a second. Then she’s gone. Wes clears the grove. Lucy is taken by the dark. Slop scrambles towards Meg and Charlie.

‘Go,’ he says, hoarse from the smoke.

Meg cannot get herself free of the blanket. Charlie sobs. Two of the men argue, shout abuse so foul it would offend the gods. Len yells at Malcolm stoking the bedlam with his branch. He brings the branch down, smothering and accelerating the fire at the same time and covering Meg with burning dust.

Charlie’s pulled her onto her stomach. She can’t get to her feet. The older of the policemen is trying to calm Len. The other one sees Meg. The white woman. He’ll be on her in a moment. One of the black men pushes the other who play acts stumbling into the fire. The older cop is obliged to intervene. Meg shoves Charlie off her. Francis reaches in from the dark, grabs Charlie by the back of his shirt. Charlie hovers. He has time to go. Meg doesn’t.

‘Go,’ she says. ‘Stay with her.’

Francis yanks him so hard his feet leave the ground. Charlie’s sob comes from metres away. Meg screams frustration at the blanket coiling around her calves. The two
men shove and shout at each other. Len’s screaming changes register. She’s yelling at the older cop but she’s faking it. She glances towards Meg, shouts louder, half laughing, her harridan howl petrol on Malcolm’s flames. She knows the cop by name.

‘Richard, ya dickhead,’ Len yells.

Meg screeches. Richard knows the black woman’s name. She is Eleanor.

Meg’s children are gone and that woman and the men are faking. Meg despises them. She will drive the burning branch into Malcolm’s neck. She’s flat on her face in the dirt. Her arms are still warm from Lucy’s sleeping form. She looks at her empty arms.

Looks at Slop. His eyes bulge with torment.

‘Don’t let them take you to the station,’ he says. ‘They have to take you to hospital if you ask.’

She frees herself of the blanket and gets to all fours to go after her children. Slop grabs her ankle.

‘Don’t,’ he says. ‘You’ll make it worse. They’re already gone.’

They’re not already gone. They’ll be at the top of the slope waiting for her. She pounces for the dark but someone grabs her from behind, mid-flight. She roars.

‘She’s fuckin’ mad.’ Len’s laugh is hysterical. She switches back to fury. ‘Get her out of here. You lot too. Arrest us or fuck off.’

Blood thick with rage, Meg brays at Eleanor. Her bellowing tears the inside of her throat. The thug who’s caught her is twice her size. They both fall. The weight of him winds Meg. Violence turns him on. Meg can smell it. He smells like Carl. His hands on her bare skin make her dry retch.

‘Dwayne,’ Richard yells.

Meg writhes in the ash and dirt, trying to get out of Dwayne’s grip. Slop looks distraught. He’s going to cry. Let him. Let his daughter’s corpse rise to haunt him. Let them all weep. Meg tears at her own limbs, beats her fists against her head, kicks out hard, pummelling the body that smells like Carl. Her children are gone. Dwayne’s trying to turn her onto her stomach. He’s all over her. His hands are on her body. She knees him in the balls, a clean connect.

‘Bitch,’ he snarls.

He lifts her by the shoulders and slams her back and head on the ground.
‘Dwayne,’ Richard yells. ‘That’s enough.’

Meg vomits on Dwayne.

‘Jesus Christ,’ he squawks and hauls her to her feet.

She chokes, swallows dust and ash and vomits again. Slop stays beside her while she heaves and spits and tries to breathe. It goes on and on until the only sound in the clearing is her panting.

Sitting in front of his smoking coals Malcolm clicks his tongue. He doesn’t look angry or amused. He looks like he’s trying to figure out how to get his fire going again.

Eleanor stands the palm leaf lamp upright, looks towards the water. She’s normal size again.

‘The kids are gone, Richard,’ she says. ‘And you can fuck off too.’

Richard brings Meg water. As she’s led out of the clearing, Len gives her a wave, a forefinger raised from her resting hand. The hand signal is battle code. The children got away.
Through the stench of her own vomit, Meg can smell Dwayne’s lust. He’s itching for more violence. He twitches in the passenger seat, slaps an impatient rhythm on the centre console.

‘I don’t know why you won’t charge her,’ he says.

She’s glad she threw up on him.

‘For defending herself?’ says Richard. He doesn’t hide his disgust at Dwayne.

‘She’s sick,’ he says.

At the hospital he helps Meg out of the car, then opens Dwayne’s door.

‘Stay here,’ he says, and slams the door.
He takes Meg’s arm though there’s no need. She’s docile, bovine. She hasn’t spoken since they left the park. What’s there to say? She’s not sobbing. She’s not anything. During the drive she’d done a double-take on anything that moved on the streets. She saw no sign of her children and so saw no signs of life.

Leading her towards emergency admissions Richard speaks quietly.

‘You don’t want to get involved with the police,’ he says. ‘Especially that one. He’s come from up north. He’s a pig.’

Meg would laugh but she’d choke on the ash backed up in her throat. Inside Richard sits her on an orange plastic seat as far away from the front doors as possible.

‘Don’t go anywhere, will you?’

Go where? She stares at the wall. Richard talks to the woman at reception and comes back with a clipboard. He’s going to pin her to it. He ticks, circles and signs the papers. This is all routine for him.

‘I know you had your kids with you back there. I know you’ve been around for a few days. I’ve seen you in the Valley and I’ve seen your boy’s face.’

Meg catches sight of herself in various glass panels, she’s hard and ugly. Two enormous men in orderlies’ uniforms are coming towards them. Richard speaks fast and low so they won’t hear.

‘I could make you stay here. I won’t. You don’t need that on record. Wes and Slop have got the kids. They’ll find you. Stay. Or this situation will get worse.’

The orderlies’ shoes squeak on the lino floor.

‘I’ve had that shiner your kid’s got,’ Richard says, and helps her stand.

She has no response to the revelation. She doesn’t care he got punched in the face. He tells the large men he found her in a park, that she’s not saying much, she has no ID, and no, she doesn’t need to be physically restrained. He walks with them to the lift.

‘You’ll be right,’ he says. ‘Stay put.’

She’s here for the night.

On the ninth floor the orderlies hand her over to a yawning nurse who leads her down a wide corridor to a room with a narrow bed, a bedside table and a brown plastic chair. Light spills in from the corridor. The room is laminated in fake, dark wood panels. The sheets on the plastic mattress are nylon. When she sits the sheets slip and slide and it
sounds like the plastic is tearing underneath her. She stands at the window. The night is still beautiful. It’s two in the morning and she’s strung up nine stories high like a baby dangling from a coat hook. The nurse asks if she wants anything. Meg ignores her.

The room faces the wrong way. She can’t see the river and so has no way to gauge the direction her children might be. An endless expanse of suburbs stretches westward towards Carl. The lights dotting the view don’t twinkle. The landscape looks like it’s smouldering under an old tarp with holes in it.

She had no time to tell them it would be alright. No time to fashion her face into an expression that might have comforted Lucy. You should always say goodbye to your children with a smile so if anything happens and you don’t see them again the last image they have of you will soothe their distress. God only knows the last image Lucy has. The last thing Charlie saw was her face contorted with rage while she yelled at him to leave her. Meg drops her head against the cold glass and cries blood tears for her empty arms.

High summer doesn’t tolerate a long night, the birds get too impatient. When dawn breaks and the ward wakes Meg is sitting in the plastic chair. She may have dozed, she’s not sure. The absence of nightmare suggests she hasn’t. Then again, even a subconscious mind wouldn’t bother with murderous visions when the marrow is already dry in the bones. All night and into the early morning she’d been aware she was being checked, every fifteen minutes the squeaking lino told her a nurse was coming down the hall. Meg didn’t turn around and the nurse didn’t speak. The shift changes about the same time the main road leading into the city fills with an ant-line of cars.

‘I’m told you haven’t slept all night.’

The nurse in the doorway is young and glowing with good cheer.

‘Can I get you anything?’ she says.

Meg shakes her head, continues to stare at the suburbs. She thinks she can see Carl’s house. If she’d told Charlie they were supposed to be on the train this morning he would still have time to get on it. But she didn’t tell him.

The nurse brings a cup of tea and a packet of sweet biscuits. Even if it is hospital policy it’s a kind thing to do but a cup of tea seems so ridiculous it’s towards the sublime. The nurse puts the tea on the window sill and perches on the end of the bed.
‘I got you extra sugar. If you want it. You’d be surprised how many people up here want extra sugar.’

*Up here. Is there no place away from Carl’s that isn’t a here?* Meg adds the extra sugar to her cup.

‘They tell me you haven’t said a word,’ says the nurse. ‘We’re not that bad, you know.’

Meg’s face hurts from not moving it. She takes a sip of the hot tea. The temperature burns her teeth.

‘Do you know what’s happening here?’ the nurse says.

She fluffs the pillow Meg hasn’t used. The sugar goes straight to Meg’s addled brain.

Her dad used to give her fifteen minutes to sulk and during that time, that’s all she was allowed to do. If she got distracted he reminded her she was sulking. When the time was up – he checked it to the second – she had to get on with whatever it was she had to get on with. A few hours pre-dawn is enough self-pity for anyone. Meg has to get on with finding her children.

‘I don’t,’ she says.

‘You’re in the closed psychiatric ward,’ says the nurse.

Meg will not cry or speak out of turn or pick up the chair and smash the window and she will not stay here. She has given Carl more ammunition to use against her. Now she’s on record as a basket case who put her four-year-old daughter to bed in the dirt. She didn’t take her injured son to hospital. She made no effort to get help when she and her children needed it most. Verdict? Unfit.

‘To keep you safe,’ the nurse says. ‘You’re not supposed to leave until the doctor sees you. It’s law.’

It’s war. In war, men will die to protect their children. Women will survive for them.

If she runs will the police try to find her? Meg doesn’t ask. Her only advantage is that they don’t know her name. She will be the best psychiatric patient without a name that ever was. They will hardly notice her. Or Lucy could end up with Carl.
The loons are crawling out of their cubicles, praying and crying and beginning a drug-induced shuffle up and down the corridors. Meg asks the nurse if she could have a shower and some clean clothes, and yes, she would like some breakfast, she’s famished.

When the nurse brings a pair of clean but stained old man’s pyjamas Meg looks at her like she’s brought an uncured animal skin.

‘You wouldn’t have anything less I’m a psychiatric patient would you? My self-esteem’s not exactly soaring here.’

The nurse looks embarrassed. Her second attempt is better. She brings an armful of clothing that has been washed so many times it’s all turned the same dull brown.

The odd cry echoes through the corridors, aggressive, distraught and primal. Meg joins the residents in the day room for a breakfast that tastes like plastic. The loonies who notice her circle her, sizing up the stranger. They ooze around the space, or they dart, there is no in-between motion.

‘Would you like to pray with me?’

The man in front of her is the size of a sumo wrestler, hands big as serving platters, mouth devoid of teeth, stomach flowing over his tracksuit pants. He stinks of chemicals.

‘No,’ Meg says.

The giant smiles pity on her, makes the sign of the cross in front of her face. She thanks him for the blessing and means it. He’s pouring goodwill on her and just as she’s done nothing to deserve his benediction, he’s done nothing to warrant her scorn. A sustained moan rolls through the ward and the sumo dashes off. In any other context his size would make his movement comical but his look of concern, of urgency, lends him grace. There’s a suffering heathen somewhere in need of his ministrations.

The day room has half a dozen tables in front of the nurse’s station. Couches line the walls. It’s a playpen for large bodies. When breakfast is done and cleared the space is set up for activities – card and board games. Meg claims a couch in the corner and watches the workings of the ward. The nurses bustle without appearing to, work on the screens at their station, shuffle files, fill each other in on which patient needs to do what today.
The ward is a bustling warren and all roads lead to this room, psycho central. The phones don’t stop. Residents accost the nurses while they’re on their way to or from the desk. The socially inclined – as opposed to the semi-comatose dribbling in corners – want to talk about god, who is top dog up here on the ninth floor. Meg’s more of a phantom here than she was on the streets. It’s midmorning and no one has brought her any news.

A dapper-looking chap, clean-shaven and in full suit, tie and polished shoes, stands next to the nurse’s station and clears his throat.

‘Anyone for the cage?’ he calls.

The nurse at the desk tries to hide her smile but she’s too late, Meg saw it and the nurse saw that she had. There was nothing untoward about the nurse’s smile. Why wouldn’t a person laugh at a loony in a suit and tie calling his people to a cage? Meg tags along behind the animated group following the suited man out of the main room. Three floors down the group of un-chaperoned inmates winds through yet more corridors to a small veranda closed in by heavy duty wire.

The cage is the resident’s smoking room. The wire, which they rattle, is to stop them flying off the sixth floor and into the arms of their beloved almighty. The veranda’s packed with bodies and smells of unwashed human flesh, of wounds that need attention, ashtrays and febrile rot. Twenty-five residents in various states of physical and psychic fever are packed into a space the size of an average bathroom. The oldest must be seventy, the youngest a wraithlike late teenage boy talking to himself about the drugs that opened the doors of his perception. New arrivals are greeted with affection. Some try to engage Meg in lunatic ramblings about god but she doesn’t respond. She has enough heart to mean them no ill will, but not enough to make the effort to speak to them. They don’t take offence and resume their gossip, none of it salacious. After five minutes, Meg knows that Damo’s gone to jail, Bernie’s going back to court, the halfway house in the Valley is closing and Rebecca’s children have been taken off her, again, and this time they’ll probably end up in care for good. Meg takes the lift back up to the ninth floor.

In the day room the unwanted and unwashed stare at walls and scratch at imaginary sores on their forearms and temples. The hum of the ward gets into Meg’s head. She can’t shake it, or think it gone. A woman with candy pink lips and cheeks wearing pink feathers, sequins and high heels, tosses a white feather boa around herself.
She’s talking to herself, replaying an argument from another life. She bats her eyes, flutters a hand to her throat, drops her chin and looks up at an imaginary paramour through false eyelashes. She’s more Blanche Dubois than Blanche Dubois. Meg wants to tell the guy not to be such a dumb dolt.

Visitors arrive. But not Slop. A bewildered mother, one of the generation that had their children late, comes to see the wraithlike boy. In her mid-fifties, her teenage child is a world away from her. The drug that’s sent her son to the psych ward probably wasn’t invented when she was young. She holds his hand while he talks about god. Meg leaves them to it.

At the end of the hallway that passes by her room she finds a sunroom twice the size of the day room. One wall is made of glass and the room is filled with natural light. There’s no one in it. It feels like there never has been. The couches are covered in a sunflower print that washes the room warm yellow. Through the bank of windows she can see the river at last. The hospital’s machinery whirs behind her, punctuated by cries from the inmates. Meg leans against the glass, arms straight, and thinks she has picked out the park where she last saw her children.

‘Ah, Meg. There you are.’

How do they know her name? She hasn’t told them anything. Something’s happened to the children. Chanting childhood’s universal prayer – nonononono, pleasepleasepleaseplease – she turns to face whoever has said her name. Her eyes are slow to adjust, her comprehension slower still. The prayer runs faster on its loop – pleasepleaseplease, nonononono, pleasepleaseplease. Jude’s bulk takes shape in the yellow room.

‘Slop sent me,’ Jude says. ‘He won’t come here. He hates hospitals. I have a soft spot for them myself. Anyway, he gave me instructions. The first thing I have to say to you – which I’ve already blown with my preamble here, hope you understand, I’ve had a hell of a morning …’

Jude’s body parts piece themselves together at high speed into digital sharp focus.

‘What message?’

Meg may have shouted the question. It doesn’t matter, in here she’s just another loon expelling excess psychic confusion. Jude’s holding out the bag Flo gave them.
'They’re safe,’ she says.
Meg’s knees turn to water. The loonies cry out. Meg snatches the bag.
‘Don’t thank me,’ says Jude. ‘I was due for some clean sheets and a decent feed anyway. I need a rest. I told Him already. I said, “God,” I said. “You’re on your own, Mate,” I said. “I’m taking a few days off.” So, you know, Meg, don’t thank me or anything.’
‘What else did he say?’
‘Who, God?’
Jude looks terrible, frail, with bags under her eyes that reach down to her mouth and a severe case of the shakes.
‘Slop. What else did Slop say?’
‘You’re welcome,’ says Jude. ‘They’re with the Blackfellas up on Mount Glorious.’
Every image from the six o’clock entertainment news passes in front of Meg, every lurid and pornographic headline from the tabloid rags screaming about the evils of black communities – decaying, overcrowded, dust bowls of red dirt and asbestos that pass for housing where drunken lawless black men and women abuse children in unspeakable ways. Meg’s on her feet, hand over mouth, innards unravelling. Jude rolls her eyes.
‘Oh, don’t be so bloody white,’ she says. ‘You met Eleanor, yes?’
‘Yes, but …’
‘And you met Wesley?’
‘I did, but …’
‘And they let you stay in their camp?’
‘Lucy is four!’
‘And I’m forty-four!’
If they don’t quiet, a nurse will come to check on them. Every minute Meg’s here is a minute closer to a confrontation with the police, or child protection or Carl. She’s giving away whatever advantage she might have had. She’s wasted a whole night thinking nothing, doing nothing, being spineless. She has to get out and find her children and she has to do it without calling attention to herself.
Heart somewhere in the vicinity of her soft palate Meg slumps onto the couch. She and Jude face the windows. Jude’s breathing is laboured. Meg’s seen this in Carl after a binge, the trembling like a broken animal in a trap in the cold. She checks the contents of the bag but can’t see what she’s looking at and gives up.

‘Gandhi said rat houses hold significant spiritual power. Did you know that?’ says Jude. Meg shakes her head. ‘Churches, graveyards and rat houses, I think is what he said.’

Meg hasn’t any idea what Jude is talking about. Nor does she care.

‘Listen, Pet,’ Jude says. Her hangover, if that’s all it is, has knocked the clown out of her. ‘Slop will not let any harm come to your children and if you think he would then you don’t deserve to call him friend. Anyway, it was Wes who spirited young Persephone away, yes?’

Lucy, eyes wide with fear, under Wes’s arm like a sack of sand. Charlie yanked into the bushes by his shirt.

‘Yes,’ Meg says.
She puts her head in her hands.

‘Well,’ says Jude. ‘Do you really think that Blackfella doesn’t know how to hide kids?’

Wes might well be able to hide a B-double in the middle of the mall but hiding her children is one thing, keeping them safe is another. There are a thousand questions Meg needs to ask but not one she dares speak.

They hear the lunch trolley rattling, calling the lunatics to the day room. The smell of food sparks Jude up but it smells just like breakfast to Meg.

‘I have to go and find them,’ she says.

‘Of course you do.’

‘But I’m supposed to see a doctor before I go anywhere.’

Random calls from the moderately insane drift down the hallway.

‘Or they could section you,’ says Jude. Whether it’s true or not, the prospect excites her. ‘Tricky.’

Food has set the inmates buzzing. The pink flamingo howls, ‘Oh, why doesn’t he love me. Why?’
‘Bloody starving, I am,’ says Jude. ‘Get us a sandwich, will you? I need some brain food. We’re gonna bust you out.’

For someone who spends so much energy trying to intimidate people, Jude has a childlike ability to commit, absolutely, to her own abandon.

‘But the police?’ Meg says.

‘Fuck the police.’

If Jude had a glass in her hand it would be raised in toast to her own irreverence. Her plan is so simple it’s genius. When it’s quiet after lunch, when the visitors have left and the inmates are locked in introspection and the nurses are towards the end of their shift, Meg and Jude will get the lift to the ground floor and Jude will walk Meg out the front door.

‘That’s it?’ says Meg.

‘Well, you won’t be abseiling down the building will you? The windows don’t open for a start,’ Jude says. ‘They know me. They’ll think you’re with me. They don’t have time to keep tabs on you. Us asylum seekers all look the same to them anyway. The police are a worry. Don’t get noticed. Find your children. Sort the rest out later.’

As they pass the desk in psycho central, a nurse tells Jude she’s checked her in and to let her know if she wants anything.

‘Thanks, Pet,’ says Jude. ‘Just taking this one to the cage.’

In the lift she gives Meg the key to her bedsit and a napkin from lunch with the address written on it.

‘You’ll be safe there,’ Jude says. ‘It’s protected. Don’t be scared by the décor. Leave the key in my letter box, number nine.’

She hands Meg a piece of paper folded into a square the size of a five cent piece.

‘Drugs,’ says Jude. ‘To sleep. If you don’t find the kids tonight, take them. You need rest.’

Subterfuge lightens their step as they amble arm in arm through the hospital’s main entrance into what Jude calls ‘the grounds’. The entrance is grand but there are no grounds that Meg can see. To the side of the main door is a park bench and beyond that a narrow footpath leads to the road where the traffic is thundering. Jude looks worse outside. After a night in controlled temperature, the heat hits Meg a body blow. The
further from the entrance they get the weaker Jude appears. She hasn’t linked her arm through Meg’s for show.

‘There’s money in the bag,’ Jude says. ‘Slop and Troy collected it. You should use it for a cab.’

Jude stops abruptly.

‘Come on.’

Meg tries to tug her along. Jude’s trembling and sweating, her eyes cloudy.

‘I can’t come with you, Pet,’ she says. ‘I wasn’t joking. I need a rest.’

Meg hadn’t understood she’d be leaving the hospital alone.

‘Besides,’ Jude says. ‘They got good drugs here and I’m gonna go get me some. Now, go.’ She pushes Meg. ‘God speed.’

Meg ploughs through the heat to the road to hail a cab. Feeling every inch the mental patient in her nondescript brown, she scratches in the bag to see how much money she has, a five dollar note and lots of change, close to thirty dollars. A fortune. There are no kid’s clothes in the bag which Meg takes as a good sign. As the taxi pulls into the flow of traffic she turns to wave to Jude but she’s gone.

‘Safe asylum,’ Meg whispers.
The camp’s deserted. The ash cooled silken on burnt wood. Lucy’s presence is traceable in the hollows dug in dirt. On the river bank, an area kicked and scuffed where Charlie and the other boys danced. Charlie blown to dust. No hope of following him there. At the water’s edge Meg calls up the women but none come to comfort her.

She hunts for clues to her children’s whereabouts. She tracks their escape route. Beyond the tree line it’s a short run up the hill to the road and into the labyrinth of workers’ cottages crowded onto narrow streets. With Meg and Eleanor’s duelling hysterics for cover, Wes and the kids had ample time to disappear.

Back under the willow Meg changes out of the institution’s threadbare clothes and into the better-smelling offerings from Flo, baggy cotton pants and shirt. As lovely as it
is, she couldn’t wear the red dress today, it demands an audacity she doesn’t have. She uses the dress for a purse, ties it in a knot around a clean pair of knickers, the money left over from the cab and the pills Jude’s given her. She shoves the institution’s clothes into the knapsack and puts it on the ground near Eleanor’s throne so they’ll know she’s been here.

She could stay until nightfall but it’s hours away and Eleanor and the others might not come back at all. Besides, according to the television shows, there’s some theory about returning to the scene of the crime. Surveillance is kept up in case the wrongdoer comes for a victory lap. Meg’s crime? Criminal negligence of children.

*I wanted to be invisible for a few days, so I could think, so I could make a plan.*

*And did you make a plan?*

*My plan was to not have a plan for a few days. I needed time to sort it out.*

*And what did you sort out?*

*That I was right in the first place.*

*How’s that?*

*We were doing okay as long as we were out of sight.*

She kicks dirt over the imprint of Lucy’s hip and shoulder, smooths the ground flat with her hands and pats it down, leaving a shallow impression of her palms. The child was never there.

It’s peak hour on the river. Meg moves against the tide of commuters filing off the ferry. Every mobile phone that buzzes or tings or plays disco *Fur Elise* relays news of her children that no one receives and no one passes onto her. She keeps a furtive lookout for signs of curiosity or recognition. Surely they can see she is a childless mother, a woman with empty arms. She doesn’t pay for the ferry ride. She’s paid the river enough. She’s hocked her children for the fare. She watches the water for signs of life.

She’s only been to Mt Glorious once with her father when she was still a child. There is no town there, just a coffee shop on a long winding stretch of road dotted with letterboxes at the end of hidden driveways. Even if she knew how to get there, what would be the point? All night walking the driveways and knocking on strangers doors? Anyway, the kids will come looking for her in the city. If they can.
The park recedes behind her while the city rises in front. They won’t be there in the dark corridors of the cement grid where sunlight only reaches an hour a day when it bores directly down, where there is no warmth in winter, killing heat in summer, wind tunnels in autumn and no burst of life in spring.

On land, she walks and walks and walks. She sees her children everywhere, in every doorway that stinks of piss and heartache, in every window where she checked her reflection to make sure she was still there – here – nowhere. She sees them as they stood on the city’s corners not knowing which direction to take. Charlie with Lucy on his back, her wings torn and shabby, crouched in the city’s hidden crevices only to be driven out by the heat. They fall out of buses and get stuck half way across busy roads. Unable to go forward or back, Charlie dances like he’s on barbed wire. He and Lucy are targets the city has locked onto and Charlie is dancing for their lives.

Meg walks until she thinks she can’t walk any further, then she walks some more. Her children are not in or under the fig tree. They’re not playing soccer in the park. The community centre’s closed, no free food for the displaced on Tuesday nights, not here anyway. They’re not waiting for her at the bottom of Fagin’s steps. She stops on the rock wall. They’re in the cars that pass too fast in front of her. When she sees a child’s blond head bob up in a back seat she jumps to her feet.

‘Lucy!’ she yells.

The city delivers the sound back to her. She has shrieked her daughter’s name. When a police car passes Meg crosses her feet and drops her chin, shielding her face from the blank enquiry of a bored public servant. She tears at the rock wall with her fingers, kicks the backs of her heels against it. She thinks she won’t survive the night, knows she will, and the next night and the night after that. Survival will be her penance. Children or not, she will go on.

‘Meg?’

Her name is spoken with a tenderness designed and delivered not to frighten, the same tone a mother might use to call a child back from imminent danger. It takes a few seconds to realise she is the Meg being spoken to. How many people has she identified herself to? How long have they been out here?
‘You okay?’ The cabbie leans over and opens the passenger door for her. ‘Can I take you somewhere?’

They were in his cab. He wouldn’t take her money. He was taken by the vines. He drove them to the ferry and winked at her. He couldn’t stop it all from rolling over her and the kids. She didn’t tell him her name.

‘How do you know my name?’ she says.
‘Slop,’ he says. ‘Hop in.’
The taxi reeks of luxury, sickly and overpowering, but the car’s not new.
‘Where is he?’
‘Haven’t seen him,’ he says.
The illusion of privilege comes from a car-shaped cardboard cut-out hanging off the rear-view mirror. If you can’t buy the goods you can torment yourself with the lack of them by simulating the smell.

‘Belt up,’ he says. She does. ‘I’m Daniel.’
Driving in a car is deceptive in a way that travel by ferry is not. On a ferry the elements still hold dominion, you know you’re at their mercy, same with swaying buses and rattling trains. No wonder people die in cars. The security is artifice, hubris even. You’re strapped into a pod that can be crushed like a matchbox under a boot. Daniel’s phone’s plugged into something on the dash.

‘I not sure where my children are.’
Daniel unplugs the dinging and flashing. The car slips silent and unseen through the early evening. He stops at the cab rank in the Valley and listens while she tells him what happened in the park.

‘I know Wes,’ he says. ‘I drive him and Slop around sometimes.’
His is a rich and raspy drawl. She wishes she’d flirted with him when flirting was possible.

‘Slop wouldn’t let the kids go anywhere they’d be hurt,’ he says.
She tells him someone else said that.
‘Lucy will be scared without me,’ she says. ‘They won’t know what to do.’
Though she hasn’t asked him to, Daniel buys her food. He says bodies need fuel. When the heart is in distress the body burns through its reserves at triple speed.
‘People forget the two are related,’ he says. ‘The body and the heart.’

She doesn’t know what she’s eating only that it’s tasteless, like chewing on a wad of second-hand gum. The bicycle police take up position for the night. She slouches into the seat, holding her breath and grateful for the faux-luxury tinted windows. Even if it was Richard and the Thug, they’d have to be breathing on the glass before they saw her.

‘Slop was a lawyer. Did you know that?’ says Daniel.

‘Some people think lawyers are the scum of the earth,’ she says.

‘Slop’s more you’re salt type.’

Smiling cracks the crust that is her skin. The food has cleared her head but sharpened her visions. She sees her children as if through the back of a Dali painting, melting one moment, hyper real the next. She looks for Troy, for the working girls, for the ratbag rabble of younger kids but the Valley’s deserted.

‘Where is everybody?’ she says.

‘Tuesday night,’ he says. ‘That’s the weekend down here. We do Sunday when everyone else is doing Tuesday.’

She declines his offer to keep driving her around. Better to walk until she drops. There must a point at which her body will shut itself down. She reads Jude’s address to him. It’s not far.

‘If Slop say’s they’re on Mt Glorious, that’s where they are,’ says Daniel. ‘They’re not lost.’

The leopard tree’s coloured lights blink on. They illuminate nothing.

‘They’re lost to me though, aren’t they?’ Meg says.

Taking the mall to the station would lead her past the police. She takes the back streets Jude led her and Lucy down. She climbs the broken escalator and runs the gauntlet of piss-smelling dank in the disused arm of the station. Christmas muzak seeps up from underground. On platform three she watches the stragglers of the office world – men who’ve called wives to tell them they’ll be late home and will arrive sheepish and defensive to a cold dinner, underpaid and overworked women who still have kids to collect, bathe and feed. Meg won’t be doing that tonight. Trains come in, disgorge their cargo and pull out. She waits for Troy with his impish grin and bringing news of her
children. She stays until the last of daylight fades from the tunnels but Troy doesn’t come and neither do her children.

At the far end of the platform a group of kids move around each other as though they’re a single blob of flesh. They’re late teens, all male, eight of them and not a weedy one among them. Their necks are wide as their thighs. They’re well-fed and well-housed. They’re tourists here, not people of the Valley. Her steps echo off the ceiling and dripping walls and return to lodge in her chest. Since she was twelve she has feared packs of late teenage boys turning circles in a fog of self-generating testosterone. Once she had the kids, she’d cross a road rather than push the pram through that fog. The pack’s alpha is easy to pick. He’s taller than the rest, more handsome, his teeth are straighter, he has a bigger swing in his swagger. He steps forward, plants his legs apart and puts his arms out, not in welcome but to taunt. He sneers at her. She knows this type, this moment, when reason is redundant and she is merely the shape of a human, assumed not to be attached to an actual person.

‘You right, Lady?’ he says.

His puppies jeer. Getting this close was stupid.

‘I was looking for someone,’ Meg says. ‘Never mind.’

As she turns to go his fingers dig into the flesh on her upper arm. He’d have more strength in one of his oversized thighs than she has in her whole body. She notes the fear in her body, her heart’s arrhythmic spasm, her mouth lined with the iron taste of fear. It’s only physical. Fear of this man-child and his pack in a feeding frenzy over her carcass is nothing compared to her empty arms. She looks at the hand on her arm then up at him.

‘That would be my body you’re touching,’ she says.

She is meat to him, pray to his predator, but compared to Carl, he’s an unlikable toddler stamping his foot and holding his breath. He drops her arm, waves his hand in the air like it’s been burned.

‘I beg your pardon,’ he says. ‘Who’re you looking for? Perhaps we can help?’

Slop wouldn’t befriend this lot in their laundered clothes and expensive shoes and their teeth well-attended to. There’ll be chunks of quality steak waiting for them in comfortable homes on the hills above the river. They have no need of a Slop, couldn’t even conceive of him.
‘No,’ she says. ‘You can’t help. You wouldn’t know him.’

Meg turns her back on them and walks away.

‘Have a good night, Lady,’ the alpha calls after her.

She gives him the finger behind her back and prickles with the expectation he will retaliate. She stops herself running to the escalator.

Dark has descended while she’s been underground. The Christmas lights look dejected without a crowd underneath them. It should be cold. She should have the satisfaction of pulling an inadequate coat around her and leaning into a biting wind. The police have replaced their pushbikes with a paddy wagon. She recognises them, and if she knows their faces, surely they know hers. She takes an alley to avoid passing too close to them.

She walks, weaving her way through unfamiliar streets until she comes to the stone cliff that contains the river. From here, on good days, the water would shine gold in long afternoon light, and on good nights, frolic in silver moonlight. Tonight it is matte black. She faces the direction of Mt Glorious but the city lights burn the scenery beyond into a uniform dark. The bank of black mountains has no discernible peaks, nothing to suggest the whereabouts of her children. She puts her hands together and her lips to her fingertips. God must get tired of people like her who have sudden conversions to faith in times when their mouths are full of iron, fear punctures their lungs, and their hearts pump blood in the wrong direction. She cups her hands to make an empty space but no essence of Lucy wriggles into her palms. The river has given her nothing. The city the same.

According to Daniel, Jude’s place is on the street behind the Empire where she and a band of stale children were the only patrons and Troy harnessed the moonlight to entertain them. A couple loiter on the steps of the theatre, sharing a cardboard cask of wine. They’re late sixties and, unlike the jocks at the station, have nothing to prove, no titles to defend and no need to stake the territory as theirs. The woman gives Meg a nod, a benign acknowledgement that they’re on the same street corner. The man barely glances up. Meg’s legs seem to think they can go on without her but the smell of rotgut wine has the effect of walking into a wall. She can’t remember the last time she slept but the thought of lying down in Jude’s bedsit grieving her missing children is intolerable.

‘Excuse me,’ she says. ‘Do you know Slop?’
They don’t laugh which gives them away. Quicker off the mark than her companion, the woman attempts to cover by laughing just a bit too late. The man keeps his head down, worrying away at something in his hands. Meg climbs the half dozen steps and jams herself into the corner and out of the light.

‘Tall, skinny man?’ she says.

The woman shakes her head but she’s lying and Meg knows it.

‘He has my children,’ she says.

The man snaps his head up, takes in Meg, grunts, and goes back to whatever’s in his hands that has him engrossed.

‘Or, he knows where they are,’ Meg says. ‘My boy and my little girl.’

The man fills a plastic cup from the cardboard box and offers it to Meg. She drinks it in one go. It’s poison. She holds the cup out for more. He obliges. The empty street is soundproofed by the late hour. Meg’s words hang suspended in the dark. She sculls the second glass then addresses the woman.

‘I’ve looked everywhere I know where to look for him.’ No response. ‘Do you know Wes?’ Meg says.

The woman drains her glass, holds it out for a refill. Meg positions herself in front of her. When she turns away, Meg moves with her.

‘You know them,’ she says. ‘I know you do.’

The theatre cracks and groans. The sound reverberates in the gutted auditorium, steel against steel, warping out of necessity. Warp or break. Meg takes the woman’s hand.

‘Please,’ she says. ‘My daughter is only four years old.’

With her free hand she takes the paper with Jude’s address on it and presses it into the woman’s palm.

‘If you see them tell them this is where I am.’

The woman pockets the address without looking at it.

‘Please,’ Meg says. ‘Help me.’

She drops the woman’s hand. The Empire sounds like the empty hull of an unmanned ship, a ghost ship adrift.
‘No one’s gonna find anyone at this time on a Tuesday night,’ says the woman. ‘But if I see them, I’ll tell them you’re looking for them. Okay? We’ll put it out on the jungle drums.’

The man laughs. He’s shaping a strand of thin wire, bending and reshaping it. He inspects his handiwork with one eye closed, then bends and shapes some more. The street leads down to the park, but all Meg can see is free-floating black on black in tunnel vision. She leans against the wall to steady herself. The man stands.

‘Here,’ he says. He gives her the scrap of wire he’s been shaping. ‘You need sleep.’

The woman puts the wine and plastic cups into a bag.

‘They’ll hear those drums before morning,’ says the sculptor.

He takes the woman’s hand and leads her down the street.

‘If your kids are with those two, they’ll be alright,’ says the woman. She turns, and walking backwards, calls, ‘Sleep. Good luck.’

When the couple are out of sight Meg looks at the object in her hand. He’s made a bed, like the one in Van Gogh’s room.

On Jude’s long street Meg knocks herself repeatedly on the head with a closed fist, not to hurt herself but to turn her brain off. The wine mixed with the late hour spins macabre images in front of her. They’re all in the kitchen at Carl’s. Six-week-old Lucy’s head rests in the palm of his large hand. Ten-year-old Charlie’s outside the screen door, kicking and tearing at the flywire. He screams at Carl to stop, yells at Meg to do something. She’s in front of the stove and cannot move. She can’t save Lucy. Carl smirks at Charlie and crushes Lucy’s skull. Meg hears the pop, the moment the bones in Lucy’s head break into shards and pierce her brain.

Falling through vertigo, Meg grabs at anything that might keep her upright, fences, letterboxes, the branches of trees. She lurches through the dark spaces between pale pools made by the streetlights. Lucy’s skull pops. Charlie smashes his head against the door. Meg’s heart pumps tar. It’s trying to get through her pores. She stays out of the light and reels from fence to gate, whispering her children’s names but the dark erases them as soon as they’re out of her mouth. The city has cast her aside.
Her hands are slabs of meat trying to get the key in Jude’s door. Once inside, she doesn’t have to look for the light switch, there are no curtains and a street light directly outside. She retrieves Jude’s pills and chokes trying to swallow them dry then cups her hands under a tap and drinks deep. She hangs the red dress over a chair back so the wrinkles will fall out while she sleeps. Tomorrow she will be brazen, she will wear the dress that demands courage and she will find her children. Opposite her is a mound on top of a single bed. She sweeps everything to one side, crawls onto the bed and pulls armfuls of the soft material on top of her.

Tiny on the edge of a mountain, Lucy calls and calls for her. Charlie kneels over Lucy in a ditch on the side of a red dirt back road. He pulls the wayward curls off her face and arranges her clothes to cover her broken body. Meg tries to call out to them but horror makes her mute.

She thinks she should pray but doesn’t know how, or who to pray to if she did. Is there a god for childless mothers? She faces the wall and weeps and curls herself tight so nothing will seep out her pores. Loss is her lullaby.
Green-grey streaks blur the sky through the window at the end of the bed. No birdsong calls up the dawn. She’s roasting and the bed’s soaked with sweat. She clamped herself shut to plug her pores but her heart bled out anyway.

Cutting through the green dark, digital numbers, 345, float in the centre of the room. Her neck and jaw are locked. Her bones have doubled in volume, her muscles thinned to membranes. She’s pinned to the bed. Pain that starts in the back of her head pounds through her in time with her sluggish pulse. The mound of material she pulled on top of her is heavy as wet clay.

There is a familiar flavour to this malaise, she knows it from the mornings after she’d taken too many sleepers so Carl couldn’t stir her no matter how – or what he tried.
Two glasses of rotgut and Jude’s pills have made her putrid, body and mind. She hears the moaning in the room as though it’s not coming from her. She pushes herself up through the wet clay and swings her feet to the floor. When the room stops spinning she goes to the sink and guzzles water.

Looking for the bathroom she rattles every door knob in the corridor. Someone grumbles at her. She’s almost passed out on her feet when she closes the door to Jude’s room behind her and walks into the absence of her children.

Things unfathomable, human and not, move in the green muck in front of the window. Jesus with his bleeding heart pumping ripples in the eerie light. His child mother Mary rocks her infant side to side. A globe spins at a reckless speed. Chained to the window handle, dragons the size of chicks strain against their bonds. A miniature Charlie in denim overalls and a wig of wire ringlets dances beside a fat grinning Buddha. This is Jude’s protection, a spread of mismatched icons that come alive and scuttle around in the depthless green of water that’s been stagnant for eons.

A lone bird squawks a tuneless call to arms. Meg ignores it. Morning will wait. The pills pull her under while the green streaks turn to jaundiced blonde, the sky a bloodshot red and Jude’s menagerie dreams her dreams for her so Meg doesn’t have to.

She wakes sober. A single wide blade of sunlight cuts through the window. Her thinking tracks towards last night’s loop of misery but she shuts it down. The children are safe on a mountain. It may be deluded to believe it, but delusion she can work with. All the Valley folk can’t be wrong about Slop. Jude brought the bag Flo gave them to the loony bin. The last time Meg saw the bag Charlie was running through the bush with it. He could have dropped it, but what possible reason would Jude and Slop and the rest of them have to deceive her? It is Slop’s self-appointed job to protect people like her who come to the Valley ill-equipped to survive its hazards. Nothing he’s done or said has given her reason to doubt him. Slop didn’t put them in danger; danger found them under a willow tree. The children are out of the city and out of Carl’s reach. They’ll be snuggled up, talking quietly. Charlie will not be curled in a ball snivelling for his mother.

It’s after seven. The city’s grinding its daytime dirge. The dawn orchestra has finished, the birdsong sporadic already. She takes a towel from the back of the door and
only remembers going to the bathroom in the middle of the night when she’s in the corridor. She lets the water pelt her. Back in the room, Meg pulls on the red dress.

Jude’s is a standard bedsit – bed against one wall, kitchenette opposite and a couch facing a television that’s crammed into a corner. But nothing else about the room is standard. A pile of newspapers acts as a retaining wall for the garbage that grows on one side of the fridge, a fecund garden of waste. On the other side are dozens of empty and neatly stacked vodka bottles.

Though expansive, the pile of garbage is not the room’s defining feature. On a table in front of the window is an eye-watering array of religious and voodoo objects. They’re so incongruous they look like a blasphemy rather than the expression of worship Meg knows it is. There is the Jesus Meg saw in her drugged delirium, and the virgin child mother. What she interpreted as midget dragons are beads, feathers, stones, bones and shells strung on lengths of leather hung from the window handles. There’s a plaster replica of Raphael’s cherubs, a large brass bell, Bibles, horoscope and numerology books, books of poetry, the complete works of Wilde and Shakespeare, tarot cards, Indian medicine cards and the Book of Runes, its stones scattered across the table. Incense sticks, little Buddhas, bigger Buddhas, and a wizard in robes. A mandala in the centre of the table is covered in candles of every colour and shape, including a golliwog, that politically incorrect memento of little black Sambo and a battalion of angels made of plaster and wax. Finger puppets of the Greek scholars, Plato, Aristotle and Sophocles, at their feet is a quote written in a loving hand and attributed to each. Children’s figurines of Pocahontas and Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz. Alice from Wonderland looks up at the bleeding-hearted Jesus. She’s standing on a piece of paper with curiouser and curiouser written on it. A globe has a sun pendant hung on one side and a moon on the other. Jude has positioned the three wise men so they’re dwarfed by the laughing Buddha who’s wearing a Star of David and looking down on them.

Reading from left to right, the table of prayers changes tone, from childlike wonder it moves to a fearful awe. A fading photograph in a frame with broken glass shows five young girls who’re obviously sisters. Jude’s on the end, the youngest. Beside this photo is another, dog-eared and unframed, of one of the girls in the group. She’s a large young woman – the same shape Jude is now – doe-eyed in her wedding dress,
holding a bouquet of paper daisies. The photo’s been ripped in half. All that remains of the groom is a forearm in a formal suit. If the angels have been cut out of cards or books they have been cut carefully, the pages of laminated poetry likewise. The tear in this photo is violent. In front of it, tokens are laid out like an obsessive torturer’s tools of the trade, a small axe, nunchuks, knuckleduster, meat cleaver, replica gun and a switch knife, blade drawn and pointing towards the door. Meg steps out of its path. Under the bride Jude has written RIP.

Meg sees herself curled in an old photograph, her wedding day smile frozen in stopped time and an arsenal of weaponry laid out to protect her memory.

She turns her back on the display and takes a step into the middle of the room. If she were ever to hear the jungle drums it would be here in the presence of Jude’s irreverent prayer. But all she hears is the city.

Under the sink she finds a tube of toothpaste with mould around the opening. The thought of using it turns her stomach but she’d swallow paint stripper if it promised to mask the taste of last night’s tar. She uses her finger for a toothbrush. In the wardrobe she finds black hair slides with pearls and glass beads stuck to them. She pulls her hair off her face and pins it back with the bejewelled slides. She needs to not look like the woman who fell off the train a few nights ago. She wants Charlie to see she cares enough to make herself presentable. She wants Lucy to tell her she looks pretty. Wants them to think she never doubted she’d find them.

The fridge is bare except for the dregs of a tub of yoghurt growing its own culture and some unrecognisable vegetable matter in the bottom drawer. In the cupboard she finds dry biscuits and an old bottle of honey but the concoction barely resembles food. She gathers the remnants in her mouth and spits the indigestible dough down the sink, takes a few mouthfuls of water and spits again.

She imagines the tap-tapping on the window is an aural hallucination and doesn’t dare turn around. The tapping persists. Someone’s calling her name. Charlie and Lucy don’t call her Meg. She smooths the red dress down, lifts her chin, touches a hand to her hair and turns.

The shape outside the window is long, thin and trying to jump out of its skin. Slop’s smile is luminous through the mottled glass. She sees it as though it’s detached
from his face. Her children are safe. Mud-thick blood fills her empty arms. Lucy and Charlie have dodged the river.

Slop hops from foot to foot, gesturing for her to come outside and whisper-shouting about missing peak hour and Wes and a car and that she should hurry. She spins to gather her things, then remembers she has nothing worth gathering. She rifles in the bed for the sculpture made of twisted wire, reshapes it with trembling hands and places it on the table next to the bride in perpetuity. So she’ll have somewhere to rest.

Closing the door behind her she thinks Jude’s room with its crazy paraphernalia is not just somewhere to say a prayer, it is a prayer. If it was necessary to bleed her heart out and sweat herself to a husk, she’s glad she got to do that in someone else’s prayer. She drops Jude’s key in the letterbox on her run to the car.

‘They’re fine,’ Slop says, holding the door open for her.

‘How did you know where to find me?’ she says.

‘Called Jude at the rest home,’ says Slop.

In the driver’s seat, Wes can’t keep a smile from crinkling around his eyes and mouth. Meg keeps her head down, fiddles with the seat belt she’s already tightened so they won’t see she’s stung. She spent half the night searching for Slop and he knew where she was the whole time.

‘Let us venture up the Mountain,’ says Slop.

Meg loses her sense of direction before they’re out of the city. Peaking on anticipation, she’s like a sixteen-year-old on her way to her first date. She wishes she had presents for the kids. A plastic bit of shiny junk would do for Lucy. Harder to think of one for Charlie. It would need to mean so much. She looks from one of the men in the front seat to the other. Of the two, Wes would be more likely to have an idea about a gift for Charlie. But even if they were not in this heightened hour, she couldn’t ask him. He hasn’t addressed her directly, not a single word in any of their encounters.

“‘Wes talks alright,’” Daisy had said. “‘Just not to you cos you’re a fuckin’ idiot.’”

The drive is so slow it’s excruciating. Slop tries to tell her what happened after she was taken to the loony bin but his account is fractured, whole hours are missing.
From what he doesn’t say she knows he had little, if anything, to do with spiriting her children to safety. It was Wes. Wes knows the territory.

The more she needs to say to him the less she is able. She looks at the rear-view mirror and knows he’s avoiding eye contact.

Slop tells her what he can about where the kids are. Wes grunts to emphasise a point, or laughs at Slop’s way of telling it. A woman called Ruth has been taking kids in, black mostly, for close to thirty years. Sometimes ‘the department’ knows about it, most times they don’t.

‘So, you turn up with my children in the middle of the night and it’s business as usual?’

‘That’s right,’ says Slop.

Wes clears his throat, shifts in his seat. He’s steps ahead of her, knows what’s coming. She’s on shaky ground. Her dark-skinned son doesn’t give her immunity.

‘And my kids are okay?’ she says.

Wes laughs a warning. She stares with intent at the rear-view mirror but he’s expert at ignoring unwanted communication. His is the deadest of pans. She addresses the changing landscape outside.

‘Jude told me it was a Blackfella place,’ she says.

Wes looks at Slop, incredulous, and laughs from the belly up.

‘Fuck,’ she says.

Wes chuckles to himself.

‘The place isn’t easy to explain,’ Slop says. ‘You’ll see.’

The suburbs have given way to bushland which thickens by the minute.

‘Ruth’s white,’ Wes says. ‘If that makes you feel any better.’

She doesn’t tell him it does. He knows anyway. He’s not laughing anymore. Slop plays with the radio for a while but all he gets is white noise. When it has cleared the air he turns it off.

The climb is treacherous, closer to single lane than double, the corners blind and sharp. Meg has to hold onto the door handle so she doesn’t slide from one side of the car to the other. At first she thinks the mountain is too steep to have reaped the benefit of the morning sun and that the road is still damp from the dew, but sees they’re driving through
rainforest. An hour from the suffocating heat of the city she’s dumbstruck by dripping wet iridescent greens, giant palms and ferns, undergrowth thick and succulent, and gums with girths so wide she and the kids couldn’t join hands around them.

Wes pulls into a hidden driveway and through a forest of ironbarks that must be as old as the mountain. The vegetation falls away to show a view that includes the city and stretches all the way to the sea and beyond, if there is such a place.

The jumble of a house that appears started as a single-roomed weekender. The original structure is obvious from the roof line. A second story has been added above one part of the house, in another a deck facing the view is connected by a narrow corridor covered in heavy plastic sheeting. From conception to build, someone dreamed up an extension and started building an hour later, without a plan and with any material to hand. Gnarly natives have overtaken the garden beds. In the foreground of one, a store dummy has been painted black, dressed in a red lap-lap and has a spear in its hand. It’s the strongest-looking thing on the block. Taken together the place looks flimsy, like a light rain would send it sliding down the mountain. In Meg’s imaginings, Ruth ran a ship-shape rig, everything in its place and every place with a function. The house and its surrounds look like a fairground that’s been overrun by anarchists.

She imagined Ruth on the elderly side of middle-aged, grey-haired, softly spoken, and bent over by thirty years of child care. The woman who comes out of the house is built like an oak. She looks strong enough to fell one of the old gums with a hand axe, or slit a goat’s throat and carry the carcass home on her shoulder. She’s shouting at one of the half dozen kids running along behind and beside her. The kids ignore her, run faster, squeal louder and push each other into her. She has a plump black toddler on one hip, and holds tight to the collar of a mongrel dog with her other hand.

The poise Meg wanted to meet her children with eludes her. She feels like a teenager all right, out of her depth, eager to please, and so self-conscious she’d rather sulk in the car than interact with the formidable woman barking orders and stomping towards her.

‘One of you kids get this bloody blind old dog out of here before I fall over her.’

If Ruth falls over the ground will break. The fat toddler pulls her hair. Wes outright laughs at Meg whose efforts to put herself together have failed.
‘You might want to get your jaw off the ground,’ he says. He gives Ruth a weary smile. ‘Mum,’ he says.

He takes the fat baby, who dribbles recognition at him, and goes into the house. Jumping up and down and talking at once, all but one of the kids follow him. The one that’s stayed holds Ruth’s hand and buries his face in her thigh.

‘You don’t look so good, Slop,’ Ruth says.

‘I’m alright,’ he says.

He leads the blind dog around to the front of the house. Meg’s already-burning face is now blazing. It hadn’t occurred to her that helping her might have cost Slop, or Wes or Ruth and the people she harbours on the mountain.

Ruth’s pale skin is freckled and weathered, the hand she offers Meg hard and calloused.

‘Ruth,’ she says.

Her grip is reassuring but the look she gives Meg is a vivisection.

‘Meg.’

‘You got good kids,’ says Ruth. ‘He never let her out of his sight.’

And that, as far as Ruth is concerned, is the end of the matter. She drops Meg’s hand and laughs as a battery of children file out the door and around from the front of the house. Meg smooths the red dress down. Want of her children has turned her inside out, her stomach feels like it’s trying to get out through her mouth.

Cut-glass gaze still fixed on her, Ruth puts a hand on Meg’s shoulder.

‘They’re alright,’ she says. ‘You’re okay.’

Young women, some with babes in arms, stay close to the house. Adults appear from out of the view. Children keep coming.

‘My girls have gone overboard with your Lucy, I’m afraid,’ says Ruth. ‘I don’t get many white kids up here. She’s the first in years.’

A shape fitting Charlie’s dimensions steps into the view. It cannot be possible that he’s grown taller in the last thirty-six hours, but it looks like it. He’s still in head-to-toe black. Ruth’s place is teeming with life and there is Charlie, smack bang in the thick of it. It suits him. Not only is he unharmed, he has something newfound that fills him to the outer reaches of his skin. Of course it’s not height he has gained. He has gained nothing.
It’s what he’s shed that makes him taller. The boy is gone. And with him the worst of the wounds Carl inflicted, the weight of them, the shame.

Meg’s not fool enough to think this will be the end of it. Shame returns, it remakes itself, reruns and replays, changed in form but not in substance. It settles on you in the supermarket line, at the school gate and in doctor’s waiting rooms. Shame can bury you alive. There is a way through the choice between victim or survivor into something that is neither, but Meg has never found it. Charlie has. He’s made that shift and reached the only place that has a future. He has integrated Carl’s violence. And he is still whole.

The older girls lead the young ones out of the house. In the middle of the group a figure is covered in a length of calico. Under the shroud, Lucy is giggling.

‘Like I said, they’ve gone a bit overboard,’ says Ruth. ‘God love ’em.’

Ruth’s sigh is deep and contented. Meg had forgotten she was beside her.

One of the older girls whisks the calico off and there is Lucy, looking for all the world like a life-sized porcelain doll from a horror movie. Dark make-up is plastered on her face. She’s wearing false eyelashes made of glitter and so much sparkling frippery it’s a wonder she can stand at all. Her hair’s in pompom bunches all over her head, tied with coloured ribbons and held back with a rainbow-striped headband for good measure. She’s dripping with costume jewellery, wearing purple and green leggings, a sequinned black tutu over the top and a red feather boa around her neck and shoulders. The girls clap their hands, tell Lucy how pretty she is and look to Meg for an appropriately enthusiastic response. Easy to give, Meg has never seen a child look quite the way Lucy does now.

‘Oh, Lucy,’ she yells, because the house on the edge of the mountain demands life be lived loud. ‘You are a vision!’

Lucy has been instructed what to do after the big reveal. She strikes a pose somewhere between The Statue of Liberty and the Virgin Mary.

‘No, Mummy,’ she yells. ‘I’m a pome.’

The pose doesn’t last long. Lucy is falling over herself to get to Meg.

‘You’re a what?’

Ruth leans towards Meg.

‘I told her she looks like a poem.’
Lucy leaps and smacks into Meg, making maternity a contact sport. She wraps her legs tight around Meg’s waist and applies the bulk of her body to her chest. Meg hugs until she hears the bones of Lucy’s back crunch and she could cry for the texture of her four-year-old skin.

‘I knew you’d come today,’ says Lucy.

Chest to chest, they hold onto each other for dear and fragile life. Charlie hasn’t moved. He’s stayed on the edge of the view. Lucy takes her mother’s face in her small hands.

‘Don’t cry, Mummy,’ she says.

Meg hugs her closer, smearing the circle of lipstick from Lucy’s cheek onto her own. She rocks and sways and motions Charlie to come forward.

‘I’m not crying, Lu,’ she says. ‘I just missed you so much.’

Ruth barks at the assembly that they’ve got a big day to get on with and wrangles most of them inside. The adults have already disappeared. The plump baby is now in a sling on the back of one of the older girls.

Meg peels Lucy off her and sets her on the ground, keeping a tight hold on her hand. Charlie comes towards them, his chin dimpling.

‘I didn’t let her go,’ he says.

‘I know,’ she says.

There’s less than a body length between them but Meg can’t reach across it.

‘I tied our hands together at night,’ he says.

He laughs through a sob that has escaped, tries to suck the tears back into himself.

‘He did,’ says Lucy.

With a different child on her hip and a wooden spoon in her other hand, Ruth kicks the door and holds it open with a foot.

‘Come and have a pancake, Lucy,’ she calls.

Meg gives Lucy the seven kiss salute, temple, temple, cheek, cheek, chin, forehead, nose.

‘We’re okay,’ Meg says.

‘I know that,’ says Lucy.

Meg squeezes the breath out of her.
‘Can I talk to Charlie for a minute? We won’t go anywhere,’ she says.

‘Promise?’

‘Promise,’ says Meg.

Lucy runs towards the house like she’s lived here all her life. Ruth waves the spoon at Meg. No hurry.

Charlie’s crying into the view. The tears he shed at Fagin’s were little boy’s tears. These are not. Meg links her arm through his.

‘It’s been a long few days, hasn’t it?’ she says.

He leans into her, groans through a laugh while tears stream out of him.

‘It’s been a long seven years,’ he says.

Meg chokes back her own tears. Now is not the time to mourn the boy who won’t be back.

‘I thought I was making us safe,’ she says.

‘Well,’ he says. ‘That worked out well.’

She has to reach up to wrap her arms around him. He has grown taller. He drops his forehead onto her shoulder.

‘Ah, fuck, Charlie,’ she says.

He snorts a teary laugh.

‘Yup,’ he says.

She clutches his upper arms and pushes him away from her so she can look at his face, still beautiful but forever changed. They stand side by side watching the city shimmer in the distance.

‘Come on,’ Meg says. ‘We can’t stay here all day.’

She takes his hand but he won’t move. She’s said something wrong. She tries to think how to backpedal a few moments, to take back whatever she’s said that has made him baulk at her. Trying to start a game to put them back together the way they should be, she makes an exaggerated show of straightening herself up, then reaches out to stroke his face but he leans out of her reach. Tremulous to begin with, her smile wavers.

‘I could,’ he says. ‘I could stay here.’

He could put his arms wide, fall backwards into the view and know the sky would break his fall; he’d hover like a bird in a pocket of air, whereas Meg would smash to bits.
on the way down. Last night’s vertigo revisits her. He wants her to go without him. He wants to leave her. He wants to stay in the not here.

‘No,’ she says.

The city is a toy town in the distance.

‘Not yet,’ she says.

She takes his face in her hands, doesn’t care she’s being rough. She kisses him either side of his mouth. It’s the only stamp of authority she has.

‘Not yet,’ she says.

Two more cycles of the seasons and he’s gone anyway.

She leaves him there in his pocket of air.

Too shaken to go inside she stops in the kitchen doorway.

‘Alright?’ says Ruth.

She puts a giant mug of tea in front of Meg.

‘Just,’ says Meg.

Some older girls sit with Lucy at one of three small tables. They’re scrubbing the gaudy doll’s face off her. At the other tables, groups of two and three are in the middle of those earnest and impenetrable conversations toddlers have. A chattering kitchen detail of young teenage bodies swings dishes and pans above their heads and behind their backs while they make plans for the day and deal with the requests of the younger kids. This mostly involves saying no to more ice cream. Lucy wants to wear someone’s high heels. Her pleading makes it apparent she hasn’t been told no since she’s been here.

‘Please, Hannah,’ she whines.

‘Not today, Bub,’ says Hannah, winking at Meg.

Hers is the only smile Meg has ever seen equal Charlie’s in wattage. Fat baby in arms, Ruth puts a second mug of tea in front of Meg.

‘Slop’s in my garden round the side,’ she says.

‘Could I borrow your phone? I need to text my friend.’

The kitchen area opens into another room where a group of young boys play a game on a large screen television. Behind them an entire wall is covered with photos of hundreds of children. Ruth takes her phone from on top of the fridge, hands it to Meg and stomps towards the boys.
‘You lot need more sunshine,’ she barks, stepping over the boys’ limbs. ‘You got ten minutes then I’m turning that bloody thing off.’

The older girls have the young kids well in hand, including Lucy. Meg checks for Charlie. He’s where she left him, hands in pockets, looking down the mountain. Hannah puts a sugar bowl in front of her.

‘Want this?’ she says.

‘Thanks,’ says Meg.

Meg has never felt more out of place in her life.

‘No worries.’

You’d think that were true, that the people living here on the skyline have not a worry in the world.

Meg tucks the phone in her bra, sugars both mugs, blows Lucy a kiss, tells her she’s just outside talking to Slop and backs out of the kitchen. A crowd has gathered on the deck through the corridor made of plastic. She finds Slop not far from the house, sitting alone on a sturdy bench overlooking the view.

‘Ruth made us tea,’ she says, handing him the mug.

This garden must be Ruth’s escape. The bench is built for one, so when Meg sits beside Slop they almost touch.

‘Too many kids in there for you?’ she says.

‘They multiply up here,’ says Slop. ‘I could never keep track of them all.’

In front of them the escarpment drops down to a sheltered valley where half a dozen huts the size of modest caravans are built in a circle. Some have annexes made of corrugated iron and sheets of tin. Towels, clothes and bedding are flung over lines strung between the gums. Two water tanks serve the huts and homemade antennae crown them. Camp chairs and lounges are scattered on cement slabs in front. Paths run between all the huts, connecting each to the other and all to a fire pit in the centre. A fire burns in front of the furthermost and oldest hut, the smoke a wisp of grey rising in the stillness.

‘How many people live here?’

‘I have no idea,’ says Slop. ‘Thirty? Sometimes more. It changes all the time.’

The group on the deck are huddled in conversation. The older girls from the kitchen have joined them and the two dancing boys who thought running from the police
was like Christmas morning. Meg assumes the conversation has something to do with the
raid in the park. She’s too far away to hear what they’re saying, but close enough to hear
the tone and see the gestures. The youngest are furious, the eldest have a composure Meg
envies.

‘Eleanor was right,’ she says. ‘Me and the kids brought trouble.’

‘That’s not about you,’ says Slop. ‘They’ve got plenty to worry about before
they’d be worrying about you. They’re trying to keep their boys out of jail.’

Meg watches the smoke coil and disperse. He’s right of course, the raid in the
park had nothing to do with her and the kids. They were collateral, flotsam that washed
up on the river bank on the wrong night.

‘Anyway,’ Slop says. ‘If Ruth didn’t want the kids here, they wouldn’t be here.
Nor would we.’

For days Meg has used the noise of the city to get her balance, to read the time
and gauge her safety. She has used it as a pacemaker for her hiccupping heart. Now the
city sits in the midsection of the view, one benign feature among many.

‘Slop? How do I look to the law?’ she says.

He sits up, drinks half his tea in one go, leans forward again, elbows on knees. On
the deck, the young women are shrill, the men tired.

‘Not as bad as you think,’ Slop says. ‘Easy to argue you’ve been trying to protect
them.’

‘And you,’ says Meg. ‘You’ve tried too.’

He shrugs.

‘If you’re asking my advice,’ he says. ‘I’d say stay away from the law. Even if it
works out in your favour, you’ll go through the wringer. So will the kids.’

Lucy comes to check Meg’s still there. She’s scrubbed clean, dressed in sensible
clothes and bearing gifts for Slop and Meg – giant pink hibiscus flowers crawling with
ants and already closing.

‘I’m inside,’ she says.

Lucy flits away again. When their tea has gone cold and the shade has moved off
the garden and the meeting on the deck has gone quiet, Meg squirms on the bench.

‘Did you stay here too?’ she says. ‘Both nights?’
One day she will learn how to communicate again, instead of having to steel herself for the most innocuous exchange. Slop makes it easy on her.

‘I came to get you, Meg,’ he says. ‘The first time I went to Jude’s, you weren’t there. The second time, I couldn’t wake you.’

The meeting breaks up. The adults wander down the hill to the huts. Hannah helps an old man down the steepest leg of the path. When he’s safe on flat ground he shrugs her off. His is the furthermost hut. He picks up one of the camp chairs, turns it around so he’s facing the bush, and lowers himself into it.

‘We’ll be going soon,’ Slop says. ‘You ready?’

He’s eager to get off the mountain. So is Meg.

‘We’re leaving, Slop,’ she says. ‘We’re going to Sydney. Tomorrow. My friend will buy us train tickets.’

Slop smiles but his body folds further into itself. Living like he does, as guide to the city’s wandering lost, he must say a lot of goodbyes. Or worse, not get to say them at all. Either way would burn him. He mutters something about Wes and leaves her alone in the garden, feeling small in front of the view and wondering how to tell Charlie they’re leaving on the morning train. She texts Helen. Meg. Borrowed phone. Can’t talk. Can get on train morning. OK with you?

She listens to the birds. They’re not agitated like in the city, up here they sing with the quiet, not at it. The quiet and the birds are a duet.

Ruth’s phone chimes Helen’s reply. Tickets already at info desk. They expecting you. Know you have no ID. See you tomorrow night.

Meg doesn’t jump when Ruth comes to get her. Last night’s drugs have dulled her, or the panic she’s been in since they left Carl’s can’t get a foothold up here. Ruth drops an overnight bag on the ground in front of Meg.

‘I don’t want a fuss,’ says Ruth. ‘It’s just clothes and a bit of money. Charlie told us you got nothing.’

She sits beside Meg. ‘Good spot, hey?’ she says.

Meg follows orders and doesn’t make a fuss. Sometimes pride is just arrogance. She hands Ruth her phone.

‘Thank you,’ she says.
‘You just you hang onto those kids,’ says Ruth. ‘Slop says you’re going to Sydney. That’s good. You need to get your boy away from the Valley. I’m keeping those other ones here for a bit. Richard’s okay but that new copper’s a worry. Seen his type before. They’re like Rottweilers, they’ll let go eventually, when the kids have been stripped to the bone.’ Ruth stands. ‘You right?’ she says. ‘Wes is ready to go.’

Apart from Lucy’s insistence that Hannah carry her to Wes’s car, their leaving is fast, clean and without ceremony. Slop and Charlie are already in the idling car. Lucy waves until the forest of ironbark closes around the house behind them.
The neutral quality Charlie’s adopted is a thin veneer that makes him more vulnerable. Meg should be thankful he hasn’t gone for angst as his default but this repose, sombre and too watchful, is beyond his years. Between her deception and Carl’s malice, this is what they have done to the playful boy. Chin in hand he leans into his corner of the back seat with an arm around Lucy gazing out at the passing rainforest. He’s given no sign going to Sydney is news to him. Meg expected resistance, that she’d have to persuade him, but neither is necessary. She’d have preferred a fight. She takes Lucy’s hand and squeezes. They won’t fit back together like before.

Wes speaks. Winding their way off the mountain he directs his conversation to Charlie via the rear-view mirror. He’s giving instructions on how to get around Sydney. He rattles off a long list of names and where to find them.
‘Cousins of mine,’ he says. ‘They’ll look after you.’

Apparently most of them live on the same street. He tells Charlie about a park at the end of a block where his many cousins spend their time. Meg’s only just pulled Charlie out of one burning house, she’s not keen on seeing him crawl into another.

‘Let’s just have Christmas with Helen,’ Meg says. ‘Then we’ll see.’

What will they see? A different set of streets, even less familiar than the ones they’ve been travelling? Men like those in the front seat?

When they pull up at Jude’s, Slop says he’ll be there in the morning to take them to the train.

‘Departs 7.30, right?’ he says.

Wes gives a wry smile but nods assent, it’s his car after all.

‘See you 6.30,’ he says.

Meg and the kids wave until Slop and Wes are out of sight. For one night she has them to herself. They’ll have the decent meal she’s been craving, served from a spotless kitchen that isn’t Carl’s. Even if she has to steal them from somewhere, they’ll sleep in the clean sheets she’s been fantasising about. After dinner they’ll wile away some hours in front of bad, the worse the better, television. Some mindless piece of twaddle with a large body count, lots of smashed-up cars, and an ending she and Charlie will take bets on while the opening credits roll. One of them is almost always right. She will fall asleep to the sound of her children breathing and first thing in the morning, they’ll be gone.

The camellia in summertime bloom gives a living frame to Jude’s altar of mismatched offerings to her mishmash of gods. Lucy’s eyes pop when she sees the table of prayers. Even Charlie’s impressed. He whistles.

‘That switchblade’s real,’ he says. ‘They’re illegal.’

Lucy’s itching to play with the objects but approaches with caution. She knows voodoo when she sees it.

‘Careful, Lu,’ Meg says. ‘That’s Jude’s magic. You don’t mess with other people’s magic.’

‘You said magic isn’t real,’ says Lucy.

‘It’s real to some people.’
They spend the afternoon cleaning. In the laundry at the back of the house is a washing machine, dryer and some cheap detergent. Meg sets up a production line washing and drying everything that isn’t nailed down. She hangs the sheets. She wants to feel the crackle line-dried sheets give on first contact with the body. Charlie and Lucy drag out the garbage and distribute it to the neighbour’s bins once Jude’s is full, which doesn’t take long. Meg scrubs the stove top and wipes out the empty fridge. She and Lucy clean the table of prayers. Lucy holds each object like they’re day-old kittens. Jude could not ask for a more reverent apprentice. Meg cleans one piece at a time, one stone, candle, figurine and incense holder after the other, and puts them back exactly where they were.

They do this, hours of it, with barely a word. They’re like Jack-in-the-Box toys whose limbs have popped out of confinement and continue to wobble and stretch into space. Meg hums, phrases simple as nursery rhymes. Light on his feet, Charlie lifts Lucy, pretends she’s a full-sized dance partner for a single turn and puts her down again. Lucy doesn’t squeal with delight. She’s a rag doll to Charlie’s debonair dancer. They’re doing what they did at Carl’s when he was working nightshift and they had the house to themselves and a whole night to fill however they wanted. On those nights the three of them kept a steady pace, didn’t cram the hours with noise or activity. Carl out of the house gave each the opportunity to expand without the pall of threat his presence threw over the house.

Meg showers with Lucy. Charlie takes a teenage hour. He’s always been an allergic-to-bathing kind of a kid. But that was before he met the enchantress April. While they wait for him, Meg and Lucy raid the camellia. They pick the largest of the flowers and arrange them all over the room, in jars and coffee cups and floating in cereal bowls. Meg puts a bunch in the centre of the prayer table. They make up the bed with the sun-crisped sheets. Meg finds a bedspread on top of the wardrobe and arranges it on the couch for Charlie.

On dusk, clean as kings and dressed in their donated finery they go in search of food. They walk as far away from the main street as possible. Slop said to go towards the river, that they’d come to a corner of shops with a supermarket and restaurants that do good takeaways. She buys toothbrushes, real juice and a cooked chicken from the
overpriced supermarket, fancy salads from one restaurant and desserts from another. They swing through the last of daylight and get back to Jude’s on dark. They eat their beggar’s feast by candlelight and watch an hour of *Simpsons* reruns. The movie is suitably dumb. Lucy’s asleep before it starts, Charlie halfway through. Meg pulls the covers over them and turns the television off.

She sits on the floor and watches the candlelight flirting with Jesus and the Buddhas and camellias. She’s stashed a bag of Christmas presents in the laundry cupboard at Carl’s. She spent months collecting shiny things for Lucy and paying off Charlie’s first smart phone. All meaningless. She and Helen will give Lucy a good Christmas regardless, but this is the year Christmas becomes a day like any other for Charlie. She blows the candles out and lies down with Lucy. The kids snore in tandem. Her sleep is dreamless.

She wakes after first light. Through the window, the camellia smudges the late dawn sky deep pink. Charlie hasn’t moved all night. Lucy’s facing the wall. There’s no reason to wake them just yet, they don’t need to do anything but pull on some clothes and walk out the door. The day will be long anyway, fourteen hours on a train. They won’t get to Helen’s until after ten tonight.

Last night’s euphoria has been replaced by the dis-ease that’s smothered Meg’s mornings year in and year out since she and Charlie moved to the wasteland. On the first day Carl made a joke about burying Charlie in the back yard if she didn’t keep him in line and Meg was immobilised by the enormity of her mistake.

She watches the changing sky. The morning is overcast. Porous like raw linen, the clouds soak up the dawn colours. She and the kids will arrive in a strange town wearing donated clothes and carrying small change. Charlie’s on the cusp of manhood and the sum total she’s got to show for fourteen years of parenting is a pocketful of nothing much, a man-child with a newly scarred face and a girl-child who spends most of her time in a netherworld thinking she’s some kind of fairy.

It’s not yet six but the pink smeared morning quivers under the first blast of heat. Trying not to disturb Lucy, Meg slides out of bed and stands in front of Jude’s altar. Her days have begun like this, in defeat, for as long as she can remember. She is Pavlov’s dog, and dawn the command to begin her internal whipping.
If Charlie can rise from the ashes of Carl’s pyre, then so can she. They’re not in a shelter lining up for the system’s crumbs. Carl hasn’t found them. They’re doing alright. At seven thirty they’ll vanish and Pavlov can crack his whip over someone else’s back.

When she gets back from the bathroom Wes is outside Jude’s door. She must have stayed in the shower much longer than she thought. She’s smiling but the optimism doesn’t last the length of the corridor. The arrangement was that she and the kids would be outside ready to go. She didn’t stay in the shower too long, she can tell by the light. Wes is early. He looks like a clenched fist.

‘Mum wants to see you,’ he says.

They need to get on the train. They don’t have time to drive up the mountain.

‘Ruth?’ Meg says. ‘Why?’

Charlie comes to the door, Lucy close behind him. Meg’s stomach turns with the pleasure of having them close and turns again with fear for them. Wes doesn’t acknowledge them.

‘Eleanor,’ he says. ‘In the park.’

Not long ago, on a night when Charlie had stayed out too late and Carl was cooking up his night’s fury in the lounge, the police came to the door. Meg didn’t hear their opening gambit. Her rushing blood made her deaf. It took minutes before she believed they weren’t there to tell her something terrible had happened to Charlie. They were looking for a runaway girl. Meg stayed at the door long after they’d driven off. She feels the same now, like pieces of her are falling away.

‘Where’s Slop?’ she says.

Charlie takes Lucy back into the room.

‘I’ll be in the car,’ says Wes.

His footsteps are soundless on the corridor’s bare boards.

Charlie’s trying to dress Lucy and himself at the same time and fumbling both jobs.

‘I’ll do that, Charlie,’ she says.

‘Something’s happened to Slop,’ he says.

‘You don’t know that,’ says Meg. ‘It could be anything.’

Lucy’s warm and pliant from sleep.
‘We going on the train?’ she says.

Meg pulls her close.

‘I hope so,’ she says.

While they’re in the bathroom Meg makes the bed, folds the bedspread, tidies the room and packs last night’s leftovers into the bag Ruth gave them. Through the window she can see Wes in the car, hands on the steering wheel, looking straight ahead. The sky is swollen, the horizon heavy with clouds of dark magenta.

The kids come back with their faces dripping wet. Meg pats Lucy dry and tosses the towel to Charlie. Poor kids, they’ve only been awake five minutes and already she’s hustling them to hurry. This should have been an easy day.

‘We ready?’ Meg says.

She takes a last look around the room, closes the door behind her and gives the key to Lucy.

‘Put this in the number nine box, Lu. You know which letter is nine?’

‘Of course,’ says Lu and walks off down the corridor with the key held out in front of her. She knows she’s been given an important job.

‘Something’s happened to Slop,’ says Charlie. ‘Or he’d be here.’

Charlie takes the front seat. He’s a loyal lieutenant and adopts Wes’s posture, back straight, eyes ahead. Still groggy from sleep, Lucy doesn’t speak. She and Meg hold hands in the back seat. It feels like they’re sitting on damp cellophane trying not to tear it.

When they cross the river Meg looks to the sky rather than the water. Dawn is almost done. The sky’s already faded to a dirty grey. The magenta was a stunt, a trick of the light to lure the city into a bogus belief in its own beauty before the heat lowered its oppressive hand.

Eleanor and Malcolm are alone in the grove. They’re on Eleanor’s couch which has been turned so their backs are to the water.

‘Charlie,’ says Wes.

It’s an order. Wes steers the kids to the water’s edge. The sun in Meg’s eyes makes them black shapes against the silvery sharp slick that is the river. Eleanor looks twenty years older than she did two days ago. She stands. Malcolm turns his face away.

‘Slop’s in intensive care,’ says Eleanor.
When the woman who lived in the flat next to her father called to tell Meg he’d died, Meg said, ‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ and hung up on her. Then she walked through the house to the back yard and tore up the jasmine she’d planted the week before. She ripped the clothes off the line. She went back into the kitchen and though it was only midmorning, she pulled the potatoes out from the cupboard and tipped the whole bag into the sink. Then she stood with the peeler in her hand but didn’t know how to peel them. She went back to the yard and shoved the jasmine back in the ground, rehung the washing with her filthy hands, sat in the dirt under the clothesline and looked at the back of Carl’s house, at the torn flywire and the sagging roof and wondered how she was ever going to peel a potato again, how anyone had ever peeled a potato.

‘We want you to go see him,’ Eleanor says. ‘And tell us what happened.’

Over on the river bank, Charlie has his head high but Meg knows by the line of his shoulders that Wes has told him. Lucy has her arms around his thigh.

‘They’ll stay here,’ Eleanor says.

If Eleanor thinks Meg’s leaving her children here, in this park, less than twenty four hours after she got them back from the last time they were here, she’s mad.

‘I can’t,’ Meg says. ‘We have tickets for this morning’s train.’

Eleanor looks at the glass-flat and constant river. It’s debatable whether her calm is drawn from the too-still water or if the river has taken its cue from Eleanor. Malcolm looks at Meg like she’s got two heads.

‘We’ll get you more tickets,’ he says.

Meg’s had her hearing.

‘Wes’ll drive you,’ Eleanor says.

She sits, settling deep into the couch. She and Malcolm won’t move until Meg comes back. The tide could cover them and they’d still be sitting on opposite ends of the couch waiting for news of Slop.

Meg leaves last night’s leftovers, the upmarket breakfast they were going to have on the train, with Eleanor. She goes to tell the kids what she’s doing. Wes has already told them. Lucy tells her to say hello to Slop for her. Charlie looks like a fawn caught in the headlights. Meg hugs them both, not back-crunching hugs. She has to jog to keep up with Wes’s quick steps.
‘Why can’t you go?’ she says.

She sounds petulant but that wasn’t her intention. She had the impression Wes and Slop were friends of a higher order. Wouldn’t he want to go? He doesn’t answer.

The hospital is near where she used to live with Charlie, in the heart of the second-hand end of town. Morning peak hour turns a ten minute drive into half an hour.

As they get closer to the hospital Meg sees people she thinks, or imagines, are familiar to her. They’re in groups of two and three, some alone. They’re gathered on street corners, in bus shelters and on park benches. She’s probably seeing things, looking for signs that Slop being in intensive care means something, that he’s more than a random John Doe lying in a sterile room with no one to grieve for him. She imagines the bags of homeless bones on the street corners as Slop’s guard of honour.

Wes pulls into a loading zone.

‘They found him unconscious in the station. That’s all we know,’ Wes says. ‘I’ll be back here in two hours.’

She doesn’t need that long, she can be in and out in half an hour. Wishful thinking, hospitals wrap time in a hermetic seal and steal hours you didn’t know you had to spare.

Meg’s thankful for her clean clothes, the morning’s shower and last night’s life-giving food, they’ve upholstered her. She asks for directions to Intensive Care. Takes an elevator, gets out at the wrong floor and asks for directions again. She walks in a stupor through the corridors until she finds the lift that will take her to the top floor. Muzak is streaming *Deck the Halls*. *Fa-la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la.*

The lift opens at the waiting room of the Intensive Care Unit. The tiny room’s crammed with people whose faces are distorted by grief. They are loved ones to the traumatised bodies inside, the half-alive here to see the half-dead. Meg washes and re-washes her hands as instructed by the signs all over the too-small room, as though clean hands will somehow undo the damage beyond the security door that separates the world of the sick from the world of the well.

Meg understands why Eleanor and the others, and Wes in particular, couldn’t come here. After all that space near water and under the wide summer sky, this place, death’s waiting room, would be intolerable. It’s not large enough to hold them.

The door that separates the worlds has a square panel of glass at eye height through which Meg can see the grievous wounded prostrate on their beds. She presses an
intercom button and tells the faceless voice she’s here to see her friend. No, she doesn’t know his real name. He was brought in late last night from the Valley Station. She’s buzzed in with instructions to be brief.

A thousand machines whirr and rattle, sounding a mocking chime in greeting. Slop’s face is a death mask. Hooked up to the machines, he’s wax-like on the narrow bed, bloodless under the fluorescent light. His hair has been hacked off in chunks. One patch of his head has been shaved and partly covered with a dressing through which tubes are inserted. Under the plastic apparatus covering his lower face his lips are blue and straining around the tube fed into his mouth. More tubes rest under his nostrils. His arms on top of the covers are the colour of off cream. Those long arms that cast shadows on the walls of the church, looking for a way out. He may have found it. Meg goes to the nurse at the station to get the information she’s been sent to gather.

A single blunt-force blow to the back of the head. No evidence of other injury, nothing internal. No signs of struggle. Impossible to say if he will come out of it.

‘Out of what?’ Meg says.

‘Coma,’ says the nurse. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Up close, Slop looks peaceful. Meg puts a hand over one of his and immediately withdraws it. His flesh is cold. Surely humans aren’t supposed to be alive and cold as death at the same time?

A mother and father come to see a youth in the bed next to Slop. Meg only knows he’s male because the mother says his name, Oscar, through a gasp at the first sight of him. Unlike Slop, his injuries are visible. Both legs and one arm are in plaster. His face has been stapled together. Like Slop, he’s breathing with the aid of a machine, a tube shoved down his throat and taped to his cheek. His pillow is blood flecked. His lips are the same colour as his cheeks, worse than pale. The father draws the inadequate curtain around his son’s bed. The machinery plays a dejected bed of sound for the mother’s tears to land on.

Shadows are Slop’s element, the place he has kept himself for years. The bed’s individual light shines on his face, sucking whatever life is left further out of him. Meg turns the light off but it doesn’t make him look any more alive. He’s as close to his toddling daughter in this state than at any other time since he lost her.
Meg sits on a stool at the end of the bed and listens to the breathing machine carrying oxygen in and out of Slop. The sound is indecent. Her being here is indecent.

Unquestionably male, the hand on her shoulder is a comforting gesture. It doesn’t make her jump. It reminds her she is in the world of the living.

‘Meg.’

Daniel smells of the street, masking for a moment the unnatural odour of the ICU.

‘I just heard,’ says Daniel.

He pulls one of the visitors’ stools close, leans forward, head in hands, then looks up at Slop.

‘Oh, Jesus, mate,’ he says.

Meg doesn’t need to see any more.

‘He’s cold,’ she says. ‘I’ll get more blankets.’

She stops the first doctor she sees and drills him for more information. Whoever called the ambulance did so anonymously. The paramedics brought Slop in around two in the morning. They think he may have got into a scuffle with someone. He wasn’t on a part of the platform easily visible and could have been unconscious for hours. He’d been moved from where he initially fell. Whoever had the heart, or lack of it, to drag him out of sight knew to put him on his side in the recovery position. Someone showed some care. Not enough, but some.

He’s had part of his skull removed to relieve the pressure and so the fluid can drain off his swollen brain. The gurgling tubes coming out of his head have been threaded into Slop’s brain. Apart from keeping him comfortable, there’s nothing they can do except wait.

‘I’m sorry,’ says the doctor.

The mother cries behind the curtain. She and the machinery have found a rhythm, one rattles while the other breathes in and vice versa. Breathing in here is hard labour.

The ward is an iron lung.

‘He’s cold. Can he have more blankets?’ says Meg.

The doctor waves a nurse over.

‘He doesn’t like hospitals,’ Meg says.

‘No one likes hospitals,’ says the doctor.
A nurse brings two warmed blankets and helps Meg put them over Slop. Meg pulls them right up to his chin. Daniel has moved the stool even closer and is talking to Slop in a quiet voice. When the dying have lost the ability to smell, touch, taste and see, they can, it is thought, still hear. There’s nothing Meg wants to say to the wax-covered shell on the bed. Anyway, Slop might live. She taps Daniel on the shoulder.

‘I’ll wait for you outside?’ she says.

‘Yeah, yeah. I saw Wes in the Valley. I’ll take you back to the park. Give us a minute?’

Meg doesn’t look at Slop again. She’s already seen too much.
Meg and Daniel sit in the idling taxi watching a mother push her child on the same swing
Meg and Charlie used to play on. The child flies skyward pedalling his legs through the
air, tucks them under him for the backwards swing then tries to push himself to go higher
still, further than the range of the chains. From the highest point of the arc you can’t see
the playground underneath, just river turning into sky. Meg loved that. She and Charlie
would pretend they could fly off the swing and land on the other side of the river. She
still loves a swing, the feeling of her stomach being left behind. She envies the child his
easy flight.

‘Can I use your phone?’ she says.
Daniel hands it to her. There’s no point calling Helen, she’d be at work. She texts, *Meg. Borrowed phone. We’re OK. Missed train. WILL see you tomorrow pm.* She gives the phone back.

‘I need to go,’ says Daniel. ‘There’s more people to tell.’

Meg doesn’t go to the clearing straight away. Another half hour isn’t going to change the news. She smiles at the swinging child as she passes. She sits on a bench watching the ferries crisscross the river, they look like toys bobbing in a shallow bath. She doesn’t know what day it is, tries to remember but can’t. Not that it matters. It looks just like yesterday and the day before that. It probably looks like tomorrow as well. She wonders if the women in the water are appeased, or if they’re still there, waiting, ready to receive. She wants to ask them: How much is enough?

In the clearing Lucy sits between Eleanor and Malcolm on the couch, a pile of frangipani flowers between them. They’re deep in conversation. Francis and one of the men who pretended to fall into the fire the night of the raid are positioning an old door across some milk crates and arguing, quietly, about how high it needs to be. Hannah and another girl stand by with bags of food. The gulf between the hospital and the misery it houses and the energy in the clearing is disorienting. Meg can’t put the two into the same equation and stalls. Lucy comes and leads her across the clearing.

‘Where’s Charlie?’ Meg says.

Eleanor struggles to get to her feet.

‘With Wes,’ says Lucy.

Francis comes to help steady Eleanor.

‘Yes, but where?’ says Meg.

‘Gone to get stuff,’ Francis says. ‘It’s alright. Everything’s sorted.’

On a day like today it’s probably good to get stuff sorted. Meg wishes there were a way to relay the news without having to say it. Lucy keeps hold of her hand. It’s disconcerting that her four-year-old can read her so easily. Meg should be reassuring *her.* She looks to Eleanor for help but there’s none she can give. Meg tells them what she found out. Lucy wants to know what a coma is.

‘It’s like sleeping,’ Meg says. ‘But for a really long time.’

‘Can he dream?’ says Lucy.
Meg doesn’t tell them Slop’s had a piece of his skull removed, can’t voice the grisly detail in front of Lucy. She and Eleanor stay out of the speculation that follows, that there must have been a fight and who might have been involved. No amount of talk is going to wake Slop. When there’s a lull, Meg tells them Slop’s not in pain.

‘You sure?’ says Malcolm.

He hasn’t asked a question as much as he’s voiced his doubt. It’s a reasonable thing to wonder. How can anyone know, really?

‘He looks peaceful,’ Meg says.

Eleanor shoos everyone away.

‘Go on,’ she says. ‘Get on with it.’

Meg has nothing to get on with. Malcolm and Lucy resume their activity. They’re making garlands, stringing the frangipani flowers on rough yarn. Malcolm hands Lucy the flowers but he’s absent.

Without making a show of it, Hannah helps Eleanor to sit. The young people out here are too wise. Meg is in awe of them, Hannah and Francis, Troy and Daisy, April, all of them. Smoothing the moment over, Hannah tells Eleanor the food has come from Ruth.

‘She can’t leave the kids,’ says Hannah. ‘She said to tell you they’ll be lighting the fire at sunset.’

Meg retreats to her spot under the willow. Her palm prints are still in the dirt. One light sweep of her hand wipes them away. Bored with the garland making, Lucy attaches herself to Hannah who keeps her occupied, arranging the food or letting her chase the pigeons. Everyone else moves at a measured pace, conserving their energy for the night ahead. It will be long, something other than a death watch, and it cannot be a celebration of life. It will be something in between, just as Slop is somewhere in between. Who better to conduct proceedings than the people of the not here.

Charlie and the dancing boys follow Wes into the clearing, carrying sleeping bags, blankets and swags made of old cane curtains. The others go to Eleanor. Charlie drops his armful and comes towards Meg.

It’s as though she hasn’t seen him for days. His cheeks are more finely cut, his height more fully inhabited. He has peeled off whatever remained of the little boy, a skin
he has had to discard. If Carl appeared now, he wouldn’t be able to close the distance Charlie has taken from him. There’s nothing more Carl can do to him. So there’s nothing more Carl can do to Meg. She puts her arms around Charlie. He rests there, briefly, then steps out of the embrace. Neither will cry. He stands at attention, a brother in arms, while she tells him what she saw.

‘Will he be okay?’ he says.

From the opposite shore the noise of the city rolls towards them but the river intercepts the sound. By the time it reaches them it’s an echo of itself, the way a whipbird call in the bush can sound like it’s coming from miles away when the bird might be in the trees above.

‘They don’t know,’ says Meg.

He doesn’t have a million questions like he would have a week ago. He doesn’t squash her hand with his. They watch the preparations going on in the clearing. Heart sunk, Meg knows the park dwellers have done all this before, too many times.

‘I’m staying, Mum.’

Meg takes his hand, kisses it and lowers it back to his side. He doesn’t mean forever and he doesn’t mean in the not here.

‘We’re all staying,’ she says. ‘But we’re getting on that train in the morning.’

All afternoon people come into the park. Some hear about Slop and leave straight away. Some stay a while then leave. Some just stay. Between them, Eleanor and Wes have veto rights, anyone who thinks they’re here for a regular party is quickly dispatched. Guitars, a drum and a didgeridoo are added to the pile of bedding under the trees. Charlie stays close to Francis. They clear the area around the fire so anyone can take up a place there.

The afternoon passes. The preparations are complete. Not a single voice disturbs the grove. The sunset doesn’t dazzle. The sky is flat and cloudless, the standard spray of pinks and gold fleeting. The colour has no canvas to hold to. Dusk brings birdsong so sparse it only punctuates the silence. Talk of Slop circles and recircles in whispers, it’s news that can’t be reduced to a tidy understanding. The mood turns leaden with a seized kind of madness. Meg knows it well, but it doesn’t stop her getting caught up in it, again. It’s the perverse madness that comes with trying to reason the unreasonable.
Before dark settles, Malcolm lights the fire. The tinder has come from oil-rich eucalypts so the smoke is thick, blue and pungent and swamps the clearing, making eyes water and lungs protest.

‘Jeezussss, Malcolm!’ Francis shouts. He makes a comic routine of getting away from the smoke, reels around the grove. ‘You trying to kill us, or what?’

The company laughs. The effect is a clean break, like thick glass split in two by extreme heat. Jude was wrong. It’s not Charlie who is the Princeling out here. Francis joins Meg and Lucy under the willow.

‘Would you like to come and live with us, Francis?’ Meg says.

He gives her a sky-clearing grin.

‘But you already moved in with us,’ he says.

Night falls. Drinks are passed around. The guitars come out. Wes plays the didgeridoo. Meg’s heard the instrument before. A Blackfella troupe gave a performance at Charlie’s school. The flimsy hall was packed, the sound of the few hundred people deafening until one of the troupe played the didge, a single wavering note that silenced the hall and stretched on without straining for minutes. Meg’s never heard anything to equal the timbre of a didgeridoo. No bass on the highest decibel ever gutted her chest cavity the way the didge did that night. The player joined the rest of his troupe blowing melody under country and western and holding down the traditional songs, but hours later, Meg was still feeling that first note in her chest.

Lucy is gobsmacked by the sound, it frightens her. She huddles into Charlie and only loosens the stranglehold on his neck when Wes blows her name through the didge and nothing Meg says will convince her Wes wasn’t making magic. Wes – sorcerer to Lucy’s siren.

Hannah and her friend distribute the food. When Lucy’s had her fill, Meg takes her and the bag Ruth packed for them to the old toilet block. It’s still junkie territory. She and Lucy have to step over and around the used needles and condoms. Meg no longer sees this debris as filth, but as evidence of self-preservation. She strips Lucy of the fancy clothes she’d chosen for the train ride this morning and dresses her in the loose pyjamas Ruth packed.

‘We’re leaving tomorrow, Lu,’ she says.
‘Are we coming back?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘What about Slop?’ Lucy says.
If he wakes, Slop might not be the same. He might not list to the left when he walks. He might not remember his daughter. He could wake up thinking she’s alive and have to lose her all over again.

‘I don’t know what’s going to happen, Babe,’ Meg says.
‘Will you carry me?’

Meg breathes in the smell of the pint-sized siren in her arms. She grips her harder when the path runs beside the river. The women in the water are close but if they want a reckoning they can have it without Meg and her kids. They will not have her children.

The collective has a job to do. They have to get Slop home, wherever home may be. They will take him there the only way they know, the most direct route, song. Listening to the singing, it’s clear humans invented god so they could make sense of music and have something equal to its mysteries, something worthy of the offering.

Sentries of stone, Eleanor and Malcolm look across the water. On the river bank, Troy has Daisy in his arms, she’s crying. Charlie and April sit back from the fire in the semi-dark, the tenderness between them obvious. Francis and one of the older men play guitars but it isn’t clear if they’re leading the singers or the other way around. Like the last time Meg heard this singing, the words are indistinct, immaterial, half the singers don’t know what song they’re singing but it hardly matters. The song isn’t important, the singing is. The guitars are passed around, in constant movement, so a new song begins before the old one ends. The segues are awkward, the key and rhythm changes handled so badly the accompanying laughter becomes a musical bridge the singers fall off, only to land in the next song.

Meg’s given up trying to get Lucy to settle. She has a job here too. She’s a light bearer after all. She darts around the circle, reclaiming her garlands from one person and giving the limp necklaces to someone else. When the young boys play reggae Lucy waggles her hips and jumps up and down at the same time. Hannah and her friend shuffle-dance the breadth of the grove, collect Lucy on the way and twirl her around in the firelight.
People talk quietly, some leave, others arrive but the singing never stops. The bodies around the fire are conduits for a song that, having been plucked from the ether, cannot be allowed to lapse. When the musicians tire, a dancer will take the centre of the circle to keep the rhythm afloat. More than once, Meg has a physical sensation of being on the edge of a whirlpool, like the clearing has been untethered from the earth and spins in the air. Bottles of spirits circulate, along with copious amounts of dope. Hannah brings Meg a capful of scotch and a smoke.

‘Drink up,’ she says.

Meg does. Hannah hands her a joint.

‘I don’t smoke,’ Meg says.

‘You do tonight,’ says Hannah.

She laughs at Meg coughing, then pours another capful and takes it to the next person. Lucy crawls into Meg’s lap. The clearing spins faster. The music picks up momentum, its movement independent of the singers.

Beat-boxing into his cupped hands, Troy takes the centre of the circle. The drummer shifts to accommodate the beat, the guitarists bang on the back of their instruments, the clack sticks snap in triple time. Troy raps, badly.

‘You’re a fuckin white boy, Troy,’ Francis yells.

Charlie can’t sit for a second longer. This rhythm is made for him. He tags Troy who does an ape-man lope back to Daisy. She takes his face in her hands, kisses him and bows with him.

Like everyone else in the grove, Charlie is in service to the song for Slop. The story he dances doesn’t belong to him and he knows it. Head up, face to the night, his lines are clean and exact, his moves minuscule. He’s not keeping time, he doesn’t have to. Time is keeping him. The river swells and rises with the spirit of the song. Meg could cry. Not for Slop, but for bearing witness to Charlie dancing because his every move binds him tighter to the earth, to the living and to blessed life.

Wearing one of Lucy’s garlands, April steps into the dance. Keeping the fire between them, she puts herself in Charlie’s line of sight but doesn’t look at him. Slight as shadows, Charlie’s friends, the dancers, move into the circle. None of the dancers looks at the other. They are exquisite in the firelight. They move in time with the tide. The
dance becomes a yearning. The young people move as one. They know they can’t save themselves, or the other, or Slop or anyone. They won’t get their child’s-eye view back, they know it’s futile to try, as does every adult witnessing the dance, but they yearn for it anyway, all of them.

The song, reshapes, moves on. April takes Charlie to the river bank. If she hasn’t kissed him yet, she will tonight. Meg looks around for someone to share the thought with. On the other side of the clearing Wes gazes into the fire seeing something no one else can. Slop’s absence is acute and absolute.

Even when it gets so late the city across the water is silent and the ferries have stopped for the night and the waning moon has reached its apex in the vast sky, the song continues.

Wrapping herself around Lucy, Meg turns her back to the clearing.

The men sing in language. Wes weeps through the didge. The droning moves the ground, makes Lucy’s body vibrate against Meg’s. Lucy stirs.

‘It’s alright, Lu,’ Meg whispers.

‘I know,’ says Lucy.

Wes plays his requiem and not a soul in the camp will sleep until he’s done.
Dawn is mauve everywhere. Meg lifts her head to see the scope of the spectacle. The mist and the still river underneath it, the sky, the glass and chrome city, a trail of smoke rising from the burnt-out fire, all are lit in brilliant shades of violet. Lucy’s still in her arms. Charlie’s sleeping on the other side of his sister. All the young people are gone. Except Meg’s.

She watches Charlie’s shoulders rising and falling, puts a hand on Lucy’s chest, feels the double-time heartbeat through her palm. She stays like that while the violet turns to red turns to pale blue.
She’s not convinced she is where she is. If she got up and walked across the clearing, no one would see her. The idea doesn’t frighten her. She runs a check on her body to make sure she’s in it. She is. It’s not herself that’s missing. It’s the fear.

Mornings will continue on the river bank the way they always have. The birds will ring the city’s wakeup call. The river will keep running. Nothing has changed for the people out here. And nothing will ever be the same for Meg and her children.

Wes pulls on his boots, kicks Francis to wake up then comes over and squats in front of Meg.

‘We fixed up your tickets,’ he says. ‘I’ll take you to the station.’

Gulls caw and gather to scavenge behind the morning’s first ferry.
Francis declined to come to the station. He and Charlie said a shy goodbye back in the clearing. No matter where or when, they’ll know each other as friends.

Meg and the kids say their goodbyes to Wes on the street. Wes shakes Lucy’s hand.

‘See you, Bub,’ he says.
‘I hope not,’ says Meg. ‘No offence, Wes.’
‘None taken,’ he says.
Charlie offers his hand but Wes pulls him into a bear hug, crushing the breath out of him.
‘You know where to find us,’ says Wes.

* * *
He holds Charlie tight, slaps his back, then picks up their bag and slams it onto
Charlie’s chest. Lucy looks up at Meg, confused by the ritual. Meg rolls her eyes.
‘Men,’ she says.
Charlie grows another inch. Meg thinks Wes is blushing, but he’s so black she
can’t be sure.
‘Yeah,’ he says. ‘Okay.’
He can’t get in the car fast enough. They watch him pull into the early morning
traffic.
The pedestrian tunnel to the interstate platform goes for miles. Meg and the kids
walk against the early peak hour crowd. Meg ticks off the metres.
‘We’re getting on this bloody train, Charlie,’ she says.
‘Yes, Mum.’
Filthy from sleeping in dirt, they’re attracting attention. Meg keeps her head
down, refrains from breaking into a run. Wes said the tickets would be at the booth near
the gate at the end of the tunnel. Meg’s stomach is somersaulting. Charlie picks Lucy up
and jogs to keep up with Meg. Once they’re through the gate, they’ll be home and hosed.
Whatever that means. It means they won’t be here.
‘Meg.’
She knew it was too easy. She doesn’t turn around. They are within metres of the
booth. Charlie’s fast, he’s already got Lucy. They can get away.
‘Charlie.’
It’s a woman’s voice, older than Meg.
‘Don’t turn around,’ Meg says.
Too late, he’s turned on instinct. A woman jogs towards them. The tunnel is
filling with people coming off the suburban lines. Meg would square up to the woman but
she’s leaning over with her hands on her knees. She hasn’t moved that fast since she was
a girl. Which was a long time ago.
‘Denise,’ the woman wheezes. ‘We spoke on the phone a few days ago.’
Charlie takes Lucy into the corner near the booth. It doesn’t give them any shelter.
‘You’re from welfare,’ Meg says. ‘We don’t want your help.’
The tunnel elongates, like a living thing it bulges and contracts. If Meg and the kids tried to run it would just get longer, it would never end.

‘Yes you do,’ says Denise. ‘Wes called me.’ Denise puts an envelope in Meg’s hand. ‘Your tickets.’

There’s a bundle of papers inside. And money.

‘There’s a group of us,’ says Denise. ‘We’re off the record. The system doesn’t work for everyone. That’s about three hundred dollars. We usually try to make it more but Wes didn’t give us much time. There’s information there about services you can use. Safely. Get yourself somewhere to stay. It’s the one thing that makes the difference.’

Meg looks goggle-eyed towards the kids, then back to the scarlet-faced Denise. She looks around for the punch line, for Carl or the police.

‘The tickets aren’t in your name,’ Denise says. ‘You did a good job of keeping that quiet. I couldn’t for the life of me find out your surname but it would only have taken another day.’

‘Oh,’ says Meg. ‘It’s …’

‘For god’s sake, don’t tell me now. I’m not a good liar. The police don’t like us much.’

The loudspeakers call five minutes to departure. Meg looks at the envelope. She wants to tell Denise what she’s seen but falls on her instead. She clutches and hangs off the front of her. She tries to make words but they come out a lowing, an ululation. Her tears will stay in the mortar for years.

‘Mum?’ Charlie says. ‘We have to go.’

Denise pats Meg’s shoulder, like she’s patting a dog that might bite.

‘It’s alright,’ she says. ‘You did it. Good for you.’

Charlie’s through the gate. Denise frees herself from Meg and pushes her towards him.

‘Really. Go. Now.’

Charlie jogs ahead of her. Meg has to run to catch up. At the corner she turns to wave to Denise who hasn’t moved. Meg and the kids sprint towards the train.

‘Wait, Charlie,’ Meg says.
He doesn’t. He puts Lucy in first and gets on the train, or half of him does. He has one foot in the carriage and the other on the platform. The loudspeaker calls time.

‘What the fuck, Mum?’ he calls.

There’s a map on the platform wall. Meg traces the interstate route with her finger, that’s what she’s trying to do but her hand is convulsive with the shakes. She finds what she’s looking for then dives towards her children who pull her into the carriage as the door is closing.

Charlie holds her. Lucy pats her thigh. Meg cries and cries and laughs when the carriage shunts forward.

The train will not cross the river on the way out of town.

They’re gone.
Reading in *A Beggar’s Garden:*

being without shadow
I am moved by fancies that are curled
   Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
   Infinitely suffering thing.

   – T.S. Eliot (Eliot 1962: 15)
I

What is expression? *It is a kind of howling.*
– Brian Castro (Castro 1999: 82)

My objective in writing *A Beggar’s Garden* was to take a bleak and ugly story of abuse, homelessness, poverty, class and race and a blistering, propellant fear and use these bitter elements to craft something beautiful. From the beginning and without apology the novel was conceived as an inherently political piece of art – not for me to say whether it is good or bad art. The modernist idea of art as a purely aesthetic endeavour and the artist as conduit for a pre-existing metaphysical truth is, for me, as irrelevant as it is erroneous. It is remarkable how persistent the associative coupling of artist and ‘truth’ remains. In 2009, Australian scholars Bill Ashcroft, Francis Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden wrote, ‘In so many ways the artist and writer expose truths they may not even personally experience, truths they are grasping for, that may only be intimated in the horizons of
imaginative language’ (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass & McCredden 2009: 18). When I turn up to my desk to write I am reaching for something but it isn’t the vaguely mystical truth in art that Ashcroft et al seem to believe exists, nothing so grandiose. With A Beggar’s Garden, if there was a truth I was grasping for it was more closely aligned with Hemingway’s famous directive to ‘write one true sentence’. I was working for one elegant, grammatically flawless, musically harmonious sentence, paragraph and chapter after another. I am suspicious of any artistic endeavour that claims access to truth.

Before the argumentative anti-discipline of Cultural Studies became established in the academy and pronounced that no word is innocent and that all texts are of equal and significant cultural import, from cartoons to menus and Shakespeare to pulp fiction, before feminism upset the establishment by laying claim to the phrase, the personal is political, George Orwell had argued there was ‘no such thing as “keeping out of politics”. All issues are political issues’ (Orwell 1962: 154). More recently, in a blunt assessment, Toni Morrison declared, ‘All of that art-for-art’s sake is BS. All good art is political! There is none that isn’t … I’m not interested in art that is not in the world’ (Morrison in Nance 2008). Morrison’s qualifier, the implication that only political art is ‘in the world’, can be read as a comfort to the politically and creatively inclined, and as a call to arms. Regardless of its ‘truth’, I hope A Beggar’s Garden is both of a local and particular world, and ‘in the world’, that is, in my interpretation of Morrison’s decree, relevant to and reflective of the time and place where I live and write. So, in context of this account of my work, I defer to Virginia Woolf’s suggestion that ‘one can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold … can only give one’s audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker’ (Woolf 1965: 6). A novel, any art, is nothing if not an expression – a howling – of idiosyncrasy.

Australian writer Rosie Scott offers a loose definition of political fiction as ‘fiction that works as a mouthpiece for the dispossessed in a society, speaks to them and for them, and is … one important source for the predominant myths and moral tone of a community’ (Scott 2008: 30). In light of the apparent decline of the literary field in Australia (McCann 2004, Davis 2007, Castro 2009), Scott may be overstating the role of fiction in
contemporary Australia. Whatever the moral tone of the community, the nation’s literary culture can be understood, Bridget Rooney writes, as a ‘site of struggle over the terms of cultural distinction and symbolic power’ (Rooney 2009: xviii). Following Cultural Studies, third wave feminism and queer and postcolonial theory, the idea of speaking for the dispossessed is problematic. I suggest especially problematic in a text like *A Beggar’s Garden* with its array of traditional outriders – the mad, homeless, blacks, the very young and very old and other more spectral identities like ghosts. The novel’s problematics and politics are doubly complicated for me by a belief, contrary to Scott’s above, that, as Paul Dawson articulates it, the primary responsibility of writers ‘lies not in whom they address or speak for, but in recognising how literature functions in society’ (Dawson 2005: 204).

In what follows I hope to map the critical and cultural discourses that inform my creative work, and to illustrate the inverse of Dawson’s suggestion, that is, how these discourses bring pressure to bear on my work, how society functions on and within the text.

As author of the creative work *A Beggar’s Garden* and of this account of that work, attempting to place both in cultural and socio-political context I approach armed with Edward Said’s notion of the intellectual as amateur, that is, ‘as exile and marginal … and as the author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power’ (Said 1994: xiv). There is an important distinction between Ashcroft et al.’s assumption of a mysterious external truth embedded in art and Said’s, whose focus, as the quote suggests, was always aligned with justice in the world both within and outside the text, with the politics of representation and with critiquing and developing languages that could articulate the discursive conditions of the marginalised and the oppressed and serve as an emancipatory instrument. Said’s amateur intellectual is motivated by ‘love for and unquenchable interest in the larger picture, in making connections across lines and barriers … in caring for ideas and values despite the restrictions of a profession’ (Said 1994: 57). Here I would substitute the word discipline for profession. I consider myself part of what Jeffery Williams calls, and what Dawson has further elaborated on, the ‘posttheory generation’ (Williams in Dawson 2005: 180). I spent my years as an undergraduate in the academy digesting whole and learning to read and write vertiginously high capital T Theory and now have, in relation to that Theory, ‘a sense of belatedness, of appearing after the revolutionary polemics of poststructuralism, Marxism and feminism became
institutionally sanctioned’ (Dawson 2005: 180). Compounding this belatedness is dissolution about the political usefulness of high Theory, other than as an in-house language academics use to communicate with each other but which does not usually translate beyond the halls of the academy. I am not suggesting that high Theory is a redundant tool in the production of knowledge. I am, however, interested in exploring the idea of and working with a form of low theory that might straddle the divide between the wider community and the academy, not in competition with high Theory, or as a dumbed-down translation of it, but to complement it. I imagine the two to be mutually beneficial. Of course, there are creative and critical writings in this mode already and a small number of specialist journals that publish it, but I am imagining a common touch, capable of reaching a wider audience. I am interested in producing critical and creative work in the register of the dominant culture and so more readily situated on a political front line, a serrated edge from which the work might write back to, against and across the complacency of a dominant order wilfully dismissive of the hardships and complexities of living different – ‘coloured’, poor, ill or broken – in contemporary Australia where ‘a blindness to alterity’, Brian Castro writes, runs ‘parallel to an identitarian politics framed by exclusion’ (Castro 2009: 83).

Mark Davis, who has been called a ‘gangster’ (Brown 2013: 18) and a ‘bad boy’ (Huggan 2007: 42) of Australian literary and critical culture offers a scathing but salutary assessment of the place and production of ‘traditional liberal literary theory’ in Australia and wonders if it is ‘losing whatever relevance it once had’ (Davis 2007: 8). ‘Theory,’ Davis writes, ‘is an oppositional discourse of critique whose traditional “target”, liberalism, is in a state of deep crisis, having begun to lose its status as the epistemological axis of western civic discourse’ (Davis 2007: 8). This crisis has occurred, he argues:

As a new political force has emerged, capable of making new social meanings and connecting them with power in ways that neither theory nor liberalism have been able to anticipate or meaningfully counter. I speak, of course, of the rise of the new conservatism and the increasing entrenchment of neo-liberalism, since the early 1970s, at the centre of most national public spheres, and its growing reach into institutional centres of power and everyday social meanings. (Davis 2007: 8)
Davis’ argument conjures an image of ‘traditional liberal literary theory’ chasing ‘the new conservatism’ around in a glass bowl at the same speed and in the same direction, neither able to catch up, let alone collide with the other. Davis is the only writer/critic I have encountered who has suggested or made an attempt to articulate what low theory might involve, or how it might function. He envisions a theory, he writes,

that states its concerns at the level of the vernacular and the popular … that puts the critique of difference and representations in new frames. Low theory would also involve learning to use the logic of affect since … this is the logic of contemporary politics and the public sphere … we need to proceed from accounts of people and place so as to tell stories that make our concerns real in ways that resonate with broader audiences. (Davis 2007: 26-27)

If we accept Davis’ assessment of the terrain of Australian literary culture, then developing different languages – poetic, utilitarian and academic – is incumbent on the nation’s writers.

The story of my novel grew, or rather arrived, and was roughly mapped out over the course of a single day, though it would be more than two years before I began to put it in words. At the time there was much earnest talk in the national press about the country’s housing crisis. This all pervasive discussion grew out of the global financial crisis – and the fear it engendered – and focused on housing affordability or lack thereof for the middle class buyer. The co-existent crisis in the availability of affordable rental properties for low income earners or those on government payments was given lip-service only, despite a senate committee enquiry that found ‘many more renting households in stress than home buying households’ (A good house is hard to find: Housing affordability in Australia 2008: 1). The senate inquiry changed nothing. The situation got worse for the poor and the number of homeless continued to climb (Australians For Affordable Housing 2011). After some weeks of listening to what passed for debate on the subject, I became increasingly frustrated, or more accurately incensed about the complete omission of any acknowledgment that this crisis in any way affected actual human beings other than the fictional entity so valued by conservative thinkers, the nation’s ‘Mums and Dads’ – whoever they are – and the middle class who were the most likely to have housing security anyway. All other entities were absent from
the discussion. The section of the population most adversely affected by the crisis – young people, single people, immigrant, asylum seeker or otherwise, the unemployed, Indigenous, disabled, very poor, the mentally ill and sole parents – in other words the routinely erased were once again erased. The language of the debate suggested it was the bricks and mortar that were in crisis. I imagined shabby fibro dwellings crumbling close to an encroaching shoreline putrid with pollution. At the time I was living with my two young daughters on a very low income and paying an extortionate rent for the privilege of residing in the backblocks of a boutique coastal town with a glittering veneer of glamour that barely hid a growing and increasingly discontent underclass. It was common practice to move tenants on every six months so the landlords could increase the rent. Watching my children walk to the bus stop in their faded public school uniforms, I thought, women in my position are among the most vulnerable to the housing crisis. I thought, we would be in real trouble if we got evicted. The story of *A Beggar’s Garden* was roughly shaped and populated by the time my girls came home that afternoon. Three days later we were evicted.

The idea of serendipity as research practice enjoys a legitimate place in the hard sciences, but, curiously, not so much in the arts. According to *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, serendipity is ‘the quintessential form of informal experimentation, accidental discovery, and spontaneous invention’, as opposed to exploration with which it is often confused. Interestingly, ‘the broad-ranging, purposive, systematic, prearranged undertaking’ of exploration is most often associated with ‘creative people who are trained to routinely produce new ideas’ (Stebbins 2008: 814). The former resonates more strongly with me. A related form of research that has more purchase as a credible scientific method and which more accurately describes my model of researching and writing *A Beggar’s Garden* is the serendipity pattern. Social science scholar Robert Merton defines the workings of the serendipity pattern as involving three key elements:

1. The finding is *unexpected*: A researcher notices something that may not be related to the initial hypothesis

2. The finding is *surprising*, stimulating broader thinking to make sense of the finding
3. The investigator brings a strategic interpretation to the unexpected finding (Perry & Edwards 2010, emphases in original)

The serendipity pattern in research requires ‘observational acumen’ and ‘is shaped in part by cultural circumstances … by the humanness of the researcher’ (Perry & Edwards 2010). Over and over during the writing and research of *A Beggar’s Garden*, whether it was tone, setting, character, an event, a line of dialogue, a relationship or detail or the sudden availability of work space when I had lost mine, which happened more than once, I surrendered to the serendipity pattern and watched my novel take directions I hadn’t considered. Low theory and the serendipity pattern loosely align in a suitably vague constellation to describe the creative’s inevitably chaotic approach to arts research and production. Jennifer Webb’s description of Cultural Studies and its ‘piratical’ (Webb 2000) approach to knowledge production sits comfortably somewhere in this equation as does Tess Brady’s idea of the arts researcher as a finicky bowerbird sorting varying shades of blue into an arbitrary order (Brady 2000). Having been schooled in Cultural Studies, I relate to Webb’s description – especially here in the textual space of the exegetic – of the arts worker ‘swooping through the academy robbing literature, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, psychology and even physics of their gems, and rearranging them’ (Webb 2000). As Brady points out, relevant to the creative work and more especially to the exegetic, ‘I needed to acquire a working rather than specialist knowledge, not in one area but in a range of areas and disciplines’ (Brady 2000). Like piratical looting, the bowerbird approach requires ‘nerve, a great eye and a lot of know-how. With so much information to gather, the writer needs … to know the questions to ask and to be able to isolate the essence’ (Brady 2000). What follows, then, is the result of research within which ransacking can be imagined as the defining feature.

There is a another aspect to my research, I will call it a methodology, that complements low theory and the serendipity pattern and is relevant to both the critical and creative work presented here. Early in a nine-month period of frenzied and feverish work on the novel I was diagnosed bipolar, otherwise known as manic depression, a condition unusually prevalent among writers (Jamison 1994). The first empirical study to examine the relationship between mental illness and creativity was conducted using writers from
the famed Iowa Writer’s Workshop. That study found that eighty percent of the writers had some type of mood disorder and thirty percent had either bipolar I or bipolar II disorder, figures significantly higher than the control subjects (Andreasen 2008: 253). The study found that among the writers, poets had the highest rate of needing medication for mood disorder and were the only group to have received treatment for mania. The writers studied also had significantly higher rates of alcohol and substance abuse than the control group (Andreasen 2008: 253). I claim bipolar as a research methodology conducive to creative writing because the characteristics of the illness/disorder, in particular phases, can be understood as an exegetical lens or frame of reference through which to view the process of writing and the product of that process.

In his work, *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler coins the term ‘bisociation’ and uses it to describe the creative process as:

> the perceiving of a situation or idea ... in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference. The event [creative act] in which the two intersect, is made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths, as it were. While this unusual situation lasts, the event is not merely linked to one associative context, but *bisociated* with two. I have coined the term “bisociation” in order to draw a distinction between the routine skills of thinking on a single “plane”, as it were, and the creative act, which … always operates on more than one plane. The former may be called single-minded, the latter a double-minded, transitory state of unstable equilibrium where the balance of both emotion and thought is disturbed. (Koestler 1964: 35, emphases in original)

This double-minded see-sawing, an ability, however fragile, to occupy more than one plane of consciousness at a time is a fitting, if simplistic, description of the state of being in bipolar hypomania – a manic phase that stops short of psychosis. In bipolarity though, the divisions are not so cut and dried, the bipolar can occupy both sides and others besides, simultaneously. It is why the condition can be so fraught. Koestler’s ideas provide a useful baseline for discussions of bipolarity as it is echoed in creative production. Throughout his analysis he uses the terms ‘matrix’ or ‘matrices’ to ‘denote any ability, habit, or skill, any pattern of ordered behaviour governed by a “code” of fixed rules’ (Koestler 1964: 38, emphasis in original). In the creative act, as in bipolarity, these codes are fluid, they warp, slide, spread and re-arrange themselves in any given moment.
Koestler draws a distinction between scientific and creative processes to illustrate this phenomenon:

In the discoveries of science, the bisociated matrices merge in a new synthesis, which in turn merges with others on a higher level of the hierarchy; it is a process of successive confluences towards unitary, universal laws ... The progress of art does not display this overall “river-delta” pattern. The matrices with which the artist operates are chosen for their sensory qualities and emotive potential; his bisociative act is a juxtaposition of these planes or aspects of experience, not their fusion in an intellectual synthesis – to which, by their very nature, they do not lend themselves. This difference is reflected in the quasi-linear progression of science, compared with the quasi-timeless character of art, its continued re-statement of basic patterns of experience in changing idioms. (Koestler 1964: 352, emphases in original)

There were times when trying to order my thoughts towards writing felt like trying to get two negative ends of a magnet to touch. Integrating the friction, juxtaposing the different planes, became the only option. Through a wider perspective, Koestler’s ideas are suggestive of my intention with my creative work: that is, the exploration of new ways by which to re-inscribe and re-state the basic patterns of human experience in the hope this reconfigured structure will find an echo of familiarity, some empathic alignment with the experience of others.

I will return to the possibilities of bipolar as research method. Here, I just want to flag that Merton’s description of the serendipity pattern, the unexpected finding, the surprise and the judicial strategic interpretation, can also be superimposed onto the symptoms of hypomania. One of my kaleidoscopic reactions to the diagnosis was to laugh so hard I had to hold onto something or fall over. In the midst of hypomania I will look for meaning everywhere in everything and usually find it. I apply meaning to seemingly random objects and events – to red feathers, a child crying in the distance, to things that can be understood as elemental, the wax and flame of candles, scents, flowers, pretty stones, strips of leather, to the first day of the seasonal light change, usually autumn and spring, to a single singed-by-fire high-heeled shoe I found on one of my regular solitary bushwalks and placed just so in the fork of a tree so the owner, whatever realm she was in, could find it should she need it again. In hypomania, coincidence – that fond first
cousin to serendipity – becomes undeniably meaningful. I laughed at the diagnosis for two reasons. The first, because searching for meaning is what writers do – Said’s ‘making connections across lines and barriers’ – by which reckoning, all writers are ‘mad’. And I laughed because I was hypomaniac at the time and … in the culture I live in, searching for meaning is considered symptomatic of mental illness. The serendipity pattern posits the ‘humanness of the researcher’ (Perry & Edwards 2010) as fundamental to the research. My humanness is indelibly shaped by bipolarity as is, obviously, my writing.

Forced to move on again by the rising rent and terrified my children and I would end up living in a caravan park, we moved interstate to the city where, with the help of my family we secured housing. The river that runs through the centre of the city had broken its banks and whole suburbs were already underwater. We arrived on the day, the very hour the river peaked after rising insidiously through the city’s drainage system on an unusually moderate day for high summer with the sky a cloudless blue and the humidity mitigated by a gentle breeze. At the time I was formulating ideas about the way I wanted to use language and symbol in the novel and knew I wanted to inflect the writing with a kind of backhanded religiosity and the irreverence that implies. I wanted the work to read as parable or fable but also wanted it to sit comfortably in the realm of realist literature. I had started to think of the style of language I hoped to use as ‘bent realism’, the real recognisable but made strange, the ordinary self-consciously weighted with meanings that would suggest the mythological, an otherworldly hand, events driven by the fates, by bored and reckless gods, by destiny as written in the stars, by voodoo, by serendipity. I wanted the language of *A Beggar’s Garden* to ‘familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar’ (Morrison 1993a: 15). I have written towards this strange familiar from the opening line when I introduce Angels in the possibly incongruous context of riding a bicycle. As my daughters and I crossed the swollen river on the only one of the three city bridges that was still open the day of the flood, the river became, in my story, a recurring image or motif that was at times a benign source of comfort for my characters, at other times sinister with threat, demanding sacrifice. Our move interstate was biblical.

Dawson asks how creative writing, as a discipline, can ‘get outside the text and explore how literature operates in society … as an active social agent alongside other discourses’
(Dawson 2005: 171). As mentioned, if I want anything for my work, both creative and academic, I want it to have the capacity to be absorbed by and into everyday language and so be able to function independently ‘in the world’. Towards this end, I read with interest Dawson’s analysis in *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, where he returns again and again to the idea that the artist, in this case the creative writer, and the critics of that writing, have socio-political agency and suggests that ‘the distinction between the practice of artists and the theory of critics can be circumnavigated by collapsing both figures into that of the intellectual … For an artist to be an intellectual it is less important to have a theory of writing than to possess a vision of how a literary work might operate in society’ (Dawson 2005: 195). He ends his analysis of the place of creative writing in the enterprise university by conjuring what he calls ‘literary intellectuals’, who ‘are critically aware of how literature circulates in social power relations’ (Dawson 2005: 205). Following the now-standard feminist practice of transgression and/or trespass by stealth, I wanted the language of *A Beggar’s Garden* to be seductive, a slippery, surface aesthetic designed to provide easy passage for the more brutal elements of the story. I wanted to use the imagery of the cultural and literary familiar – the river, library, church and religious iconography, ghostly apparitions, lunatic asylum, prostitutes, mad women, broken men, beleaguered blacks, the beauty of youth, the child as innocent, innocence lost, the lost child – in such a way that they might infiltrate the imaginary before the breach is discovered. I wanted to use everyday language to write my characters and their situations in a manner that might unsettle the dominant order or, more specifically, de Certeau’s ‘violence of order’ (de Certeau 1984: xiv). The language of *A Beggar’s Garden* is designed to aerate through the status quo of social power relations inherent in our everyday language that is hostile to people like my characters who find themselves homeless, abused, penniless, irrevocably wounded and vulnerable to the dehumanising treadmill of the systematics of the State.

In the State where I now live the first significant act of the newly elected Premier was to do away with the Premier’s Literary Awards. He and his party did this, he argued, as part of a raft of austerity measures being introduced to address the State’s debt. The local writing community expressed their outrage, writers from other States joined the condemnation. There was a short-lived discussion in the local press then the whole
episode was put aside. The State’s writers had been emphatically, if metaphorically, put in what the State considered to be their place; the story tellers were banished, symbolically silenced, exiled. Within weeks of announcing this decision the State sanctioned and financed a ticker-tape parade that closed down, at some cost, the capital’s city centre in honour of a sports team winning a title for the second year in a row. At the end of the parade the Premier was on hand to present each player with a certificate of appreciation. Order was restored. The circus was in town.

The political message from these two events is clear and in a climate of ever-increasing conservatism on all sides of the political spectrum, indicative of a wider national tendency to value brawn over brains and sport over thought, while cultural workers and critics, artists and artisans, in this case writers of all persuasions and genres and by extension any person with a slight whiff of the intellectual about them are to retreat to their garrets forthwith and tell their stories to the walls. And this in a developed, affluent democratic nation not under threat from another, that has never had a civil war or a government deposed in a bloody coup. Did the State imagine itself under siege? From what? Stories? Clearly, writing and its raison d’etre, the transmission of ideas, still has the power to make a – for all intents and purposes – peacetime government nervous. Scrapping the awards was both a tacit acknowledgment of this power, political and social, and a testament to the significance of storytelling to the culture.

McKenzie Wark, another gangster bad boy, apparently, has argued that

… the ruling intellectual fashion is (still!) for difference, disaggregation [sic], suspicion of all attempts to abstract from particulars. One is supposed to subvert totalities, metanarratives, identities, and so on and so on until now there is nothing left to subvert except subversion itself. This is a conceptual formation now in a perpetual state of boredom with itself and with the world. (Wark 2005)

While I don’t quite share Wark’s wonderfully jaded opinion that there is nothing left to subvert, the efficacy of subversion as a form of political intervention is questionable in this post-postmodern moment when it might simply reassert the status quo by fixing the target of the intended subversion in centre place. I am not suggesting that postmodernism as an intellectual movement hasn’t advanced knowledge, or helped to usher in
revolutionary change in fields as disparate as marriage and medicine. I am suggesting that Derrida’s famous ideas, playing in this case with a line from Yeats, that ‘the centre will not hold’, no longer resonate with the possibilities of radical intervention they once did. If anything, post-9/11 in mainstream Western cultures, the centre and the grand narratives the postmodern theorists tried to persuade us were unravelling have now been resoundingly reinstated and reiterated. Australia has spent over a decade participating in a thinly veiled holy war, what Said called the ‘preposterous fiction’ of the ‘clash of civilisations’ (Said 1994: xv). Narrative doesn’t get much grander. The metanarratives of religion, morality, nationhood, good and evil, rich and poor, East and West, race and gender are all still spinning in perfect centripetal force around a centre firmly in place. War itself is a grand narrative and our language is bleeding with its insinuations. We are perpetually ‘at war’ on a mindboggling number of fronts and have been for decades – War on Terror, War on Crime, War on People Smugglers, War on Drugs, the Culture Wars, History Wars, War on Poverty, War on Democracy, we even have a War on Fat. This sabre rattling is illustrative of the political language Orwell wrote about in 1946. It is a language ‘designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind’ (Orwell 1962: 157).

This talk of war has helped embed a seam of violence in our everyday language. Much like the housing crisis apparently involves no humans that need housing, this militaristic language is bandied about with no enemy in sight, it is an example of what Morrison has called ‘the policing language of mastery’. It is an oppressive language, and ‘oppressive language does more than represent violence, it is violence’ (Morrison 1993b). And it has become so ubiquitous its violence has been subsumed, naturalised but not neutralised, not innocent. Said wrote that ‘[e]very individual … is born into a language’ (Said 1994: 20). An obvious statement – but it bears repeating. If the language of violence and subsequent violence in language has become a ‘habit of expression’ (Said 1994: 21) – and I argue it has – and allowed to slip into the vernacular as undisputed truth, then war becomes inevitable, a prophecy, an event writ large in an unexamined language, the language we are born into. Moreover, the habitual use of militaristic language deployed as a pre-emptive offensive on ‘pure wind’ – terror – numbs the community who share the language to the possibility that there is any collateral damage – a bloodless euphemism –
on the front lines. Orwell wrote ‘an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original
cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely’
(Orwell 1962: 143). The effect of violence in language, in this case endless talk of war, is
fear. The effect of that fear is to produce enemies, these enemies provoke more war talk,
and so on indefinitely. While this rhetoric names no specific foes the many wars
mentioned cannot help but invoke them. And because it is a language presented without
nuance – what Orwell would call ugly, inaccurate and slovenly (Orwell 1962: 143)
language – it enables a slippage that constructs, in simplistic terms, a parade of
representative enemies. The war on terror has fashioned enemies out of whole nations
and religions; the war on people smugglers has made enemies of the people being
smuggled; the war on drugs posits drug-dependent people as the enemy; the war on
poverty allows the poor to become targets, backsliding the culture so spectacularly that
after a succession of conservative governments the nineteenth-century idea of the
deserving poor once again has cultural currency. The poor don’t try hard enough and so
don’t deserve the rewards, the help, that the ruling conservatives – left/right, right/left,
whatever – have the power to dispense. While these enemies may be phantoms, the
material effects of the rhetoric are not. Asylum seekers, too often children, have been cast
out into the desert and behind razor wire or, in a shroud of political secrecy, dumped on
some of the poorest countries on earth. Either way, they are out of our sight and out of
their minds in near-apocalyptic landscapes. Two decades after the first salvos were fired,
the history and culture wars have devolved into the most facile terms and become a
debate about school curriculums rather than a site where the expeditious concerns of the
historically and culturally marginalised might be addressed. The ranks of the poor are
swelling and the number of homeless, particularly women and children, is growing
exponentially. The most vulnerable in the community keep getting more vulnerable.
Collectively, these many wars have assaulted language and left a wasteland in their wake.
It was the topography of this linguistic wasteland I hoped to traverse with A Beggar’s
Garden. I wanted to make a contribution, however small, to help keep language itself
from becoming collateral, to keep it from moving ‘relentlessly toward the bottom line and
the bottomed-out mind’ (Morrison 1993b). I’m aware some elements of A Beggar’s
Garden are ugly and that the novel is concerned with depicting the violence of the milieu
the characters live in. Nonetheless, I have tried to infuse the story with hope, humour, dignity, a sturdy spine, a slip of whimsy, and, above all, love. I want no part in and will not contribute to the war effort.
The language of a novel is the system of its “languages”.
– Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1986: 262)

Before the cultural revolution, before poststructuralism and deconstructionism, Orwell was arguing against the idea of language as a sealed representative system that ‘merely reflects existing social conditions’ (Orwell 1962: 155). He railed against ‘the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes’ (Orwell 1962: 143). Around the same time Russian philosopher and linguist Mikhail Bakhtin argued for language to be understood as ‘ideologically saturated … as world view, even as concrete opinion’ (Bakhtin 1986: 271). Bakhtin argued against an understanding of language as existing in the ‘monologic context of a given self-sufficient and hermetic utterance, imprisoning it, as it were, in the dungeon of a single context’ (Bakhtin 1986: 274). I am drawn to Bakhtin’s work, in part because he
was enchanted with and by the productive possibilities of language, in part because his analysis appears to have been untouched by the universalising tenets and the rigidity of structuralism. His writing is a demonstration of his philosophy of language, dense and obscure, and at the same time playful and tangential, like an extended improvisation by a jazz master. Michael Holquist, editor and translator of Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, called the writing ‘highly idiosyncratic’ (Holquist 1986: xvi). Against the fashion of his times, Bakhtin produced a concept of language as all-inclusive, as fluidity, ‘multi-voiced, multi-styled and often multi-languaged’ (Bakhtin 1986: 265), a linguistic bricolage he called ‘heteroglossia’ (Bakhtin 1986: 263):

… a diversity of social speech types … and a diversity of individual voices … social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour, (each day has its own slogan, its own emphases). (Bakhtin 1986: 262-263)

These many elements form ‘the internal stratification of any single national language’ (Bakhtin 1986: 262). Heteroglot language functions dialogically, in a perpetual dance in which meaning shifts and alludes, opens up and creates yet more stratification:

[a]ny concrete discourse (utterance) finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, already enveloped in an obscuring mist … entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien judgements and accents. The word, directed towards its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group. (Bakhtin 1986: 276)

All languages and facets of those languages – social, political, medical, military, critical, literary – are themselves heteroglot, internally stratified and dialogised, criss-crossing disciplinary, specialist or localised borders leaving meaning vulnerable, and meaning making up for grabs. Bakhtin’s philosophy of language creates a fertile playground for a creative writer who, in my case, was deliberately attempting to confuse, change and/or
challenge what might be considered ‘common sense’ ways of knowing an assumed order of things.

It is pertinent to draw a distinction between my wishing to confuse, change and challenge and a desire to subvert. While it may be an overly pedantic distinction to draw, nonetheless, it is one I found helpful while writing *A Beggar’s Garden*. Attempting to subvert implies a form of ‘soft’ opposition that assumes an unmarked acquiescence to the dominant ideologies embedded in the structure of language. Subversion takes ‘common sense’ meanings and strategically and politely troubles them. I felt no compunction to be so gracious. The creative drive writing *A Beggar’s Garden* was born out of a cold and sustained rage against the machine of a dominant order increasingly lacking in compassion for the most vulnerable amongst us. Australian novelist Andrew McGahan said, ‘This no longer seems the time to be polite or indirect in fiction, or artfully diffident. It’s time to confront the danger and what’s going on here head on’ (McGahan in Scott 2008: 31). If anything, almost a decade later, for a writer concerned with social justice and for the most vulnerable in the community, as I am, pursuing this confrontation has become more urgent. My purpose is not so much to subvert the national language. Rather, I am interested in confusing the placement of its various elements, images, metaphors, symbols and wider cultural and historical references by plucking them out of everyday discourse and re-placing them in a way that might push towards a re-alignment within the national imaginary and the antiquated but enduring meanings these elements still hold in the language of the nation. ‘Art,’ Castro writes, ‘arises from the seedbed of rebellion. Yet, when I speak of dissent, I speak not of some kind of facile opposition. But of a measuring of displacement, not in terms of overturning the system but of forcing a presence and a variation upon old acceptances and prejudices’ (Castro 1999: 32-33). I hope *A Beggar’s Garden* does not present a facile opposition, a tale of ‘sound and fury signifying nothing’. Describing her intent with her work of literary exploration, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison specifies her approach is ‘unencumbered by dreams of subversion or rallying gestures at fortress walls’ (Morrison 1993a: 3). Extrapolating from this, creative work driven by such dreams risks becoming only political, a polemic at the expense of the poetic. Further, it positions the writer and the work as outsider to the centre, shoring up a binary that, with my novel and this
account of it, I was attempting to dissolve, or side step, but mostly ignore because the hierarchical nature of binary logic is a violent divide and so not useful to me. My cast of wounded and misfit characters don’t see themselves as outsiders on the wrong side of the fortress walls. Despite the references to ‘out here’, ‘down here’, ‘up here’, and ‘the not here’, it never occurs to them that they are not front and centre in the world. They are always ‘here’, present, participating, visible to themselves and to each other. They know themselves to be the centre.

Unlike structuralist and poststructuralist, deconstructionist and psychoanalytic approaches to language, Bakhtin’s model of language analysis avoids the violence inherent in understanding meaning making only and always in terms of the deficit model of hierarchical binary logic, on assumed lack. Gail Jones argues ‘the poetic can preserve … nuanced interiority, difficult understandings, a sense that the dichotomous forms we are taught to think with are never – never ever – the sufficient or efficient basis for a moral life’ (Jones 2008: 78, emphases in original). Being somewhat of a relativist, I am not confident to state what constitutes a ‘moral life’, but I will reiterate Jones’ insistence on the limits of understanding only according to dichotomous thinking. It is this belief that forms the basis of my affinity with Bakhtin’s radical formula of cascading, stratified meaning that expands the possibilities of meaning making and never limits them.

Embedded and encoded in the Australian vernacular is a suite of tired, meaning-laden and ‘common sense’ signs and signifiers dialogically threaded, plaited and knotted through everyday language and through the formation of national identity and the stories and mythologies that prop up that illusory entity. Writing A Beggar’s Garden was driven by a want to disentangle or pick at these knots in order to recycle the proscriptive if threadbare material to different ends. Said argued ‘one of the main functions of a language community is to preserve the status quo, and to make certain that things go smoothly, unchanged and unchallenged’ (Said 1994: 21). As a result, he wrote, it becomes ‘too easy to repeat collective formulas, since merely to use a national language at all (there being no alternative to it) tends to commit you to what is readiest at hand, herding you into those stock phrases and metaphors for “us” and “them” that so many agencies … keep in currency’ (Said 1994: 24). The luxury of the creative writer is to appropriate these
collective formulas, stock phrases and metaphors and attempt to infuse them with contrary meanings in a bid to befuddle those aspects of language used to stake a claim to belonging and through which we enact the outlawing of the outsiders and others to the community. I wanted *A Beggar’s Garden* to perform a ‘textual … critique of received opinion, with the ultimate aim of effecting social change’ (Dawson 2005: 201). The narrative of my novel is driven by violence – physical, emotional and spiritual. To attempt to counter that violence I kept in mind the simplest of ethical directives, a version of the Hippocratic oath familiar to me and a legacy from my physician father, ‘Do no harm’. In order that the violence in my novel and the rage in myself be tempered – or the novel become a reactionary polemic and myself inarticulate, illiterate with fury – I layered my palimpsest language with tender care and a dread-filled awe, not just because language was the only tool I had to translate the novel’s violence into beauty but more importantly because the images and representations I have used still hold significant cultural power and currency. They are dangerous.

Some of the overdetermined images and codes I have used that inform the nation’s self-image – albeit in some cases at a subterranean level – include but are not limited to the following. Homeless women, who, if they appear in the national imaginary at all, are constructed as ‘bag ladies’, middle-aged, a little mad and drunk – they do not appear with children in tow and using references to Shakespeare to make sense of their days. Women who have been subject to criminal violence in the home who, if they are thought about at all, are still, despite evidence to the contrary, constructed as un-educated, below par in intelligence, passive victims who never fight back, who cannot help themselves and so are in need of saving by a State notoriously incompetent at helping women and children escape violence in their homes. Adding insult to injury, there remains an assumption that battered women can/should ‘just’ leave the domestic space, as if that is an unproblematic possibility for these women and their children. Homeless youth who are more and more imagined as a feral, undifferentiated pack with not a brain cell between them, who wear ‘hoodies’ and are binge-drinking drunks; homeless men, thought to have squandered the ‘fair go’ assumed to be available to all regardless of lived experience or socioeconomic status, who are also imagined as drug addicts/drunks. There remains an idea that people ‘choose’ to be homeless and so are deserving of the deprivation that living on the streets
involves. Other overdetermined images include the idea that Australia does not have a class system, is a homogenous and harmonious population that, if it has divisions, are attributable to personal and economic mismanagement and not to an intertwined cluster of dominant and oppressive constructions of ethnicity, class and/or gender. Graham Huggan has described this misconception as the nation’s ‘self-congratulatory fantasy of a Happy White Australia’ (Huggan 2007: 21). And the idea that Indigenous people, if they are imagined at all, are not subject to racism, are incapable of forming cohesive communities, are all fringe dwellers and passive recipients of too generous government handouts. Oh, and they’re all drunkards. I exaggerate for effect, but not by much.

These and other received ‘truths’ transmitted by the everyday dialogic languages of the nation form a bedrock of meanings I was obliged to allow as intrinsic to the language of A Beggar’s Garden. These meanings are central to the politics and poetics of the novel. They were integral to the story. Indeed, there would be no story without them, illustrating Bakhtin’s argument:

The prose writer as a novelist does not strip away the intentions of others from the heteroglot language of his works, he does not violate those socio-ideological cultural horizons (big and little worlds) that open up behind heteroglot languages – rather, he welcomes them into his work. The prose writer makes use of words that are already populated with the intentions of others and compels them to serve his own new intentions, to serve a second master. (Bakhtin 1986: 299-300)

Imagining the internals of novelistic languages and the interplay between the systematics of those languages as existing in a dialogic relationship provides a template for discussing the more problematic elements of the national languages without having to resort to a discussion only about ‘the return of the repressed’ – a favoured mode and a recurring trope in some Australian literary and cultural criticism of the last decade (Tacey 2009, Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass & McCredden 2009). Just as the creative languages of A Beggar’s Garden do not violate the socio-ideological codes embedded in the images I’ve used, this critical account of my creative work cannot escape the stratified languages of cultural and literary criticism.
Looking to place *A Beggar’s Garden* in the frame of critical discourses, I could position the text as an Australian, that is, a lackadaisical version of magic realism, or as intertextual in sensibility, as comfortably in the realm of Bakhtin’s ‘carnival’ and ‘grotesque realism’ (Bahktin 1984: 8) which did have an undeniable influence on the imagery of the novel. Bakhtin theorised carnival as a world unto itself that ‘belongs on the borderline between art and life’ (Bahktin 1984: 7). ‘Carnival,’ he wrote, ‘is not a spectacle seen by the people: they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people’ (Bahktin 1984: 7). Meg and her children are swept up into the carnivalesque world of the homeless community who greet them the moment they step off the train and spend the rest of the novel keeping a surreptitious eye on them. They are drawn into the homeless community, into belonging, as opposed to being cast out of the world ruled by the cruel king Carl. Jude is a truly Bakhtinian figure, casting spells and dispensing her tincture to Meg in the library and claiming a seer’s ability in understanding the world. The vigil in the Blackfellas’ camp, Meg’s time in the lunatic asylum, statues that come to life, the river’s dead, Lucy as a siren in green fairy wings, the scene in the Cat Society Op Shop, all can be understood as carnivalesque. Bakhtin’s carnival, like dominant discourses of homelessness, is steeped in physical and spiritual degradation, but in grotesque realism that degradation is overwhelmingly positive. ‘It has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one’ (Bahktin 1984: 21). I hope the novel gestures towards regeneration, and that the degradation of life on the street becomes a site of renewal for Meg and her children. The grotesque is ‘a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming’ (Bahktin 1984: 24). *A Beggar’s Garden* is simultaneously a story of a woman, and perhaps more importantly of the man-child Charlie, unravelling selves no longer useful and becoming people who look to the future with hope instead of fear. While I was concerned not to write the characters as victims and to portray the homeless community as a semi-functional one who know their way around surviving on the streets and think of themselves as doing alright, thanks very much, I didn’t want to obscure the horror of their individual stories, or romanticise the hardship of the street, or overly valorise their ability to survive in dire circumstances, all of which become too possible if the novel is positioned as grotesque realism under the banner of the carnivalesque. If I
could dictate a reading posture – which I know I can’t because Barthes killed me off way back in ’67 – I would argue against *A Beggar’s Garden* being read as a redemptive narrative, to do so would be to apply a soothing quasi-religious balm over the trauma that has driven Meg and the other characters towards the protection they imagine the anonymity of the streets will give them. I remain mystified by the critical propensity to position realist stories of hardship as redemptive narratives. Meg and her children do nothing that requires redemption. Redeemed from what? Being human? Confounding expectations and surviving?

At one stage a grand statesman of Australian letters read three thousand words of the novel – words that didn’t make it to the final draft. ‘Ah,’ he said, in his inimitable way, ‘the gothic family.’ I can see the gothic in my (ir)religious use of Christian/Catholic imagery and in the references to the tragedies of the master Goth, Shakespeare. Both loom large in my imagination and have done since childhood – my mother had a pithy quote from Shakespeare to illuminate just about any event and my father’s Catholic faith didn’t survive the church’s dogma that Mary, the mother of Jesus, ascended bodily into Heaven. This was too much for my father who was a scientist, a radiologist. He read bones. My father became a lapsed Catholic, and, as many people who’ve tried to leave the church would attest, leaving Catholicism is a bit like trying to leave a liberation movement. Positioning the novel as gothic would allow a decoding of the text’s more improbable images and events, the Jude character and her menagerie of religious and voodoo iconography, Fagin’s boarding house – there’s that other master Goth, Dickens – sleeping in the church hall, in an abandoned theatre, Slop’s story of the fire that claimed his daughter, Charlie’s face ‘like a mulberry muffin’, the threat of the river – all could be configured under the rubric of the gothic. Still, to view *A Beggar’s Garden* through a gothic lens would undermine, for me, its hyperrealist aspirations, even if I have written some characters and scenes in a deliberate attempt to confound that realism.

Any number of critical lenses might adequately position *A Beggar’s Garden* and produce a relevant reflection of the novel’s socio-political possibilities and intentions. Nonetheless, given the subject matter, in particular the summoning of Australia’s raced, classed and gendered practice of removing children from their families, *A Beggar’s
*Garden* bears explication under the broad reach of postcolonial literary criticism as it is practised in Australia.
III

In the productivity of power, the boundaries of authority – its reality effects – are always besieged by “the other scene” of fixations and phantoms.
– Homi K Bhabha (Bhabha 1985: 158)

There is much energy to be drawn from a judicial ransacking of the field of postcolonial critique. ‘Postcolonialism,’ Marcelle Freiman writes, ‘in its political, experiential and discursive struggles for representation and authority, has a striking capacity to generate creativity’ (Freiman 2006: 82). At the heart of this generative power are language and the problems and challenges inherent in the settler population having to use the Mother Country’s language to assert difference, independence and specificity in opposition to the ‘metropolitan’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 5) centre. Ashcroft writes ‘the postcolonial engagement with imperial culture is an engagement within the imperial language’ (Ashcroft 2010: 30). It is this tension within language that produces the conditions for the creative possibilities of language to flourish. Further, as Freiman points out:
The writing produced within these conditions is ... inherently critical ... it endeavours to re-imagine, or re-vision what is encountered as the experience of disjunction, uncertainty or disruption between “held” knowledge (local culture, or “home” culture as in settler societies) and a “new” situation of settlement, migration or oppression. The postcolonial response is an assertion against the very real sense of disruption of identity, sense of place, and the experience of threat to the existence of historical narrative. (Frieman 2006: 83)

This idea of threat to the historical narrative holds a central place in Australian postcolonial critical discourses, as it does in the wider community. The struggle over the nation’s historical narrative is the battleground on which the culture and history wars continue to be waged. In creative terms, in the realm of storytelling, as in more overtly political sites, these same discourses exhibit blind spots within what Huggan describes as a ‘compulsive, collectively self-mythologizing storytelling that has remained a feature of Australian literature, from the mock-demotic yarns and bush ballads of the 1890s to their more self-consciously sophisticated counterparts in the present day’ (Huggan 2007: 1). If nations are formed through narrative, through the stories we tell to establish community, then what becomes of those myriad others – the ‘coloured’, poor, ill and broken – not represented in the nation’s narrative, whose stories are suppressed? Ashcroft argues:

The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place ... the abrogation or denial of the privilege of “English” involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication ... the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks the separation from the site of colonial privilege. (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 38)

Well, does it? Or in Australia has this separation only laid the ground for a more localised form of (barely post-) colonial privilege? Ashcroft is a critic who has a propensity to position postcolonial literature as a genre of 'resistance literature' (Slemon in Huggan 2007: 30), but how much resistance is being given and against what, exactly? The postcolonial as articulated by Ashcroft is describing the struggle, the scramble for local meanings against the inadequacies of the language of the metropolitan centre, but does it, in the process, reconfigure a version of the centre as the rightful place of a dominant
culture that adheres to a set of rules and definitions, signs and signifiers whose historiography is firmly situated in Mother England’s lap? That is, white men writing white ‘truth’ in the heart of an ostensibly white nation barely out of its infancy, let alone divorced from the imperial centre. Language remains one of the most contested and contentious sites in the neocolonial playbook and in Australia vestiges of the struggle to claim the right to define what is or is not acceptable use of dominant language can still be heard in the echoes of class consciousness. To speak like a ‘bogan’, or, often as not, with the accent of an other, is to display lesser ability, intelligence and morality, is to be, in short, the deserving poor. The legacies of class as it is practised in Australia are traceable to linguistic roots, to the time not so long ago when plummy BBC English was ‘deployed as the primary civilizing discourse of the British Empire’ (Ashcroft 2010: 18). As Huggan points out, there are still good reasons to ‘be suspicious of the self-heroicizing view of Australian literature struggling to free itself from its European conceptual legacy, and locked in a permanently combative relationship with the nation’s colonial past … the ambivalence of settler writing functions as the sign less of resistance than of complicity’ (Huggan 2007: 30). White Australia claiming successful separation from England is a spurious proposition, particularly as it stands in relation to class, which remains a perplexingly under-theorised aspect of Australian postcolonial literary critique. The romantic sentiment of rebellion that Ashcroft presents does have the capacity to incite and even inspire, but the re-write of the narrative of the nation has hardly begun, unless we accept a profile of the nation as still bound by the Mother Country’s ideologies of class, gender and race.

If, in the creative work I was playful with the nation as a postcolonial site, here in critical mode, I have some reservations regarding postcolonial literary discourse in Australia. These misgivings centre around the centrality of race, even if, and often because, race is omitted from the discourse. As Huggan points out, ‘some absences … are a good deal more noticeable than others; tactical exclusion can end up drawing attention to itself, reinstalling the excluded other as an unsettling absent presence’ (Huggan 2007: 25). For reasons that will become obvious, I have long been exasperated by the fact that the terms and definitions in discussions about race in Australia have become more fixed and immutable, more impermeable to complexity, more exclusive of attempts to reconfigure
it, more staid in tone, and in some instances, plain idiotic. Too recently I heard a conservative commentator attempt to open a debate by asking why we couldn’t have a discussion that explored the possibility that some races are more intelligent than others (Duffy 2005). In the arena of public discussion – the town square that is the media, from trash infotainment to more reputable news institutions – race is hidden in the skirts of liberalism’s ‘progress’, in the mythology of the ‘fair go’, in the saddle pockets of Simpson’s donkey. It is un-Australian to talk about race and those of us who try are often met by white people with a defensiveness that is rabid. A piece of fiction that features race relations has already waded into a socio-political quagmire. While white Australian authors writing race in fiction can be a damned-either-way proposition and can lead to a war zone or two like the culture and history wars, that’s not a good enough reason to acquiesce, by silent assent, to the dominant white voices in the critical conversation.

In 2007, in Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism, Huggan argued that the cultural politics of race remains one of postcolonialism’s least theorised aspects (Huggan 2007: ix). Little has changed. If anything, when the topic of the politics of race is raised it is likely to be met with an attitude that resembles a stifled groan and indicates, ‘We’ve covered that.’ We may have, but now we need to exhume it because whatever we imagined we’d achieved, we haven’t. A phantom anyway, race continues to mutate. In Australian literary discussions the troubling imperatives of postcolonial critical discourse threaten to overwhelm and underplay the significance of dominant cultural ideas or Bakhtin’s ‘sociopolitical purposes of the day’ regarding race, by turns effacing and exaggerating, demonising and fetishising and using and abusing the realities of a racialised subjectivity. I did not set out to write – and hope I have not produced – a treatise on race which is only one aspect of the everyday languages I have tried to write my way through but it is, as the saying goes, the elephant in the room, present yet somehow ignored. Race is inextricable from the languages, creative and critical, that I am steeped in and that are available to me.

Critical discussions that use the postcolonial as a point of departure for scholarly meditation on the construction of national identity as it might be understood through the nation’s literary product form and reform around what is a stock set of themes and
imaginings that is the conceptual framework of postcolonial literary critique in Australia – amnesia, anxiety, alienation, displacement and dislocation. This set of ideas is almost always tethered to the white settler experience, thereby subsuming the experience of displacement, alienation and dislocation of the white settler’s others. This in itself is not my major concern, attempting to theorise from the assumed position of the other is rightly considered intellectual malpractice. However, the focus on white settler anxiety allows it to become the yardstick against which all others are measured and, in keeping with the binary, found to be lesser in degree. Collectively, these ideas tend to collapse into an all-consuming configuration of the nation as haunted, a dominant theme in Australian postcolonial cultural and literary critique, so much so that Jones has issued a caution. ‘If we are to avoid what I have called the seductive allure of “terminal Gothicism” – the simple pleasure of invoking the decorative vocabulary of spectres and phantoms – then the metaphor of haunting needs … to be considered a strategic discourse’ (Jones 2006: 16). I argue the nation as a haunted site has been operating as a strategic discourse since first European contact. The question is, how is it currently being deployed, by whom, and to what end?

The haunted trope winds through recent scholarship by way of Freud’s essay ‘Das Unheimlich’ (‘The Uncanny’) in which he defines the uncanny as that which ‘ought to have remained hidden and yet comes to light’ (Freud 1976: 623) – the return of the repressed. In Australia the haunted belonging argument runs as follows: the settler is unsettled by the knowledge that his or her presence in the landscape is predicated on the violent dispossession and displacement of the Indigenous peoples. Any sense of belonging the settler gleans from his/her occupation of the land is always already haunted by the suspicion that his or her ownership of place is illegitimate, fraudulent or, to use another recurrent word from the discourse, riven by the repressed Indigene threatening to return. To cite one standard example of this argument, McCredden writes:

[a]re all forms of identity – individual, communal, national – riven, needing to be understood always in relation to what they are not? According to a range of contemporary psychoanalytic and linguistic models of subjectivity the answer is “yes”: identity is structured by desire and lack … in what ways are Australian cultural discourses of identity ghostly or haunted? (McCredden 2007: 13)
Framing discussions of Australian literary culture and product in terms of this Freudian notion is, surely, reaching its use-by date. To posit that our white belonging – however riven and ambiguous – is based on the profound absence of the repressed other is to insist on that absence. At no point in this logic is the lesser other granted agency, merely positioned for effect, so we can know ourselves by taking the liberty of assuming to define, know and understand what and who we are not. This formulation, articulated by Franz Fanon, Homi Bhabha and other postcolonial theorists, in the hands of mostly white and socioculturally privileged theorists and commentators, becomes a form of reinscribing the repressed other and so rings with the tone of oppressive language. It may be productive and even comforting for white people to assert their presence by acknowledging that it is premised on the absence of others but it positions black people, or other others, as little more than intellectual tools of the academic trade. I am not referring to individual critics here but to the body of work as a body of work which sees a plethora of white scholars’ contributions but few black or other contributors. This apparent dearth is not because black theorists, or others, are not producing the work – it is there if you look. As Sneja Gunew has argued, ‘the problem is that their work is neither given the kind of support it deserves nor recognised as part of the national culture’ (Gunew in Davis 2007: 10). I’m not arguing that all white theorists present different versions of the absence of the repressed other. I am suggesting, as I have elsewhere (Stringer 2011), that the sheer bulk of the work and its overly optimistic tone can be understood as a form of discursive violence: for example, the sleight of intellectual hand that constructs the displaced and dispossessed other as a reified hybrid subject critically positioned to find comfortable housing out of (our) sight, conveniently in ‘the not here’.

As Leela Gandhi has pointed out:

> For all its hyperbolic claims, the discourse of hybridity … is not without its limitations … if the language of hybridity is to retain any serious political meaning, it must first concede that for some oppressed peoples, in some circumstances, the fight is simply not over. Hybridity is not the only enlightened response to oppression. (Gandhi 1998: 136)

Since we’re talking in Freudian terms, I ought ‘confess’ to the personal stake in this discussion alluded to earlier. As all Australians do, I live in a racialised zone. Unlike the
I don’t have the option to occupy this zone as an academic problem to be interrogated or with an amnesiac rumbling in the back of my mind. I live at a coalface of racialism because my daughters are of African descent and identify as black. I am white Australian, their father is a Xhosa man from apartheid-era South Africa. Thirteen at the time and coming alive to the personal politics of her colour, my elder daughter said, ‘If you’re a little bit black in this country, then you’re black.’ Unless you are Indigenous Australian, in which case you will be subjected to what Tony Birch has described as ‘white Australia’s pathological views of Indigenous identity including its obsession with skin colour and … the anxieties over race and miscegenation that pervade the white Australian conscience’ (Birch 2004: 150). The lighter the skin, the less likely white Australia will concede an Indigenous identity. Etymologically, the word miscegenation comes from the Latin miscere, ‘to mix’ and genus, ‘kind’ and was brought into common usage in context of the American civil war. The use of genus was/is based in the discredited biological (mis)understanding that a category of race exists as a scientific fact. I have always bristled at the word miscegenation, it implies my daughters and other ‘mixed race’ people are genetically miscast. The word is a weapon and almost always used as such.

Recently my daughters went to see an R rated movie. The younger was sixteen, is four foot eleven and could pass for thirteen. The elder was nineteen. They planned to get the younger one into the movie by playing the race card. The elder bought her ticket, gave the younger her identity card and went into the theatre. The younger presented her sister’s card. The ticket seller looked at the ID card, then at my daughter, then at the card again. Her confusion was because she thought she had already sold my youngest daughter a ticket, not because the image didn’t match the girl standing in front of her. After some toing and froing my daughter dropped her chin and said, ‘It’s because I’m black, isn’t it? You think we all look the same.’ Lay down misère. Victory through loss. I don’t tell this story as an example of racism – I don’t believe it illustrates racism as much as it exposes the fault lines in the social order where race is concerned and demonstrates the counter measures some have adopted to muscle themselves a place at the centre. I have countless stories like this. Some make my daughters and I laugh until we cry. Some just make us cry.
My younger child has cried too much in recent years because she’s not white, blonde-haired and blue-eyed and because she is continually being ‘put in her place’ because of her colour. A few examples: boys have told her to her face, ‘black people are ugly’; she has been called a ‘fake black’; she has been told by an otherwise smart seventeen-year-old girl that her skin colour will gradually fade until she becomes white; when told she doesn’t sound like a black person, she answered, ‘What does a black person sound like?’ Apparently the only ‘real’ black is an African American who says ‘yo’ and ‘nigga’ a lot. Africans themselves don’t register and Indigenous Australians don’t exist in these young people’s world. If the word ‘black’ is used to identify something, ‘black music’, or someone, ‘that black guy’, the speaker, often distressed at his or her imagined faux pas, looks to whichever one of my daughters is present, and says sorry, when my daughter has not been insulted in the first place. If there is insult it is because the underlying assumption is that their colour warrants apology. These stories from the front line, written on the bodies of young black people, indicate the failure of their elders to provide them and their young white friends with a language to speak equitably about identity and difference. Huggan writes of the ‘repeatedly frustrated search for a national identity that remains haunted by the past from which it wishes to free itself, forcing the nation’s younger citizens back into reliving the nightmares of another, older world’ (Huggan 2007: vii). The stories of my daughters’ colour may trace back to the nightmares of another, older world, but they are stories of this world and time. As Castro writes, ‘History is now’ (Castro 2009: 98 emphasis in original). These stories speak to a fractured future in race relations where people will continue to bumble over the words ‘black’ and ‘white’, not wanting or meaning to insult but doing so anyway because they are captive to a language and therefore a culture ill-equipped to acknowledge difference. Morrison describes this phenomenon:

… in matters of race, silence and evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate. The situation is aggravated by the tremor that breaks into discourse on race. It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture. To notice is to recognise an already discredited difference. To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body. According to
this logic, every well-bred instinct argues against noticing and forecloses adult discourse. (Morrison 1993a: 10, emphasis in original)

The image of a black body without a shadow is poignant and horribly accurate in describing the source of my younger daughter’s tears. I imagine her turning in circles, searching out her own shadow, looking for evidence that she is present, that she is matter and that she does matter. Fortunately, she gets some comfort from my older daughter who, in the face of her sister’s tears will roll her eyes and say, ‘White people can be fuckin’ dumb.’

From the haunted uncanny theorised as integral to postcolonial settler identity a complementary critical narrative thread has developed, what Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs have called ‘discourses of the sacred’ (Gelder & Jacobs 1998: xi). Depending on who is contributing to the conversation, this is another troubling critical thread because, whether witting or unwitting, it yokes Indigenous peoples and ways of knowing to the discussion as representative symbols for illustrating the settler’s haunted and unsettled relationship to place. My concern centres on the slippage that occurs when the white Australian critical community conjures the sacred to speak about settler identity, belonging or not belonging, because no sooner is the spectre of the sacred raised than the spectral, shadowless Indigenes are called forth and the sacred is raced. Here the repressed other is returned, over and over, as mainstream symbol to stand in for the ‘dark’ of an unknown yet insistent metaphysical ‘truth’ that can only be revealed by exposing the oppression inherent in the binary in the first place: white – good and knowable, black – dangerous, dark and mysterious, thereby bringing the black identity into relief in such a way as to reassert the violence of the hierarchical structure and … we are back to Orwell’s ‘effect – cause – effect indefinitely’ equation. In a racialised culture, this is the white people’s story – the ‘dark and stormy night’, the ‘black heart’, the ‘black abyss’, ‘dark interior’ and the ‘dark night of the soul’, none of which has anything to do with black people and all of which, in the pseudo-spiritualist language of psychoanalytic discourse conjure them. The dark bodes ill for a white person in spiritual, moral or metaphysical danger. These are stories that expose, if nothing else, the ‘sycophancy of white identity’ (Morrison 1993a: 19).
Obviously, there can be no returned repressed other if no absence is conceded in the first place. When contemplating the dark, it is not the repressed other that comes into view of the settler same, it is the settler having a moment of clarity, attempting to grant embodiment to the shadowless other they have created in the first place, trying to both take and abdicate responsibility at the same time but sinking themselves further into their own dysfunctional discursive logic. ‘I see you, black person, and because I see you, you now have a shadow.’ In this abstracted configuration the Indigenous sacred is assumed to be not only comprehensible by but unproblematically available to non-Indigenous people. McCredden argues ‘many non-Indigenous Australians are at present demonstrating a new level of need for and openness to “spirituality”, with Indigenous Australians, for better or for worse, being placed as major symbolic bearers of spiritual significance and directions’ (McCredden 2001: 190). A multitude of violent assumptions are papered over with the phrase ‘for better or for worse’. This, I suggest, is an example of the ‘tremor that breaks into discourse on race’ that Morrison referred to. Whose better(ment) is at stake here? Whose ‘worse’ matters? The shadowless other? The unsettled same? This is the discredited ‘race’ recuperated and conflated into the honorific Indigenous and used as a surrogate to symbolise spiritual knowledge. McCredden’s use of the phrase demonstrates Morrison’s point that ‘the ideological dependence on racialism is intact and, like its metaphysical existence, offers in historical, political, and literary discourse a safe route into meditations on morality and ethics … a way of thinking about justice; a way of contemplating the modern world’ (Morrison 1993a: 64). I think Morrison is being facetious calling this route ‘safe’. Safe for white people, maybe. McCredden continues, ‘There is now a manifest need being expressed in Australia for mutually conceived symbols, as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians seek to negotiate racial relations’ (McCredden 2001: 190). Well, haven’t we all been ‘negotiating racial relations’ since ‘the first fuckin fleet sailed in’? The white dominant order is currently just using more polite language. Now, because there is a ‘manifest need’ we’re all off to the negotiating table? What are the terms of the negotiation? Who is negotiating for what? Whose needs will be met? Can my daughters have some skin that won’t fade? You trade your sacred knowledge so I get peace of mind and in return I will allow you a shadow? Hardly seems a fair exchange. Demonstrating a need for a spirituality assumed to be the purview of
Indigenous ways of knowing is not a compelling reason for the shadowless to risk the 
overexposure and, being without shadow, the potential annihilation that would follow 
stepping into the light.

McCredden acknowledges the potential danger of tacking white Australia’s spiritual need 
to assumed Indigenous ways of knowing and/or practising spirituality. Other critics and 
commentators show no such qualm. David Tacey has used the sacred in Australia as a 
thetical baseline from which he subjects the whole nation to a Jungian psychoanalytic 
reading and finds us lacking. Among his ‘arguments’ is the assumption – in his world it is 
a ‘truth’ – that a ‘sense of complete unreality and alienation plagues contemporary life’ 
(Tacey 2009: 147). His remedy? To achieve a sense of reality and belonging, Australians, 
he writes, must ‘discover the indigenous person within’ (Tacey 2009: 203). No need to 
worry that you’ll misrecognise this internal identity when it pops up because, Tacey 
assures us, ‘Non-indigenous Australians are being aboriginalised in their sleep’ (Tacey 
2009: 205). Remarkable how white people are so blessed we can acquire someone else’s 
identity in our sleep. This psychobabble isn’t much more erudite than a seventeen-year-
old child/woman thinking my daughter’s skin will fade to white. Tacey is a Professor and 
so presumably can be held to account. In any language. In a different context but 
applicable here, Kay Redfield Jamison writes about the ‘excesses of psychoanalytic 
speculation … [and] other abuses of psychobiography … [that] have invited well 
deserved ridicule’ (Jamison 1994: 3). Tacey’s attempts at inclusivity, surely the 
aspiration of an intellectual argument for belonging, are telling. He writes, ‘We have been 
forced into new awareness, however limited, about Aboriginal people, women, gays, 
ecology and the environment, other cultures, other races and Asia, possibly the most 
potent symbol of the other at the moment’ (Tacey 2009: 129). ‘We’ is a most select group 
that excludes everyone and everything in the list that follows the pronoun, which is an 
awful lot of people. ‘We’ – white men – have been forced into awareness of everyone 
and everything that isn’t ‘our’ selves? While on the one hand Tacey’s ideas are quaint 
and a little laughable, on the other they are violent misappropriations repackaged as 
academic knowledge and distributed to a crossover popular/academic audience. In page 
after page of Tacey’s substantial body of work the imagery suggested by his choice of 
language, and it remains language I am interested in here, veers close to conjuring the
figure of the noble savage, which, anytime anywhere but especially in a dominant culture intellectually dismissive of magic, voodoo and the sacred – what Bhabha would call “‘denied’ knowledges’ (Bhabha 1985: 156) – is a form of infantilising. The indissoluble paradox Tacey presents is, as Gelder and Jacobs write, ‘that an otherwise underdeveloped modern Australia can achieve (spiritual) development only by turning back to the “primitive”’ (Gelder & Jacobs 1998: 12). This is a sinister turning back because it elides the discursive and literal violence out of which the idea of primitivism was born and, by ignoring it allows its perpetual return. Inherent in Tacey’s primitivism argument is the suggestion that the mystical sacred knowledge attributed to Indigenous peoples is based in passive, childlike awe of the natural world. It follows that Indigenous peoples using their own knowledge are innocent, even endearing primitives. White people using the same knowledge become spiritually enlightened. Huh? As McCann points out, in Tacey’s work, ‘the sacred is the key concept in attempts to imagine a version of Australian identity uncompromised by, if not magically released from, the fatal entanglements of settlement’ (McCann 2005). Because we imagine we have been released from the responsibility of producing the primitive, noble savage and the derogatory associations that follow this construction, we imagine we can claim ownership of that same primitive’s knowledge along with the ability and the right to use the knowledge. Referring to fiction but relevant to Tacey’s troublesome thesis, Castro writes:

… in Australian literature there are countless mythologies of flawed men and women who transact mysteries with indigenous peoples and with Nature in order to find salvation through a recuperation of innocence. This enthusiasm for nativism is in effect a subconscious re-appropriation of equality where there is none. The power of the primitive urges readers to admire characters who can thumb their noses at European sophistication … realism as a form of national legitimation. Simply to represent this re-adjustment is often considered to be holding the higher moral ground. (Castro 2009: 88)

Tacey’s reifying of the Indigenous sacred is part of a (mis)conceptualised imaginary that enjoys some cultural legitimacy in contemporary Australia. I would cite the reputation of any number of geographically privileged – that is, coastal – towns that economically trade on an ‘alternative’ lifestyle. These towns are imagined as places of profound healing, as remedy to the speed and grit of the soulless cities, as centres of spiritual
practice and knowledge. The emphasis on ‘healing’ can’t help but produce its corresponding ‘damage’. In context of this manufactured ‘damage’ and ‘healing’ pendulum, where it finds an obvious home, peddling the idea that white Australia can become ‘aboriginalised’, can learn and ‘know’ the ‘indigenous person within’, and (what?) paint our faces with ochre, don a lap-lap and reach spiritual enlightenment is critique as barely disguised repressive instrument played out on the body politic. As Simon During has pointed out, primitivism ‘repeat[s] a metaphor that has done a great deal of political and ideological work in Australia, even more than in other settler-colonial states. The notion that Indigenous peoples belong more to nature than to humanity has helped discount their prior claims to the country’ (During in Davis 2007: 14). The romantic construction of the fantastical figure of the returning repressed Indigene can be understood as a form of critical *terra nullius*, an opaque subjectivity emptied of the realities of material life – political neglect, poverty, illness, dispossession, racism. How much un-de-re-construction can one subjectivity bear? Already shadowless, this phantom has been skinned.

In a more sophisticated and so potentially more disturbing example, Bill Ashcroft, a senior scholar in Australian postcolonial criticism, expounds on the virtues and the value of the sacred in Australian life:

The sacred has been an empowering feature of post-colonial experience in two ways: on one hand Indigenous concepts of the sacred have been able to interpolate dominant conceptions of cultural identity; and on the other western forms of the sacred have often been appropriated and transformed as a means of local empowerment. In a complex and intensely mediated way both these features have been true of Australian experience. The sacred occupies the region of the repressed in Australian cultural life and moments of cultural trauma demonstrate a return of the repressed, sometimes … in quite violent ways. Complicated by an intense fascination with Indigenous mythologies, with its battle to localise received European and imperial forms of religious observance, and with its reliance on the literary imagination to tap into this repressed energy, Australian culture has, like many other post-colonial societies, begun to encounter the sacred as a region of difference, transformation and empowerment. (Ashcroft 2009: 22)
While I admire Ashcroft’s attempt to put a positive spin on the postcolonial experience, I remain unconvinced by this fairly typical and puzzling passage. Ashcroft’s language slides close to ecstatic, it reads like missionary triumphalism – giving religious thanks for the natives’ inevitable conversion to superior Western ways of knowing. Ashcroft does not specify how he knows that ‘Indigenous concepts of the sacred have been able to interpolate dominant conceptions of cultural identity’ nor does he say what this reconfigured Indigenous sacred becomes or how it is expressed. Like McCredden’s ‘for better or for worse’, Ashcroft’s ‘have been able to’ papers over the history of frontier and ongoing violence which was often driven by religious fervour, by the ‘moralizing Christian sentiment that permitted itself to express sympathy for the unfortunate natives’ (Huggan 2007: 18). Ashcroft implies an unproblematic acquiescence to ‘dominant conceptions of cultural identity’. What are these dominant conceptions, whose identity do they describe, and who is accepting them? Ashcroft doesn’t say. Is this part of what Alison Ravenscroft describes as ‘a “self-same” argument whereby other’s reality is produced as if it were a version of the colonisers’ own, only a lesser one”? (Ravenscroft 2010: 197). Is this contemporary assimilationist theory dressed up as ‘empowerment’? Ashcroft’s language has a theistic tone. Are we becoming One Nation under God? Exactly where, when, how, by whom and to what end have ‘western forms of the sacred … been appropriated and transformed as a means of local empowerment’? Whose local? Whose empowerment? It is not a stretch to imagine Ashcroft is talking about building churches. ‘Western forms of the sacred’ remain undefined in the piece from which this passage is drawn. This is legitimate in a scholarly meditation on the concept of the sacred but it becomes questionable when attempting to define the other’s appropriation, understanding and/or practice of the sacred because it implies knowledge and understanding of a cultural paradigm as it existed before transformation, an impossible feat. Ashcroft takes the time to establish and celebrate the mysterious interpolation and integration of Western sacred knowledges and by extension identities, by Indigenous peoples, then immediately banishes the sacred to the region of the repressed. He then executes a discursive move that returns us to his Westernised construction of the sacred as a form of empowerment. I am bewildered. Where did the Indigenous peoples go? I read Ashcroft’s ideas as an example of what McCann has described as a ‘well-meaning
penchant for elegiac posturing [that] looks suspiciously similar to the poetic rehearsal of doomed-race theories in the nineteenth century’ (McCann 2006: 52). McCann argues:

For all their good intentions, contemporary attempts to tether the sacred to a framework of collective renewal can also resemble the forms of primitivism that we frequently find at the intersection of colonial and modernist cultural production … Against the neo-imperial, neo-conservative fervour of contemporary Australian politics, the Anglo-European evocation of the sacred frequently expresses a well-meaning liberalism. Still, as a panacea for contemporary ills, the residual character of a paradigm deeply rooted in the colonial imaginary means that these ills are fundamentally misrecognised and their solutions misconstrued. (McCann 2005)

Cloaking a bastardised Indigenous sacred with an equally ill-defined Anglo-European sacred and presenting this strange hybrid as a site where mutual recognition between Indigenous and settler identities can be realised, which I suggest is what McCredden, Tacey and Ashcroft are doing, is an impossible equation and its aspiration bound to fail because it is a re-enactment of the old-fashioned anthropological assumption to ‘know’, to assume the power to define and so to claim a form of ownership of another’s cultural and intellectual property. Jones writes, ‘Every settler colony strives to manufacture ideological unity, but such manufacture is characterized by its forms of perpetual failure’ (Jones 2006: 13). One form of this failure is evident in the pervasive and irreconcilable flaw in McCredden’s, Tacey’s and Ashcroft’s arguments. It is the same flaw that can reduce my daughters to tears because its correction is so easy, so available and so consistently refused. This is the assumption that another’s perspective and/or subject position can be felt, known and understood. Ravenscroft describes the mechanics of this refusal: ‘If white subjects are canny enough, smart enough, patient enough, so the fantasy goes, we will be able to see what our others see, know what they know. From such a “white” subject position … we can be tempted to approach another’s knowledge as if it were always and in all ways accessible’ (Ravenscroft 2010: 198). The quest to make the sacred, now infused with Indigenous epistemologies, accessible to all is a disguised form of neocolonialism wherein another’s knowledge is acquired by stealth and fabrication. First, there is an assumption that the Indigenous sacred is based in primitive and so redundant ways of knowing and therefore denied legitimacy in its original form. Then, while it is deflating under the apparently unproblematic weight of absorbing Western
epistemologies, it is snatched away and reinvested with white ways of knowing that make it legitimate again. Finally this reconfigured sacred is put back on the marketplace packaged as healing empowerment in a contemporary symbolic order that ignores its Indigenous specificity and promises a mode of belonging to the haunted white settler whose subjectivity is imagined to be stabilised by the absence of the Indigenes … and around we go again. Little wonder Davis writes that ‘Australian literary criticism as it exists in the popular critical consciousness … continues to function as a veiled defence of colonialism and white nationalism’ (Davis 2007: 10). The sweeping uses of the raced sacred and what it purports to promise settler Australians would appear to demonstrate Davis’ provocative argument.

Lamenting that the ‘middle-class, middle-brow tone of Australian literature is probably undeniable’ (McCann 2004: 24), McCann suggests:

A radical literature in Australia would consist partly in exploding the possibility of those transferences between historical catastrophe and aesthetic gratification (however ambiguous), and generating forms of writing in which notions of Anglo-Australian belonging – nation, landscape, the literature of the soil – are clearly identified as belonging to the toxic legacy of colonialism. (McCann 2006: 54)

I share McCann’s dejection. It is a shocking notion that white writing and storytelling that acknowledges the ‘toxic legacy of colonialism’, as A Beggar’s Garden does, would or could constitute a ‘radical literature’. My novel was not designed as radical literature, or to deliver shock value but neither was I attempting to provide what McCann has called the ‘middle-class literary solace’ (McCann 2004: 24) that ‘the vast majority of readers still expect from belles lettres’ (McCann 2006: 54). If anything, I have consciously tried not to be confrontational, and to nestle the story in a comfortable, traditional form, a linear narrative that progresses according to plot not political abstraction. In my world, in the literary patch of soil that produced my novel, telling stories that pretend ignorance of the toxic legacy of colonialism would be radical and furthermore would constitute a betrayal of Shakespearean proportions – of my daughters and their exiled father; of my commitment to justice, poetic and otherwise; and of the Indigenous community who helped keep my little family together by ‘hiding’ my children at a time when I believed the State was about to take them away from me. But more of that later …
Ravenscroft is one critic whose analysis of the postcolonial gaze not only avoids the pitfalls that Tacey, McCredden and Ashcroft fall into, she articulates an alternative. In a more measured but no less emphatic register, she argues: ‘In postcolonial literary criticism, gestures are always made towards difference, and the word ‘dialectic’ runs through this criticism like a talisman that could ward off charges of neoimperialism … But … these gestures towards difference and the dialectical turn out to be merely moments of deferral’ (Ravenscroft 2010: 197). In the face of what is incommensurable difference, Ravenscroft offers an alternative practice of reading another’s culture. That is, ‘through the paradigm of radical uncertainty, an impossible dialectic’ (Ravenscroft 2010: 197, emphasis in original).

This impossibility is brought home to me by living in close proximity to my daughters in their black skins. I can never know or understand their experience of living coloured in a dominant white culture. To claim I can would be to disavow and – in one fell misappropriation, ‘I know’ – silence their sometimes painful experiences of living coloured in contemporary Australia. My daughters are good-natured in their discipline of my recurring stupidities regarding their colour – I am not exempt because I live close to their skin. Distracted by other tasks and trying to comfort her, I recently told my distressed, again, younger daughter, ‘Anyway, black people are cool.’ When she howled with righteous derision, I said, ‘Sorry. That was probably racist. Was that racist?’ She said, ‘Nah, Mum. Just white.’ The only way I know to get over, past, through or across these moments with my daughters is to listen when they feel like talking about living black and follow when they feel like taking the lead. No matter where they lead. Ravenscroft writes of recognising difference without the hubris that insists we can know an other’s experience and suggests instead a ‘necessary estrangement’ derived from the ‘impossible dialectic’ in order to ‘sit still’ with the other’s beauty and ‘bear its enigma’ (Ravenscroft 2010: 198). Considering my ineffectual rage in light of the stories of race that drift through the house whenever my daughters are present, this focus on beauty is not only sound, it’s comforting. My daughters are beautiful because they’re beautiful. Beyond that, in our house their difference was always a given. Their courage was not. Sometimes I can be still and quiet and bear in pale dusk light the beauty in my daughters’
courage. Other times I laugh out loud at myself – the representative white person – when their stories demand it. Which is often. And, I write about it.
Everywhere, everywhere, children are the scorned people of the earth.
– Toni Morrison (Morrison 1994: 103)

I knew from the day the story arrived that *A Beggar’s Garden* would be a haunted text and that its haunting tracked the nation’s history of colonisation and the myths and folklore that have informed the national narrative ever since. Meg’s fear and her conviction that her children will be taken from her if the three of them become visible to the State dictates all her decisions and therefore the arc of the story. The shadow that lurks in this fear has haunted the nation since first European contact. That is, the figure of the lost child who is a more insistent and profound presence now than ever before. ‘Australian literature,’ Huggan writes, ‘offers a set of local variations on the ghost story; it is recurrently afflicted, if not by horror, then at least by some deep-seated ontological dis-ease’ (Huggan 2007: xiii). This dis-ease is nowhere more apparent than in attempts to
reconcile the nation’s colonial past with its postcolonial future. The ghosts of Australia’s lost children straddle just this divide and become the disembodied expression of an ontological homelessness, of a shadowless being in a place but never at home. The lost child is a vulnerable entity that is, paradoxically, more durable than the other mythologies informing the national identity – mateship, the fair go, the conviction that Australia was built on the sheep’s back, the taming of the land and *terra nullius*, to name a few. Jones writes: ‘The no longer living rupture time – philosophically at least – in order to make a claim, to register ghostly disquiet. Fundamentally these are justice claims: the ghost requires us not to forget the wrongs of history and to work for reparation in the future, for the *arrivants*, the not-yet-born or arrived’ (Jones 2006: 16). Trailing their annihilated childhoods the ghosts of Australian children continue to be forced into a perpetually circular exile, a longing for a home that never was, a recognition that has yet to be given because for over two centuries Australia has not mourned her lost children. The evidence suggests these ghosts are destined to wander for a while yet.

Day after week after month I held fast to Hippocrates’ ‘Do no harm’ dictum while the bereft apparition of the lost child was a palpable presence accompanying me as I wrote, hovering over my shoulder demanding a hearing or cowering under my desk seeking protection while the nation was bearing witness to child murderers’ trials and to the daily horror drip-fed through the media from yet another national inquiry into institutional, or institutionalised, child abuse and countless other stories of traumatised children that never end – because the damage inflicted on these children can never be undone. ‘The traumatised,’ Cathy Caruth writes, ‘carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of … history’ (Caruth 1996b: 5). Childhood trauma revisits for a lifetime, it is a life and too often in the form of suicide, a death sentence. The narrative of the nation is replete with a litany of stories of children lost, stolen, abandoned, discarded, betrayed, deceived, enslaved, neglected, denied, beaten, debased, raped, tortured and murdered. I wish I were exaggerating.

Since 1997 there have been forty-three enquiries and/or Royal Commissions at state and federal levels investigating the failure of the child protection industry to protect children (Lonne B, Gray M & Harries M 2013). In a five-year period four apologies relating to
some of these damning reports were issued. The first apology – given eleven years after the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report, *Bringing them Home* (1997), that recommended it – was delivered to The Stolen Generations of Indigenous children and their families. Apologies were issued to women and children separated by forced adoption as a result of the Senate Inquiry Report, *Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices* (2012), and to The Forgotten Australians, in excess of five hundred thousand of them (us), who spent years in orphanages and other institutions where they were subjected to brutal abuse – physical, sexual and psychological (*Forgotten Australians: A report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children* 2004). And lastly, an apology was issued to The Lost Innocents – British and Maltese children taken from their unwed mothers and transported to Australia where they joined their forgotten kin in abusive institutions (*Lost Innocents: Righting the Record - Report on child migration* 2001). Kristina Olsson, whose work *Boy, Lost: a family memoir* (2013a) documents her family’s collision with the lost child narrative, writes of her discovery that

we lived in a culture that had witnessed and condoned the wholesale removal of children for decades … Australia had watched as Aboriginal children were stolen, as British children were taken and resettled, as the children of the poor were removed … and “illegitimate” babies were appropriated by the state … As a nation, we turned from them all … unwilling or unable to confront the meanings of these events and their repercussions. Deep silences were imposed in the name of protection and care … We had somehow, collectively, agreed not to notice. (Olsson 2013b)

Olsson’s story of the life of despair led by her brother Peter as a result of being stolen from his mother’s arms is a harrowing tale. My own family’s encounter with Australia’s lost child narrative rings in a more hopeful register. While *A Beggar’s Garden* is not a fictionalised autobiography – it is a novel – I have drawn extensively on autobiographical material and knew that Meg’s children would at some stage be given shelter on the side of a mountain with an unofficial Indigenous community because that’s what happened to my children.

Around the turn of the last century Australia was witness to an explosion in the politics of race that began with the Prime Minister’s Redfern speech that acknowledged for the first
time the State’s role in the atrocities inflicted on the Indigenous peoples by successive governments and by generations of white Australians’ ‘nationalist belligerence’ (Said 1999: 5): a belligerence associated with the revisionist history that imagines Australia’s past as a narrative of ‘heroic’ (Howard 1996) deeds and, where the Indigenous peoples are concerned, admits only to a few ‘blemishes’ (Howard 1997). In the same decade the *Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991) and *Bringing them Home* (1997) reports were delivered. The court cases *Mabo vs Queensland* (no 2) (1992) which overturned the doctrine of terra nullius, *Wik People vs Queensland* (1996) and the government’s response to the rulings of these cases, the Ten Point Plan (*Native Title Amendment Act* 1998), that watered down the impact of them; the same government’s refusal to apologise to the Stolen Generations; the 200 to 250 thousand people who marched across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in a show of solidarity with the Indigenous peoples and protest against the government’s contempt for humanitarian decency in the face of the collective suffering, historical and contemporary, that the *Bringing Them Home* and *Deaths in Custody* reports exposed.

I was not oblivious to these events but neither was I a participant. My life was in a spiral of mental illness, drug addiction and struggle as a single mother of two brown baby girls. As a family we were hurtling towards tragedy, most likely for my children in the form of my death from overdose. That trajectory was set in a different direction in part because of our encounter with the legacy of The Stolen Generations as it is lived in the present on the side of a mountain from where, on a clear day, you can see the sea silver in the distance. After months of subsistence living, my girls and I were sliding closer to life on the streets. I had been told by welfare workers that if I asked for help again, they would ‘have to’ take my children away. There was nothing else they could do for me. They were being kind. I wrongly believed my family were making moves to have my children taken from me. At three in the morning I stood in the doorway of the room my daughters shared, listening to them breathe and watching them sleep. I was immobilised by panic. I believed I had only two options: either I would lose them to the State, or I would need to find a way to hide these two conspicuously ‘different’ little girls. First thing in the morning I called a Blackfella friend, a member of The Stolen Generations I’d met through the network of the ‘street’. In less than twenty-four hours he’d arranged for my
children to be hidden with an Indigenous community while I tried to get my life into order. My girls were given shelter by this community on and off for several months. In *A Beggar’s Garden* this is Ruth’s place. As improbable as this story is, it happened. Its poignancy is that these events could only have happened as a result of the policy of removing Indigenous children from their families and of the resistance that the Indigenous community has developed in response to that practice. As far as I know the community is still there, doing what it’s done for forty years, trying to keep black families together instead of seeing them torn apart and their children sacrificed to ‘the savage mercies of the state’ (Olsson 2013b). I feel a responsibility to this story because, while my involvement with the community at ‘Ruth’s’ was fleeting, I know that my white skin afforded me privileges not available to the many Indigenous mothers and their children who have found reprieve on the mountain. I haven’t done anything to deserve these privileges. They are simply the luck of the birthright of the skin colour I was born into. I could collect my children and slip back into my good-middle-class-white-woman persona and under cover of that anonymity, waltz off to a better life. Which I did. The story of the kindness shown to my girls and me at ‘Ruth’s’ is a story of complexity, of irreconcilable difference, an impossible dialectic that produced not hostility, victimhood or reconciliation but shelter and restoration. One definition of the word ‘grace’ is *undeserved privilege or favour*. My girls and I were shown grace by a community whose existence was born out of its opposite – injustice, cruelty and a bewildering form of vengeance towards the racialised other.

During the nine-month fever when I wrote, edited, re-wrote, slashed, and re-wrote again and pulled *A Beggar’s Garden* into a shape that would hold the story, I listened to the radio as I drove to my work space not more than five minutes from home. There wasn’t a day I didn’t hear another story of a child or children lost, missing, abducted, tortured and/or murdered. These stories didn’t wash over me, I absorbed them by some osmotic process and approached my desk with a churning stomach and my bisociating heart sunk in a swamp of sorrows. The stories of children abused that I heard overlaid onto one defining crime committed around the time of the novel’s inception. Perhaps because I was in a sponge-like state, casting a wide net with a defiant eye, on the look-out for any contemporary material I could use, this crime seared itself into my imagination. Darcey
Freeman was a cherubic blonde four-year-old whose father threw her off Melbourne’s West Gate Bridge. As harrowing as this crime was its imagery was also compellingly poetic and became emblematic for me, finding its way into A Beggar’s Garden. It became central to my conception of the river’s dead and what and/or who they represent – the nation’s blind eye, the pact we have made as a community ‘not to notice’ the abuse and murder of women and children. I remained unable to shift the image of that girl-child tossed from the apex of a large, high bridge over a body of cold, blue-brown water used for industrial passage. There were many other equally harrowing reports of murdered and abused children. Even if I weren’t attuned to these stories because of whatever scene of near capture or calamity I was writing my characters in or out of, I cannot imagine it would have been possible to sit at my desk and not try to deliver the many threatened, abused and/or lost children in my novel some poetic justice. I can read Meg’s efforts to keep Charlie and Lucy with her and safe as a gesture towards a gentler denouement to both the fictional and real life tales of lost children that fuelled that nine-month writing fever.

The lost child arrived in colonial Australia with the first fleet and has been wandering in ‘purgatorial terror’ (Kociumbus 2001: 41) amongst us ever since. Over forty children under the age of twelve were transported to the colony as young offenders or convicts in 1788 (Holden 1991: 59). It wasn’t long before these criminal children were given more savoury fictional counterparts who were set to work in the ‘narrative of originary moment’ (Frost 2001: 219). Carmel Bird, whose work is often informed by the lost child, writes, ‘Myth was then, and is now, never far from the surface in Australia. It is nourished by fact, explained and embellished by fiction, spoken and written, and in its turn informs the way lives are lived and perceived’ (Bird 2013). Forty-three enquiries in seventeen years speaks to a surface already deeply scarred and still erupting with stories of lost and abused children.

Bird writes:

The Lost Child, the stolen child – this must be a narrative that is lodged in the heart and imagination, nightmare and dream, of all human beings. In Australia the nightmare became a reality. The child is the future, and if the child goes, there can be no future. The true
Where the young are concerned, the story Australians tell themselves is a sorry tale. From the earliest days of settlement the image of the motherless ‘babe in the bush’ was used to caution children against straying into what the settlers experienced as a hostile, malicious landscape. Robert Holden describes ‘an idiosyncratic Australian attitude’ (Holden 1991: 59) to the ‘savage environment’ (Kociumbas 2001: 37). Into the nightmarish landscape, tempted by the ‘limitless horizon’ (Pierce 1999: xvii) and ‘the enticing bush track’ (Holden 1991: 60) wandered the children of the empire, oftentimes, in story and in fact, towards certain death. These doomed children carried with them not only the hopes of the colonisers, but also their dispositions. They were portrayed as ‘frail, white, somewhat girlish children… tragically… overwhelmed by a seductive wilderness, particularly hostile to the vulnerable young’ (Kociumbas 2001: 37). They were ‘feeble, androgynous’ (Kociumbas 2001: 40), drawn by ‘the alluring prospect of the bush’ that quickly ‘becomes a deadly snare’ (Holden 1991: 67). The colonists’ ‘babe in the bush’ story speaks to the dangers of separating from the mother country. For John Scheckter, the moral of this story was clear: ‘If one goes a-roving, one loses identity’ (Scheckter 1981: 64). The empire’s child is cast into moral and mortal jeopardy if he or she strays. The child lost in the landscape is a tale bound by an umbilical cord connecting it to colonisation and from there to the present in an indirect but unbroken line.

Elspeth Tilley has written a deconstructive study of what she calls the ‘white-vanishing trope’ (Tilley 2012: 1). She writes, ‘Commentators on Australian literature and culture have been noting the numbers of narratives about lost or vanished children for more than fifty years’ (Tilley 2012: 22). The last decade or so has seen a flourish of critical interest in this figure, much of it in response to Peter Pierce’s book length study, *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety* (Pierce 1999). As his subtitle suggests, Pierce follows the well-worn narrative thread of the unsettled settler as anxious occupant of a land intent on obstructing attempts by this interloper to claim belonging. Pierce argues:
the lost child is the symbol of essential if never fully resolved anxieties within the white settler communities of this country … the lost child represents the anxieties of European settlers because of the ties with home which they have cut in coming to Australia, whether or not they journeyed here by choice … children lost in places they might not belong focused anxieties not only over legitimacy of land tenure, but of European Australians’ spiritual and psychological lodgement. (Pierce 1999: xi)

Like Pierce, Scheckter posits the lost child as a metaphor for the vulnerability of the European settler. ‘Australians,’ he writes, ‘have often seen themselves as the orphans or outcast children of Europe’ (Scheckter 1981: 62). Holden considers that ‘Australia remains a land of exile, of white usurpers in a devouring landscape which reduces us all to the level of irrational children’ (Holden 1991: 62). Lucy Frost writes, in relation to what she calls ‘the trope of vanishing’, that ‘conquest over the land is not complete if settlers continue to vanish into its spaces’ (Frost 2001: 226). Whatever the deeper cultural meanings assigned to the lost child, the figure remains a powerful part of what Pierce calls ‘one of the oldest and most disturbing bodies of story that European Australians have told’ (Pierce 1999: 198).

Pierce divides The Country of Lost Children into two parts. The first covers the period from 1850 to 1900. He deals with accounts of colonial children lost in the bush and with the folklore surrounding the figure which, in keeping with the trend sketched above, he posits as a metaphoric tool that becomes ‘a vital means for European Australians … to express and understand the insecurities of their position in a land that was new to many of them, and strange to all’ (Pierce 1999: xiii). The second half of the book covers the period from the 1950s to the turn of the twenty-first century during which, he argues, ‘new and sharper versions of that old anxiety were again being expressed in Australia’ (Pierce 1999: xiv). For Pierce this move between centuries lands us in ‘a moral terrain that has been radically transformed’ (Pierce 1999: 96). Twentieth-century lost child stories, he writes, ‘tell of institutional brutality and of individual perversity, moreover of the suspicions that these engender about a society in which the abuse and loss of children can seem inevitable, if regrettable, and worthy of note mostly for the peculiar horrors that some of the stories reveal’ (Pierce 1999: 96). Pierce argues that twentieth-century stories of children ‘abandoned, abused, aborted, abducted or murdered’ (Pierce 1999: 95) are so
violent in detail, so irreconcilable with the nation’s self-image that they constitute some kind of ‘a cultural death wish’ (Pierce 1999: 97). While Pierce acknowledges that in his missing half century (1900-1950) the lost child remained a feature in the national narrative, his decision to exclude a period of particular brutality towards children is puzzling. He defends this decision by arguing that during this time ‘much imaginative writing, both fiction and poetry, was concerned to offer a retrospect on the taking of the land from its Aboriginal inhabitants by pioneers and settlers’ (Pierce 1999: xiii). He calls this ‘saga fiction’ in which the old anxieties ‘were over-ridden in the narratives of progress’ (Pierce 1999: xiii). In other words, his missing fifty years was a period of revisionist history in which a conservative reading of the nation was imposed, when the narrative of the white masculinist settler hero who tamed the desert wilderness and ‘smoothed the pillow of the dying race’ (Flannery 2010: 15) was at its most virulent. During the same period the assimilationist policy was introduced and imposed with zeal and the policy of removing Indigenous children from their families was robustly enforced, when The Lost Innocents began to arrive in their legions, and, from 1920, the time when the half a million Forgotten Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, were taken by force or coercion into State ‘care’ where they were abused with impunity (Lost Innocents 2001). Pierce’s decision to leave these fifty years out of a book that focusses on the lost child represents at best a missed opportunity for analysis that might have helped shed some light on a time of barbaric ill-treatment of the young and on the repercussions still rippling through the community today and at worst imposes a disconnect within the narrative that casts the child-sized ghost further into ‘purgatorial cruelty and suffering’ (Kociumbus 2001: 44).

The points of division in Pierce’s timeline amount to an act of obfuscation. Frost insists that when placing lost child narratives of the past next to current versions, ‘similarities to the colonial period appear for which Pierce’s argument does not account’ (Frost 2001: 225). In the same vein, Jan Kociumbas argues that Pierce’s insistence on the benign demise of children in the late nineteenth century is historically inaccurate and writes that ‘deliberate acts of cruelty towards children in this land did not wait until the 1950s. The removal of Aboriginal children commenced not in the 1950s but in 1789’ (Kociumbas 2001: 41). She adds that the British children arriving as a result of forced transportation
had already reached ‘substantial numbers’ by 1834 (Kociumbas 2001: 41). Pierce’s missing fifty years is not the only punch he pulls. His analysis favours a romanticised view of settler life and loss. In his reading, the lost (white) children in the nineteenth century did not fall victim to predatory adults. They encountered not a hostile but an ‘indifferent’ (Pierce 1999: xii) land where they did not perish from the effects of starvation, hyperthermia, hypothermia or dehydration but simply fell asleep and slipped ‘gently into death’ (Pierce 1999: 8).

In reference to critical texts that address the lost child, Tilley identifies ‘two major trends’ in the analyses – ‘child symbolism’ and ‘solace/pleasure’ approaches (Tilley 2012: 22). The ‘child symbolism’ approach, as demonstrated in Pierce’s and Scheckter’s work, ‘either allegorizes the Australian nation as a child or reflects a settler people’s sense of having a child-like vulnerability in their new environment’ (Tilley 2012: 25). The ‘solace/pleasure’ approach, she writes, ‘addresses, and might even help resolve, a sense of anxious settler alienation or estrangement … these kinds of analyses effectively valorize the lost-child trope as a settler indigenizing myth that can help white society to build or assert a redemptive spiritual connection with the Australian landscape’ (Tilley 2012: 33). In the ‘solace/pleasure’ position the lost child became a symbol around which the community could and, according to the historical record often did, build a sense of cohesion. When a child was lost in the bush the community came together for the search and stayed together through the outcome to celebrate if the child were found – when their ‘salvation virtually becomes a resurrection experience’ (Holden 1991: 66) – or to commiserate when the child was found dead or not at all. Configuring the lost child within discourses that posit the narrative as achieving ‘resolution or even reconciliation’ for white settlers effectively ignores the narrative’s ‘participation in a race politics of land and cultural ownership’ (Tilley 2012: 35). Further, Tilley contends that ‘the trope as a whole is engaged in a strategy of forgetting and displacing the non-white, and installing itself as a constituent of dominant national mythology’ (Tilley 2012: 35). Here Tilley’s arguments are suggestive of Davis’ that ‘the logic of … liberal theory … is always raced and nationalist’ (Davis 2007: 9). If Indigenous peoples are granted a role in the lost child narratives of the nineteenth century it is almost exclusively in the guise of the ‘sharp-eyed and indefatigable’ Aboriginal trackers (Holden 1991: 63), ‘the secular agents of
salvation’ (Pierce 1999: 10) who helped to find the settler children, dead or alive, while their own children were being stolen from them. By the twentieth century, the Indigenous presence in the lost child narrative was never more literal and at the same time never more occluded than by the political and social languages employed to spruik the policy of removing Indigenous children from their families.

Pierce states that his book is

written in hope, out of a humanist belief that the rehearsal of stories of our past … can still illuminate how in Australia we came to be as we are … if the analysis of current anxieties concerning an Australian future … shows this anxiety to be so deep and wretched and scarcely examined that the next generation is set at hazard, then these stories must be addressed as a matter of moral and cultural urgency. Otherwise, Australia … may become the place where the post-medieval Western notion of childhood dies first. (Pierce 1999: xviii)

I don’t doubt Pierce’s sincerity but there are some recurring privileges he takes for granted and so continues to propagate. His failure to consider a through line from the nineteenth century to the present does the already-embattled lost child a further disservice. His suggestion that this is ‘a story from our past’ denies the effects of the past on the present. When Pierce does turn his attention to the place of Indigenous peoples in the lost child narrative he sees it as offering a missed opportunity towards reconciliation. Pierce suggests that in the historical narrative the Aboriginal men who searched for, and often found, missing white children were a ‘potentially … potent image of reconciliation between black and white Australians. All too soon, it was forgotten’ (Pierce 1999: xii). Considering the children of, in his words, ‘the so-called “stolen generation”’, Pierce writes:

Where once the land indifferently took lost Australian children of European origin, now Aboriginal children were systematically taken away from their land. If these bodies of suffering and story can be connected, then the process of reconciliation between European and Aboriginal Australians, which can be glimpsed at times in the colonial tales of lost children, might be advanced in ways that do not allow regression to an age that once we thought of as less enlightened than this. (Pierce 1999: xiv)
The call to connect The Stolen Generations with the European lost child in the bush is disingenuous in light of Pierce’s analysis that imagines the European child came to grief as a result of ‘falling asleep’ and ‘slipping gently into death’ while he fails to specify the Indigenous children were lost as the result of a human agency barbaric in practice and proportion. In the quote above, Indigenous children ‘taken away from their land’ is a phrase that not only rings with the hollowness of passive voice (who took the children? A Bunyip?) but also the sentiment it contains conflates white children ‘taken by the land’ and Indigenous children taken from their families. This not only denies the specificity of The Stolen Generation’s grief, and for that matter, the specificity of the loss of white children, it also denies the policy of Indigenous child removal which has been equated with genocide. Conflating the black and the white stories of lost children in the way that Pierce is suggesting would, yet again, abdicate the responsibility of white Australia to recognise the wrongs perpetrated by the policy of Indigenous child removal. Pierce’s hopes that we can address these wrongs without an accompanying willingness to take responsibility for them is a demonstration of Tilley’s argument that ‘the solace/pleasure approach’s interpretive focus on symbolic healing enables a forgetting of material debts, inequalities, and out-standing grievances’ (Tilley 2012: 43). A willingness to address the past is not the same – as Pierce seems to think – as a ‘regression’ to the past.

Castro argues ‘Australian writing is layered with [an] inability to mourn others while glamorizing death as a concept’ (Castro 2009: 88). An inability to mourn others is not only a scathing indictment of the nation, in context of the lost child it is a show of indifference that further condemns the child to the shadows. Alexis Wright writes, ‘I have often thought about how the spirits of other countries have followed their people to Australia and how these spirits might be reconciled with the ancestral spirits that belong here. I wonder if it is at this level of thinking that a lasting form of reconciliation between people might begin’ (Wright 2007: 92). Until such time as white Australia can look clear-eyed at our own historical losses and acknowledge our culpability in the losses of the other, no reconciliation can happen, not in the ghostly realm and not on an earthly plane. For now, I imagine the ghosts of Australia’s lost white children wandering the banks of the river Styx, unable to leave the water’s edge to seek shelter because we on the other side refuse to acknowledge the nature of our loss, and our part in the loss
experienced by the other. The ghosts of Australian children, black and white, are stuck in a world of grief that is segregated along racial lines.

The continued refusal to mourn our lost children by deliberately obscuring the circumstances of those losses damns them to misrecognition and so keeps summoning their ghostly forms to haunt us, to search for answers to their justice claims. Birch offers a view of the aftermath of the Bringing Them Home Report (BTH) that is relevant here:

… it is clear that the energy created by the release of BTH served the function of allowing colonial listeners confronted with a narrative of their own violence contained in the report to simultaneously absorb and purge themselves of a trauma. This outcome lacks the ethic of responsibility, reflecting Slavoj Zizek’s observation that “in order to forget an event, we must first summon up the strength to remember it properly.” As a result of this behaviour, indigenous communities, having facilitated the healing of the coloniser, now carry the burden of being left to live within a state of injustice. The outcome of BTH is not an isolated incident of a language being utilized to cleanse the nation’s soul. It’s indicative of the gulf between liberal rhetoric and its associated expression of empathy on the one hand, and genuine attempts to alleviate injustice on the other. (Birch 2004: 140)

Rather than trying to conflate stories of lost black and lost white children into a whitewashed ceremony of non-specific grieving, we could honour the other’s loss by recognising that while grief may have universal qualities – and I believe it has, there is a depthlessness to grief that makes it a singular experience of affect – the causes of that grief are not the same. These ‘bodies of suffering and story’ can be connected but not by insisting on a falsified ‘sameness’ that obscures the circumstances of the other’s loss. Part of the reason the reconciliation policy has fizzled is the consistent refusal of white Australia to acknowledge by simply listening to stories that speak of the suffering born of difference in this country. ‘We are threatened not by difference,’ Castro writes, ‘but by sameness’ (Castro 2009: 96).

In 2009, on the heels of the twenty-first inquiry into child abuse in twelve years, and referring to the 2007 Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, The Little Children are Sacred report, Tacey wrote:
Tragically, it might be the case that precisely because little children are sacred that they are now the targets of sexual assault. The adult self seeks union with the sacred, but what does it do if no living symbols are to be found? If spiritual water can no longer be found in ritual, art and ceremony, in prayers, petitions or symbols, the thirst for this water might lead some to seek it in previously unthinkable places. Incest has long been associated with the notion of spiritual rebirth … the urge for the sacred has become demonic, and no longer operates according to the rules of morality. Because that urge can no longer be satisfied in moral ways, and yet must be satisfied in some way, this makes child sexual assault more attractive to a perverted desire that has lost its intelligence and its soul. (Tacey 2009: 195)

This is a bizarre and disturbing passage. Having spent years reifying his understanding of the Indigenous sacred, here Tacey swings a wrecking ball through his own ideas. Critiquing Tacey’s 2000 book, *Re-enchantment: The New Australian Spirituality*, Ken Gelder points out that ‘like every other spiritualising or theological treatise on the need for non-Aboriginal Australians to embrace the Aboriginal sacred, Tacey … never mentions a single sacred site … nor does [he] mention a single sacred object. His notion of the Aboriginal sacred has no materiality at all’ (Gelder 2005: 167). Conceding no materiality to children allows Tacey to offer them up for ritualistic sacrifice on the altar of his quest for the spiritual fulfilment of the (white) nation. Tacey is directly referring to *The Little Children are Sacred* report which dealt exclusively with Indigenous communities. In a spectacular about face, then, the same body of knowledge he has been exalting for years he here claims has no ‘living symbols’, no meaningful ‘ritual, art and ceremony … prayers, petitions or symbols’, and furthermore has no applicable ‘rules of morality’, has become ‘demonic’, ‘perverted’ and ‘has lost its intelligence and its soul’. Suddenly the entire, in Tacey’s treatment, monolithic Indigenous culture and community is accused – not individuals who commit criminal acts. Tacey is using the abused child as a metaphor to illustrate spiritual poverty. As a writer, critical and creative, I would not deny the power and the necessity of metaphor to the craft but, surely, there is a need to be mindful in our use of metaphoric languages. Jones writes: ‘Although we deal with the symbolic and the metaphoric … we wish too not to ornament indulgently that which is essentially austere’ (Jones 2008: 85). No matter what mumbo-jumbo it is dressed up in, sexual assault against children is a crime that is especially heinous and accepted as such.
by community standards and by law. To configure this crime as, in Tacey’s own words, ‘a grotesque literal enactment of the desire for spiritual rebirth’ (Tacey 2009: 194) is indulgent. It is reprehensible to use this criminal behaviour as evidence in an ill-defined analysis and argument for … well, I’m not sure what Tacey is arguing for but I think it is that vague and abstract notion, *spiritual enlightenment*. Furthermore, here is evidence of that bewildering racialised vengeance I mentioned. Why did Tacey choose the only one of, at that time, twenty enquiries that dealt exclusively with Indigenous communities, thereby pulling the focus away from the horror stories within his own community, the white same, and ensuring it stayed on the racialised other? ‘One of the shabbiest of all intellectual gambits,’ Said wrote, ‘is to pontificate about abuses in someone else’s culture and to excuse exactly the same practices in one’s own’ (Said 1994: 68). The best I can say about Tacey’s egregious misappropriation of trauma and grief in Indigenous communities is that it is shabby. Stories of children lost, stolen and/or abused should call us to a collective outrage, not to further misappropriation presented as spiritual succour for the most privileged in the community.

Another group of children in Australia’s care is being abused and forgotten right now, and an attempt to entomb their stories in silence pursued through the policies of the current government. A series of drawings by children in Australian detention centres has been shown widely in the media. The children have drawn themselves crying behind a grid of wire. They’ve drawn their parents with blood pouring out of their heads or holding up the ropes they’ve tried to hang themselves with. They’ve drawn relatives with bullet holes in their bodies. The drawings’ captions include: ‘I want go out’, ‘help us’ and ‘I heat my life’ – it’s clear the child means ‘hate’. One picture is divided in half, on one side is a child behind bars; on the other side the sun is shining over a young girl. Her caption reads, ‘I life this life’ – read ‘love’. ‘What it is the defrint’ is written in the centre of the page. The drawings came out of the second enquiry in ten years into children in detention (Australian Human Rights Commission 2004 & Australian Human Rights Commission 2014). This last enquiry has found that the treatment these children are subjected to is child abuse. More lost children. More irreparable damage to the young. More enquiries in the future exploring institutional abuse of children in the past. More cries of the wretched falling on deaf ears. Will we never learn? Out of the mouths of
babe – in the last drawing described above, from behind the wire the child has written, ‘I Why I’m not same the other??’ (New Matilda 2014).

In 1981, seven years before The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report that began the tidal wave of enquiries addressing the mistreatment of children in Australia, Scheckter argued that the ‘lost child is a political story’ (Scheckter 1981: 62). And further, that in its Australian manifestation, the stories of lost children ‘become archetypes of national determination. Since the character is genuinely innocent, having no basic form or preordained personality, the author can … freely load it with national symbolism’ (Scheckter 1981: 62). It is time to relieve the figure of the lost child from the burden of having to carry a national mythology that from the beginning has failed to recognise the child as part of humanity or that children do, in fact, have personalities, are absolutely human in form and are not equipped to carry the political responsibilities or aspirations of a national identity on their slim shoulders. Attitudes like Tacey’s, Scheckter’s and Pierce’s – that use children as metaphoric blank spaces, voids to be filled with the attributes imposed on them by the adults around them – have contributed to the current litany of abuses against children. Children are not metaphors. They are children. My concern in referencing the lost child in A Beggar’s Garden was to wrest the figure back from the exile imposed by a metaphoric positioning that recognises only an abstract identity assumed to be always available for service to some other argument or conception, usually regarding nationhood, and to re-place it in the contemporary world I have endeavoured to depict. In my novel the lost child is not used as a metaphor for settler disquiet or displacement or as a spurious signifier for reconciliation, spiritual enlightenment or anything else. I hope that in A Beggar’s Garden the lost child or children are simply that – vulnerable, small humans lost in an adult world too ready to treat them with disregard at best, and at worst, with abject cruelty.

In a 2003 newspaper article discussing contemporary attitudes to lost children, Karen Jones offers a familiar lens through which to contemplate the fate of lost children, a lens that overtly displays its ‘residue of the colonial past’ (Frost 2001: 225). The lost child, she says, is understood ‘as a lightning rod for social anxiety … a missing child makes us feel we can’t control the risk of just living in the world’ (Jones in Elder 2003). This may
be true in a general sense but I am tired of being told how anxious I am, how conceptually precarious my position as a citizen. I can suffer apoplectic anxiety as a result of disordered mental health but not because I enjoy the culturally privileged subject position of white in a dominant white order, of same in a culture that favours same. A missing, lonely and abused child does not represent risk to me but an abiding ‘child-shaped grief’ (Olsson 2013b). This grief will find no comfort while my community keeps feeding the lost child narrative with factual accounts that are immediately obscured by the rolling narrative of nationhood. In the same article Pierce is quoted as follows: ‘In the 19th century, a lost child united communities. In the 20th century, the event divided communities. “Which one of us did it?” The answer might be, “None of us did it”.’ (Pierce in Elder 2003). A more ethical response would be to give the lost child some long overdue comfort by taking collective responsibility for a couple of centuries of abuse. I can think of no more ‘infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing’ than the ghost of a lost child. Laying that ghost to rest might begin by answering ‘Which one of us did it?’ with the more honest and obvious admission, ‘All of us did it’.
You – you will make no terms with the spirits of fire and earth and air and water.
You have made the darkness your enemy.
We – we exchange civilities with the world beyond.
– William Butler Yeats (Yeats 1962: 106-107)

After several years of wandering from space to space, setting up temporary and/or makeshift desks in over a dozen locations while I wrote and re-wrote *A Beggar’s Garden*, I found a work space in the corner of an empty church. I hasten to add, a deconsecrated church, though how a church becomes deconsecrated remains a mystery. My niece, also a writer and bipolar, suggested forming the sign of the cross with my forefingers and shouting, ‘Jesus, be gone’ into the empty space. I did that and was not smote so I suppose god had already left the building. Some insist god has left, period. Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden write, ‘The twentieth century stands in the minds of many Westerners as the century when the gods finally departed, or at least hid impassively behind the clouds of war, holocaust, and mass displacements of peoples’. They go on to quote Maurice
Blanchot. ‘What will become of art, now that the gods and even their absence are gone?’ (Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass & McCredden 2009: 1). On the relationship between grief and creativity, Castro conjures a world gone awry and offers: ‘What remains is grief and loss: the residue of a terrible century drained of love and innocence’ (Castro 1999: 71). My days writing at the church were often soaked with grief. The lost children who haunt my novel do so because while I was writing the story I encountered those children outside the text in ways so distressing it became physical, my chest ached for months at a time. The stories of my girls living other in a sea of same can fill me with an enraged but impotent sadness. This pervasive sorrow is not without redeeming features. As Castro suggests, ‘grief is as much a passion as anything else’ (Castro 1999: 65). When configured as part of the creative process grief blends with a melancholic disposition that can produce a state of mind wildly acquisitive of meaning making.

My church, as I’ve come to think of it, is not a wooden or sandstone structure with a tidy garden, stained-glass windows and crowned with an elegant spire. Built in 1967 it is a suburban, sizable rectangular building with a red brick frontage and banks of floor-to-ceiling windows set between walls painted what I now call Virgin Mary pale blue. The space is filled with natural light. The official name is still prominent on the front wall, St Mary Magdalene’s Anglican Church, which appeals to my feminist sensibilities. Magdalene was the transgressor, the mistress to Jesus, the whoring double of the Virgin. I feel quite at home writing in a space set up in her name. Outside, a path leads down to the old Manse that would have housed the parish priest but now houses the current owner, Mervyn, and his son, Piers. Underneath the church they’ve built a workshop where Piers makes toys in bulk that he ships around the country. I set up my desk in the corner farthest from the entrance and here I spent twenty months alone re-writing and shaping A Beggar’s Garden, and lately surrounded by piles of papers about the sacred, Australia’s lost children, and other related musings. Anzac Day in the church was especially moving. My father was active in World War II, in intelligence, part of a secret operation that helped crack the codes that ended the war in the Pacific. I lit a candle for the bone man, as I always do on Anzac day, and listened to the plaintive Last Post playing in the distance, drifting along the empty public-holiday streets, across the neighbourhood and in through the windows of the church. My candle-lighting ritual is always specific, almost
always to signify the loss of someone or something. Occasionally I have lit them for my characters.

I came to the church via the serendipity pattern, unexpectedly, with a wary surprise and a strategic interpretation of the events that surrounded the offer to work there. These events were entangled with the novel itself, with the story and characters I was writing, so much that in an extended period of bisociative thinking I suspected some magic had been worked in my characters’ names, a conspiracy concocted to insist on their presence as an actuality to be reckoned with. They had been wandering with me from desk to desk for years. They were my responsibility and, like me, they were weary of the roaming. I had a complete first draft which I needed to slash by a third and until that was done, and the re-writing begun, my characters would have no place they could be, they would remain characters in search of a text. In an article exploring the role of authorial empathy in the creative writing process Enza Gandolfo describes her relationship with her characters:

[O]n writing days, I often felt anxious. This anxiety varied in intensity from tightness in the jaw and a sense of impending doom to a feeling of hopelessness and dread that kept me awake at night. The more I worked on the novel the more I found myself worrying about my characters, especially the young woman... I worried about her and the impossibility of the situation I had created and then placed her in. This worrying was not distant, it was embodied and emotional. (Gandolfo 2014)

I take comfort from Gandolfo’s piece. For years I have thought my physical relationship with my characters was odd. I cried with them. I laughed with and, when they were dumb, at them. I fretted over their safety. My heart pounded with Meg’s, my knees turned jelly-like in the face of threat to Charlie and Lucy. I sweated and shivered with them. When they were hungry I ate to nourish them. I sang when they sang. On the embodied process of writing, Virginia Woolf wrote:

[L]iterature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, and negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax … hardens to tallow. (Woolf 2012: 4)
This physical relationship with the textual is related to, but not the same as, the physicality of the writing process. Morrison says ‘characters make claims, impose demands of imaginative accountability over and above the author’s will to contain them’ (Morrison 1993a: 28). My characters overflowed the boundaries of my text. They got us into situations we had no business being in. When I couldn’t find the words to meet their demands, when I was baulking at the task and floundering in our shared state of exilic exhaustion they sent their earthly familiars to appear in human form in the most uncanny or serendipitous ways.

In the months before I went to the church I was stalled in the writing. I had lost my work space, again, and had spent six weeks at various kitchen tables re-working the scene when Slop tells the story of losing his daughter to a fire. Six weeks and I still didn’t have the emotional arc of this scene right. Added to that, re-working the Indigenous presence was about to intensify and I wondered if I was losing my nerve to retain that thread of the story at all. I never intended to write from a position of ‘knowing’ the Indigenous other, but to write the other at all is to represent or more often to misrepresent that other. There can be no doubt that white people writing black, no matter what their intentions, have contributed to the cultural, political, and physical harm done to Indigenous peoples. Indigenous writer Melissa Lucashenko has been scathing about this issue in the past: ‘Who asked you to write about Aboriginal people? If it wasn’t Aboriginal people themselves, I suggest you go away and look at your own lives instead of ours. We are tired of being the freak show of Australian popular culture’ (Lucashenko in Heiss 2002). More recently, Tony Birch has spoken about his experience with this issue as a teacher and a writer at large:

It is rare for an event concerned with Aboriginal writing to pass without the question coming from the floor, ‘can non-Aboriginal people write an Aboriginal character?’ ... problematically, many would-be writers who ask the question are seeking absolution and endorsement; a misguided notion on two counts. If the Aboriginal writer endorses their ‘right to creative expression’ a beaming smile appears on the face of the would-be writer. He or she has been saved, cleansed and become ‘entitled’. If an endorsement does not follow the question, perhaps with the blunt comment ‘don’t do it’, the would-be writer is prone to either break down in tears or verbally attack the
I never felt the need to seek absolution or endorsement regarding the Indigenous presence in *A Beggar’s Garden*, but there were times when I feared ‘doing it wrong’ and repeating the questionable manoeuvre that Castro articulates, his observation that ‘in Australian literature there are countless mythologies of flawed men and women who transact mysteries with Indigenous peoples … in order to find salvation’ (Castro 2009: 88). By writing the scenes when Meg and the children spend a night on the river bank with the Blackfellas and join the vigil for Slop, I was potentially perpetuating the primitivist idea of the Indigenous peoples as the bearers of a superior spiritual knowledge. I was writing close to the type of dubious transaction Castro describes. Successful or not, my intention was to push what Morrison calls the ‘economy of stereotype’ (Morrison 1993a: 67) to its outer limits, to pull the reader into that dangerous territory. According to Morrison, using a stereotype gives the writer ‘a quick and easy image without the responsibility of specificity, accuracy, or even narratively useful description’ (Morrison 1993a: 67). This may be so but in terms of Bakhtin’s heteroglot languages, to write the Indigenous other at all is to conjure the stereotype. To have black characters activates, in Dawson’s words, ‘a range of extra-literary languages which organise social relations’ (Dawson 2005: 209). The stereotype is imprinted in the languages of race relations in Australia where Indigenous people denote a suite of mostly negative and/or impossibly immutable imaginings. ‘Literature is, in essence,’ Dawson writes, ‘a conscious dramatization of [the] dialogic clashing of living discourses in society’ (Dawson 2005: 209). The alternative to writing black into *A Beggar’s Garden* was to erase the Indigenous presence and other others, including my daughters’ literary familiar – my Charlie character – from the landscape all over again. There have been and will continue to be plenty of writers who do not imagine Indigenous people in their stories and so in the narrative of the nation. I am not one of them. Politically and poetically my position was: damned if I do, damned if I don’t. I opted for being damned.

Bhabha articulates not a middle ground through the problematic sketched above, but a way of occupying Ravenscroft’s impossible dialectic that allows for recognition, no matter how bewildered and, perhaps more importantly, for misrecognition. He writes:
My reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the *identification* of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *process of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse. To judge the stereotyped image on the basis of a prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its *effectivity*: with the repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence that constructs the colonial subject (both coloniser and colonised). (Bhabha 1983: 18, emphases in original)

While critically I was intent on skewing the stereotype of the Indigenous other by the strategy of engaging with it, creatively I was relying on its effectivity since an attempt to deny it would, as Bhabha suggests, dismiss it and banish it to the region of the repressed. An Indigenous presence is not the only vernacular imagery I have tried to push to the edge of credibility. It is just, arguably, the most politically charged. I had designed the novel around stereotypes, to trouble and displace them, to expose and hopefully, question the basis of their effectivity but sometimes the wisdom of that design escaped me and my belief in my capacity to deliver on it deserted me.

I put a notice in a local coffee shop saying I was a writer looking for a work space. In the same week a familiar face appeared in the media advertising a commercial product. This was an old friend of mine, Dave, whom I’d met in drama school many years before and lost contact with for over a decade. The class we’d been part of was rambunctious. We were loud, precocious, worked hard, partied harder, talked back and had developed the intimacy that such group behaviour engenders. I sent a greeting to Dave through the generic email of his agent and didn’t expect to hear from him. Months later, just at the point when I felt the novel was slipping out of my reach, out of the possibility of the story or the characters finding a home in my writing, Dave called. He was working on an Indigenous television production shooting in the same area I had been forced out of a few years before. Early in a diverse career in performance Dave gravitated towards the Indigenous acting and storytelling fraternity and has worked extensively with that community ever since. I knew from past experience that when Dave is working with the Blackfellas he is also partying with them. By that stage my eldest daughter was practising the language of rebuff to white people. ‘Oh,’ she’d say, oozing sarcasm, ‘I’m sorry if my
being offended by your racism is offensive to you.’ But my younger daughter was stranded in a place without language, cornered in the lonely experience of her self as other and retreating further into herself. Castro argues that ‘a corporeal process, “the experience of skin”… form[s] the essential meninges or membrane of language … the capacity to include or exclude, enhance or corrupt’ (Castro 1999: 201). After decades working with Blackfellas, Dave is fluent in the languages of skin. I told him about my younger daughter’s predicament, of living ‘the experience of skin’ without the connective tissue of a language to comprehend or voice that experience. ‘Bring them down for a few days,’ he said. ‘We’ll have a dinner.’ My girls would have the rare experience of being black in a room of black faces.

Morrison wrote that in her capacity as a novelist ‘imagining is not merely looking at: nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, becoming’ (Morrison 1993a: 3, emphasis in original). Becoming, in this sense, is to exist in a state of mutability, a refusal to accept the notion of a stable self or, by extension, subject position. This state is akin to the metaphoric exile of the amateur intellectual Said wrote about, an exile that in a metaphysical sense ‘is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others’ (Said 1994: 39). Woolf wrote, ‘“I” is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being’ (Woolf 1965: 6). Castro suggests that ‘writing makes no progress except the marking of time … it is both being and nothingness … writing a novel while being conscious of its need to change is to work without a net, pushing forward in the dark, demolishing every idea in order to get to the heart of nothing’ (Castro 2011a: 260). These writers are describing abandon, of the self and of the known. This willingness to surrender or, put another way, this tendency towards abandon is not dissimilar to the quality that musicians refer to as feel or soul. It describes a vulnerability and in people who practise the arts, a willingness to give that vulnerability form. Feel involves an absolute commitment to abandon to the moment without monitoring the self in the action of abandon. While feel can never be forced, the practice of it in artistic production dictates a single-minded pursuit of the objective of the moment, usually to elicit an emotional response, whether fear, laughter, anger, embarrassment, a collective sorrow or any other fellow feeling that ‘makes us wondrous kind’. Good comedians display abandon in their work, they go all the way out there on their own and dare us to
follow. The surrender to abandon is not a lack of artistic discipline, on the contrary, in order to abandon the known, to freefall through the unknown ‘without a net’, requires the courage to trust your technique and to risk failure, again and again. Andreasen, who has spent over forty years studying creativity writes, ‘Creative people tend to push the limits and live on the edge. As the saying goes, “when you work at the cutting edge, you are likely to bleed”’ (Andreasen 2008: 245). Watching good comedians pursue a laugh that is not immediately forthcoming can be exhilarating and also terrifying because the audience senses the performers will shed their own blood before they give up on the laugh. It is the objective they are pursuing, the laugh; spilled blood is a mere by-product. Comedians are not bleeding for the sake of that banal notion of ‘suffering for your art’. Adherence to that notion can produce self-indulgent work that reflects inward. Good art reaches beyond the self towards that much maligned concept – the universal. ‘Universality,’ Said wrote, ‘means taking a risk in order to go beyond the easy certainties provided us by our background, language, nationality, which so often shield us from the reality of others’ (Said 1994: xii). Everybody bleeds. Writers too can be called to a bloodletting. ‘There is nothing to writing,’ Hemingway said. ‘All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.’

The writers above are describing not an ascent into higher reasoning through pristine logic, but a descent, ‘a journey into chaos’ (Andreasen 2011). Koestler argues: ‘The capacity to regress, more or less at will, to the games of the underground, without losing contact with the surface, seems to be the essence of the poetic, and of any other form of creativity’ (Koestler 1964: 316). Being, we can imagine, is to live and think on the surface of the everyday, whereas to dwell in the vicinity of nothingness is to journey to the underground where things are never as they seem and meaning is subject to radical change without notice. Woolf, Castro, Morrison and Said all echo theories of creativity that have circulated from early Greek philosophy to twentieth-century specialist. There is a general consensus that ‘artistic creativity and inspiration involve, indeed require, a dipping into pre-rational or irrational sources while maintaining ongoing contact with reality and “life at the surface”’ (Jamieson 1994: 104). Koestler writes:

[T]he creative act always involves a regression to earlier, more primitive levels in the mental hierarchy, while other processes continue simultaneously on the rational surface – a condition that
reminds one of a skin-diver with a breathing tube. (Needless to say, the exercise has its dangers: skin-divers are prone to fall victims to the “rapture of the deep” and tear their breathing tubes off… A less fatal professional disease is the Bends, a punishment for attempting to live on two different levels at once.) (Koestler 1964: 316)

Koestler could be describing hypomania in which, as in the throes of creative agitation, a marked tendency towards high level divergent thinking is present. Convergent thinking is a style of thought that applies ‘a sequential series of steps to answer a question’ (Andreasen 2011) while in divergent thinking, ‘there is much searching about or going off in various directions … most obviously seen when there is no unique conclusion’ (Guilford in Jamison 1994: 106). Divergent thinking is defined as ‘the ability to come up with a large number of responses to an open-ended question’ (Andreasen 2011). Jamison’s book, Touched With Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament, has become a seminal text in the field. In it she maps the similarities between the workings of the creative process and of bipolar disorder. She writes:

Many of the changes in mood, thinking, and perception that characterize the mildly manic states – restlessness, ebullience, expansiveness, irritability, grandiosity, quickened and more finely tuned senses, intensity of emotional experiences, diversity of thought, and rapidity of associational processes – are highly characteristic of creative thought as well … Two aspects of thinking in particular are pronounced in both creative and hypomaniac thought: fluency, rapidity, and flexibility of thought on the one hand, and the ability to combine ideas or categories of thought in order to form new and original connections on the other. The importance of rapid, fluid, and divergent thought in the creative process has been described by most psychologists and writers who have studied human imagination. (Jamison 1994: 105)

A preoccupation with words and word play are markers of a hypomanic state. One comparison study of writers and manics found that both ‘tend to sort in large groups, change dimensions while in the process of sorting, arbitrarily change starting points, or use vague distantly related concepts as categorising principles’ (Andreasen & Powers in Jamison 1994: 107). The body of psychiatric scholarship addressing bipolar and its relationship with creativity stretches back over two thousand years and has much to offer the discipline of creative writing because it can provide an exegetic lens through which to
view the creative process, which can in turn help to negotiate a way through those times when a writer is stuck, when they can see no way through the writing.

I didn’t know I was in an elevated – to use the medical parlance – state when I took my girls to the room of black faces, though ‘elevated’ hardly conveys hypomania. I was climbing towards a stratospheric high. I was rudderless and ricocheting between the contradictory worlds of the surface and of somewhere else – below, beside, inside, beyond and in a parallel universe all at once. All looked crystalline. Being stymied in the writing I was obsessed with it and my thinking was florid, flighty and expansive. As in Jamison’s description above I was restless, ebullient, grandiose. I saw my surroundings with digital clarity, individual leaves on the trees, the illuminative quality of the light at different hours. I had an insider’s knowledge of why dusk is called ‘the magic hour’ and thought all hours were dusted with the same magic. I was intoxicated with exuberance and abundance, in a state of ‘unbridled euphoria’ (Jamison 1994: 98). (There is a reason why bipolar people often won’t seek treatment for hypomania: you’d have to be mad to give it up voluntarily.) All things were connected. I just needed to follow the old man’s lead and find the coordinates that would crack the codes that were flying towards and all around me like metallic dust towards a magnet.

I had modelled my Wes character on the Indigenous actor, Kelton Pell, whom I had met briefly twenty-five years earlier, such was the impression he made on me. It was a soul, a feel thing. At the time we were all in Hobart. I was on tour with a Theatre in Education team, and Dave and Kelton were with the Jack Davis stage show, *No Sugar*. There’d been an incident where the police were called to remove some of the child Indigenous cast members who were at a pub with Kelton and some older cast members. The older members questioned the police trying to throw the young people out, arguing they weren’t drinking and were under adult supervision – a scene I have transplanted to *A Beggar’s Garden*. The argument with the police was to no avail. Racism trumped. Dave and I ran into a heart-heavy Kelton later in the street. Not knowing Kelton, I stood aside while he told Dave the story. I have always felt a kindred spirit with the heavy-hearted. This feeling connection where there may be none is a characteristic of bipolar and, as theorised by researchers of creativity, is also part of the divergent thinking integral to
creative production, the imposition of meaning onto seemingly arbitrary events. Andreasen writes, ‘[C]reative people are better at recognising relationships, making associations and connections, and seeing things … that others cannot see. Part of what comes with seeing connections no one else sees is that not all of these connections actually exist’ (Andreasen 2014). I call this sense of connection ‘empathy overload’ and I experience it, at times, as an occupational hazard of creative writing. The purpose of any art must surely be to try to illuminate human behaviour in all its baffling complexity. Empathy overload is a useful tool in that endeavour but it can also lead to an unravelling of the self, an obliteration of sorts, a metaphoric bloodletting.

I think now what I saw in Kelton on the street that day was a brittle quality. I’ve seen the same brittleness in my daughters when they’ve been subjected to overt racism. It has a specific presentation because racism is specific, it works like a blade between ribs because it strikes at the core of the person under attack. Complete strangers feel entitled to abuse and belittle their others, however covertly. Further, I have observed that racists can have an expectation that to make their lives easier, more comfortable, the person of colour could and should change their skin so as to better accommodate the racist and enable that person to not have to be racist. The logic goes something like this: ‘If you weren’t what you are then I wouldn’t have to treat you the way I do. You’re making me look bad.’ It’s a mystifying logic. Primo Levi argued against understanding such blind hatreds. He reasoned that to understand ‘is almost to justify … “understanding” a proposal or human behaviour means to “contain” it, contain its author, put oneself in his place, identify with him … We cannot understand it, but we can and must understand from where it springs … If understanding is impossible, knowing is imperative’ (Levi 1987: 396). Levi lived the worst that humankind can be and do. One of his legacies is to hold us to a higher account.

When Dave and I made the plan to put my girls in the room of black faces, I didn’t know Kelton would be one of them. It is most disconcerting for a fictional character you have created from the tiniest morsel of actual experience twenty-five years earlier to appear and sit down to dinner with you. And it wasn’t only Kelton’s presence that was disconcerting. My car broke down, of course, and one night away turned into an extra-
long weekend during which my girls and I moved into the world of my novel when the Indigenous presence becomes pivotal to the story. The room of black faces included a shy young black man, ridiculously handsome, with impeccable manners, who spent the first couple of hours wandering around with a Penguin Classics book of poetry in his hand. I had already created my Francis character but he came to life because of this shy young man and the relationship I observed between him and the now even more soulful Kelton, which was warm, affectionate and, especially from the younger man to the older, deeply respectful. Characters and situations from my novel formed in fluid motion in front of me and then dissipated. As a fellow writer I told Dave how I just couldn’t get the scene with Slop in the church right. He acted it for me, a most discombobulating experience to watch a seasoned actor play out a scene I had written but hadn’t been able to crack. What is in the novel is simply a description of what Dave did. I had thought that Meg and Slop couldn’t look at each other but to see Slop, with his head tilted to the left and his back slightly stooped—a most vulnerable, almost childlike posture—wiping down a sink over and over was, if not magic, then at least towards the magical.

In my life before children I was a blues singer and often crossed paths with Indigenous musicians. The kinds of bands I was in, a bit mongrel—that’s the blues—were asked to play ‘their’ pubs and vice versa and these were some of the wildest nights I had among many years of wild nights. Often as not, it was after closing time that the musicians and assorted associates really played the feel. In my experience, partying with Blackfellas has always involved song. Guitars come out and are passed around, everyone plays, everyone participates in one way or another. Harmony is in easy reach, laughter easier still. Everyone sings a story and some, like Kelton, sing their stories through the didge. I had written Slop’s relationship with Wes and the vigil scene where Wes sings the sorrow of the group through the didge. Being in that scene and hearing the first baritone note through Kelton’s didge playing tipped my thought processes into overdrive. Koestler writes: ‘[A]t the decisive stage of discovery the codes of disciplined reasoning are suspended—as they are in the dream, the reverie, the manic flight of thought, when the stream of ideation is free to drift, by its own emotional gravity, as it were, in an apparently “lawless” fashion’ (Koestler 1964: 178). This is an accurate description of the state of being I was experiencing: the drift, the lawlessness, the manic and the dreamlike,
interspersed with moments of, if not clarity, then at least a suspicion that I may not have been entirely sane. This last hints at the cruel effects of bipolar illness, including an involuntary abandon which can be terrifying. As the weekend went on and characters and situations I had written came and went as though this was a normal state of affairs, I longed for a desk space where I could write my way into making sense of the experience of living my novel all over again. The desire to write, and desire is the operative word, was physical, a whole body experience of need. The energy of this longing was mixed up with the worlds of my fiction and this other plane where that fiction was taking material form. I took to walking away from the house, to calm, or maybe try to hide my increasing hypomania and to leave my girls to further dazzle the company and savour the pleasure of being black among black, same among same. On one of those walks, Mervyn phoned, said he’d seen my notice in the coffee shop and that he might have a work space for me. After being offered some spaces that were unworkable, I dared to hope that whatever the space being offered, it would be suitable. If someone named Mervyn couldn’t magic-up the right space then nobody could. I said I’d call him when I got back to town.

I told Kelton we’d met before, a long time ago in Hobart. He thought for a second then said, ‘You were the one on the street that day,’ and described the circumstances. Months later I asked Dave why on earth Kelton would have remembered me. ‘It’s all story,’ Dave said, and shrugged. ‘You were part of the story of the day.’ In amongst an increasingly hyper-real weekend the relationship that intrigued me the most was the one between Kelton and Dave. I watched my Wes and Slop characters interacting exactly how I’d imagined and tried to write them. There was more than just an ease in each other’s company, the kind of ease that only long friendships generate. There was a quality of relationship between them unusual, in my experience, in friendship between men – brotherly, but something more, easy to see, harder to read. The word that kept coming to mind was tenderness. Outside in a quiet moment I asked Dave about his relationship with Kelton. What turns a friendship between two overtly masculine men into something so tender? Dave looked at Kelton inside, laughing with his young friend. ‘A few years ago …,’ Dave said and trailed off. He turned away and addressed the bush we were surrounded by. ‘Kelton lost a child,’ he said. ‘A daughter. It changed … everything.’
There was more singing. Spun out of spirit, there is always more song. People continued to come and go. We sang and ate and drank and smoked and danced and yelled and fought and we did it all to excess. We laughed and may have cried. I didn’t want the desk so I could write. I wanted it so I could cut every bit of apology from the manuscript. I would court my rage, for my daughters, myself, my characters, for the lost and forgotten children and to honour the force of life, of love and loss that mark what it means to be human. I would make my story a furious thing, a howling. I would make it bleed.
CODA

_Out of the creative anarchy emerges the new synthesis._
  – Arthur Koestler (Koestler 1964: 230)

The ancient Greeks understood melancholy as related to one of the four humours or fluids: blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm. These humours were in turn understood in relationship to the four seasons, the four elements and with various organs and other parts of the body. According to Hippocrates, thought to be the first physician to describe melancholia in clinical terms, black bile was associated with autumn, the earth, the spleen and with melancholy. We tend to think of melancholia as a listless, morose and inert condition characterised by hopelessness and while these aspects are present – and often dangerous – this conception does not take into account the rage that can also be part of melancholy and which can give the condition a generative power. If the list of artists, writers, musicians, physicians, mathematicians and other scientists who are said to have
suffered or who do suffer with melancholia is any indication, then it does appear to be a condition that lends itself to bisociative thought and to creative production. For me, the association between the melancholic and the poetic is bound up with the political. That is, as much as my at times disordered mental health, my cultural politics are the source of my melancholy and form the basis of my wish to intervene creatively via a ‘sociological poetics’ (Dawson 2005: 211) into everyday languages and the discourses they articulate, especially in relation to social justice.

Jones issues a warning to writers who may be preoccupied with justice. One challenge, she writes,

is not to succumb to luxurious – that is to say, debilitating – melancholy. Since the contemplation of justice and injustice is a serious matter and likely to lead to despair, there must be a way of entertaining the darkness that is not pathological but somehow creative and intrinsically resistant … Melancholy is close, too close, to political quiescence: the insistence on affirming commentary, statement, symbol, voice, is fundamental, surely, to imagining otherwise. (Jones 2008: 83)

This is the populist understanding of melancholy which does not take into account the power of the fury nor the force of the physiology of melancholia. Jones invokes the romantic’s view of the melancholic who ‘dwell[s] in the luxury of complaint, living a life equivalent to aristocratic boredom’ (Castro 2009: 90). I cannot make the associative leap that imagines melancholy as ‘political quiescence’, as lacking in creative potential and/or political agitation because I live the experience of melancholy as the polar opposite to what Jones describes which is closer to the deadened state of depression. Configured within a formulation of creative production, ‘creative melancholy’ (Castro 2009: 91) is more complex than the either/or proposition Jones presents. Melancholy is active and passive, it participates and withdraws, erupts and withers, overflows with empathy and with self-absorption, heals and can destroy, it is a ‘dark tide’ and a ‘perpetual ferment’ (Foucault in Jamison 1994: 35). This constant and chaotic movement is what marries melancholia to hypomania. The link between these two has been noted since the second century CE and by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries ‘most medical writers thought of mania as an extreme form of melancholia’ (Jamison 1994: 35). This swinging between and/or being in all states at once is intrinsically resistant because it is movement, the
movement of becoming. Castro gives a more measured reading of melancholia and its possible uses to the writer because he acknowledges the role of its accompanying pique. He writes, ‘without spleen you cannot overcome despair’ (Castro 2009: 84).

Standing in the empty church when I went to view its possibilities, I knew my characters and I had found a home. The space would work. I had a room of my own. It was close to Christmas and I told Mervyn I’d start in the New Year. Because I like the idea that numbers and dates might mean something, I went to begin work at the church on New Year’s Day and promptly fell asleep on an old couch for three hours. Again and again researches of creativity stress that ‘the creative process arises from the unconsciousness rather than occurring as a conscious process’ (Andreasen 2011). Sleeping in the church that first day set the tone of the following nine months. That is, the church was a safe space where I could abandon myself to the feel of the novel, to becoming. I could drift, lawless and rudderless and know that while bipolarity dictated I would inevitably fall from what Castro, who has a way with melancholy, has called ‘melancholic grace’ (Castro 2011b) into depression, I would also, somehow, land in or near my story. When I fell it was into mild depression, which has its own uses to the writing process since it can ‘serve a critical editorial role for work produced in more fevered states. Depression prunes and sculpts; it also ruminates and ponders … It allows structuring, at a detailed level, of the more expansive patterns woven during hypomania’ (Jamison 1994: 118). I found this to be true. Like Koestler, Andreasen suggests the dreamlike as a state that produces the conditions for creative production and goes further by defining this state according to the growing field of the science of the brain which has been revolutionised in the last few decades by brain imaging:

The person is typically in some type of reverie or dissociative state when the mind wanders freely and thoughts and images float around without censorship. During this fluid time, the brain is probably working feverishly, despite the subjective sense of reverie and relaxation … At the neural level, it is as if the association cortices are working actively, throwing out feelers for possible connections between unrelated capacities – verbal and visual spatial association, abstract and concrete associations, colours, images, concepts … a veritable primordial soup of thought. (Andreasen 2011)
The day after I made my acquaintance with the world beyond while I slept in the church, I began the concentrated work on the novel, driven by an ever-present political disquiet, by ghosts, the sorrows of my racialised daughters, by hypomania and a drifting reverie, by ‘creative sadness’ (Castro 2009: 86) and melancholic grace – ‘something that returns us to what is human’ (Castro 2011b). From this ‘creative anarchy’ I crafted A Beggar’s Garden.

Melancholy is closely related to grief and mourning and is a central element in the language of affect. Melancholy as affect can in turn be understood metaphorically as a wound. The link between the wound that is melancholia, politics and writing can be imagined as a holy trinity of and towards creative production. From the first day I started to think through A Beggar’s Garden, its politics were informed by and infused with the deep blue hue of melancholy. The postcolonial is a wounded site, the lost child a wounded entity, and racism a scar etching ever deeper in the national imaginary. Castro writes of the wounds of the past that cannot be healed and despite efforts to cover them over, keep reopening. He argues this reopening of wounds is necessary ‘in order to cauterize them through a recognition of them’ (Castro 2009: 88). In a strikingly similar use of imagery, Alexis Wright offers:

Writing is about crawling down the hole to see what we have all inherited. It’s about dragging our memories, realities and losses back up to the surface and letting the whole world see them in the full, glaring light of day … For only then can the wound be kept open and the much desired forgetting be reversed with a steadfast telling of the truth which begins with the words “Once upon a time”. (Wright 2002)

These writers are describing the wound as a site of confluence where creative intervention, artistic integrity and political dissatisfaction meet, the wellspring from which political fiction rises. According to Castro, ‘writers, whose real subject is themselves, should also strive to be the radars of a society, not only because they sublimate their own personal experiences but because they are driven to make sense of historical catastrophe’ (Castro 2009: 95). Political fiction offers a counter narrative to fill the void left by a nation intent on forgetting the catastrophes of the past and so ignoring their impact on the present. Such fictions are ‘always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise
available’ (Caruth 1996: 2). As a writer of political fiction I am always searching for ways to expose the nation’s wounds, to use the vernacular to dismantle the prescriptive language of populist politics, ‘that poisonous language which muffles the truth and plays so effectively on our fears, aspirations and prejudices’ (Scott 2008: 31). When ‘politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia’ (Orwell 1962: 154), then a poetics capable of countering these violent tendencies must be grounded in their opposites. Scott argues, ‘the best political fiction [is] work where love is considered important, the world a place to be celebrated and passionately fought for, where there is humour, optimism and sensuality as well as a fierce, compassionate gaze at the ugliness, grotesqueness and injustice of life’ (Scott 2008: 45). Caruth’s ‘crying wound’ (Caruth 1996: 8) trying to tell its story is the voice of melancholia, of empathy and compassion. In political fiction, then, ‘in an artistic and ethical sense, one sings one’s melancholy for others’ (Castro 2011b).

I hope A Beggar’s Garden wears its wounded heart on its political sleeve. Whether I have been successful in that aspiration or not, I do know that the work was driven by a furious response to the political neglect of the weakest and most vulnerable amongst us and by the wound that this neglect has inflicted on my community’s language, by an abiding passion for justice, and by love. While this passion was as often as not steeped in spleen, I also know that work driven by passion alone can become strident and lose its heart in a temper tantrum. ‘Passion,’ Castro writes, ‘exacts retribution’:

> [W]e grieve as we come into the world and again as we leave it, but writing is pitiless. The imagination pulls the other way, hardboiled, refusing remorse while simultaneously coaxing it … a duel to the death. Even at its most compliant, the imagination is nothing more than a good epidural for creation, a sort of twilight sleep from which one wakes in fright. It is then that the hard work begins. Yet at the end of everything, we do have a story. (Castro 1999: 70)

And stories matter. Stories that counter the nation’s grand narratives which continue to deny the small comforts of home, of being with shadow – these stories matter.

I worked with unusual focus at the church. The nine months flew by. I had the sense I was unstoppable. Maybe this was a result of hypomania, maybe it was the result of the
bisociative and serendipitous ferment that kept feeding my story. I woke in fright, day after day, sentence after sentence, but the fear forced clarity. I was on a mission and drifting in an aimless reverie, I was wild with splenetic fury and swamped in sorrow. I coveted my melancholy and channeled it into the novel.

When I finally roused from my twilight sleep in the church, the cherry blossoms were beginning to bloom. I had written my way through the short gloomy days of autumn and the phlegmatic days of winter, associated in ancient Greek medicine with the brain. I woke with a completed novel in spring, the season of hope, courage and play, of air and blood. The season of the heart.
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