Writing Urban Nature: A Novel and Exegesis

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Abstract

This thesis is comprised of a novel and exegesis which explores how contemporary fiction can contribute to understandings of nature and culture, questioning oppositional dualisms and ultimately re-placing the human within nature. The exegesis discusses how fiction writers might engage with nature in their writing, by concentrating on the potential of urban environments – places where nature and culture co-exist. I argue that through fiction, writers can re-imagine cities in ways that extend contemporary ideas of place, nature, urban experience and ecologies.

I use several methodologies in the creation of this novel and exegesis including practice-led research, eco-criticism, reflection, and embodied experience. My aim is to develop a method of writing-practice based on the hybrid role of doctoral candidate as creative writer/researcher and nature writing as a hybrid of poetic and scientific expression. I walk the boundary between real and fictional, natural and cultural, self and other. I seek to extend understandings of nature through the concepts of ‘situated knowledges’ and lived experiences with reference to Estelle Barrett and Donna Haraway. By questioning the binary set up between theory and practice, situated knowledge allows engagement between theoretical and creative inquiry and results in a more complex understanding of the creative-practice/research relationship.

I argue that the definition of nature writing can be broadened to include fiction, urban areas and narratives that contribute a range of knowledge (poetic, scientific, personal, relational, and mythical). I consider the way language and meaning might play a role in understanding place and non-human nature. By re-conceptualising the way landscape, terroir, wilderness, country and nature are used and understood, I find new ways to think about nature/culture relationships. Eco-criticism, particularly through a social ecology lens has provided me with a critical frame to negotiate my own use and understanding of these conceptions.

I aim to discuss the interrelationships between non-human nature and human culture in a way that critiques an ideological separation of the two concepts. Eco-criticism and social ecology offer a way to re-conceptualise human culture and speak back to the dangerous split that has eclipsed western culture since the Enlightenment. These theoretical considerations...
then feed into the fiction as I construct narratives that cross boundaries and question traditional ideas of the human/non-human relationship. By deliberately situating my fiction in urban settings, I explore how these areas can provide a common ground between non-human nature and human culture. My work shows that this connection is possible even when situated in largely man-made or constructed environments.

The accompanying novel, *The Season of Shellfish*, tells the stories of three women – Acacia, Violet and Frangipani. Each of these women has a different relationship with place, nature and ecology. Frangipani has moved to a smaller island off the coast of Australia and must come to terms with this lush yet volatile place. Violet lives in the suburbs of a large capital city where gardens and parks support and interrupt human actions. Acacia must come to grips with her body, riddled with metal implants after an accident. As she navigates life in the inner city she finds exclusion, connection and a new way of being human. The cities I write are not literal representations of Australian cities as we know them now but speculative depictions. I explore historical and present understandings of the urban living experience in Australia and present cities as re-imagined natural/cultural places.

The three narratives revolve around the experiences of women and place and I examine, in the exegesis, literary representations of women and non-human nature. In western culture, women have traditionally been linked with nature to justify exclusion from cultural production and development, while nature has often been feminised to justify exploitation. While women in non-western cultures may experience similar domination despite not existing within a Cartesian framework, it is necessary to discuss Western dichotomies as a writer working within and resisting this culturally dominant paradigm. I look to eco-criticism and ecofeminism to examine the possibilities of re-conceptualising the women/nature relationship in fiction.
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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Chantelle Bayes
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Publications Arising from the Dissertation


Creating Places: Developing Fictional Experiences with Urban Nature
Introduction

My writing desk is made of compressed wood chips, painted grey. The wall and ceiling plaster is crushed rock bonded with gypsum, lime, sand, and clay. A possum plays in the wall cavity as I work. She doesn’t see a difference between the hole in a tree trunk and a wall. Outside the window (formed from melted sand), birds flit in the tree tops. Lorikeets test branches for their mating suitability by hopping up and down in one spot. The computer I type on is constructed with zinc, copper, silicon, even gold and platinum. My computer’s plastic covering started off as crude oil before the atoms were coaxed into new structures. The building and everything in it was created through relationships between humans and non-human nature. Like the possum, I see the nature of the city, even when highly manipulated and changed by humans. A quote above my desk reminds me why I’m writing:

Imagine Nature divided from Culture by an official barrier, like a state border. This is a metaphor, certainly, but the division between the two concepts is nevertheless real enough, and with real political effects (Muecke 2006, p. 1).

The human impact on nature is an increasingly important issue as the twenty-first century experiences environmental change on a global scale. Environmental issues such as pollution, climate change, and biodiversity loss not only stem from human action but also problematic conceptions of our position in relation to nature. As Stephen Muecke (2006) suggests, an imaginary separation between nature and culture persists, positioning culture as dominant and reinforcing an idea of nature as something to be exploited by culture. This way of thinking forgets that culture is dependent on nature.

This thesis is comprised of a novel and exegesis which explores how contemporary fiction can contribute to understandings of nature and culture, questioning the dualistic narrative implicit in this divide and ultimately re-placing the human within nature. Contemporary literary fiction allows complex stories to be told: stories about the other, stories from shifting and multiple perspectives and stories that re-imagine the world. In this project, I focus on telling a more complex story of the city as a narrative site, one that re-positions non-human nature, traditionally seen in opposition to the human-constructed city. This exegesis will discuss how fiction writers might engage with nature in their writing, by concentrating on the potential of urban environments – places where nature and culture co-exist. I argue that through fiction, writers can re-
imagine cities in ways that extend contemporary ideas of place, nature, urban experience and ecologies. Narratives influence the way we think about ourselves. By telling stories that re-imagine nature/culture relationships, writers can help to question what it means to be human, how we might live in urban ecologies and ultimately encourage readers to consider their own relationships to the non-human.

As part of this research, I develop a piece of fiction in the form of a novel – *The Season of Shellfish*. It tells the stories of three women – Acacia, Violet and Frangipani. Each of these women has a different relationship with place, nature and ecology. This decision was made to show multiple experiences are possible and to question the stereotypical woman/nature relationship depicted in some Western literature. Frangipani has moved to a smaller island off the coast of Australia and must come to terms with this lush yet volatile place. Violet lives in the suburbs of a large capital city where gardens and parks support and interrupt human actions. Acacia must come to grips with her body, riddled with metal implants after an accident. As she navigates life in the inner city she finds exclusion, connection and a new way of being human. These cities are not literal representations of Australian cities as we know them now but speculative depictions of Australian cities. I explore historical and present understandings of the urban living experience and present cities as re-imagined natural/cultural places.

*The Season of Shellfish* is both a response to and driver of the theoretical considerations introduced in the exegesis and should be read as a conversation with the exegesis rather than as a solution to a creative/theoretical problem. Each story explores different aspects of cities/towns and the relationships that occur within and contribute to urban living. Violet’s story explores the experience of parks and gardens, their use in public and private places and how we form relationships to these green-spaces. Acacia’s narrative explores technology, its benefits and damages and how we might come to understand this complex urban network. Frangipani lives in a place that aspires to city status. Her story allows me to consider the underlying myth, idealism and imagery associated with tropical islands which is used to enhance many Australian coastal cities. I also use this imagined place to ask what makes a city, what urban aspects such as infrastructure, food and community look like when restricted by the island environment, and how we might live in fragile yet volatile ecosystems in the twenty-first century.
I seek to extend understandings of nature through the concepts of situated knowledge and lived experience with reference to Estelle Barrett (2007) and Donna Haraway (1988; 1991). By questioning the binary set up between theory and practice, situated knowledge allows engagement between theoretical and creative inquiry and results in a more complex understanding of the creative-practice/research relationship (Barrett and Bolt 2007). In writing a novel, I practice theory, extending ideas of what it means to be human in the contemporary world and exploring how people might live as natural/cultural beings. I construct an environmental imaginary:

In some literature, this term denotes how one’s physical environs shapes one’s sense of social belonging and values, but it can also refer to the imaginative space wherein we formulate—and enact—our values and attitudes towards ‘nature’…. Like social imaginaries (and overlapping with them), environmental imaginaries are sites of negotiation that can orient material action and interaction (Neimanis, Asberg and Hayes 2015, pp. 5-6).

As Astrida Neimanis, Cecilia Asberg and Suzi Hayes (2015) suggest, by constructing imaginaries, I bring together multiple ways of knowing through practice.

Although focus varies considerably both within and between fields of inquiry, the imaginary is nonetheless generally understood as the explorative, yet somewhat restricted, sense-making field wherein humans cultivate and negotiate relations with the material world, both emotionally and rationally, while also creating identities for themselves. Since imaginaries are created through engagement with our world, we could say that imaginaries are not what we have, but what we do (Neimanis, Asberg and Hayes 2015, p. 5).

Here, Neimanis, Asberg and Hayes suggests that through writing imaginaries, the researcher can produce knowledge which is connected to and derived from the material world.

The novel and accompanying exegesis are informed by eco-critical theory and social ecology. By drawing on these two theoretical frameworks in this project, I aim to discuss the interrelationships between non-human nature and human culture in a way that critiques an ideological separation of the two concepts. Eco-criticism and social ecology offer a way to re-conceptualise human culture and speak back to the dangerous split that has eclipsed western culture since the seventeenth century. These theoretical considerations then feed into the fiction as I construct narratives that cross boundaries and question traditional ideas of the human/non-human relationship.
In the Romantic tradition, fiction and poetry since the eighteenth century has often evoked nature as something to be found and experienced in rural and wild places or designated within urban areas as passive setting (Arnold et al. 1999). Writers such as Wordsworth linked natural landscapes with tranquillity and conjured up images of Pan: harmonious connections with forests, the renewal of life in Springtime and the pastoral ideal (Wordsworth 2015). By looking back to an idealised rural life, writers have sought to counter the ideals of rationality, objectivity, intellectualism and material progress which are seen as driving the exploitation of natural resources and loss of untamed nature (R Williams 1973, p. 127). As Raymond Williams (1973) shows, often the city and country are used to signify larger processes of change which have comparable effects on both areas:

Clearly ideas of the country and the city have specific contents and histories, but just as clearly, at times, they are forms of isolation and identification of more general processes. People have often said ‘the city’ when they meant capitalism or bureaucracy or centralised power, while ‘the country’, as we have seen, has at times meant everything from independence to deprivation, and from the powers of an active imagination to a form of release from consciousness (R Williams 1973, p. 291).

So while the city is often linked with industrialisation as though it were the city driving destruction of rural lifestyles, the processes of capitalisation, manufacturing and production have had a similar effect on the social and natural elements of cities. Rural myths that play on nostalgic ideas of simpler times, lost rural cultures and lifestyles more in harmony with nature are now perpetuated in cities within constructed suburban communities and tourism reproductions of farm life (Wilson 1992). In some instances, traditional farming practices have led to considerable changes in ecologies through the draining of wetlands and deforestation (Wilson 1992; Giblett 2011) while some urban processes such as sewerage management have led to increased diversity and ecosystem health as Tim Low (2002) demonstrates. Rural myths serve to reinforce the idea that nature/culture relationships are better in idyllic rural areas while also suggesting these areas are remnants, and these relationships are not possible in a contemporary industrialised and urban world. In this thesis, I contest the idea of nature as other to the city and through my creative and exegetical research, explore new ways of writing about the non-human.

One consideration in developing my approach to the exegesis was whether to use subjective or objective language. This depends on what kind of 'truth' is sought in
order to understand non-human nature and natural processes. Objective language
distances the writer from their subject matter by presenting the bare facts and without
identifying the author’s presence or opinion in an attempt to create a non-biased text.
Subjective language includes the writer, identifying their position in the text and the
engagement of the writer with their subject matter. The truth sought in the latter is
derived from situated knowledge and considers the relationships present and
contribute to the research including the relationship between the researcher and
subject. The truth sought through objective language is a uniform and universal truth
that can be applied to multiple situations.

Scientific inquiry has long dominated the discourse of nature, relying on notions
of objectivity and rationality in order to appear as the authority on knowing and
understanding nature (Katz and Kirby 1991, pp. 261-262). Scientific texts have
traditionally spoken about nature as ‘other’, that which is to be found away from or
separate to culture. David DeMeeritt (1998) argues that the conception of science as
‘truth’ leads to ‘the tendency either to worship science for its God-like objectivity or to
demonise it for failing to live up to our unrealistic expectations’ (p. 188). These two
interpretations of science are supported by dualistic thinking which separates nature and
culture, objectivity and subjectivity, the scientific and the social. Val Plumwood (2002)
argues that scientific objectivity excludes the emotional and the bodily (seen as
feminine traits), the particular, the personal and the political, however, the actual
practice of science and discovery are far from objective (pp. 41-42). This myth of
objectivity in science conceals the context of scientific research, influenced by
economic markets and political agendas, and instead serves to ‘facilitate control by
privileged social groups’ (Plumwood 2002, p. 42). This is not to disregard the results of
scientific inquiry but to recognise the context in which that inquiry is undertaken with
the aim of re-placing this knowledge into the broader socio-political sphere.

The authoritative and seemingly objective voice of scientific texts allow the
authors to obscure their own position in the construction of concepts of nature and so
reinforce this idea of nature as other. Barbara Adam (1998) says:

Scientific objectivity … suggests that the position of “observers” is irrelevant to
what they see, that the object of observation is the same irrespective of context,
that difference in time and space do not affect it in any way (p. 38).
This suggests that the writer who seeks to close the gap between nature and culture may find the objective approach ineffective. This is not to say that science is unimportant for understanding nature but it must be recognised that scientific discourses are also cultural productions and as such are constructed and interpreted. Demeritt (1998) argues that climate change sceptics have used the social constructivist argument to denounce scientific demonstrations of climate change and advocate inaction which has led to further social and environmental damage. So while science must be analysed carefully within a broader context, it must not be denied altogether. Instead Demeritt (1998) proposes a new way of conceptualising science through artefactual constructivism:

The reality of the objects of scientific knowledge is the contingent outcome of social negotiation among heterogeneous human and non-human actors (p. 175)… It refigures the actors in the construction of what is made for us as nature and society. The social in these social constructions is not just ‘us’: it includes other humans, non-humans, and even machines and other, non-organic actors (p. 180)… These objects of scientific knowledge are co-constructors. This makes them no less real or materially significant. It simply highlights the complex and negotiated process of scientific practice and representation by which they are materialized and produced for us as natural-technical objects of human knowledge (p. 180).

This conception of science requires a careful consideration of both human and non-human agents in the construction of knowledge, and opens up science to a new kind of critical analysis along with other ways of knowing.

Barrett (2007) argues that the benefit of the dual platform of inquiry (creative work/exegesis) is in the extension of scientific knowledge, situating research in everyday experience. Scientific ideas might be enhanced through broader studies of understanding and texts that explicitly recognise subjectivity. Lawrence Buell, Ursula Heise and Karen Thornber (2011) remind us that scientists often rely on local or Indigenous people’s knowledge to guide their research (p. 424). Only recently have scientists in Australia begun to examine Indigenous narratives themselves to find these accounts record environmental transformation over time including the longest known oral history of climate change (Reid, Nunn and Sharp 2014) and the introduction of foreign species to Australia (Bowman, Gibson and Kondo 2015). Scientists also utilise narrative to tell environmental stories to a wider audience. Rachel Carson discusses chemical pollution in Silent Spring (1962), Tim Flannery explores climate change in The Future Eaters (1994) and The Weather Makers (2005), and Tim Low re-evaluates urban nature in The New Nature (2002). Creative writers in turn have examined the
possibilities of scientific research through fiction. Frank Schatzing explores non-human intelligence and climate change in *The Swarm* (2012) and Margaret Atwood investigates the potential effects of genetic engineering in the MaddAddam series. Atwood sets the three books in a post-apocalyptic world where a waterless flood (a pandemic virus) kills almost all humans who are then replaced by bioengineered and environmentally-friendly hominids called Crakers (Atwood 2013). While this may seem fantastical, Atwood suggests that these books are futuristic projections of current issues and based entirely in current scientific achievements. ‘Although Maddaddam is a work of fiction, it does not include any technologies or biobeings that do not already exist, are not under construction, or are not possible in theory’ (Atwood 2013, p. 393).

I employ both narrative fiction (novel) and narrative non-fiction (within the exegesis) in recognition of the ways each form of nature writing contributes to a discussion of nature/culture relations. The use of narrative allows me to develop environmental imaginaries which Neimanis, Asberg and Hayes (2015) argue are communal sites of negotiation and contest that work to reorient social values, material action and interaction. Environmental imaginaries encourage people to question their relationship with places and encourage social values which drive alternative ways of living as ecological beings (Neimanis, Asberg and Hayes 2015). Consequently, the novel/narrative text also becomes a way of linking the research with the everyday lived experiences of a wider audience.

Fiction and non-fiction have different roles to play in culture. Non-fiction nature writing allows the writer to bear witness to particular places at particular times as experienced by a subjective participant. This process acts to question, confirm or reshape knowledge through experience. The resulting narrative gives a deeper understanding of the past and present as manifest in place. Fiction, on the other hand, extends knowledge by abstracting and simulating reality. The writer of fiction is able to test out scenarios, behaviours and systems and project possible futures based on current and past conditions. The readers of fiction place themselves in this simulated world as emotionally-engaged participants:

The abstraction performed by fictional stories demands that readers and others project themselves into the represented events. The function of fiction can thus be seen to include the recording, abstraction, and communication of complex social information in a manner that offers personal enactments of experience.
rendering it more comprehensible than usual. Narrative fiction models life, comments on life, and helps us to understand life in terms of how human intentions bear upon it (Mar and Oatley 2008, p. 173).

While the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are not always clear and to some extent both can act to simulate reality, the focus of non-fiction is observable phenomena and experience, while the focus of fiction is what lies beneath and beyond individual experience. As opposed to scientific experiment however, fiction does not try to locate a universal truth but offers a space to test out possible truths, extreme realities and personal reactions:

Fiction is a laboratory that allows us to experiment in a controlled and safe manner with intentions, emotions, and emotion-evoking situations that would be impossible and often highly undesirable in the real world (Mar and Oatley 2008, p. 183).

As Raymond Mar and Keith Oatley (2008) suggest, fiction can have a real effect on readers. Researchers have demonstrated the way literary novels can increase empathy and place people into the position of others (Clark 2013; Bergland 2014). Novels might also act to help people understand their socio-ecological environments. Anecdotally, a couple caught up in the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia recognised early warning signs from a description in *The Swarm* and were able to flee to safety before the water hit (Schwarz 2015). Further, novels may even help us to critically examine complex social and environmental phenomena. South African literature and in particular JM Coetzee’s writings, were important in shaping international understandings of South Africa’s apartheid (Barnett 1999, p. 288). By examining nature/culture relationships within fiction, I am able to test out simulated natural/cultural worlds, and question the boundaries between human and non-human in ways that would be impossible in non-fiction.

In order to discuss the multiplicity of issues involved in writing about nature, I will include anecdote and memoir – subjective personal experiences told in first person, as a way of engaging with the non-human even as I culturally construct, create and represent myself and non-human nature within this text. Such an approach will also help to highlight for the reader, my self-conscious participation in the project, in addition to the support and perspectives provided by the presence and ‘voices’ of eco-critical theorists and other writers of fiction. Ultimately the exegesis functions as conceptual
construction of ‘nature’ by drawing on a combination of sources, as well as a critical reflection on the project.

The creative and exegetical components of this project were written simultaneously, allowing each to play off the other. My personal experiences, theoretical reflections and creative product converse with and disrupt each other, keeping the subject matter in a deliberate state of flux to encourage progressive perspectives. This approach reflects my attempt to unsettle ideas of nature and culture and their perceived separation.

In chapter one ‘Nature and the City’, I argue that the definition of nature writing can be broadened to include fiction, urban areas and narratives that contribute a range of knowledge (poetic, scientific, personal, relational, mythical). The traditional notion of nature writing has been non-fiction, often in essay form, about rural and wild areas and drawn from scientific knowledge. By broadening the definition of nature writing, I attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the contemporary natural/cultural world I live in, and investigate what it means to be human in relation to place. By deliberately situating my fiction in urban settings, I explore how these areas can provide a common ground between non-human nature and human culture. My work shows that this connection is possible even when situated in largely man-made or constructed environments. I attempt to invoke non-human nature as an active influence within culture by highlighting the way natural processes can permeate even the most controlled human-environments. The finished product should be suitable for creative publication, whilst also contributing to the knowledge of nature construction and the cultural experience associated with natural urban places. In support of the express goals in my fictional work, the accompanying exegesis will attempt to examine the relationship between non-human nature and human culture in such a way that neither will be privileged.

I use several methodologies in the creation of this novel and exegesis including practice-led research, eco-criticism, reflection, and embodied experience. My aim is to develop a method of writing practice based on the hybrid role of doctoral candidate as creative writer/researcher and nature writing as a hybrid of poetic and scientific expression. I walk the boundary between real and fictional, natural and cultural, self and other. I enter places, collect experiences and store them in the manifold, a metaphor
used by Janet Frame to explain the memory/imagination from which fiction is
developed. These methodologies support the construction of creative and academic texts
that extend ideas of nature, place and urban experience. I discuss methodological
considerations in chapter two ‘Writing Urban Nature’, before going on to discuss the
development of my methodological approach in chapter three ‘Hybridity and
Embodiment’. This chapter is a modified version of ‘Nature and the Embodied Hybrid’,
a paper published in the AAWP 18th Annual conference proceedings (see Bayes, 2014).

As The Season of Shellfish developed, it became clear the novel was going to tell
the stories of women in particular. In western culture, women have traditionally been
linked with nature to justify exclusion from cultural production and development, while
nature has often been feminised to justify exploitation (Soper 2000; Mack-Canty 2004;
Booth 2010). While women in non-western cultures may experience similar domination
despite not existing within a Cartesian framework, it is necessary to discuss Western
dichotomies as a writer working within and resisting this culturally dominant paradigm.
Dichotomies, associated with Cartesian dualism effect notions of gender and nature and
work to reinforce the oppression of both. In dualistic thinking, men and women are
considered opposites. Characteristics associated with the masculine are seen as positive,
while those associated with the feminine are seen as negative (Cixous 1986; Soper
2000; Mack-Canty 2004; Plumwood 1993; Booth 2010). According to Helene Cixous
(1986), women are often related to nature, the body and emotional thought while men
are linked with culture, the mind and rational thought. Cixous (1986) goes on to argue
that while the dominant categories ‘culture’ and ‘masculine’ are seen to be stable and
exclusive, modes of being which don’t conform to stereotypical images of male or
culture are often associated with the feminine and (along with the female and nature)
assigned to the category of ‘other’ (Mercer 1994; Cixous 1986). In this way of thinking,
the ‘other’ is seen to be less valuable than the masculine, cultural and rational (Mercer
1994; Cixous 1986). Cixous sees this ‘othering’ as reducing someone to a ‘nobody’.
Therefore, it is important to consider how women and nature are represented in
narratives and how new stories might re-imagine these relationships without reinforcing
dualisms. I explore issues of representation and gender in chapter four
‘(Mis)representing Women and Nature’.

The sections of the exegesis are linked by narrative hybridities, blurred
boundaries and manifold (rather than dualistic) possibilities. In exploring definitions of
nature, I find fluidity. The term nature, in literature (and often in western culture more broadly), sometimes includes and other times excludes the human. I adopt the term non-human nature in the exegesis to clarify this discussion but even then the boundary between the human or cultural and the non-human is always in flux. I argue in chapter one ‘Nature and the City’ that this position of flux allows for multiple possibilities and can help to overcome dualistic notions of nature and culture which reinforce damaging actions towards the environment. Notions of place, space and landscape are also questioned as I search for new possibilities for story construction. The hybridity of nature writing itself is discussed. Nature writers draw on scientific thought while adopting poetic and literary forms. Likewise, cities are explored as hybrids of natural/cultural entities. Finally, I find the concept of manifold possibilities useful for considering representations of women and nature – demonstrating in my fiction the multiple and varied relationships between women, place and narratives.
Chapter One: Nature and the City

This project contributes to research by reconsidering the place of narrative in re-imagining human/non-human relationships in urban areas. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the theoretical considerations of the project and discuss the rationale behind decisions made in writing the novel. I explore conceptions of nature, landscape, place and space to find new ways of thinking and writing about the human/non-human relationship. How we relate to and engage with nature can be beneficial or detrimental to ourselves and others. I examine what this means in the twenty-first century as we deal with severe environmental issues on a global scale. I will use the French term terroir to address the ways landscape is often directed towards a romantic gazing over the land (Buell 2005, p. 142). Terroir can be used to re-imagine places in more embodied ways. As with the term landscape, terroir describes the human use of the land but emphasises the physicality of the human in place rather than the conceptual abstraction of the human as suggested in the term landscape, as I will demonstrate. The city is reconsidered as a more-than-human place where notions of natural/cultural assemblages and hybridity lead to new textual representations. I argue for the use of fiction to explore new ways of representing urban nature, pushing the boundaries of nature writing and allowing for multiple truths to emerge. Finally, the Australian context of the novel is discussed.

What is Nature?

I look out over my mum’s suburban backyard. Most plants in her garden were put there by someone. She’s proud that her grass contains a diverse mix of weeds she’s managed to keep, despite the real estate agent suggesting she use a weed killer. Apparently, a uniform patch of grass would be more aesthetically pleasing. On both corners of her street are wilderness areas, a compromise between development and conservation. They were cleared, re-planted with native plants, and are managed by the local council. They’re also routinely used by neighbours to dump rubbish. A cat smooches around my legs for attention like she might do to another cat in her kin group. When I ignore her, she meows, a distinctly domestic trait. Cats who grow up without humans only meow as
kittens but I don’t understand her scent marking so this is her best option for communicating with me. There’s no doubt that the garden, the wilderness area or the cat are non-human and act beyond human intentions but all are changed in some way through human contact. In a world where interaction between human and non-human is increasing, it becomes ever more difficult to define nature.

Rather than seeking to pin down a definition of the term nature, I seek to extend the possibilities of nature and ultimately re-imagine the relationships between human and non-human. To address this question, what is nature? I draw from, problematise and reinterpret both the deep ecological aspect of eco-critical theory and the post-structural aspect of post-modern theory in relation to conceptions of nature. There are many variations within both these theoretical perspectives and I will first examine the extreme positions of each, in order to articulate the complexities of a combined perspective. For the purposes of this research, the extremes could be said to be represented by a strict realist position within deep ecology and an idealist position within post-structuralism. In examining these perspectives, I will endeavour to identify and consider the ideological implications of my own argument.

Eco-critical thinking has been heavily influenced by deep ecology. Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess (1989), coined the term ‘deep ecology’ to refer to a deep connection with and concern for the natural environment (p. 12). Naess talks about nature as something that can be found and experienced away from human culture. Deep Ecology relies on a realist stance in which nature is seen to exist apart from projections of cultural meaning. This idea of nature is at odds with a post-structural view, the driving force of post-modernism, in which everything (including nature) is seen to be a construct of the language and contexts created by culture. Both deep ecology and post-structuralism become problematic when applied to the concept of nature. Deep ecology creates a separation between human and non-human and reinforces a position in which human action is seen in isolation from distant environments. Post-structuralism doesn’t necessarily deny the existence of a world beyond the human but creates a human-centric idea of culture in which the non-human is denied agency. These issues are emphasised in urban places where nature is present along with culture and cities are shaped by these entangled natural and cultural entities. Michael Bennett (2001) suggests that resolving the disconnection between eco-criticism and post-modernism enables urban environments to be analysed more effectively.
There is a growing body of cultural criticism engaged with urban ecology that
tends to reject mainstream ecocriticism’s focus on the genres of nature writing
and pastoral, insisting on the incapacity of these genres to represent the complex
interactions between political choices, socio-economic structures, and the
densely populated ecosystems that shape urban environments (Bennett 2001, pp.
31-32).

By situating my ecologically-focused fiction in urban places, I encapsulate these socio-
political and natural systems. In doing this, I hope to inspire my readers to see nature as
a part of everyday life.

Sue Ellen Campbell and Michael Bennett explore the boundaries of these
theories in an attempt to create a study of nature that imbues nature with respect and
value but can also be discussed in the realm of post-modernity. Campbell (1996)
identifies two areas where these concepts connect. Both deep ecology and post-
structuralism have similar critical positions and could be understood to share a similar
belief in the nature of reality. From Campbell’s (1996) perspective, both post-structural
theory and deep ecology reject a humanist view (p. 127). Post-structural theory replaces
this with a focus on textuality and deconstruction; whereas ecology focuses on 'the way
the rest of the world – the nonhuman part – exists apart from us and our language'
calling for a move towards a ‘social ecology’.

In short, deep ecologists are troubled by humanism because they hope to replace
androcentrism with a biocentric view that displaces the human, while social
ecologists, influenced by poststructuralism, are more likely to be troubled by the
raising of the human into an ‘ism’—a transcendent, ahistorical, and monological
category of absolute value (Bennett 2001, p. 34).

This concept of social ecology is able to sustain both ecological and post-modern
perspectives by adopting what seems to me a deep ecological view of the nature of
reality (ontology) and a post-modern view as to the way we are able to know and
understand this reality (epistemology). So non-human nature can be said to exist in
reality and beyond our conceptions of it but the only way that we can know and
understand non-human nature is through culture. This position is confirmed by Paul
Wapner (2002) who writes ‘postmodernists do not question the fundamental substratum
of material reality … but, rather, they question the way people make sense of that
reality’ (p. 174). Social ecology allows flexibility to re-think relationships between
human and non-human nature, and provides for new representations of cities to emerge.
My project lies within the realm of social ecology, extrapolating from the ontological position of deep ecology and the epistemological position of post-modernism. This combined perspective highlights the human position as both interpreter of the natural world and creator of ideas about nature. My creative process is a reflection of these ideas as I enter natural places, interpret the relationships present and then create fictions that both reflect and construct nature. In considering nature this way in my writing, I also practice a critique of human ontology. I question the human as enactor of nature and urge a philosophy of coexistence and engagement as Demeritt (1998) suggests in his notion of artefactual constructivism.

In writing these texts, I am aware that the destruction of nature has long been associated with the idea that nature was infinitely available, regenerative and belonging to humankind (Soper 1995, pp. 15-37). Nature was re-conceived in the seventeenth century through the idea of the world as machine rather than organism and this influenced the way people sought to know and understand the non-human. Carolyn Merchant (1980) demonstrates the way this change in thinking encouraged an imperial attitude towards nature:

The image of the earth as living organism and nurturing mother had served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings. One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body, although commercial mining would soon require that. As long as the earth was considered to be a live and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behaviour to carry out destructive acts against it (Merchant 1980, p. 3).

The connection of nature with lifeless and unfeeling machines enabled a cultural acceptance of more destructive industrial processes. I reconsider this relationship with non-human nature to find new ways of constructing these relationships. Kate Soper (1995) asks why human relations with nature are viewed as damaging when the similarly damaging actions of other species are seen to be part of the natural order of things (p. 19). Soper is not attempting to defend or excuse environmental destruction but rather explore this boundary between human and non-human in an effort to see ourselves as part of nature. Ecologist Kay Milton (1999) answers, describing a nature that fits with a social ecological perspective. For both Milton (1999, p. 446) and Soper (1995, pp. 44-45), nature can be seen as all-encompassing and includes all that is human and culture. However, Milton (1999) argues that culture is only one part of nature, that there is a non-human nature that exists beyond the realm of culture and the human.
Wapner (2002) captures this concept of a nature beyond the human. ‘As a matter of necessity, nature can be manipulated – and, indeed, always is as humans interact with it – but its ultimate physicality and fundamental structural characteristics are not up for negotiation’ (p. 171). This is particularly evident in urban environments which encourage a re-thinking of nature as boundaries become more and more difficult to distinguish. The cultivation of plants and gardens, the domestication of animals, or even regular feeding of wildlife mean the boundary between what is nature and what is human or cultural is never clear. In fact, even non-humans manipulate their environments as Soper (1995) points out. If we consider the highly manipulated structures of other species such as bee hives or termite nests as natural, then it’s hard to argue that the act of building human structures is somehow unnatural. However, the construction of city structures is often a highly damaging process. There is a tension here – while the growth of cities is supported and influenced by non-human nature, cities are often responsible for the destruction, pollution and damage of non-human nature. This is no more evident than in the development of plastics, a material often used temporarily but which takes hundreds of years to break down, causing many environmental problems. The key issue is not whether cities are natural but the extent to which these urban interactions disrupt ecosystems and cause irreparable damage.

I use the term non-human nature in this exegesis to indicate nature beyond the human. However, even with this term, the boundary between human and non-human is not clear. The Oxford dictionary (2012) describes non-human nature as the ‘features and products of the Earth, as opposed to humans or human creations’ (np). This definition is, arguably, no longer adequate as human actions now have such a global and historical reach that what may appear to be natural is in fact man made. A human layering has formed over landscapes; the human intervention is initially unseen in what otherwise appears to be a natural space. Not only are nature and culture heavily intertwined but nature is a cultural category applied to the non-human. Adam (1998) extends definitions of the non-human, adding that nature is also a series of processes (pp. 29-33). Seen as a set of ‘features and products’ nature becomes a passive and stable concept that suggests it is something to be gazed upon and separate from our human experience of being within the world. As a series of processes, non-human nature is active, able to affect human culture as culture in turn affects non-human nature. This active and changeable concept of non-human nature places it within our temporal as well as spatial experience
of the world and allows us to see nature as an influence in everyday life rather than something to be stumbled upon in wild, untamed or rural areas (Adam 1998). Nature is not a singular entity but plural and entangled with cultures, as Muecke (2006) argues. He uses the term *naturecultures* with reference to Bruno Latour to describe these complexities (p. 1). Even this definition of nature proves problematic in some contexts. Andrew Ross argues that we must be able to separate what is natural and what is a cultural projection upon nature. Nature as a model of behaviour or a higher moral authority is in fact a cultural representation (Ross 1993, p. 111). We must recognise that in knowing and understanding nature we cannot conceive of it without creating nature, in-part, conceptually.

The dynamic character of the term nature as well as the active and changing processes of non-human nature makes it difficult to stabilise. By keeping the term nature in flux, the city might be conceived of as natural space where relationships between nature, culture and the humans who exist in-between can be written about in resistance to problematic dualisms. My fiction is, in part, an exploration of the ways in which the human traverses this tentative boundary between the natural and the cultural. My characters dwell, travel and exist amongst the tangled networks of cultural, urban and natural entities.

**The Urban Experience**

Writing about the complexity of nature/culture in cities requires new ways of thinking about the urban. Now that the majority of the world’s population live in cities, there is a fear that the globalisation of urban networks will cause cities to become uniform and repetitive reproductions of each other (Olalquiaga 1992, pp. 1-3). Eco-critics such as Buell (2005) are working to change the conception of city as non-place by reminding us there is a network of natural and cultural processes feeding each city with its own assemblage of entities. I argue that by complicating ideas of the city and re-imagining the urban as a more-than-human place we might destabilise dichotomous notions of nature and culture.

Olalquiaga (1992) describes the experience of contemporary urban living as psychasthenic, a state in which an organism’s physical location within a space becomes
confused with represented space (pp. 1-2). She analyses the psychasthenic city where boundaries between objects are blurred through reflection, repetition and simulation. Her own psychasthenic experience of the city involves noticing the way buildings like walls of glass, seem to ‘disappear behind reflections of the sky’ and the way hourly changes in light are artificially neutralised as the city shifts from sunlight to constructed lighting (Olalquiaga 1992, p. 3). As I walk through cities, I understand to what extent the boundary between nature and culture is also blurred within the city. Acacia’s narrative in *The Season of Shellfish* partly explores the way this psychasthenic aspect is emphasised by focusing on the technology of contemporary cities. What is a human construction and what is non-human becomes increasingly blurred, as Acacia succumbs to the idea that she is no longer completely human. She is also left to question the extent of human intervention in environmental phenomena.

As the idea of psychasthenia suggests, the city is often thought of as non-place, lost somewhere between physical location and symbolic representation of an ideal city. I argue that despite the merging of physical and symbolic, cities are full of human and non-human agents which contribute to the constitution of place. Michel de Certeau (1984) writes that the city is ‘a universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places’ (p. 103). This idea of the city captures the complexity of natural/cultural cities. Christopher Schliephake (2014) argues that understanding cities requires cultural mediation of the human/non-human through language. ‘We are of an environment, but we do not blend with it. That other broad realm called “culture” gives us the means with and by which we engage with our surroundings—thoughts, language, and tools’ (p. 143). Use of narrative is an important way to retain those things that make up a city’s localities by exploring the relationships between the natural, the cultural and the human who exists between these.

Cities are complex structures of nature and culture. Not only do cities require flows of water, air and food but cities are developed through historic negotiations between natural and cultural entities. Rod Giblett (2011) shows how the construction of cities often meant the destruction of swamps and wetland environments as well as an exclusion of indigenous peoples from their lands. However, rather than see the nature of the city as displaced by culture, it’s possible to reimagine urban nature as an active agent contributing to the city:
The urbanization of nature, a transformation that has gained accelerated momentum over the last few decades, is clearly much more than a gradual process of appropriation until the last vestiges of ‘first nature’ have disappeared. The production of urban nature is a simultaneous process of social and biophysical change in which new kinds of spaces are created and destroyed, ranging from the technological networks that give sustenance to the modern city to new appropriations of nature within the urban landscape (Gandy in Heynan, Kaika and Swyngedouw 2006, pp. 62-63).

This re-consideration of the urban as a negotiated process between nature and culture rather than a colonisation of nature by culture acknowledges the agency of non-humans in the construction of cities. Though some non-human entities and human groups have benefitted by this process at the expense of others and this requires new ways of negotiating urban processes. Bruce Braun (2005) contends that cities need to be re-imagined as more-than-human. A key aspect of this re-imagining is examining relationships within cities:

[T]he interest in ‘connectivity’ might itself be seen as an outcome of attempts to think cities as ecological spaces, for once the myriad things that circulate through its streets, plazas, offices and homes are brought out of hiding, it becomes clear that urbanisation occurs in and through a vast network of relationships, and within complex flows of energy and matter, as well as capital, commodities, people and ideas, that link urban natures with distant sites and distant ecologies (Braun 2005, p. 637).

Conceiving of the city as more-than-human undermines the traditional separation of nature and culture. Key to re-imagining the city is recognising the myriad ways in which non-human nature acts upon us and influences decisions on how we live in cities (Schliephake 2014, p. 140). The notion of ‘post-humanism’ underlies this understanding of the city and is beneficial to conceiving of urban nature as a philosophical position that acknowledges the human as already embodied and embedded in the non-human world.

The city has only recently been recognised by eco-critics as a place suitable to discuss nature. This identifies a shift in thinking, away from the usual duality between what is wild and what is civilised, and towards a re-imagining of both rural and urban places. Braun (2005) suggests that the city allows for boundaries between nature and culture to blur.

[R]hizomatic geographies confuse the purified spaces of the city and compound our attempts to divide space, bodies and organisms into ‘here’ and ‘there’, ‘this’ and ‘that’. We may have brought ‘nature’ into the city, but we may still be some
way from truly grasping the transivity, porosity, and rhythms of these multiscaler ‘machinic assemblages’ that give urban life its potential and its risks (Braun 2005, p. 647).

This confusion of boundaries is not seen as a negative aspect of urban environments but an aspect that allows us to re-imagine cities and even ourselves as natural/cultural entities, re-placing the human in nature.

This blurring of boundaries allows dualities to be re-conceptualised. Antoni Jach in his novel *Layers of the City* (1999) explores the notions of barbarianism and civilisation and how these concepts enter into the identity of the city of Paris. He finds himself torn between the Romans and the Barbarians. The technologically innovative, yet stationary Romans put all their efforts into creating perfect speeches to keep the Barbarians at bay. Meanwhile, the physically intimidating, travelling Barbarians remain outside their walls waiting for the right moment to attack. Each group identifies itself in opposition to the other, so when the Barbarians stop travelling and the Romans lose their connection with Rome, the identities of the two groups are put into question.

We have realized that we are happy neither travelling nor being still and, worst of all we are starting to feel less like barbarians with each passing day … There is no-one apart from ourselves, who regards us as barbarians and therefore we feel unsure as to who we are. Only the Romans are capable of holding up a mirror to us that will reflect us back as we wish to be shown (Jach 1999, p. 249).

This is the foundation of Paris and the narrator’s national identity. He questions his relationship to these groups, attempting to position himself as one or the other until he identifies himself as both. It is suggested that Paris is a reflection of Roman and Barbarian history, possessing both wild and civilised qualities. This re-thinking of the city shows that it has become possible to imagine and represent the urban and rural in new ways.

When re-conceptualising the city as more-than-human, boundaries between nature and culture blur, destabilising oppositional dualisms, and providing a space to reconsider what it means to be human. This re-imagining of the city can also combat reductionist ideas of cities as non-places. The city as uniform cultural-reproduction can also be addressed by recognising the agency of nature and the role of natural entities in shaping urban environments. If as Schliephake attests, language allows us to make sense of our place in these environments, then literature can serve to reconsider the cityscape as natural/cultural place.
Urban Nature Writing

‘Nature writing’ is a contested term. Scholars such as CA Cranston, Robert Zeller (2007, p. 8) and Mark Tredinnick (2003, p. 31) argue that ‘nature writing’ is a dismissive term and that ‘place-based writing’ might be a more appropriate label as it allows for the inclusion of many genres. More recently, the term literary ecology has been employed to describe the multiple forms, styles and disciplines of texts discussed in eco-criticism (Schliephake 2015; Waldron and Friedman 2013). Conversely, in Granta’s special edition New Nature Writing (2008), Jason Cowley suggests that nature writing can include a variety of genres and texts about a range of subjects. In this exegesis, I will use the term nature writing in reference to the established body of literature it encompasses and also to emphasise the way these texts foreground non-human nature.

The paper ‘Forum on Literatures of the Environment’ surveyed the field of eco-critical study and literature written about the environment (Arnold et al. 1999). At the time, the authors identified three areas they felt needed further discussion: urban nature writing, a focus on a wider range of texts including fiction, and expanding the focus to include texts and eco-critics outside of Euro-America (Arnold et al. 1999). A more recent study found that despite this call for expansion in 1999, urban areas in eco-critical and nature writing still remain largely unexplored and require further consideration (Bracke 2014).

Two publications that have sought to expand nature writing are the aforementioned Granta’s New Nature Writing (2008) and Tyrell Dixon’s City Wilds (2002). Both anthologies address some of the issues raised in ‘Forum on Literatures of the Environment’. Editor of New Nature Writing, Jason Cowley (2008) describes traditional nature writing as romantic, pastoral wanderings while ‘new nature writing’ approaches nature in unorthodox and experimental ways (p. 10). All the pieces published as part of this anthology are first person narratives, giving the writer's voice a privileged presence within the texts. Many pieces are autobiographical or creative non-fiction in style, approaches which have become vogue and somewhat dominant in nature writing. However, other ways of writing about nature were included: graphic fiction, poetry, photographic memoir, and fiction.
Partly, the use of the first-person essay comes from the tradition of writing natural histories. Thomas Lyon (2001) describes the nature essay as having three main dimensions: ‘natural history information, personal responses to nature, and philosophical interpretations of nature.’ The use of subjective first-person essay allows nature writers to draw attention to human destruction, ask questions about how we live with non-humans and develop greater understandings of place. As discussed in the introduction, writers of non-fiction bear witness to place:

Mostly this literature of nature is framed by the authors own experience of geography. Without a personal presence nothing may be witnessed. But when the writing is good, the work, you feel, is not really about the author. It is about a place – and its meaning for one writer (Tredinnick 2003, p. 33).

This bearing witness has allowed for a cross-checking of information. As Don Scheese (2002) argues, the non-fiction writer can’t hide in speculation but must locate the narrative in place to confirm or correct knowledge. This form of writing has played an important part in developing understandings of nature but fiction can also contribute to knowledge of nature/culture relationships. The ability of fiction to abstract and simulate complex social and ecological phenomena means it offers a way to examine problems, test out solutions and construct experiences for readers which pay attention to unexamined realities.

What is recognised as an important goal for nature writing is voiced by Lydia Peelle. She stresses the need for nature writers to connect with nature in ways that go beyond scientific objectivity and observation:

The new nature writing … has got to be couched in stories – whether fiction or non-fiction – where we as humans are present. Not only as observers, but as intrinsic elements. In my thinking, it is the tradition of the false notion of separation that has caused us so many problems and led to so much environmental degradation. I believe that it is our great challenge in the twenty-first century to remake the connection (Cowley 2008, p. 12).

Here, Peelle raises the importance of exploring nature in urban environments as well as rural and wild places. The separation of nature and culture can be seen most prominently in the tradition of nature writing where nature has often been discussed away from highly built up areas. Gina Mercer (2011, np.) argues that successful nature writing places people back into the environment.

It is writing which shows a passionate consciousness of our belonging to, and interaction with, the natural world. This kind of writing doesn’t separate human
from animal, it shows a deep understanding of the fact that we too are ‘just’
animals with all the implications of that in terms of how we live on the planet.
These writers, when they speak of ‘water issues’ don’t think of that as an
external problem to be solved by bureaucrats on planning committees. These
writers profoundly remember that our bodies are composed of 70% water, so if
the planet has ‘water issues’ then that is an issue for every individual – we can’t
split ourselves off from it and treat it as remote and somehow separate.

This is an important consideration in my writing wherein I re-imagine the city as a
complex ecosystem of human, cultural and natural entities. This re-conception of nature
writing shows it is possible to include fictional and non-fictional narratives about urban,
rural and wild places. Therefore, nature writing might be defined not as a proscribed
form but rather through its express goals to understand and connect with the non-human
through writing.

Dixon (2002) says that while those who live in the city may foster a concern for
rural and wild landscapes often the nature of the city itself is ignored (pp. xii-xiii).
Environmental destruction within cities has become commonplace, allowing cities to
expand and progress at the expense of nature. In choosing pieces for the City Wilds
anthology, Dixon suggests he was more concerned with the way writers engaged with
urban nature than any particular style. Urban nature has been made prominent in these
stories rather than reserved for setting, background or a point of casual reference (Dixon
2002, p. xvi). A range of creative non-fiction as well as fictional pieces have been
included, with care taken to include pieces from writers of various nationalities and
backgrounds and stories featuring a wide range of places.

Dixon (2002) observes that fiction is important to understandings of urban
nature as it provides diversity in styles and ideologies and allows for a wider scope of
imaginative freedom (p. xvi). Literature can serve to ‘transcend and undermine the
frameworks posed by dry scientific or cultural theory, expressing and testing inherent
tensions and contradictions within a de-pragmatised discourse’ (Schliephake 2015, p.
199). Multiple truths merge in fiction and the authority of knowing or understanding
nature is questioned. This is partly because fiction can be explicit about the construction
of nature. Annette Kolodny argues, ‘the final written account is inevitably partial and
contrived, a shaping and reshaping of whatever the actual raw experience might have
been’ (Dobrin and Keller 2012, p. 9). So, even in non-fiction, the written representation
of place is a reshaping. As a fiction writer, I expose this process of reshaping place and
nature while attempting to reflect some truth about the relationships present in cities. Schliephake (2015) argues that ‘literature itself can be seen as a mode of ecological thinking, where disciplinary gaps are transcended and alternative visions of living with and in an environment that encompasses both the human and non-human can be explored’ (p. 205). Nature writing reconsiders a dynamic and agential world in which humans are also re-made, enriched and re-situated in an ecological community (Plumwood 2009, p. 119; Kelly 2011, p. 6). While I draw on real experiences, memory and scientific understandings, I also engage with mythology and re-imaginings of natural/cultural cities. I do this as characters remember or tell stories about place. These stories shape the character’s understandings of place and lead to deeper connections as well as ruptures when current experiences don’t meet their expectations.

Buell (2005) identifies the need to extend the scope of both eco-criticism and nature writing but cautions that the importance of writers working in the area of non-fiction shouldn’t be dismissed either (pp. 29-35). It is in the inclusion of various genres, writers, styles and voices that we can sufficiently know and understand nature. What is important to contemporary nature writers, who seek to create more appropriate ways of writing about nature, is the experience involved in connecting with non-human nature as well as culture.

One story in the City Wilds anthology that demonstrates how a fiction writer may successfully discuss the complexity of urban nature is ‘Bottles of Beaujolais’ by David Wong Louie described in Dixon’s introduction as a ‘complex environmental fable’ (Dixon 2002, p. 47). The unnamed protagonist is responsible for an otter, which has been displaced from his natural environment and housed in the shop window of a sashimi bar. The otter, called Mushimono, has been placed within an environment created to mimic his home, complete with a faux natural climate which the protagonist generates. At the beginning of the story the complicated processes of nature have been mastered, scientifically explained and re-created. By the end however, the protagonist and his love interest Peg/Luna find the artificial climate lacking. While on a date, the protagonist attempts to transform Mushimono’s tank from a night in the middle of winter into a day of summer only to find the climate outside imposing. This attempt to create an artificial version of the environment only to find it lacking is mirrored when the protagonist and Peg/Luna make wine. The protagonist had earlier cut his hand while preparing sushi and he and his date decide to mix his blood with Saki in an attempt to
make something resembling red wine. However, something goes wrong in the process and the protagonist finds the wine transformed:

I picked up the bowl and was horrified by what I saw. The contents had been retranslated by the suns. The blood had coagulated into a cinnamon crust, sealing in the saki underneath (Dixon 2002, p. 58).

So the wine, which at first appears to be just like the Beaujolais, is revealed to be a kind of monstrous creation lacking the essential qualities of real wine. The real Beaujolais wine captures something of the landscape in which it was made, an inherent component that cannot be manufactured. The characters often refer to Beaujolais as the wine of summer. The image of Eduard Manet’s painting The Luncheon on the Grass (‘dejeuner’ in the text), is used to represent the symbolic importance of the wine, invoking images of summer holidays, picnics in the grass and the French countryside. The protagonist and Peg/Luna find they are unable to re-create either the wine or the French summer and at the end of the story they, along with Mushimono, retreat outside, into the real nature of the city:

“Central Park,” I told the cabbie. “To the lake where you rent those boats in the summer, you know, where the ducks live.” … The cab swerved uptown. Snow kept falling. It covered the city, softening edges, blurring lines. But I had never seen things any clearer than I did that night. Blizzard-force gusts made our journey difficult. I told the cabbie not to rush. We could not outrace the storm. There would be snow, plenty of snow. I knew by daybreak the snow would turn to rain and by noon it would all be forgotten (Dixon 2002, p. 60).

Realising that the created environment in Mushimono’s tank is missing the essential character of the real place, the protagonist takes the otter back to the park. This story captures the complexity of living in the city, a place where natural and cultural entities engage, co-operate, and come into conflict. Louie reminds us that nature is ever-present in our cities. However, it can also be read as a cautionary tale that questions the ability of humans to control and reproduce nature through technology.

Fiction writers do not just represent non-human nature but are capable of re-imagining cities and natural/cultural relationships. By broadening the nature writing genre, as Cowley suggests, writers can more freely examine urban nature and extend understandings. The inclusion of fiction in a broader genre of nature writing means multiple forms may be held up together, as parts of an on-going conversation. By drawing on multiple disciplines and engaging multiple truths in texts, nature writing can serve to question traditional notions and authorities of knowing. While writers have
explored ecological problems and understandings of nature in literature before, often these contributions can be missed as Tim Winton suggests:

> Literature has been quarantined from other disciplines for so long. My suspicion is that my public work as an activist has alerted some critics and scholars to the role of the environment in my fiction, but very few saw that strand of thought in the work itself until very recently (Vidussi 2014, p. 118).

The increased interest in relationships between nature and literature have no doubt also brought to readers, writers and scholars a new awareness of how writing can and does engage with place. My writing is an attempt to explore fictional nature writing with the consideration of a tradition and body of thought which has previously been reserved for non-fiction writing.

**Place and Space**

To write about cities as places, it is necessary to discuss the complexities of the term place and the associated term space. Lawrence Buell (2005) defines place by its contrast with space. In an effort to address the privileged position that space has been given in dichotomous thinking, Buell theorises place as being value laden, while space becomes the empty counterpart (pp. 64-65). Place, Buell argues is what we attach ourselves to and imbue with cultural significance. Our memories and histories are written onto place not space. Space is described as an abstract concept, empty of both physicality and meaning (Buell 2005, pp. 64-65). But this way of thinking could easily lead to an inversion of the Western dichotomy where place is simply more valued than space.

For this reason, de Certeau’s (1984) theory of place makes an important contribution to the discussion. For de Certeau, the distinction between place and space is an issue of movement. Place concerns the arrangement of entities distributed in an area and the co-existing relationships formed by their configurations (de Certeau 1984, pp. 91-110). There is an implied stability to place. Space, he writes, is an acting out of places (de Certeau 1984, p. 98). The movement of entities within an area feel out direction, speed and time variables that create space.

For Doreen Massey (2005) however, de Certeau doesn’t push the concepts of place and space far enough. Both space and place are ever changing. For Massey (2005), space is characterised by the simultaneity of intersecting trajectories so far while
places are events – collections of stories in a particular place and at a particular point in time (p. 130). Massey’s conception of place and space supports an idea of nature as a series of processes, situated in spatial but also temporal experience. This is important for understanding cities as places. ‘Rather than bounded spaces, cities are best seen as “polyrhythmic” assemblages composed of multiple networks stretched across space and time in which humans and nonhumans are inextricably entangled’ (Braun 2006, p. 644). Braun’s (2006) sense of cities as spatio-temporal networks mirrors Massey’s concept of meeting trajectories.

Movement is central to Massey’s conception of place and space. Place requires a recognition that even geographies change over time as continents rise and fall as well as inch towards or away from other landmasses (Massey 2005, p. 57). The stability and even location of place is brought into question. Massey (2005) argues that this constant movement means that places are invariably always moving on as humans and cultures are always in motion (p. 57). As Sidney Dobrin and Christopher Keller (2012) argue ‘Places are not static, reified things but instead are open-ended, contradictory processes’ (p. 2). So the places we remember are not the same places we return to. In this sense, we are always interacting with places in flux, as multiple entities affect and are affected by these relationships.

This idea of place supports the flexibility of the term nature and ideas of the city as assemblage. Nature is given agency as the trajectories of humans and non-humans are taken into account and brought into relation. This way of thinking about space and place gives both terms equal importance and provides a more embodied sense of these concepts. By refocusing on movement and spatio-temporal experience as opposed to cultural significance both natural processes and cultural practices (including attributing value to place) are included in notions of place and space. This concept allows me to imagine and create fictions in which my characters are embodied participants in natural and cultural processes. In The Season of Shellfish, people are affected by storms, earthquakes and animals while urban processes like water systems, gardens and beaches are managed and controlled. As I venture into place, and interact with cultural and non-human entities as part of the research process, I’m aware that these entities have their own spatio-temporal trajectories and our relationship is dependent on our combined spatio-temporal experiences.
Landscape

One of the concepts that has powerfully shaped western ideas and attitudes towards nature is landscape. In the western cultural tradition, the term landscape was used to describe a style of painting, formed during the Romantic movement that depicted rural and wild places, both real and imagined (Buell 2005, p. 142). Romantic notions of landscape allow a cultural framing of the natural world, both literally and conceptually: literally in that particular scenes of nature were constructed to fit within a frame (as a view from a window or a painting); and conceptually as this allowed for particular cultural understandings of nature to emerge that related to notions of order, symmetry, harmony, and composition (Soper 1995; Adam 1998). The notion of landscape was also connected with the sculpting of physical land which was often seen as an ‘improvement’ of nature and sought to present an Edenic wilderness that was aesthetically pleasing, tidy and suggestive of an original or pure nature as presented in the garden of Eden narrative (Merchant 2003, p. 118). These notions of landscape were entrenched in much nature writing of the period and continue to influence current notions of nature/place (Buell 2005). However, the Romantic Movement was also a response to the exploitation of natural resources and loss of untamed nature in an age of technological innovation (Adam 1998, p. 27). Soper (1995) argues, ‘Untamed nature begins to figure as a positive and redemptive power only at the point where human mastery over its forces is extensive enough to be experienced as itself a source of danger and alienation’ (p. 25).

Similarly, the current environmental crisis can be seen as a driving force for new fields, such as eco-criticism, to emerge. However, many eco-critics and other contemporary academics who research nature/culture relationships see this idea of ‘nature as a redemptive force’ problematic as it suggests that a pristine nature exists and can be looked to to solve cultural problems (Ross 1993, p. 111; Arnold et al. 1999, pp. 1097-1098). Instead eco-criticism seeks to learn from flaws in previous environmental movements with a view to addressing dualisms such as nature/culture, urban/rural and body/mind (Soper 1995). Jonathan Levin suggests that rather than choosing between nature and culture, eco-critics should focus on how the human fits into and impacts this natural/cultural world (Arnold et al. 1999, p. 1098). As a result of eco-criticism’s
renegotiation of nature/culture relationships, contemporary use of the term landscape is no longer limited to the descriptions of wild or aesthetically pleasing areas but can be applied to rural and urban areas, places that aren’t necessarily aesthetically pleasing, and places where views may be obscured as well as panoramic (Buell 2005, p. 142).

On a trip to Hamilton Gardens on New Zealand’s North Island I was able to explore the way different cultures have valued landscapes over time. Walking through these gardens, it became evident that implicit in landscape, is the idea that there is always a person gazing out over the land. Postcard-like shots are arranged so that you feel, as you glimpse the panoramic view of the Waikato River beyond the Indian Char Bagh garden that you have stumbled upon this picturesque view by mistake. The facilitators are intensely aware of these false discoveries, having cultivated them deliberately, not only to represent the value placed on such views in the style of garden but also to engage with the contemporary value of scenes that can be photographed.

*Terroir* is a complex term used to describe the distinctive relationships between cultural and natural elements as they exist within each particular area. Each region or *terroir* is seen as having a unique set of characteristics including its climate, soil composition, topology, cultural and agricultural practices, and people (Gade 2004, p. 849). These unique arrangements are able to produce unique products. Timothy Tomasik (2001) argues that as well as being used in reference to particular wines or cheese, *terroir* is also used to describe a person’s accent or a localised turn of phrase (pp. 523-524).

I introduce this term *terroir* here, not in order to enter debates on its definition or as a means of evaluating its usefulness as a geographical tool. Instead, I borrow this term from its original context in an attempt to unsettle the idea of landscape and re-imagine landscape as an inclusion of natural and cultural entities. While this borrowing may have been seen by de Certeau as a ‘poaching’ (displacing) of the term as Tomasik (2001) argues, there is no appropriate word in the English language that sufficiently parallels its meaning and so the use of the French word is necessary (pp. 521-522). Tomasik also borrows the word in his translation of de Certeau’s work and reasons that ‘poaching’ might also be a means of making something ‘digestible’ for the reader (p. 540).
Terroir allows locales to be seen as embodied by both natural and cultural elements and this makes it a particularly useful concept to discuss ways of writing about place/nature. With terroir, the focus is shifted from the Romantic figure gazing upon the land from the outside to a person who is an active part of the cultural and natural processes that shape landscapes. By drawing on terms such as terroir, the nature writer would be able to recognise and re-imagine the human in relation to place. As they set out to experience and then construct place within a text, it would become possible to imagine and engage with non-human nature in new and embodied ways.1

Landscape is often evoked in writings that discuss nature. John Wylie (2010) and Barry Lopez (1989) explore ways of writing about landscape by addressing the separation between inner self and outer landscape, an issue linked to the disembodied gaze that underlies conceptions of landscape. Wylie attempts to address this separation by using personal narrative, drawing on Jean-Luc Nancy’s theory of estrangement and Irish writer Tim Robinson’s poetry. Wylie critiques the position of phenomenology in discussions of landscape and addresses notions of estrangement and ‘uncanny’ experience as a counterpoint. He uses personal narrative as a point of entry to this debate though admits his lack of knowledge in literary matters.

Down on the beach I didn’t know which way to look, at this or that aspect of the scene, at small things close to hand, or out into the middle distances – out over the sea, for example, whose entire surface was glowing salmon pink and mercury silver, a sight the like of which I had never seen before (Wylie 2010, p. 52).

These reflections of his experiences enter into romantic conceptions of landscape, using only visual descriptions of non-human nature, and positioning Wylie as ‘other’. He discusses this dual struggle (both personal and academic) in forming a phenomenological connection with his surroundings, a ‘being-within-the-world’ (Wylie 2010, p. 46).

Wylie’s sense of ambiguous distance from his surroundings may stem from his own conception of landscape as an entity to be gazed upon by either a ‘domestic’ and ‘rooted dweller’ or ‘nomadic’ traveller. He resolves this struggle between inside and outside, belonging and estrangement by positioning himself between the two. He concludes that writing about landscape is writing as a form of absence even while being

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1 The above section of Encountering Landscape is a modified section from Bayes (2014) Nature and the Embodied Hybrid, AAWP 18th Annual Conference Proceedings, pp. 5-6.
in the midst of landscape. For Wylie, even the dweller who he views as insider, is ‘other’ to the landscape and so the separation between nature and culture remains unresolved and unresolvable here. I use this work as reference point for my own project, showing that in contemporary western thought, the concept of landscape still resonates with eighteenth century conceptions that separate non-human nature and human culture.

What links the work of Wylie and Lopez is their participation in travel and the response this generates towards notions of inside and outside. Ideas of travel are negotiated differently by Wylie and Lopez. Wylie (2010) embarks on a journey to a place near his childhood home, calling himself a tourist and suggesting the landscape to be ‘inaccessible’ to those who do not dwell (pp. 50-51). Lopez (1989), rather than consigning himself to the role of outsider, finds ways of connecting with place through narrative (pp. 61-66). The potential of travel, as conceived by Lopez, is beneficial to my own work, as a way of narrating landscapes through movement, unsettling place, creating space, and allowing an interaction with nature and culture.

By contrast, Buell (2005) critiques the work of deep ecologists and phenomenologists, such as Martin Heidegger, who believe that a concern for non-human nature is better addressed through the practice of ‘dwelling’. With reference to Heidegger, Buell (2005) suggests that to ‘dwell’ is to form an intimate attachment to a single region (pp. 63-71). Stuart Cooke (2011), whose work I discuss below, critiques this concept of Heideggerian ‘dwelling’. Cooke sees ‘dwelling’ as an idea that directs people towards the care of a single place while the complex network of multiple regions that support that place are ignored (p. 237). I extend on these meanings, using the term ‘dwell’ to describe the attachments formed with multiple places by those living or working in them, however momentarily. Buell (2005) also disagrees with the practice of regionalism implied by the notion of dwelling, arguing that writers who travel, such as Lopez, are able to exercise as much concern for non-human nature as those who dwell (p. 69).

Lopez (1989) uses travel and personal narrative in an attempt to re-imagine how self and landscape might connect. He describes two landscapes, the inner landscape of the self and the outer landscape of nature (p. 63). This outer landscape includes both the sight as well as the sensorial experience of the land. He writes about these experiences in terms of the relationships that exist between the human, and the natural/cultural
elements of a particular place. The inner landscape is a projection of the outer landscape, but within a person (Lopez 1989, p. 63). In this way, Lopez believes that the places we live in and travel through become part of us, influencing our understandings of the relationships that exist in the landscape and our attitudes towards nature and culture. This view of landscape evokes ideas of embodied experience that parallel the notion of terroir. I use ideas of travel and the cultivation of place-based experiences to inform my fiction, creating characters that reflect off the natural and cultural landscapes in which they dwell. For example, Acacia’s city is technologically enhanced and so is her body. In turn, the characters become reflections of the places that I experience. I further discuss ideas of the inner and outer worlds of the writer in reference to writers Nigel Krauth and Janet Frame in Chapter three ‘Hybridity and Embodiment’ where these notions help to make sense of the process of writing and the construction of texts.

Lopez (1989) also addresses the conflict between factual accounts in the naturalist tradition and fictional accounts of nature. He dismisses the idea that one form of writing may be a better representation of nature or better at advocating connections between nature and culture. Instead he describes the difference not between fact and fiction but ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ stories (Lopez 1989, p. 65). He explains an authentic story as being able to accurately capture the relationships present within landscape while an inauthentic narrative denies these relationships (Lopez 1989, p. 65). While the idea of authenticity is problematic, Lopez’ considerations open up possibilities for other ways of writing about nature. I continue this discussion in chapter two ‘Writing Urban Nature’ where I reconsider the relationship between fact and fiction through Janet Frame’s notion of the manifold.

Celeste Olalquiaga (2007) links authenticity with the notion of originality in a contemporary culture in which repetition and reproduction are so prolific (p. 46). The authentic original becomes a representation of a unique experience and presence in a particular space and time (Olalquiaga 2007, p. 46). She describes the search for an original nature as a Romantic idea, no longer possible. Turning to post-modern notions of nature she re-thinks the concept of authenticity with the identification of ‘third nature’.

In third nature what we find is a manipulation of nature that has no cultural presence other than itself: here the technological apparatus has reached such
perfection that it remains invisible, it does not form part of the body as in second nature, it becomes no trace of its agency (Olalquiaga 2007, p. 52).

Olalquiaga finds examples of third nature in the farming of fresh water pearls, cloning, and the use of an old pin-hole camera to photograph sea life (pp. 52-53). There is more to say on the matter of authenticity and I discuss it further in chapter four ‘(Mis)representing Women and Nature’ where authenticity becomes an important consideration in literary representations of women and nature. I challenge ideas of authenticity and attempt to find a way of representing women and nature that go beyond these kinds of assumptions.

An Australian Perspective

Early Australian nature writing reflected some of the colonial ideas about Australian nature, often associated with resilience and endurance in difficult circumstances, but also reinforced the concept Terra Nullius, the empty country. Some contemporary Australian nature writing still tends to reflect a sublime and sometimes Romantic idea of nature – that it is awe-inspiring but also dangerous. Despite this, Australian nature writing has the potential to contribute new perspectives to international debates in nature writing and eco-criticism, an area often dominated by American and European voices. Not only can Australian nature writing add to a growing body of work that questions ideas of wilderness and landscape but the Australian context is suited to re-negotiate relationships between people and place. Australian nature doesn’t always allow you to stand back and gaze upon it in the Romantic tradition, especially in places like Queensland where nature can be intrusive. Bats occupy residential neighbourhoods and propagate palm trees, birds attack or steal people’s food, and fast-growing vegetation can encompass neglected structures very quickly. This disturbs the Romantic gaze and forces people into sometimes unwanted yet embodied relationships with nature. Meanwhile, the long-standing connections between the Indigenous community and country disrupt ideas of wild, pristine or untouched nature and interrogate ideas of nature, culture and the place of humans.

Investigating post-colonial concerns in depth is beyond the scope of this exegesis; however, it’s important to address some of the implications for nature writing.
in and about Australia. For Indigenous people, country is never empty but ‘alive with cultural presence’ (Salleh 1997, p. 120). The notion of wilderness, like Terra Nullius, denies the Indigenous presence in country and reinforces the separation of nature from culture. This denial of Indigenous presence has led to violence, dispossession of people from their land and the denial of cultural participation (Kelly 2011; Salleh 1997). The exclusion of Indigenous people from the development of cities and a long held denial of Indigenous land ownership in Australia has also meant an exclusion from cultural knowledge which resides in the land (Giblett 2011). Noeline Kelly (2011) argues that nature writers must at least acknowledge the Indigenous history of countries within their work.

For settler Australians, representing the land from a position of knowledge and intimacy in the way that nature writing requires, is clearly problematised when that same land is the site of Indigenous dispossession and ongoing regimes of violence, social marginalisation and economic disadvantage (Kelly 2011, p. 3).

By acknowledging this history, nature writers can work to disrupt narratives of Terra Nullius and at the same time contribute to understandings of people and place. Nature writing can also serve to deepen settler relationships with land by developing identification with and a sense of belonging to place. ‘In Australia, where the land has for millennia been invoked through poetic address, been known and communed with through visceral and embodied interaction, nature writing is potentially one access point for settlers seeking a similar communicative exchange’ (Kelly 2011, p. 9). In writing this dissertation, my own connection with place was questioned. Writing The Season of Shellfish gave me an opportunity to re-imagine not only the relationships between nature and culture but also my own relationships with Australian places.

Muecke (2003) and Cooke (2011) discuss ideas of place, landscape and travel like Lopez but address these through Australian Aboriginal notions of country and nomadic experience. The significance of landscape has become an important aspect underlying my fiction. By looking to theorists such as Muecke and his work on landscapes and nomadic thinking, I gain insight into how writers may construct and attribute meaning to natural environments.

Muecke (2003) uses the word landscape to describe ‘cultural representations of country’ (p. 282). The term country seems to suggest both the way Aboriginal people see rural land as well as how these rural areas contribute to the national identity of
Australia. In Aboriginal nomadic thinking, Muecke sees the self and landscape as being mutually dependant on each other to form identity (pp. 287-288). The landscape is changed through the actions of the people who live in it. In return, the people must adapt to the conditions of a landscape; the climate, seasons, challenges and benefits. Like terroir, this Indigenous understanding of landscape replaces the human in an ecological community where culture and nature are mutually dependant and identities are shaped by the various nature/culture relationships. By drawing on Aboriginal notions of country, I don’t mean to suggest that settlers can acquire Indigenous connections with place but that settlers might re-negotiate their understanding of Australia and their relationship with place. I use concepts such as country and terroir to re-negotiate ideas of landscape in my fiction, and construct narratives that are sensitive to both cultural and natural changes in urban environments. Muecke (2003) identifies a need to create cultural products that reflect relationships with landscapes by writing circular narratives, involving movement, and encouraging multiple interpretations (p. 291).

Cooke adds to this discussion with his own interpretation of how nomadic thinking can influence his writing practice. He describes a ‘nomadic poetics’ as writing which resists definitive understandings and can respond to fluctuations (Cooke 2011, p. 231). He sees writings that are able to sense, understand and move with the changes occurring around us as echocoherent: reflecting off the surrounding terrain and returning to the reader fainter than in the mind of the writer (Cooke 2011, pp. 241-242). I use three narratives in my fiction as a way to address the idea that there are multiple ways of connecting with non-human nature and human culture.

While Muecke primarily discusses rural areas, Cooke identifies a need for cities to embrace nomadic thinking. An ability to adapt to new landscapes is important in Australian cities where unexpected changes can occur suddenly. Natural disasters such as floods, fires and drought can devastate cities just as much as the rural areas that surround them.

[A] nomadic poetics of Australian places, or a light-footed travel across them, with an ever-present readiness to move on should certain situations demand our departure, can offer some promising alternatives for the ways in which we relate to, write about and manage contested and climactically variable locales (Cooke 2011, p. 231).
For writers, this presents the possibility for new ways of engaging with place that moves beyond Heideggerian dwelling and towards the idea of cities as a network of locales that we travel through.

**Conclusions**

In writing this chapter, I find myself continually directed towards movement in response to the failure of stasis. Movement allows texts to become more inclusive of human culture and non-human nature. My project sets out the goal to write about place and landscapes in a way that is flexible, reflecting relationships as opposed to accurate representations and avoiding stasis. By using fiction to tell stories of nature I have the freedom to move and adapt to my subject matter as I attempt to reflect the relationships of my surroundings. By drawing on the way other writers may be able to do this with their own interpretations of nature writing, particularly Barry Lopez, Stuart Cooke, and David Wong Louie, I attempt to create a narrative that is aware of the complex network of cultural and natural elements influencing my work. Drawing on Cooke’s (2011) concept of *echocoherence* I attempt to write a narrative which reverberates off the surrounding landscape, capturing the relationships between natural and cultural entities present in the place I live but also resonating with the places I’ve travelled to and experienced.
Chapter Two: Writing Urban Nature

The humidity is the first indication that I’m back in Australia. Walking down the airplane steps and out onto the tarmac I breathe the heavy damp air. A haze sits on the horizon blurring land and sky. Water vapour shimmers in the distance. The day is overcast, cool by Australian standards but I remove my jumper. I’ve been living in the UK for six months and have gotten used to the cold. I can’t seem to get enough air into my lungs. My hair seems to curl as I cross the tarmac. The airport is cold and I withdraw from the heat.

After six months away I come back with a clearer sense of what my project will be and why I want to write it. There are scholarly, creative and personal motivations that drive the project. I want to investigate the way narratives represent relationships between the human and non-human in urban places where nature is both nurtured and heavily damaged. This scholarly investigation converses with a creative work as I set out to test my abilities within a long-form narrative. In developing this creative and critical investigation, I question my own connection and experiences with place.

In this project, I use and extend a methodology well established in creative writing research which involves a practice-based approach to academic enquiry and techniques such as reflection, embodied experience, observation, and textual analysis. Through this process, I develop my own methodology hinging on the hybrid roles of researcher and nature writer. In embarking on a creative writing doctorate, the writer must assume multiple roles including writer, scholar and reflective practitioner and present work in the hybrid forms of exegesis and creative product. Nature writing is also a hybrid form, combining multiple disciplines, writing techniques, and understandings. I work between nature and culture, scientific and poetic expression, the real and imagined, scholarly and creative texts to find new ways of understanding nature/culture relationships. This notion of hybridity is explored in depth in chapter three ‘Hybridity and Embodiment’ but underscores the multiple-method approach outlined in this chapter.

I began this project influenced by Tess Brady’s research methodology (1998). According to Brady, a novelist is likely to perform three types of research: reflective
research, research informed by ethnography, and knowledge gathering. Reflective research involves employing empathy, drawing on a writers’ own thoughts, emotions and opinions to portray a character’s situation. Brady’s ethnographic research involved engaging a number of people in conversations and drawing on those conversations to develop her fiction. She also identifies this area as involving ‘visiting locations, gaining new experiences … and the tasting of foods’ (Brady 1998, np). For the third type of research, knowledge gathering, Brady (1998) describes her process as bowerbird-like:

I needed to acquire a working rather than specialist knowledge, not in one area but in a range of ideas and perspectives. I needed to function a little like a bowerbird that picks out the blue things and leaves all the other colours (np).

As Brady suggests, the challenge for the creative researcher is to become knowledgeable enough in an area to be considered an expert without losing the focus of the research for creative practice. While I develop a method more suited to my research, it’s useful to discuss Brady’s methodology here as counter-point to and foundation for my own.

Brady’s categories of writing research are very broad and general, but were instrumental in developing my own research method. I undertake a version of reflective research using Frame’s (1979) concept of the manifold and knowledge gathering with a focus on eco-criticism. I also rely heavily on observing and experiencing place. In order to better understand the relationships that occur between non-human nature and human culture, I venture into urban and natural spaces as a deliberate research strategy. I engage with places sensorially, am directed in ways that I should experience these places by cultural cues and conventions, and observe the ways urban places are used. Consequently, each part of my research process developed through notions of embodiment and hybridity. I will first discuss the context of practice-based research and how my research fits with this methodological approach before discussing the three key techniques I employ in researching this project.

**Practice-Based Research**

Practice-based research (sometimes called practice-led, arts-based, or creative research) is still a relatively contentious methodological approach. These terms arose out of a
need for creative practitioners in the university system to explain how creative practice could result in research insights (Smith and Dean 2009, p. 2). Many of the issues with this approach question what knowledge is, whether creative practice can produce knowledge and what constitutes research (Smith and Dean 2009, p. 5; Brook 2012, p. 4; Barrett 2007, p. 147). For this thesis, practice and research are considered to be two separate yet interrelated processes involved in producing the creative work and exegesis. The practice-based approach describes this hybrid process. As Susan Finley (2008) argues, ‘the term arts-based research cannot be reduced to a prescriptive set of methods for generating and representing empirical materials’ (p. 15). Instead, practice-based or arts-based research can be thought of as an umbrella term for the multiple-methods involved in constructing creative and exegetical work (Finley 2008, p. 15). In this section, I will discuss research as a process (rather than product), examine how knowledge is constructed in this hybrid creative/exegetical work and re-conceptualise the relationship between creative work and exegesis.

Practice and research are symbiotic in this project. I wrote the novel and exegesis simultaneously so that each would mould and inform the other. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean (2009) argue that there is no difference between practice-led research and research-led practice (p. 2). These two processes (research and practice) support a cyclical progression through a creative/scholarly project. Sometimes the direction of my research emerged from writing. For example, the focus on women’s experiences with nature came out of writing early sections of the novel and prompted me to research and write chapter four of the exegesis ‘(Mis)representing Women’. This research then fed back into the novel and shaped the writing. In other instances, reflection, engagement with place or knowledge gathering directed my creative practice. Thinking of creative-practice/research as a cyclical process is useful to conceptualise the relationship between the novel and exegesis. Not only are both processes recognised as contributing to the final products but in a practice-based approach, creative practice and research are equally valuable for the construction of knowledge.

Practice and theory are brought into relation through practice-based research and produce what Haraway (1988) terms situated knowledges. Situated knowledges arise from research that is located and requires the researcher to engage place and context in their work. Barrett (2007) links situated knowledges with creative research and explains
how a practice-based approach makes a significant contribution to established knowledge.

An innovative dimension of this subjective approach to research lies in its capacity to bring into view, particularities of lived experience that reflect alternative realities that are either marginalised or not yet recognised in established theory and practice. A recognition that objectivity can only be partial, calls for re-admitting embodied vision and positioning in research. Embodied vision involves seeing something from somewhere. It links experience, practice and theory to produce situated knowledge, knowledge that operates in relation to established knowledge and thus has the capacity to extend or alter what is known (Barrett 2007, p. 145).

Barrett recognises that creative work often engages with experiences and suggests that through both research and practice, knowledge is situated in every-day life. Situated knowledges also re-evaluate and test established knowledge. This understanding of knowledge creation and evaluation supports a practice-based approach to research, which draws on research, practice and experience to construct knowledge.

The novel and exegesis are two forms which emerge from the same creative/research process. Paul Hetherington (2010) argues that the creative work and exegesis serve as alternative approaches and answers to a research question (p. 3). Rather than serving as justification for the novel, the exegesis might be seen as accompaniment to the creative work:

Indeed, in some circumstances, the exegesis could conceivably rely less on ‘research’ than a work of art it accompanies (probing, exploring and developing a few particular ideas, for example, alongside a more widely encompassing creative work), providing that the two works, viewed jointly (side-by-side or side-ways), demonstrated that a research-based project had been successfully completed. If the modes of knowledge-gathering that inform the work of creative practitioners are recognised as legitimate research then an exegesis does not need to justify the research status of a ‘primary’ creative work and, in turn, a creative work is not required to justify an exegesis’s existence (Hetherington 2010, p. 11).

Hetherington suggests that the creative work and exegesis could be viewed separately as valuable works which together support a research project. If the novel and exegesis are two complementary responses to the creative and research processes (each with intrinsic value) then together they constitute a multi-dimensional investigation.

By drawing on ideas of situated knowledge, seeing the research/creative process as cyclical and re-conceptualising the relationship between exegesis and creative work,
some of the criticisms of the practice-based approach can be overcome. Not only are creative practice and research equally important processes that contribute to both the creative work and exegesis but seen in this way, the exegesis is complimentary to, rather than a justification of the creative work. The knowledge that results from this research process is valuable in extending understanding and re-evaluating existing knowledge.

**In the Manifold: Reflective Research**

I employ reflective research as a technique to construct places which reverberate off real-world localities. Reflective research involves using observations, experiences, and material collected through the knowledge gathering process along with reflections about the self to create places, characters and plots that capture a variety of emotions, characteristics, and relationships (Brady 1998). In my case, this has meant considering the natural/cultural relationships present in cities and how they contribute to the functioning of every-day life, including the identities created. Characters and plots emerge from these places as I reflect on my own emotional responses, sensorial experiences, empathy, memories and perceptions as well as other people’s narratives through observation and reading.

There were several places that shaped the cities in *The Season of Shellfish*. Most important were cities in Australia, New Zealand and Britain, the three countries in which I have lived. I travelled to many cities both in and outside Australia throughout the PhD and used these experiences to reflect on the nature/culture of urban places. As post-colonial countries, Australia and New Zealand are both influenced by ideas of nature imported from Britain and America. As a result, conceptions of aesthetically pleasing nature are derived from British nature. These expectations have left traces across the landscape as British plants were imported and cities shaped through British and American conceptions of the city.

Being away from Australia made me question how to form narratives from these cities and what this means for my relationship to the city and country I have lived in for more than half my life (Gold Coast, Australia). I ask questions of myself as part of my reflection like why do I feel so detached from some places, while I feel so at home in
others? How does a city project a narrative and what effect does this have on people? Simone Fullagar (2002) argues that travelling opens up ‘a liminal space inhabited by multiple desires that can produce different ways of knowing self and other’ (p. 57). Like Frame, I found myself comparing places and re-discovering the identity of Australian place:

In my own country.

She didn’t use that phrase as much now as when she had first arrived. Then it was At Home, Back Home, Where I come from … It’s funny over here, you … whereas we always … you do this, we do that … you … we … here … there (Frame 2009, p. 4).

Soon these comparisons fade but I hold in my mind a clearer picture of what makes up an Australian city, how these cities borrow from others and what lingers from the historical and contemporary connections with other landmasses.

After collecting these experiences, I needed a way to reflect on and engage them in my writing. Brady (1998) provides an example of her reflective research process:

[W]hen looking at the idea of sadness it was important that I not only read the literature available on this emotion, as well as how other writers had utilised it, but I also needed to reflect on my own understanding of it. I needed to ask myself what exactly sadness was, what exactly did it feel like and what caused it. I also needed to know what kind of behaviour it might generate. But to know sadness in this way is not to know it objectively, on the contrary I needed to swim in the experience of sadness, and to know that experience (np).

What Brady highlights here is the aim of reaching a deeper level of understanding by experiencing and examining multiple perspectives so the written text portrays a different understanding of the world. While this was useful for thinking about how a writer might go about writing specific characteristics and emotions, I needed to construct whole worlds that reflected on the nature/culture relationships of real places.

I extend Brady’s research method by drawing on Frame and her notion of the manifold. The manifold is a place in the mind of the writer where memories, facts, texts, and ideas are stored. This repository allows the writer to replicate the world albeit in a different form as they choose an assemblage of narrative pieces and construct new stories:

From time to time characters emerge surrounding an idea or a feeling or a dream, like creatures clinging to a growing vine, or parasites feeding for life
upon their host … one does not really ‘collect’ substance within the manifold; it is the manifold which does the receiving without choice (Frame 1979, p. 108).

Frame suggests that the manifold is a semi-automatic process whereby the collection and retrieval of content is done without consciously deciding to. However, the content is then shaped by the writer in a conscious way: ‘[S]haping the manifold equates to a fundamental negotiation of reality … but, the act of shaping the manifold is also the writer’s process’ (Cronin 2013, p. 189). Despite the writer’s shaping, the original and the replication share a truth about reality.

The manifold allows writers to examine the world from multiple perspectives and provides a method for developing stories that echo cohere as Cooke (2011) suggests. Through manifold reflections, writers might be able to compare and evaluate notions of place, nature and cities and construct narratives that question misconceptions. Resulting texts become hybrids that allow for complex narratives that might resist oppositional dualisms. The focus of reflective research foregrounds the subjective, lived experiences of people and offers new ways of investigating the natural/cultural world. By drawing on Brady and Frame, I create a reflective method suitable for my research. I expand on notions of the manifold in relation to embodiment and hybridity in chapter three ‘Hybridity and Embodiment’, and in relation to authenticity and gender in chapter four ‘(Mis)representing Women’.

**Eco-criticism as Knowledge Gathering**

The ‘bowerbird approach’ is a well-established technique in practice-based research that involves reading across many disciplines with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of a topic of inquiry than any one academic field can offer (Brady 2000, pp. 1-2; Hetherington 2010, p. 7; Brien 2006; Biggs and Karlsson 2011, p. 199). This approach draws on Levi-Strauss’ notion of the researcher as Bricoleur: ‘someone who does not necessarily possess a wide range of specialisations or specialised knowledge, but is able to make do with what is available’ (Webb and Brien in Biggs and Karlsson 2011, p. 199). In my research this has meant reading across disciplines such as literary studies, creative writing studies, eco-criticism, philosophy, urban studies, science, history, cultural studies and sociology to explore concepts of nature, cultural and
literary constructions of cities, and ways of writing about place. However, Jen Webb
and Donna Lee Brien caution that the resulting contribution to knowledge must not be
skewed by its interdisciplinary nature:

While they [practice-based researchers] may cross disciplinary borders in the
process of gathering information for their work, their knowledge generation is
typically confined to the domain of creative practice – to narrative, to poetics …
to the field in which they operate (Biggs and Karlsson 2011, p. 202).

This is an important point to emphasise. While I cross disciplinary borders, I am
primarily a creative-writer/researcher while sometimes operating within and
contributing to the fields of eco-criticism and the ecological humanities.

As a creative writer working with narrative constructions of place and character,
knowledge gathering also involves collecting pictures, music, videos, texts and other
media which can be used alongside personal experience, observation and reflective
research to inform each of the characters, places and plots in the novel. I add to this
material throughout the project. Once collected, I analyse texts for relevance to my
research inquiry as well as to understand the ways writers construct narratives. To do
this, I draw on eco-criticism and social ecology. For example, when reading fiction, I
consider the way writers construct place, what language is used to describe nature and
how narrative elements such as setting are employed.

Eco-criticism is now an established field of literary criticism, having developed
from early incarnations in the 1960s to consolidation in the 1990s and more recent
broadening and re-evaluation of the field (Cohen 2004, p. 11; Buell, Heise and
Thornber 2011). Rather than just providing a focus on analysing literary texts, the field
is also interested in re-evaluating the underlying assumptions of eco-critical inquiry, as
writers look to other disciplinary fields and construct texts which also re-imagine
environment/literature relationships.

In analysing texts, eco-critics employ interdisciplinary methods and findings
including literary analysis, place-based research, comparative studies and theoretical
investigation. Eco-criticism builds on broader literary criticism. ‘All literary critics are
taught to practice close reading – pay attention to language, its genealogy, complexity,
ambiguity, the way it carries intended and unintended meaning, and creates expectations
on the part of the reader’ (Cohen 2004, p. 19). Eco-criticism should also involve
experiencing place/nature as part of the research process as John Elder (1999) argues.
Eco-criticism then is itself a form of nature writing as demonstrated in *The Littoral Zone* where writers examine a combination of literary and scientific texts in situ and analyse them against the embodied experience of the places from which they arose (Cranston and Zeller 2007). Eco-criticism becomes not only a useful way of collecting and analysing material for use in both the creative and exegetical work, but also an example of how research, experience and writing practice might work in combination.

Yet eco-criticism is also interested in evaluating the discipline of ecological criticism, drawing on the social and biological sciences to analyse literary understandings or misunderstandings of place and nature, and critiquing global paradigms of science and culture with an ecological focus (Cohen 2004, p. 23). Michael Cohen (2004) argues that eco-criticism ‘structures discussions of environmental literature, drawing upon science, history, and philosophy, while critiquing these sources’ (p. 11). In bringing together science and the humanities, eco-criticism attempts to remake the connection, reconciling another artificial split produced in the Enlightenment. Glen Love (1999) argues that this is what makes eco-criticism so valuable to understandings of the non-human.

Ecocriticism urges its practitioners into interdisciplinary, into science. Literature involves interrelationships, and ecological awareness enhances and expands our sense of interrelationships to encompass nonhuman as well as human contexts. Ecological thinking about literature requires us to take the nonhuman world as seriously as previous modes of literary criticism have taken the human realm of society and culture (Love 1999, p. 561).

These narratives that work between the sciences and humanities have a greater ability to question and re-conceptualise scientific, cultural and literary assumptions about and relationships with the environment.

Eco-criticism helps to frame the knowledge gathering process in relation to my novel and exegesis. My research embodies eco-critical methods of research through an interdisciplinary study of literature and ecology: the collection of materials, literary analysis of texts, evaluation of language, and place-based investigations. Eco-criticism also encourages me to evaluate my own texts (exegetical and creative work) in relation to the underlying principles of social ecology.
Engagement with Place

Writing unexpectedly becomes a way for me to deepen my connections with place by paying attention to my experiences in cities, collecting ideas about urban nature and constructing my own mythical or imaginary experiences with Australian cities. In a way taking trips to other cities and returning is fieldwork. Fullagar (2002) argues that travel allows people to question the norms of western cultural imaginaries including Western dualisms, and experience diverse ideologies, cultures and gender expectations. Each time I arrive home with new understandings of people, cities and non-humans. Each time there is a sense that I am returning to someplace strange yet familiar. This is also in part a leaving and returning to my writing. With each return I experience the text differently. Like a familiar stranger, there is a new distance between me and the narrative. I see gaps and problems that I couldn’t before and then I re-immerses myself in the narrative as writer, adding details and improving the draft.

Observation and experience are widely used techniques for qualitative research inquiry and can be used to support a practice-based approach to research. This method involves experiencing and observing place and then recording those experiences in writing. I investigate the way people interact with place, express identity and develop relationships with others (human and non-human). Along with these observations, my own embodied experiences with place are documented. While I don’t include these raw documentations in the exegesis, I draw on them to construct The Season of Shellfish and inform the exegesis. Concepts such as situated knowledges and embodied experience encourage the use of observation and experience as part of the research process. Along with this, movement through place is often an important part of creative practice as supported by Nigel Krauth (2008; 2010), Michel de Certeau (1984) and Tony Williams (2013). While I discuss embodiment in more detail in chapter three ‘Embodiment and Hybridity’, in this section, I examine the broader considerations of movement and place-based experience for practice/research.

Two interrelated processes are at work as ecological writers move through place. One involves the careful attention to place, people, bodies, and movement. The other is an inattentive movement through place which allows creative thinking. These two processes work together, as T Williams (2013) observes:
In fact, it is as difficult to imagine a walker who passed through a landscape in a state of total attention as it is to imagine one who notices absolutely nothing: we all attend to a greater or lesser degree, and our attention fluctuates (p. 234).

This co-mingling of internal and external is also a mixing of research (paying attention) and creative processes (day-dreaming). Hetherington (2010) suggests that the body is a conduit between research and creative practice. ‘[H]er body itself is part of her evolving knowledge-store and is one of the conduits through which she develops her relationship to language and marshals it for her creative use’ (Hetherington 2010, p. 7). Hetherington’s embodied poet mimics the idea of situated knowledges – a bringing together of research and creative practice through embodied experience. Writing place depends on this experience yet this embodied conception of the research/writing process differs from Wiley’s (2010) sense of writing place, discussed in chapter one ‘Nature and the City’. Where Wiley saw a separation between self and place (an absence) that couldn’t be reconciled, William’s (2013) conception of the research/creative writing process does not separate the writer from place. Instead, the writer is seen to exist between the internal and external but is always connecting with place through the body (whether consciously or not). This notion of the embodied writer is a helpful way of re-conceptualising the writing/research process.

This practice of moving through place to incite creative thinking is not limited to creative practice but has been documented in research processes in both the sciences and humanities (see Krauth 2010; T Williams 2013, p. 232; Hetherington 2010, p. 7). Michel de Certeau (1984) argued that walking in the city was a critical process that allowed people to read the narratives of the city. Further, de Certeau suggests that narratives are constructed in and somewhat by places as the traveller connects place with memories and stories, discovers ‘relics’ and collects new narratives, all of which constitute a reading of place (p. 107). Michel Serres (2008) takes this further to suggest that bodies tell narratives and that senses beyond the visual might tell them better.

We used to read in our textbooks that our intellect knows nothing that has not first passed through the senses. What we hear, through our tongue, is that there is nothing in sapience that has not first passed through mouth and taste, through sapidity. We travel: our intellect traverses the sciences the way bodies explore continents and oceans. One gets around, the other learns. The intellect is empty if the body has never knocked about, if the nose has never quivered along the spice route. Both must change and become flexible, forget their opinions and expand the spectrum of their tastes as far as the stars (Serres 2008, pp. 162-163).
Serres (2008) critiques the privileging of language over experience, but he also recognises that language is necessary as part of constructing knowledge (p. 112). While engaging in place-based research, ideas of embodiment and the way my own body affects and is in turn affected by place and nature allow me to collect both observational and embodied information about place, relationships between nature and culture, and human experience.

Nigel Krauth (2008) and Tony Williams (2013) both explore the way walking can be used as part of the creative process. Krauth describes the writing process as movement. ‘The writing process can be described in terms of moving about – of mobility, portability and itinerancy – among a series of spaces, from external to internal, that constitute the writer’s creative territory’ (Krauth 2008, p. 1). These creative territories include the physical world that the writer interacts with, the private space of the writing desk, the intimate space of the novelist’s mind, and the imagined space of the text (Krauth 2008, p. 1). Krauth also draws on testimony from writers to examine how walking is a source of creative stimulus. Writers such as Wordsworth and Walter Benjamin walked as a ‘professional activity, with an aim to producing culturally significant writing’ (Krauth 2008, p. 8). T Williams (2013) argues that this walking can contribute to writing in two ways. The first is through ‘a break in consciousness’:

[B]y stopping thinking about writing, I enable new creative thoughts to happen. Walking serves as a productive site of accidental advances. I don’t think continually about writing when I walk; sometimes I think about the gas bill, or even pay attention to the landscape I’m walking through, and a phrase or solution or idea comes to me ‘out of the blue’ (T Williams 2013, p. 231).

T Williams (2013) also sees walking as a time to reflect on writing:

Working on a novel involves a constant imperative to write, to make material progress, but while immersed in individual chapters at the desk it is extremely difficult to think clearly about the project as a whole: stepping away from the work to walk the dogs provides me with the daily discipline of non-writing reflection time, where local problems can be seen in terms of the global structure (p. 233).

These accounts of walking feed back into Krauth’s idea of movement. As the writer walks, they also move between three of the four territories Krauth identifies – the physical world, the intimate space of mind and the imaginary world of the text.

Travelling to and walking through urban places has enabled me to re-conceptualise Australian cities. Through movement, embodiment and engagement with
Australian localities, I question, reflect on and create cities in my fiction that echo to use Cooke’s (2011) term. I find resistance to traditional western notions of cities, nature and place, and ultimately new ways of connecting with Australian localities. In experiencing place, I move between conscious attention to place, inattentive reflection on writing and imagining/day-dreaming. This engagement with place supports a re-conceptualisation of writing through the intertwined processes of research and creative practice essential to a practice-based approach.

**Conclusions: Manifold Methods**

The multiple methods involved in undertaking reflective research, knowledge gathering and engagement with place work together as part of a practice-based approach. In gathering knowledge through eco-critical methods, the writer is encouraged to engage in place-based research. This engagement with place in turn encourages the writer to reflect on the writing process. Reflective research sees the writer bring together this place-based and knowledge gathering in order to engage in the process of constructing knowledge. Practice-based research involves a subjective approach to inquiry that extends knowledge by replacing objective knowledges back into the world. In engaging these methods, I construct a methodology that allows me to question relationships between human and non-human and complicate ideas of place, nature and the urban.

Underlying these methods are the notions of hybridity and embodiment. Knowledge gathering involves working with multiple disciplines, eco-criticism requires a multi-method investigation, place-based engagement entails moving between territories, and reflective research requires considering multiple perspectives. The resulting texts are rendered hybrid by this process. The subjective focus of practice-based research encourages an embodied investigation of knowledge. Eco-critical practice and place-based engagement allow me to examine bodily experience. As situated knowledges suggest, bodily experience becomes an important site for research and creative processes.
Chapter Three: Hybridity and Embodiment – A Research Method

Growing up in New Zealand has undoubtedly influenced my writing. In thinking about relationships between non-human nature, culture and humans in cities, I can’t ignore the experiences I’ve had in cities that have shaped my understandings of these relationships. I had an intimate connection with Auckland, Rotorua and Tikuiti through myths, stories, memories and experiences of them. These also influenced my understanding of Australian places like the Gold Coast and Brisbane as my first experiences involved comparing these very different land masses. My relationships with Australian places were never as rich as my relationship with place had been in New Zealand. But the New Zealand I grew up with is not the same New Zealand that I encountered as a recent traveller. As Massey (2005) suggests, New Zealand has changed as I have changed. Not only did this make me reconsider place as a spatio-temporal phenomenon but also my own geographical identity as Lopez (1989) argues. I have internalised aspects of the New Zealand experienced as a child and aspects of Australia experienced as an adult. I am caught between these places and others, a hybrid of cultural/natural experiences. This became another reason to write a novel, a way of coming to a greater understanding and connection with the place that I live in.

This chapter draws together some of the methodological and theoretical considerations of this project through the concepts of hybridity and embodiment. Hybridity is a useful concept as it allows for new ways of understanding the human/self in relation to place as well as the nature writing genre. By employing this concept in the research process, I investigate the combination of natural and cultural entities that make up our cities and how we come into relationship with them. Embodiment is a useful notion for reconciling research and practice through experience. Notions of embodiment and hybridity allow me to reflect on my research and creative practice, to question assumptions and construct natural/cultural relationships in cities.

The genre of nature writing sets up an assumption of the writer’s physical participation with the world. It is an expectation that the contemporary nature writer will engage and form physical connections with the natural and cultural entities of a place, prior to constructing a narrative. These bodily experiences are expressed through the act of writing to explore the value of non-human nature and the complexity of human
relationships with nature/culture. However, a multi-layering of nature/culture occurs in the production of nature writing. The nature writer enters into a manifold (rather than linear) process of engagement, whereby their physical experiences are also shaped by preconceptions of nature – previous engagements with places, cultural assumptions, texts and memories (Rigby 2006, p. 1). The text then adds to readers’ understandings of nature. Therefore, the text not only acts as expression of bodily and conceptual engagement with the world but also presents the reader with a means of experiencing and connecting with place. As the world becomes more globalised and the individual’s impact on the environment becomes less direct or obvious to them, there arises a need for nature writers to reframe these nature/culture relationships in an attempt to understand the human and non-human impact on place, and imagine new and less damaging ways of living with nature. This highlights the need for nature writers to find ways of creating texts that encourage readers to form positive connections with the natural/cultural entities of places.

I draw on both fiction and non-fiction in this chapter and propose ‘the embodied hybrid’ methodology for both; however, as my own practice is in fiction, much of this chapter will focus on fiction. What is important to contemporary nature writers, who seek to create more appropriate ways of writing about nature (whether through fiction or non-fiction), is the experience involved in connecting with non-human nature and human culture (Cranston and Zeller 2007). Levin points out that:

Experience is always situated, in ways that no amount of theoretical reflection can transcend, and no matter how valuable that reflection may be, we should recognize the advantages (evolutionary and cultural) of living as experientially situated beings. Our bodies, our language, our sociocultural environment all shape our distinctive styles of being in the world…. The choice is not between nature and culture, as if to locate redemption either in a fuller recovery of nature from culture or in a more complete and rational application of culture to nature, but rather among different styles of dwelling in the world…. Ecocritics should aim to understand how and with what effects we are implicated, as embodied individuals and as cultural agents, in natural environments (Arnold et al. 1999, p. 1098).

This suggests the way experiences are both embodied and cerebral, whether recognised by the writer or not. By re-imagining the way the human relates to place and recognising that embodiment is part of experience, the nature writer can begin to construct narratives that reflect these ways of being in the world – ways that allow for
connections between non-human nature and human culture without encouraging the
dominant positioning of culture.

I discuss the notions of hybridity and embodiment in this chapter with an eco-
critical focus, in order to explore how the nature writer might use these concepts as
methodological tools. The aim is for the nature writer to create a text that resists notions
of Cartesian dualism – particularly with regards to the domination and control of non-
human nature – whilst also recognising that as we write about nature we are also
responsible for constructing nature. I explore the ways non-human nature has been
shaped in western thought – particularly through science and Romanticism – and
attempt to re-imagine the relationships between non-human nature and culture to allow
for more positive constructions of these relationships in texts. The concepts of hybridity
and embodiment allow writers to address the nature/culture dichotomy by writing from
a position within both. By re-imagining the human as a hybrid and embodied being, the
nature writer is able to avoid speaking about nature from the position of Culture as a
transcendental higher authority and therefore able to create narratives that challenge the
expected boundaries between non-human nature and culture.

While Frame may not traditionally be seen as a nature writer, when approached
from an eco-critical perspective, her work adds something important to this discussion
of nature/culture relationships. One way that Frame challenges expected boundaries in
her novel Living in the Maniototo is by exploring the idiom ‘going to seed’. She
considers the ways this concept relates to humans and non-humans, and reveals
connections between the two meanings:

Yes, I am going to seed. I know it.
After being eaten for so many years,
Cut, recut, forced to branch this way and that,
I have grown tall, I have put forth small white flowers,
I look over fences into people’s faces.
Bees glance at me, the wind has taken me in hand.
My taste is too strong and sour, my growth is rank.
People frown to see me put down yet one more root (Frame 1979, p. 77).

This poem blurs the conceptual boundary between the human going to seed and a plant
that is going to seed. For the narrator this is an emotional response to losing her
husband, for the plant a biological response to the season yet both are seen as
undesirable. This kind of conceptual play with boundaries creates a space in the novel
that allows for hybridities, multiplicities and human embodiment which address problematic dualities by re-imagining realities and relationships.

The act of nature writing is already hybrid, a combination of ‘scientific and poetic methods, intermingling facts with metaphors and feelings’ (Ryan 2011, p. 48). John Ryan (2011) suggests that nature writing situates the cultural activities of humans biogeographically, scientifically, ethnographically, in literature, through the personal, and within political or socially satirical conditions (p. 48). By becoming aware of these influences the nature writer can explore what it means to be human as a hybrid natural/cultural entity. I argue that acknowledging the human as hybrid can allow the nature writer to modify oppositional dualisms by re-imagining the relationships between such notions as nature and culture, mind and body, and real and constructed, to create alternative possibilities.

By re-imagining the human as hybrid, I do not wish to say that I think the nature writer can become the voice of non-human nature. I recognise that in doing so the nature writer would in fact be anthropomorphising the non-human (Ross 1993; Soper 2001). In acknowledging the issues of anthropomorphism, I must also question the way this concept denies the ability for humans to relate to the non-human other. As Cooke (2011) argues, anthropomorphism has justified the exclusion of non-human nature and further reinforced a separation between nature and culture. Instead Carl Safina (2015) argues that understanding the non-human can come through interaction and engagement with the other. Rather than becoming the voice for the other, narrative can explore this close relationship. I expand on how writers may represent nature in fiction in chapter four ‘(Mis)representing Women’.

By using the concept of hybridity and how it relates to embodiment, the nature writer can examine their own experiences with non-human nature from a subjective and participatory perspective. In this way, hybridity and embodiment allow the nature writer to explore what it means to be human (a cultural/natural entity) and the complex relationships people have with place. I will now examine the potential of these concepts with reference to Krauth’s work on writing from the body as well as contemporary renegotiations of Haraway’s cyborg feminism, and Frame’s novel *Living in the Maniototo*. 

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**Embodied Writing**

The nature writer is expected to engage with place as part of the writing process. Kate Rigby (2006) argues:

However the craft of nature writing might be conceived, there is a sense in which the nature writer is necessarily called to be a follower. Such writing, that is to say, necessarily follows nature: temporally, in that the natural world to which it refers is presumed to pre-exist the written text; normatively, in that this pre-existing natural world is implicitly valued more highly than the text which celebrates it; and mimetically, in that the text is expected to re-present this pre-existing and highly regarded natural world in some guise (p. 1).

At first, this seems to suggest a linear process – whereby the writer engages in experiences with non-human nature that ultimately lead to the practice of writing – however, nature writing (as Rigby concedes) is actually a manifold process, whereby the writer’s experience with place is in part already shaped by previous experiences, memory, texts they’ve engaged with, cultural assumptions as well as suggestions and signs presented to them upon entering a place (Rigby 2006, p. 11; Ryan 2011, pp. 44-48). Rigby (2006) argues:

Rather than thinking of this primarily as a matter of mimesis, however, I suggest that such writing be considered, more broadly, as embodying a literary practice of response: as such, we can truly say that writing comes second, following on from the other’s call, while becoming in turn the locus of a new call, to and upon the reader. Called forth by particular more-than-human others, places and histories, our words are nonetheless cast into, and framed by, a human communicative context, necessarily responding also to the words of others of our own kind, whether written or spoken (pp. 10-11).

Therefore, the text acts as expression of engagement with the world, but I argue also provides readers with a means of experiencing nature. Not only does the nature writer form preconceptions of nature through memory, culture and literature but the ways these notions shape the text also has an effect on readers’ constructions of nature.

As discussed in chapter one ‘Nature and the City’, some of these preconceptions of nature are brought about through notions such as landscape and wilderness. By drawing on terms such as *terroir* and country, the nature writer might be able to recognise and re-imagine the human in relation to place. As writers set out to experience and then construct place within a text, it becomes possible to imagine and engage with non-human nature in new and embodied ways.
Ryan (2011) identifies the ways that nature writers in Australia, heavily influenced by the works of Thoreau, use embodiment in the process of writing. In one collection of essays, *Making Sense of Place*, writers describe the process of connecting with place through touch (Celmar Pocock), sound—the acoustic identities of place (Ros Bandt), action—gardening (Jane Mulcock), and smell (Jane Mulcock) (Ryan 2011, p. 47; Vanclay, Higgins & Blackshaw 2008). In some cases, embodiment is simply a matter of paying attention to the senses when in place, in others embodiment means deliberately seeking experiences that allow physical connection with nature, for example gardening. The influence of Thoreau’s work can be seen in the popularity of using the creative non-fiction essay for nature writing, which for some writers is seen as the standard, if not the only, form of nature writing (Armbruster and Wallace 2001, p. 91).

Thoreau’s work addressed the oppositional dualities set up in the objective scientific tradition:

Thoreau’s writings are embodied expressions in a place that is experienced through sense multiplicity. Embodiment points to the ways in which ‘human and extrahuman realities are apprehended through the body’ and often responds to the objective values of the empirical sciences (Ryan 2011, p. 45).

Thoreau addressed some of the issues with dichotomies in his work, presenting himself and others as part of the environment. His works are written in subjective first person to acknowledge ‘the narrowness of my experience’ rather than the third person of the objective scientific tradition (Thoreau 1854, p. 8). As discussed in the introduction, science has long dominated the discourse of nature, relying on notions of objectivity and rationality in order to appear as the authority on knowing and understanding nature (Katz and Kirby 1991). Just as Romanticism allowed for a particular cultural framing of the non-human, so too have western scientific models of inquiry shaped western notions of non-human nature. So, by using a more subjective and embodied approach, nature writers might be able to modify dichotomous notions of nature as something separate to and less than culture. However, Thoreau’s works were largely informed by the Romantic Movement since they figure nature as a spiritual repository and link wild and rural nature with the notion of *a simpler life* or a retreat from the stress and excess of life in urban areas (Soper 1995; Merchant 2003; Buell 1995).
What I have been preparing to say, is that in wildness is the preservation of the world. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind (Thoreau 1862, p. 14).

While Thoreau saw cities and even himself as containing a ‘wildness’ he focused on largely unbuilt places in his writing and saw in these places, a more concentrated version of nature:

My spirits infallibly rise in proportion to the outward dreariness. Give me the Ocean, the desert, or the wilderness… When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place — a sanctum sanctorum. There is the strength — the marrow of Nature. The wild wood covers the virgin mould, — and the same soil is good for men and for trees (Thoreau 1862, p. 28).

In the nineteenth century, when Thoreau was writing, the notion of a real or pure Nature was seen as something to be found away from and often in opposition to culture, which set up a notion that the non-human nature present in wild and rural areas was to be valued more than urban nature (Soper 1995; Ross 1993; Adam 1998). A contemporary example of this Romanticist value framework can be seen in the argument against Tasmania’s heritage listed forest. In 2014, the Tasmanian and Australian federal governments sought to delist a portion of the UNESCO world heritage area due to degradation from logging in the recent past (Fairman and Keenan 2014). In order to avoid this separation and devaluing of nature, contemporary nature writers must be able to write about non-human nature along with culture, in urban as well as wild areas to disturb these assumptions, and imagine new understandings of and possibilities for nature/culture relationships. The concept of hybridity, which I discuss below, is useful in addressing this.

Similarly, there is a notion within the fiction writing tradition that posits that the writing process occurs in the mind, and that imagination is wholly a process of cerebral construction (Krauth 2010). Krauth (2008) argues, however, that the fiction writing process is also embodied. He documents the ways that writers venture out into places, engage with the world as embodied beings and then look to their bodies to help produce the text.

Writers are hunters and gatherers in the real world; what they garner they store in their heads. Continually they pass between the real world and their stored world. This process of passing between – this weaving/merging of the inner and
outer environments – creates fiction. The fiction writer exists in an ecosystem of mind, body and world (Krauth 2008, p. 2).

This is of relevance to the nature writer (whether a writer of fiction or non-fiction) who must navigate between preconceptions of non-human nature and their physical experiences with place. Being aware of this movement between the inner and outer environments can help nature writers to evaluate their writing practices in an effort to construct more positive and embodied textual experiences with non-human nature.

Krauth (2010) draws on notions of phenomenology as well as fiction writers’ accounts of their creative practices in order to describe the way the writing process is embodied.

There is a sense that the writing process is located, partly or wholly, somewhere in the body beyond the brain. But exactly where is not easily identified. In the best circumstances (those of Welty and James), you ask of your body and you receive. With Greer and Bukowski, you continue to strain and the body ultimately provides. With Kerouac and West, you wait for the convulsion to happen, or find a clever way to prompt it (Krauth 2010, p. 4).

Here, Krauth suggests that the writing process is not just a means of imagining or constructing but that there is also a physical aspect to the writing that goes beyond fingers on the keyboard. For example, in some of these anecdotes, writing is seen to come about as the result of straining the body, prompting memories stored in muscles, hands or the nervous system, and then capturing these bodily processes in writing (Krauth 2010, pp. 3-6).

Understanding the way the body forms part of the process of constructing narratives means that the body must be allowed to take in information. Ryan (2011) argues that ‘[t]hrough the multiplicity of the senses engaged actively on the land, place is made palpable’ (p. 47). By becoming actively aware of how the body influences the writing process the nature writer can enter places and engage with non-human nature in embodied ways and ultimately write texts that allow more positive constructions of nature/culture relationships. The notion of terroir coupled with Krauth’s idea of the embodied writer can offer the nature writer a more subjective and participatory method for engaging with non-human nature. However, embodiment alone cannot be relied upon for the construction of narratives that resist oppositional dualisms. It is possible to experience nature in embodied ways and still see nature as separate from and less than
culture. As such I suggest that nature writers might also look to the notion of hybridity in this endeavour.

**Hybridity**

I use hybridity here, not as a tool of cultural analysis but to explore the boundary between human and non-human. I concentrate on cities, as places where non-human nature and culture interact, connect and come into conflict in everyday life. As Eric Swyngedouw (1996) describes, the contemporary city is shaped by various cultural and natural entities. ‘The city and the urban are a network of interwoven processes that are both human and natural, real and fictional, mechanical and organic’ (p. 66). In this way the city can be seen as a hybrid of natural-cultural entities and as ‘cyborg’ in reference to Haraway’s hybrid (Haraway 1991; Gandy 2005; Swyngedouw 1996).

While Haraway (1991) focused on the individual as cyborg – a mechanical and organic creature of both lived-reality and fiction, comprising both a mind and a body (p. 212) – in some contemporary re-workings of the cyborg, the city becomes the focus. Matthew Gandy (2005) argues that the physical infrastructure of the city allows the human body to connect to a vast network of urban technology.

> [E]arlier incarnations of the cyborg as an isolated yet technologically enhanced body have proliferated into a vast assemblage of bodily and machinic entanglements which interconnect with the contemporary city in a multitude of different ways (Gandy 2005, p. 40).

The human thus becomes one element in a vast network of hybrid structures and beings. I use this notion of the city as cyborg in Acacia’s narrative, focusing on the way technology organises and improves urban experience but also intrudes into our lives in ways we may not like. Acacia benefits from the use of technology to repair her body after a car accident but is also impacted by the intrusive CCTV and public shaming via video screens in the city centre. Natural phenomena also impact Acacia’s experience of the city, providing enjoyment but also damage to city structures.

Focusing on the city as opposed to the individual makes the cyborg analogy useful for exploring the relationships between nature and culture in urban areas. By paying attention to these interconnections between human and non-human, the nature
writer can address the separation and devaluing of non-human nature in the construction of their texts, creating narratives that give both natural and cultural entities agency.

Frame is a novelist whose work evokes ideas of hybridity and multiplicity in resistance to oppositional dualisms. As with Krauth, Frame’s work suggests that both the inner and outer worlds of the writer must be navigated as part of the writing process. Simone Oettli (2003) argues that:

She [Frame] thus imposes her internal reality upon external reality and moves the boundary of the ‘real’ to such an extent that the ‘real’ ceases to exist even as she is moving through it. ‘I knew,’ Janet confesses, ‘that whatever the outward phenomenon of light, city, and sea, the real mirror lay within me as the city of the imagination’ (p. 76).

Rather than imposing her reality on the external or striking the ‘real’ from existence as Oettli suggests, in my view, Frame is describing the experience of place, a combination of the real and the constructed, the inner and the outer. Instead of setting up a dichotomy of real/constructed, I propose that Frame represents place as hybrid.

Gina Mercer (1994) argues that Frame’s fiction, allows for possibilities rather than restricting or excluding them.

We’ve been trained to believe that there is Truth and Not Truth, two mutually exclusive options within which all the possibilities of ‘reality’ are to be confined. Such a system leaves no space for a third or fourth possibility – and this is what Frame challenges in Living in the Maniototo, as elsewhere in her fiction (Mercer 1994, p. 213).

In her novel Living in the Maniototo, Frame creates a space that allows for these kinds of hybridised relationships. To achieve this, she uses the abstract concepts of the right-angled triangle and the manifold. Mercer (1994) theorises that the third side of the triangle (the side that the writer places herself on, between dichotomies) is not fixed, but can change, move and adapt, leading to multiple possibilities of hybrid connections. Just as Haraway’s cyborg blurs the boundary between real and constructed, the human and non-human and mind and body; Frame plays with these boundaries in Living in the Maniototo, asking the reader to question notions of the real, the human and the self.

One way that Frame does this is through the Martin Twins, two girls with lycanthropy whose behaviour is more canine than human, allowing the boundaries between human and animal, fiction and reality to be questioned:
I can’t ever forget the thirteen year old twins I knew in hospital, the beautiful black-haired, blue-eyed children dressed in their dark blue and white stripped hospital dresses made of the stiff material used for mattress covers; their bare feet swollen and blue, their arms and the upper part of their body bound in a canvas straitjacket; standing together on the stairs leading from the dayroom to the small exercise yard; and over the years I still hear in my mind the sound of their barking, yelping, whimpering as they made their bizarre canine gestures to each other and in their adolescent awakenings tried to mate each other, like dogs. And at night when the moon was full they would howl, above the turmoil of the screams and shouts and cries of the night (Frame 1979, pp. 122-132).

The confusion between human and non-human here reminds us that transgressing boundaries can also be unsettling. Soper (2001) warns that ‘our very empathy with the plight of the other being requires us to respect their difference from us and the ways this may affect our capacity to ‘speak’ on their behalf” (p. 105). The impossibility of understanding the experience of being such a hybrid of wolf/child is exactly the reason for the narrator’s fascination. In Living in that Maniototo, Frame deliberately leaves out a chapter 22. Marc Delrez (2002) argues that this missing chapter stands in for missing narratives; those that Frame feels unable to tell, including indigenous accounts, evocations of non-human experience, and depictions of the internal worlds of the mentally ill. Lycanthropy is alluded to as the subject of fiction and yet the narrator affirms the reality of the condition, describing her own experience with a pair of twins and leaving the reader to question the ‘truth’ of the matter (Mercer 1994; Frame 1979, p. 122).

Living in the Maniototo is also a book that explores the creative writing process. The boundary between truth and fiction blurs as the narrator takes us through the process of constructing a narrative:

A writer, like a solitary carpenter bee, will hoard scraps from the manifold and then proceed to gnaw obsessively, constructing a long gallery, nesting her very existence within her food. The eater vanishes. The characters in the long gallery emerge. I speak however, of fiction (Frame 1979, p. 134).

The manifold is a repository of facts, memories, texts and ideas, a combination of the inner and outer worlds of the writer. Here Frame suggests that writing lies somewhere between fact and fiction, blurring the boundaries and allowing for third and fourth possibilities of ‘truth’ to emerge (Mercer 1994). The use of the carpenter bee here as metaphor for the writing process once again conceives a connection between natural and
cultural processes whilst also re-imagining the construction of a narrative as a physical and embodied practice.

In *Living in the Maniototo*, places where nature has been heavily controlled, destroyed or lost (Baltimore and Blenheim in the book) are also places where poets die or cannot write (Frame 1979, pp. 30-31, 55). Meanwhile the plains of the Maniototo, an isolated wilderness, is a refuge for writers – the place where the extraordinary writer Peter Wallstead lived and wrote (Frame 1979, p. 55). Though the narrator, Mavis, asks who would want to live in the Maniototo in such isolation from society (Frame 1979, p. 55). The Berkeley Hills on the other hand, allow nature and culture to live symbiotically and this is where the narrator is finally able to write. Frame (1979) shows the potential of the city to become a place where non-human nature might thrive.

In contrast to the shaven lawns of Blenheim with no grass blade out of place, and the careful mown grass verges, Berkeley was passing through a ‘wilderness’ phase where it was fashionable to let meadow grass and herbs grow as they pleased, and the wild creatures come and go in the gardens and on the hillside roads, with the deer and the squirrels having right-of-way on the road (Frame 1979, p. 125).

By proposing that this ‘wilderness’ phase is simply the latest fashion, Frame implies that the Berkeley Hills have not always been so friendly towards nature and that it may revert to destruction or control once again in the future. However, for the moment this nature/culture symbiosis seems to be a necessary ingredient for Mavis to write. Returning to the notion of ‘going to seed’ plants are finally allowed to ‘grow as they please’ here and Mavis finds she can also ‘go to seed’ unimpeded by social conventions as she prepares to deal with yet another death (Frame 1979). This suggests a relationship between the control of nature and the control of the human by culture. The positive relationships between nature and culture in the Berkeley Hills create a beneficial hybrid space for the writer to inhabit, where creativity thrives and non-dualistic texts may be imagined. Frame’s fiction exemplifies how a writer might avoid dichotomies by writing from a position that includes both non-human nature (the sensuous navigation of external world) and culture (the internal world of the writer), positioning the human amongst these elements of place as an embodied hybrid.

By re-imagining the human as embodied and hybrid, the nature writer can address, through the writing process, issues associated with oppositional dualisms and attempt to write a text that opens up new possibilities for living with nature in urban
areas. In this way embodiment and hybridity can be seen as methodological tools, a systematic process of imagining, practicing and constructing embodied and hybrid experiences with non-human nature. By looking to the work of fiction writers such as Krauth and Frame and theorists such as Gandy we can begin to re-imagine the human as well as the writing process in terms of embodiment and hybridity. These notions open up possibilities for narratives that allow writers to speak as natural/cultural beings, to understand the real and constructed character of texts, and create writing practices that are both cerebral and embodied. As Rigby (2006) argues, the resulting text becomes a call to the reader (p. 10). A narrative resulting from this methodology asks readers to re-imagine their positions in relation to the culture and non-human nature of the places they inhabit.
Chapter Four: (Mis)representing Women and Nature

In this chapter, I consider the intersections of gender and environment in literature. The aim of this chapter is to discern whether a work of fiction can act to transcend dichotomies and the mutual devaluing of women and nature. Key to this goal is reconsidering the way women and non-human nature are represented in fiction. As discussed in the introduction, this became an important consideration in the development of *The Season of Shellfish*. In constructing these stories, I wanted to show the complex, multiple and varied ways women engage with place and the non-human.

Many eco-critics have taken up debates from ecofeminism to bring gender into the discussion of literature and the environment (Alaimo 2000; Buell, Heise and Thornber 2011; Gaard 2010). Ecofeminism is a contentious field which has been heavily criticised but is significant to discussions of gender and the environment. I explore the problems and possibilities of ecofeminism for literature and creative writing through eco-criticism. The inter-disciplinary nature of eco-criticism and its ability to critique texts from many fields makes it a useful sphere in which to revive ecofeminist debate. To explore imaginative representations of women and nature in fiction, I examine Janet Frame’s *Living in the Maniototo* and Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing*. I pay particular attention to the ways these writers have used fiction to re-imagine relationships between women and non-human nature. Both texts tell the story of a female protagonist and her relationship with rural and urban places. Each text plays with dichotomies and explores how these dichotomies affect place, gender and nature/culture. By drawing on these books as well as eco-criticism and ecofeminism, I discuss how writers might imagine new ways of living with nature and culture in the city.

**Sex, Gender and Ecology**

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1980s to acknowledge and examine the link between the domination of women and the destruction of nature in a patriarchal society (Buell, Heise and Thornber 2011; Gaard 2011). Ecofeminism drew attention to the ways that women around the world were disproportionately affected by environmental issues with many
women further marginalised by their proximity to environmental hazards, climatic changes, and difficult environmental conditions (Buell, Heise and Thornber 2011). Early ecofeminism explored issues of sustainability, vegetarianism, pollution, embodiment, and social/environmental justice (Mack-Canty 2004). However, criticism afflicted ecofeminist debate in the 1990’s and caused feminists and related scholars to distance themselves from this field (Gaard 2011, pp. 31-32; Booth 2010, p. 332). Ecofeminism was charged with being essentialist, romanticising women and nature, and further entrenching the female/nature and male/culture dichotomies (Gaard 2011, p. 32; Buell, Heise and Thornber 2011, pp. 424-426; Plumwood 1993; Booth 2010). Despite this, early ecofeminist thought established an important debate about sex, gender and the environment and continues to influence studies of feminist geography, place studies and the environmental humanities (Gaard 2011; Buell, Heise and Thornber 2011, pp. 424-426). More recent studies of ecofeminism encourage a return to the field (Gaard 2011; Mack-Canty 2004). By addressing some of the criticisms and responding to gaps in feminism and ecology as well as exploring intersections with class exploitation, racism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism, ecofeminism is re-emerging as a critical area of discussion (Buell, Heise and Thornber, 2011).

As part of the essentialist debate, early ecofeminism was accused of erasing difference, homogenising female experience and conflating sex and gender (Gaard 2011, pp. 35-36). According to Plumwood (1993) early ecofeminist work re-evaluated conceptions of women, nature and femininity; examined the western historical construction of identities including feminine, masculine and human; and re-evaluated the connection between human, gender and nature (pp. 8-9). Gaard (2011) argues that early ecofeminists such as Victoria Davion, Ariel Salleh and Bina Agarwal drew attention to the way women’s experiences of oppression differ across class, culture, and ethnicity (p. 35). The emergence of queer ecology within ecofeminism further addressed issues of sex and sexuality in the field (Buell, Heise and Thornber 2011, p. 425). The importance of these intersections was an acknowledgement that some women also perpetuate the oppression of women and natural environments while other women are disproportionately affected by environmental and gender-based factors (Gaard 2011, p. 36; Salleh 1997; Plumwood 1993, p. 8; Booth 2010, p. 332).

Gender and sex are complex and entangled concepts. John Hood Williams (1996) argues that sex and gender are both discursive concepts that attempt to describe
biological processes and socially constructed characteristics associated with sexual reproduction and social identity. Discussions about sex often involve the biological functions of the body, not just male and female but also intersex and trans-sexual bodies and may intersect with discussions of sexuality (JH Williams 1996; Gaard 2011). Gender is primarily concerned with social constructions of identities such as male, female, or androgynous as well as the roles and expectations associated with biology, physiology and gender identity (JH Williams 1996; Gaard 2011). In the following textual analysis and discussion, I focus primarily on gender, particularly female gender roles and expectations, although these intersect with sex through notions of gendered bodies, reproductive processes and cultural understandings of physiology.

I have previously discussed the issue of considering nature as a deity in chapter one ‘Nature and the City’ but it is worth re-emphasising the way raising nature to a higher moral authority can conflate the human and non-human in such a way that damaging human actions can be seen as ‘natural’ and justifiable (Ross 1993). With regards to women and nature this has led some to reinforce culturally constructed ideas of gender as though they were ‘natural’ (Gaard 2011). Yet this doesn’t mean spirituality should be abandoned from gender/nature discussion altogether. To do so would further marginalise groups such as indigenous communities and deny their spiritual connection with their land (Salleh 1997). In some cases, as Merchant (1980) shows, mother earth mythology has even led to the restriction of environmental destruction. The key issues are with an essentialist version of ‘Mother Earth’ spirituality which genders the land, romanticises the relationship between women and nature, and reinforces the female/nature male/culture dichotomies (Gaard 2011). Plumwood (1993) explains this perception of ecofeminism:

It seemed to combine a romantic conception of both women and nature, the idea that women have special powers and capacities of nurturance, empathy and ‘closeness to nature’, which are unsharable by men and which justify their special treatment, which of course nearly always turns out to be inferior treatment (p. 8).

However, she goes on to say that while some ecofeminist scholars had an element of this romantic conception of nature and women in their work, the majority of ecofeminists were firmly arguing against essentialism (Plumwood 1993).
Some scholars in feminism responded to accusations of essentialism by avoiding nature, just as some ecological humanities scholars seemed to avoid feminism, but this separation of the issues risks reinforcing the nature/culture split (Gaard 2011; Gaard 2010). Buell, Heise and Thornber (2011) argue that we must be able to discuss ecology and feminism together by re-addressing the premise of ecofeminism.

Many believe the link between the subordination of women and the destruction of ecosystems stems not from an essentialist identification of women with the nonhuman but instead from women’s social position, perceiving a material connection between the externalization and exploitation of women and the abuse of natural resources (Buell, Heise and Thornber 2011, p. 425).

Re-thinking ecofeminism in this way allows a shift towards a more complex understanding of the relationship between sex, gender and ecology. One way that ecofeminists have sought to get beyond issues of essentialism without losing the connection between nature and culture has been to ask what it means to be human. As Plumwood (1993) says:

Not all women are empathetic, nurturant and co-operative. And while many of these virtues have been real, they have been restricted to a small circle of close others. Women do not necessarily treat other women as sisters or the earth as a mother; women are capable of conflict, of domination and even, in the right circumstances, of violence … And of course women have also played a major role, largely unacknowledged, in a male-led and male-dominated environmental movement (p. 9).

This acknowledges the complex ways that both women and men have contributed to the destruction of the environment but also rallied for its protection, leading to a more complicated picture of human relations with non-human nature. This is not to deny the differences between sexes but to question the associated gender constructions and what this means for relationships between people and our environments.

Re-presenting Women and Nature

Representation was a key consideration in writing this exegesis and novel. In western culture, non-human nature is often described as feminine and women are often described through non-human nature (Booth 2010). As Soper (2000) argues, ‘If women have been devalued and denied cultural participation through their naturalization, the downgrading of nature has equally been perpetuated through its representation as
“female” (p. 141). This tradition of linking women to nature in the cultural imagination has imposed certain images on the identities of both women and non-human nature, as Mack-Canty (2004) argues:

In the nature/culture dualism, man was seen as representing culture, and needing to be unconstrained by and to have domination over natural processes, both of a nonhuman nature and of human embodiment. Men were identified with disembodied characteristics such as order, freedom, light, and reason, which were seen as better than, and in opposition to, women’s allegedly more ‘natural’ and/or embodied characteristics such as disorder, physical necessity, darkness and passion. The use of the term ‘men’ cannot be construed as generic here. The subtext is the association of women with nature, as women’s embodiment generally, given its reproductive capacity, is harder to deny than men’s (p. 155).

Mack-Canty suggests that the resulting identities associated with women and nature are passive, subservient and available to men. This connection between women and nature has also meant the responsibility of caring for the environment has become linked with the expectation for women to be nurturing mothers to human and non-human alike (Trauger 2004; Mack-Canty 2004; Buell, Heise and Thornber 2011). These kinds of representations which inform much of western culture today reinforce the nature/culture and male/female dualisms.

The way women or non-human others are represented might reinforce oppositional dualisms, negative stereotypes and risk capture or appropriation. However, without representation, the voice of marginalised humans and non-humans risks exclusion, silencing, injustice, and further damage. As Neimanis (2015) argues:

[E]ven while ecofeminist and material feminist positions argue for understanding of nature as agentic, changing and transformative, requiring human representatives to speak for a nature that is ultimately ‘Other-worldly’ risks reinstating the very hierarchised binary they seek to thwart (p. 13).

Neimanis suggests that writers must connect with nature in a new way, one that brings the non-human into our everyday experience of the world and ultimately recognises the human as part of nature. In The Season of Shellfish, each of the characters dwell within a city that is both natural and cultural. Violet’s story takes place around suburban areas where parks and gardens are liminal spaces: part nature, part cultural construction. Frangipani’s story is driven by natural forces which interrupt her preconceived culturally-defined ideas of the island life. For Acacia, the inner city is driven by socio-political and environmental systems and the boundary between human and non-human is never clear.
Annie Pratt (1972) shows how women in western modern fiction were often depicted alongside nature as worshipers and possessors of intimate knowledge of nature and yet women were also subsumed so that nature became an extension of the female self. Booth (2010) shows that this connection was, in part, the response of female writers to a domestic sphere that was both safe haven and prison. In this context, natural landscapes served as places of freedom from social constraints and places where female sexuality could be metaphorically explored. In contrast, depictions of men in modern fiction often attempted to master, subdue or escape nature (Pratt 1972). Men’s relationship towards nature is replicated in his relationship to women in these same texts so women also become objects to master, subdue or escape (Pratt 1972). These modernist texts reflect essentialist ideas of women/nature and men/culture, depicting a special connection between women and nature, while presenting men as outsiders to this women/nature relationship.

Neimanis (2015) addresses this issue of representation by moving towards a post-human performative position that attempts to present realism without representationalism through the notion of entanglements.

 Phenomena come into being through intra-actions. Such entanglements do not re-present what is ‘there,’ but constantly, in their on-going entanglement, elaborate and perform the reality that is purportedly represented … Nature is not ‘awaiting representation’ by culture/humans; rather, both are entangled in the coming-to-matter of the world (Neimanis 2015, p. 14).

This notion of entanglements is closely aligned to hybridity and creates a similar space in which representations of nature, culture and women might come together, each an agent, effecting and effected by this relationship. Present in this idea of entanglements is also the concept of embodiment. I’ve discussed hybridity and embodiment in previous sections but it’s important to highlight how these concepts help to re-imagine the relationship between women and nature. Sherry Booth (2010) argues that focusing on bodies can help to address poor representations.

While there is no dearth of scholarship on the female body, the focus still is more often on body as text constructed by language and culture rather than on the biological body. We see a similar situation in fiction by women. Few novelists celebrate the body and its biology, or see woman’s connection to nature as a positive thing; in much women’s writing since the late eighteenth century, nature and landscape are employed to reveal the plight of women, their material and emotional conditions (Booth 2010, p. 333).
This can be seen in many modernist fictions where the landscape serves as metaphor for human emotions rather than constituting a complex relationship between human and non-human (Booth 2010).

**In The Season of Shellfish, I create hybrid spaces for my characters to inhabit.**

All are affected by their contact with place and the non-human. One way of exploring the human/non-human boundary is through the characters’ relationships with their flowers – acacia, violet and frangipani. Each flower is found in Australia and the characters take on some of the flower’s climatic preferences, associated myths or characteristics. The frangipani grows in warm coastal climates and is an intruder in Australia – a plant from South America brought to the Pacific by missionaries, a symbol of colonisation. Frangipani too prefers the coastal sub-tropics, and she too is a product of the Australian government’s colonisation of the island in her narrative. The acacia tree is widespread across the tropics with many species native to Australia. A highly resilient plant, acacia flowers are bound up in the identity of Australia as the national flower. Likewise, Acacia is resilient, loves the heat and is caught between multiple representations of identity (cyborg, punk, criminal and her sister’s political identity). The violet is both native and introduced, preferring cool wet climates, and growing in small bunches as ground cover. In ancient Greek society violets symbolised the death of children or innocents. Violet takes on both the climatic preference and the mythology. Her story is haunted by the violent death of a women in a park and then her partner’s death.

Flowers and women have often been connected in western fiction, as Michael Ferber (1999) demonstrates:

> Flowers, first of all, are girls. Their beauty, their beauty’s brevity, their vulnerability to males who wish to pluck them – these features and others have made flowers, in many cultures, symbolic of maidens, at least to the males who have set those cultures’ terms. The most obvious evidence is girl’s names.

In *The Season of Shellfish*, I contest ideas of both women and flowers as passive, inherent victims and valued only for their sexual characteristics. I show flowers as complex and active entities that drive a plant’s reproduction process but also have cultural and culinary significance. Rather than distancing women from flowers, I question conceptions of women and flowering plants, drawing new connections and more complex understandings.
As writers, Atwood and Frame are troubled by the constraints and problems associated with representing the ‘other’ in their fiction, as I will demonstrate. In the following textual analysis, I focus on contemporary fiction. These novels depict a relationship between women and nature, though the traditional notions of what constitutes femininity (and to some extent masculinity) are called into question by the women in these novels.

**Surfacing and Living in the Maniototo**

*Living in the Maniototo* (1979) is the story of a writer, Mavis – also known as the ventriloquist Violet Pansy-Proudlock, the eavesdropper Alice Thumb and several other personas. She travels from New Zealand to visit a friend, Brian in the industrial city of Baltimore. Before long, she is rescued from this uninspiring place by the Garrets, a couple she barely knows who let her stay in their house in the Berkeley Hills while they are away in Italy. The Garrets subsequently die in Italy and leave their house to Mavis who must play host to two couples Theo and Zita, and Doris and Roger.

*Surfacing* (1972) begins with the unnamed narrator returning to her childhood home in rural Canada, along with her lover Joe and another couple Anna and David. Her father has gone missing and she has gone to find out why. While in the wilderness, the protagonist comes to understand the ways that the domination and destruction of nature reinforce social injustices. Violence against animals is linked with violent and demeaning acts towards other people and women in particular. The narrator reacts by stripping off (literally and figuratively), rejecting civilisation and attempting to become something other than human (Alaimo 2000).

Frame subverts the constraints of dualistic meaning in her novels as she creates traditional situations of dominance and then re-imagines them. For instance, Frame (1979) creates a character, Theo, who sees himself as the epitome of masculinity (p. 139) and then she renders him wordless with a stroke (p. 177). In contrast, Atwood (1972) plays with male/female representations, subverting traditional associations of men and women which are represented in the text by David and Anna. Joe, on the other hand, is primarily described through the use of natural imagery: he has the profile of a buffalo (p. 2), his toes resemble balsam twigs (p. 110), he is often referred to as a dog.
(p. 94), his hair and beard are like ferns (p. 155), and his body is warm stone (p. 155).
The narrator’s attraction to Joe is due to his animal-like physicality and his economy for speech, while Joe is more emotionally invested in their relationship, subverting the traditional male/female dualism. This loss of the narrator’s emotional self however, is a dilemma that drives her to contemplate what it means to be human and also what it means to be female.

**Being Human, Being Woman**

The protagonist in *Surfacing* struggles with the representations and expectations imposed on women. While Anna accepts and emulates these expectations, the protagonist resists them, considering the way she and other women are limited by notions of duality and normality. Anna, as well as herself and other women are often described with images of dolls suggesting the way culture manufactures women.

Rump on a packsack, harem cushion, pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes, as red as blood as black as ebony, a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, the original nowhere, hairless lobed angel in the same heaven where God is a circle, captive princess in someone’s head (Atwood 1972, p. 169).

The narrator sees this cultural manufacturing of women who are doll-like as unrealistic and dehumanising. Particular aspects of the face are emphasised with make-up – eyes are made to appear larger, cheeks appear to blush – both of which suggest culture reinforces notions of youth and beauty. In addition to this, the references to fairy-tales where women are represented as passive and fragile suggests the way these ideas about a woman’s value (beauty, sexual appeasement, submission) play into cultural expectations for women. The narrator finds this troubling and part of her search for identity deals with the search for an original and natural self, beyond these cultural constraints. In the end, however, the narrator finds herself set amongst fluid boundaries where the distinction between nature and culture blurs and the idea of an original self is complicated (Alaimo 2000, p. 141).
Rather than placing originals and replicas in opposition, Frame suggests that we are all replicas in some capacity and yet the unique composition of imitated qualities produce identities which are unique (Mercer 1994, p. 217; Frame 1979).

I found myself beset upon, not knowing what to do, in a whirl of avoiding and not avoiding, haunted by the manifold, the replicas, and the originals … We who are replicas and live in the house of replicas cannot exist until we have shaped what we have discovered within the manifold; and know in the repeated shaping that we are not Gods, and not avoid knowing that we ourselves have been shaped and patterned not by a shadow of light or a twin intelligence but an original, the sum of all equals and unequals and cubes and squares; the shaping inclusion; the hypotenuse of the entire manifold (Frame 1979, p. 117-118).

Frame introduces the manifold to describe the way that memories, experiences and realities are used to carve out an identity, which is both an original self and a self based on replicas. So, rather than seeing imitation and replication as inherently negative, Frame shows that women have agency in creating their identities, forming unique selves out of this bricolage of replication.

In both books, nature becomes a sight of resistance, of multiplicities, a place where women can redefine their identities and subvert dualities. *Living in the Maniototo* attempts to subvert notions of duality by creating a space where other options are possible: multiple personas, multiple realities, and a variety of ways to relate to and exist within nature/culture (Mercer 1994). Frame (1979) uses the metaphor of a right angled triangle to create a third and non-oppositional space. Placing herself, as writer, along the hypotenuse she brings together oppositions and re-imagines them (Mercer 1994). In this way opposites can be transformed. They do not necessarily lose their “essence”, but their relationship is radically altered from one characterised by the “duel”’ (Mercer 1994, pp. 215-216). The hypotenuse is not a stable surface but a moving and changing body which allows for manifold (numerous) relationships (Frame 1979; Mercer 1994).

There is a transience that runs through both texts creating a space of instability where concepts and identities can be transformed. As Elder argues culture can be considered a process of decay and renewal, a combination of biological and social elements that adapt and change over time and to particular conditions (Coupe 2000, p. 231). In *Surfacing* and *Living in the Maniototo* life/reality goes through many changes, it breaks apart and reforms. In *Surfacing* this is a physical transformation:
I remember the heron; by now it will be insects, frogs, fish, other herons. My body also changes, the creature in me, plant-animal, sends out filaments in me; I ferry it secure between death and life, I multiply (Atwood 1972, p. 162).

In Frame’s text this transience is more abstract; she creates multiple personalities for her writer/narrator, and multiple realities, suggesting the transience of both the female identity and the natural/cultural realities that we inhabit.

Urban Wastelands, Rural Sanctuaries

Since the Renaissance, the modern city (planned, geometric, orderly) has been connected with masculinity and the mind. ‘During the Renaissance, the city was envisioned as an arena where the ideals of the mind – coded as masculine – could be expressed literally and symbolically’ (Domosh and Seager 2001, p. 69). This conflation of the city with the masculine meant that the presence of women in the city was problematic (Domosh and Seager 2001). Women in the Renaissance were considered to be more akin with the country – organic, disorderly, unknowable (Domosh and Seager 2001, pp. 71-72). Men and women experience, perceive and prioritise facilities in both the city and country differently. According to Mona Domosh and Joni Seager (2001) safety is a priority for women and fear of crime shapes the way women direct themselves within urban space, often restricting and excluding them from particular routes (p. 184). Liz Bondi and Damaris Rose (2003) dispute this idea and show how scholarship on women and urban geography have increasingly recognised a mismatch between expectation, experience and performance of gender identities (p. 233). This is demonstrated by women who suffer from social anxiety and find the city and particularly green-spaces more comforting at night when we might expect women to avoid such places (Bondi and Rose 2003).

The city is introduced in Surfacing in opposition to the remote island in Northern Quebec where the narrator’s father lives. While the novel takes place entirely in this remote location, the city remains a phantom presence throughout. To the protagonist, the city requires a social and emotional knowledge which she lacked growing up with the scientific, rational teachings of her father and schooling in the rural North. While this may at first seem to reinforce dichotomous notions of rural and urban places, the relationships of men and women to these places is far more complex. Some
women prefer the city while some men are more at home in rural areas. Not only does the text question this gendering of place but also the associated attributes. The protagonist describes the city as requiring emotional skills and the rural North as requiring rational skills. The text further complicates gender constructions as the female protagonist identifies with the rational and scientific rural North, suggesting that place and gender do not conform with dichotomous thinking.

The narrator treats the city with suspicion, remarking on the way it is slowly seeping into the outer regions and spawning destructive ‘Americans’ (who are not always American but people who emulate the senseless destruction of nature which the narrator sees as inherent to American culture). Tourism from the city is seen as a disease: ‘summer cottages beginning to sprout here, they spread like measles, it must be the paved road’ (Atwood 1972, p. 24). The city is also seen as dangerous: ‘It’s better here than in the city, with the exhaust-pipe fumes and the damp heat, the burnt rubber smell of the subway, the brown grease that congeals on your skin if you walk around outside’ (Atwood 1972, p. 24). What is emphasised is the damage caused by the city to both the body as well as non-human nature. In contrast, the island is seen as a retreat from life in the city: ‘The space is quiet, the wind has gone down and the lake is flat, silver-white, it’s the first time all day (and for a long time, for years) we have been out of the reach of motors. My ears and body tingle, aftermath of the vibration, like feet taken out of roller-skates’ (Atwood 1972, p. 27). The imagery of feet taken out of roller-skates suggests that being in the city is unnatural.

In *Living in the Maniototo*, the city is also dangerous, polluted and damaging to both the people who live there and the surrounding and underlying nature. The industrial city of Baltimore is described as a place where:

The days still take their identity not from blossoming flowers but from the morning blossoming bank raid, the Saturday supermarket robbery, the Saturday night murder; from drifts not of fallen frothy rhododendron and Azalea petals but of paper and packet litter, and instead of the display of neat gardens the cluttered windows of shops with their giant reductions, the straddling pyramids of rusted dented tins of tuna, beans, yellow plums, spaghetti (Frame 1979, p. 24).

Here Frame contrasts images of nature: ‘blossoming flowers’ and falling petals suggesting fertility and renewal with images of destruction and decay: ‘rusted dented tins’, litter dropped in the street, murders and robberies that suggest a decay of the
social systems that maintain a community. Meanwhile, Blenheim, sister city of Berkley is: ‘[A] violent suburb. The children are restless with a sense of loss, as if they had truly been children of the native forest which, like a father, has abandoned them by dying’ (Frame 1979, p. 13). Both Baltimore and Blenheim lack nature and these quotes suggest the destructive character of urban places but also propose that living with nature is a part of maintaining a healthy society.

In *Surfacing*, the rural island and the city have much in common, the narrator talks of them both providing a sense of isolation, and in both places women and nature are controlled. She speaks of the old priest on the island who disapproved of women wearing slacks (p. 19). Meanwhile, women in the city talk of progressive feminism but in the end are still controlled by their husbands: Anna gets up early to put on make-up because David doesn’t like to see her without it (p. 38), and later David makes her pose nude for his film though she doesn’t want to (p. 129). In *Living in the Maniototo*, women are also controlled by their husbands. However, Frame subverts that control, by placing men in situations that test their dominance. Roger wants to conquer the desert but a few hours in the heat almost kills him and because Theo has had a stroke, it is Doris who rescues him. Here both nature and women are given power.

**Re-imagining the City**

In *The Season of Shellfish*, I attempt to create a more complex understanding of rural and urban areas. Rather than present the rural as cure to the city, I show how both urban and rural areas can be problematic and beneficial. Cities are connected with and rely on the rural to provide food and resources but in Australia, these rural areas can be difficult places prone to floods and drought. In contrast, cities concentrate resources beneficial to some humans and non-humans while also being responsible for perpetuating the destruction of rural and undeveloped areas. Acacia finds the city preferable over a rural area on the outskirts that presents both social and environmental problems for the people that live there.

Both Frame and Atwood come to re-consider the city in their texts also. The protagonist in *Surfacing* finds that she must remove herself almost entirely from the city in order to discover how we might live with nature but her conception of the city as
inherently bad is changed through her rural experiences and contemplations. In *Living in the Maniototo*, Frame shows the potential of the city to become a place where both nature and creativity might thrive. In contrast to the inner city of Baltimore or the Auckland suburb of Blenheim, the Berkeley Hills are a refuge for nature and creativity, as is the rural plains of the Maniototo, as discussed in chapter three ‘Hybridity and Embodiment’.

In *Surfacing*, the protagonist also returns to the city. After coming to terms with the loss of her baby, and undergoing an internal transformation, the protagonist uncovers what it means to be human and female in the 70s and the potential for new ways of being. She concludes that:

> It wasn’t the city that was wrong, the inquisitors in the schoolyard, we weren’t better than they were; we just had different victims. To become like a little child again, a barbarian, a vandal: it was in us too, it was innate. A thing closed in my head, hand, synapse, cutting off my escape: that was the wrong way, the entrance, the redemption was elsewhere, I must have overlooked it (Atwood 1972, p. 131).

Atwood suggests that the way forward for both women and nature is not in isolation but in the city, creating a version of culture and a language in which women might find new ways of becoming human, and ways of becoming new kinds of women. ‘The word games, the winning and losing games are finished; at the moment there are no others but they will have to be invented, withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death’ (Atwood 1972, p. 185). This implies that transcending oppositional dualisms doesn’t come about by changing where we live but by changing the way culture represents relationships between nature, gender and language.

Both books discuss ways in which the English language has been ingrained with dichotomies and the tendency for language to exclude or disempower women and nature. *Surfacing* is concerned with breaking down these boundaries and demonstrates a need for new ways of describing women and nature, while Frame suggests that these boundaries never existed, reveals the way that dichotomies exclude other possibilities, and provides a way of writing about the world that includes and acknowledges these other ways of being. Though Atwood’s narrator undergoes a personal transformation and comes to realise the ways that oppositional dualisms mutually devalue women and nature, she only hints at how we might avoid these dualisms through language. Frame on the other hand provides a narrative that breaks away from conventions and attempts
to transcend these dichotomies. Together these texts present writers with possibilities to imagine more inclusive narratives that discourage oppositional dualisms. The potential of urban spaces are also highlighted here as natural/cultural sites of creative possibility and connection.
Conclusion

In this exegesis, I set out to explore the role of fiction in re-negotiating understandings of nature/culture relationships. Writers in the western cultural tradition have often represented nature and culture as separate. This is conflated by traditional notions of truth, rationality and objectivity mythically applied to scientific texts (and sometimes extended to non-fiction nature writing) as well as the role of oppositional dualisms in both scientific and Romantic conceptions of nature. Romanticism and science have both made important contributions to the study of place/ecology but each paradigm has flaws which continue to be problematic. Science appears to be objective, rational and authoritative but denies the way market forces, political agendas and individual biases influence constructions of nature. Romanticism reinforces a separation of nature and culture by viewing the city and wilderness in opposition and reinforcing women/nature and men/culture dualisms. By re-negotiating these fields and investigating relationships between human and non-human in an interdisciplinary way, I gain new understandings of these relationships. As a result, my fiction re-conceptualises Romantic and scientific understandings of nature, attempts to resist problematic conceptions, and constructs an understanding of nature based on multiple, shifting and situated ways of knowing. I find that fiction contributes to understandings of the non-human and can be used to transcend and undermine rigid paradigms that uphold Western dichotomies (Dixon 2002). Fictional narratives act as experiences of nature, environmental imaginaries and communal sites of negotiation and contest (Rigby 2006; Neimanis, Asberg and Hayes 2015).

Multiple truths merge and emerge in fiction. Lopez (1989) discusses the way narratives might address this tension between fact and fiction through the notion of authenticity. While authenticity suggests an original and comes with the problem of determining what is original and what is not, I find Frame’s (1979) concept of the manifold and the hybridities which emerge help to avoid these issues. In the manifold, facts and fictions combine as the writer negotiates and draws from the multiple realities (cultural narratives, memories, myths, scientific knowledges, experiences and poetic imaginings) in which we exist. The narratives which emerge from the manifold are both replicas (of other narratives) and originals (new combinations of narrative aspects).
believe this notion of fiction gets closer to Lopez’ intention to describe stories (whether fiction or non-fiction) as ‘authentic’. Olalquiaga (2007) also engages with ideas of authenticity, replicas and hybrid forms. While the use of terms such as authentic and original are problematic, her notion of third natures reveals the complexity of relationships between nature and culture. Culture may impact nature in ways which are unseen and sometimes unknowable in the same way that nature also impacts on culture while leaving little trace.

In this project, I consider the way language and meaning might play a role in understanding place and non-human nature. By re-conceptualising the way landscape, terroir, wilderness, country and nature are used and understood, I find new ways to think about nature/culture relationships. Eco-criticism, particularly through a social ecology lens has provided me with a critical frame to negotiate my own use and understanding of these conceptions.

I discuss the way nature writing has been re-imagined by contemporary writers and why fiction might contribute to this body of work. I use eco-criticism as methodological tool, body of theory from which to draw from, and hybrid form that demonstrates how research, experience and writing practice might work together to produce new knowledges. Notions of ‘situated knowledges’ and the ability for fiction to be explicit about the construction of nature make it ideal for questioning these relationships. Fiction can be used to investigate the everyday lived realities of nature/culture relationships allowing for an extension of scholarly and scientific research in this area. The use of embodied experience as a method of research/writing allows me to ground my exegetical and creative work in place leading to writing that is echocoherent.

Urban environments provide a space in which to re-negotiate ideas of place, non-human nature and gender. As we move towards more urbanised societies globally, the way in which we understand and live in cities becomes an important consideration. Cities are places that concentrate resources and benefit some residents (both human and non-human), cause damage to environments underlying and supporting cities, and are where the majority of the people come into contact with nature. While western cultural traditions saw nature in wild areas as more valuable than urban nature, I question these dualistic understandings and find the potential of the city to resist dichotomous thinking.
and re-imagine nature/culture. Atwood (1972) and Frame (1979) demonstrate the potential of the city to question gender expectations in resistance to oppositional dualisms such as men/culture/urban and women/nature/country. Boundaries between nature and culture blur in the more-than-human (or post-human) city and allow me to re-consider what it means to be human.

Movement is an important concept for both The Season of Shellfish and this exegesis. Human and non-human relationships change over time and across space. This spatio-temporal notion of place and nature provides a frame in which to re-imagine the city as natural/cultural place. A position of flux allows for multiple possibilities and shifting meanings. I acknowledge the way places as well as humans and cultures are always in motion. Lopez (1989) discusses the way travel can facilitate connection with place and recognises that even when we dwell, we (along with places) are in flux and must adapt to changing conditions. Cooke (2011) and Muecke’s (2003) conceptions of the nomad further emphasise the way that movement might resist damaging environmental actions. This movement through the land also influences my methodology as I engage with place in multiple ways. Not only do I engage with place through observation and experience to inform my writing, but this movement through place can also facilitate reflection on creative practice and generate creative thinking (T Williams 2013; Hetherington 2010; Krauth 2010). Travel also features in Surfacing and Living in the Maniototo as each narrator embarks on a journey, one to a rural Canadian island and the other to multiple cities in America. This travel assists the narrators in questioning creativity, humanness and their relationship to place, ecology and culture.

The idea of the writer negotiating their inner and outer environments/selves was explored across the chapters of the exegesis. Lopez (1989) introduces his idea of inner and outer landscapes in chapter one ‘Nature and the City’ as a way of expressing the relationships we form with place. Tony Williams (2013) further interrogates the way these inner and outer experiences within place contribute to writing practice. Krauth (2008) argues that fiction writing is an embodied practice, resisting Romantic ideas about writing and imagination. For Krauth (2008) the writer traverses several territories in the creation of a text – the inner world of the mind, the physical outer world, the space of the desk and the imagined space of the text. Finally, Frame’s (1979) work complicates the notions of inner and outer, and finds hybrid and multiple ways these experiences shape our realities of being in the world.
Considerations of gender and nature inform both the exegesis and the novel. I question ideas that exclude the feminine including the rational and objective myth of science which excludes other ways of knowing, and oppositional dualisms which conflate women and nature, men and culture and exclude other experiences. The notions of situated knowledges, embodiment and hybridity allow me to draw together multiple ways of knowing and construct narratives which reach deeper understandings of the nature/culture and gender relationship. I find potential in fiction and urban narratives to retell the stories of women and nature and find new ways of understanding what it means to be human.

In developing this project, I engage with Australian place in several ways. I find Australian cities to be sites of resistance to western cultural ideas of nature, place and landscape. I also connect with place in new and deeper ways, seeking out cultural and environmental narratives and collecting experiences with place. In constructing *The Season of Shellfish*, I wanted to imaginatively represent place and the natural/cultural entities within as agents in the narratives rather than passive setting. I realise this by having natural entities interrupt and rupture characters’ trajectories. In turn, I explore the way human action and interaction affect the non-human.

In writing this exegesis and novel, I seek to explore the problematic conceptions of the human/nature/culture relationship and the role of dichotomous ideas in the disruption of ecosystems and irreparable damage to natural and cultural environments. The separation of nature and culture as well as the idea that nature is something to be exploited by culture has driven environmental damage. In constructing narratives that resist these damaging ideologies, I find ways of re-imagining nature/culture relationships through reflection, hybridity, the manifold, and multiplicity in order to re-negotiate these dichotomies. By drawing on these concepts, I create a space where multiple truths are able to emerge and ideas of nature, landscape, gender, the urban, the human and culture are able to be questioned, tested and re-conceptualised through fiction. There is further potential to investigate nature in fiction both critically and creatively, particularly in the areas of Australian, Indigenous and place studies as well as further considerations of concepts such as terroir, country and nomadic writing.
Works Cited


http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/nature


Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.


Other Readings


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2 Note: These readings were not cited in the exegesis but were important for the novel’s construction.


The Season of Shellfish
Part One: Revolve

Two cities on the edge of the sea bleed into each other. Lights flicker like thousands of fires along a river to a plateau in the hills. The moon drifts into the sky and pulls. Tides rise and fall, like breath, moving in and out against the coastline. The offshore islands grow and shrink below waves of shifting sand. Earth spins, pulled by the sun into orbit. Time moves in waves of light and dark. Lives sleep and wake. Plants open pores and respire into cool nights. Oxygen moves through soft warm bodies. Electricity fires along wires to keep technology running. Power peaks and falls. Never stops. The season of shellfish brings heat and rain. Plants reply: drop leaves, grow flowers, fruit, go to seed, wilt. Seawater is pregnant with fat bitter shellfish and spawn. Every ten years the rivers swell and flood. Every few hundred years a volcano erupts. Things grow and die and reform. Human animals build transparent sand castles. Honeycombed shelters rise, change, fall. A stampede in the city centre; animals driven forward by a predator called business. Others gambol through streets, goaded by the promise of more food, more people, more freedom. Machines have their own circadian songs. Motors turn over in electric cars like horses rocking back and forth as they run the black tarmac. Trains sway from side to side, one carriage in front of another, like camels across the desert. Amongst this milieu, three woman move through the night like seeds adrift on the wind looking to put down their roots.
1 City of Mud

Her island house rests on its stilts. Fresh frangipani-white paint. The fumes infusing the chill morning air of her bedroom. The colour she couldn’t walk past at the boutique home-wares store on the mainland.

‘Darl, you won’t believe this,’ she’d said to the sales assistant. ‘That’s the colour of my name.’

‘Beautiful,’ the ladies at the register mused.

Fran told them the story.

‘Me mum, she had this thirst for the smell. The whole time she was pregnant. Reckons she would’ve eaten them if they weren’t poisonous.’

Fran had excused the builder from painting the house. He didn’t want to waste the budget sub-contracting painters and she wanted to tell people she’d done it herself. Besides, John said he might flatten the drive if he had some extra time. When she bought the property a rainwater ditch ran the length of the newly tarred road. Her driveway, a gravelled patch on the other side of a steep incline making it hard to park a car. The builder borrowed a digger and formed a gentler slope. She managed to do two coats over the week. When the paint dried it was a cool shade of white, with a touch of yellow in the sunlight. Perfect.

She lies between pure white sheets, cradled in a four-posted, Balinese mango wood bed with white muslin pulled back at the corners. A proper island bed. The sunshine has made her tipsy, streaming through French windows and across her feet, warming her toes. She thinks of herself as one of those heroines from a romantic comedy that leaves everything for a farm in Tuscany or a Spanish villa. Except she’s already had the marriage and the kids. Fran stretches and reluctantly removes the sheets. She lights a few candles to cleanse the air of paint fumes. Tahiti – a warm tropical scent of guava, coconut, and gardenia.
Toma, a local man, has invited her down the beach to help him look for seafood. You’ve got to work for your dinner here. The mainland’s a three hour trip away and the local shops are a last resort. Fran met Toma on her first trip to the island. He helped her find her place, drove her there. Sometimes he plays taxi driver for the tourists, but he hadn’t charged her. Said she was an islander now, one of them. She brought his kids a few things from the mainland to say thank you – old clothes, toys, even a few dresses for his wife. He gave her his number, told her to call when she needed a lift.

Fran eats bread and jam for breakfast and looks out at her garden. White metal chairs and a filigree table set among the bare frangipani branches. Infant hibiscus trees are planted in a curve around latticed flower patches. Banana palms and paw paw trees fanning out in the background. A passionfruit vine shimmies along the fence. She’d once tried to grow seaside daisies on her veranda in the city. At first she watered them daily, then only when she remembered, then never. The leaves wilted. Joe mentioned it.

‘Don’t you water that plant mum?’ He asked. ‘Looks thirsty.’

‘Too far from the sea babe. Not enough salt in the air. Don’t know why I keep buying them really.’

‘Nah it’s ‘cause you don’t look after them.’

He crossed his arms. She took a drag on her cigarette. He went inside. When she followed, he’d been looking in the fridge.

‘There’s nothing in there.’

‘As always.’

She tightened her lips, scowled then let it go. ‘Seen your sisters lately?’

‘Mercedes is good. Still with Mark. They fight a bit. Seems happy enough though. Shayna just found out she’s preggers again.’

‘Same boyfriend?’

‘New one. Good guy. Helped me fix my car. Should go see them, grandma.’

She noticed the smirk on his lips before he turned away.
A car horn beeps. She’s summoned downstairs. Fran can fish but she’s never hunted a scallop before.

‘Not scallops,’ Toma laughs. ‘Pipi. We gotta’ dig for them.’

They arrive at the south eastern shore, where a sheltered cove stirs beneath the steaming mountain. Rocks protrude from the surface of the water. She won’t be swimming here. The sea-salt smell settles on her skin. Toma hands her a basket, woven from reeds and leads her into the rocky shallows. He shows her how to hold the basket, just under the water to clean the shells. She smiles at a family further along the shore, two girls splashing in the waves as their parents search the rocks.

The tide ebbs, drawing the coarse yellow-grey sand from beneath her feet and crashing along the jagged shoreline. Their faces are freckled with water. She can taste the brine on her lips. Toma bends and waits for the water to recede, for the bubbles to rise up through the sand. He digs. Sand clings to his arms and spatters her legs. She’s surprised at how cold and clear the water is here. Closer to home, the northern beaches are warm and cloudy and dotted with the smooth and twisted shapes of driftwood from the mangroves. Toma drops several shells into the basket. She rocks them under the water and filters out the sand. She wonders why he doesn’t just use a yabby pump.

‘So how do you cook these, love? Bit of hot water?’

‘You could steam or boil them. My wife likes to cook in the hot springs.’ He reaches into the water, sand swirls with the current and his arm disappears beneath. ‘You been to see them yet? They’re just around the mountain near the fish shop.’

Fran hasn’t explored much beyond her house and the port. Toma adds some more pipis to the collection. Fifty is the daily maximum but they take less.

‘Got to leave some for later,’ he says.

When they’re done, Toma takes Fran down to the end of the cove and points up. A bare surface juts out below a grassy slope.
‘See that wood sticking out? Bit of a ship. Some heritage group guy was here last month. Wants to dig it out. Reckons it’s British.’

‘How the hell did it get up there?’

‘The mountain’s called Bogong, after the warrior who used to fish here before there was an island. Bogong would row far from the mainland. Further than anyone. There was more fish out here ay. Really good fisherman though. Some say he turned into a moth and flew over the water. That’s how he got his name. The light would catch his wings and the fish would come to the surface, try to catch him.’ Toma daws an arc with his hand then he flips it and brings his hand down palm-up like a fish smacking the surface. His muscles ripple, a water droplet traces the curve down his arm. His shirt tightens across his chest. She glimpses the tattoo on his bicep, black ink curls, like fish scales.

‘The fish would leap out of the water but they’d forget about the boat, find themselves thrashing against the wood at the bottom. He was crafty, Bogong was. Used to fill his canoe. The fattest tuna you ever saw, grouper that looked like gold.’ Toma puts his fingers to his lips like he’s holding a piece of greasy fish. Like she could lean over and lick his fingers clean.

‘All these strange shaped fish people never saw before. Soon his family had more fish than they could eat. They started to preserve heaps, give it away for meat like cassowary and kangaroo. Everyone got tired of eating fish but Bogong kept bringing more, until the sea got angry. The fish were disappearing. So one day, when Bogong was out in his canoe there was this massive roar from the water. The sound was so loud people on the mainland heard. They were scared ay. They took off, went further inland. Bogong’s family hid in a cave by the beach though.

‘The water around Bogong boiled and the sky turned black like night.’ They look out at the water as though they might catch a glimpse of Bogong in his canoe. ‘A dragon rose from the water and ate him, boat and everything, but Bogong turned into a moth inside the dragon. Must’ve tickled his stomach ay. The dragon vomited Bogong up in a slush of fire and mud, leaving him here, in this island.

‘For months Bogong’s family stayed in the cave, living off the preserved fish. When the sea settled and the light came back, they went looking for him. Found the
island. They knew Bogong had been turned into this rock as punishment. Steam rises as he sighs over people that have died. Every now and then though Bogong wakes and spits like an angry fella.’

Toma pats the rock. ‘See how the lip droops on this side? The volcano dribbles. Ash and magma run down, searching for water. Not to scare you ay. It’s safe on our side of the island. Been a few hundred years anyway. Gone to sleep now, they reckon.’

Toma looks out over the water. ‘We better get back. Looks like a storm coming.’

Fran can barely see the clouds on the horizon. Her clothes smell like cotton and salt as they dry on her in the sun. The wind has picked up and she can only imagine he’s expecting the clouds to move quicker now.

They stop at Toma’s house in Tahi village on the way home. A first for Fran. If a storm wasn’t coming he might have invited her in, instead he offers her a few shellfish, says his wife will give her something for tea. All the houses are shacks on stilts, pieced together with second hand planks and bits of driftwood. Not like her house or the others around her. Two minutes further inland she’s a newer resident, on government appointed land with building regulations. Paradise on sale! The estate agents had auctioned off the last few properties for a fortune but she got a bargain. Cheap as chips. Sell your house and move to an island.

Fran can smell smoke rising from outdoor ovens, the searing of vegetables and fish. Hanging from the roof of the veranda are carved shells on lengths of string, swaying in the breeze and chiming as they knock together. Toma introduces her to his wife, Tarni, who comes out of the house smiling, pushes a glad wrapped pan into her hands, a creamy-looking fish stew. Tarni is short with voluptuous hips. Fran doesn’t recognise most of the words they speak to each other. Some sort of hybrid language. She can make out a spattering of English-like words. Fran almost expects an argument on her behalf but they speak with smiles. Toma and Fran haven’t slept together but the wife should show her the decency of suspecting. Children peek around a doorway inside and giggle. A baby cries out. The voice of another woman hushes it.
Fran heats the pan in the oven. The wind has grown cold. She closes the windows but can still hear shivering leaves on the glass and the wind rushing beneath the house. The smell of cooking fish settles in the air, like so many summer evenings spent beach-side barbequing. When lunch is ready she dishes it into a bowl, sits by the window and draws her knees up on her chair. She holds the bowl close, warming her hands as she eats: a coconut sauce over snapper, taro, sweet potato. A subtle tang of lemon, maybe kaffir lime.

The sky darkens, casting blue shadows on her walls, the garden, herself. She devours Tarni’s fish. Another woman’s care and attention, refined in a recipe the way a husband might be improved over time. Fran always liked the taste of another woman’s food. Lightening knives the sky. Large drops pummel tin roofs. Wind rushes through her garden. Fran puts down her empty bowl watching as plants, newly planted, rip from the soil. She puts her hands to her temples and shakes her head. Rain pounds the earth. She jumps as her mailbox, thrashed by wind, falls on its side with a clatter. The rain gets heavier. A rumbling shake through the floorboards, beating in her ears. What the hell does a volcanic eruption sound like? She takes a deep breath to calm herself, it’s just thunder. Water floods down the glass. Fran tries to remember everything she knows about rising tides, monsoons, cyclones, and tsunamis. She conjures a surge of agreement: nothing can be done.

Fran turns on a movie, The Beach, to drown out the sound of the storm. She sits watching the windows shake in the wind and chews her fingernails to the skin. A bang startles her – a sheet of rain blown against the house, or something swept up in the wind and thrown. The wooden table and chairs on the veranda creak. Wind rams them closer to the edge with each gust. Fran opens the door to try to save them but the weight of the wind heaves against her. Water hammers all over the wooden floor. She thrusts forward. Rain gnawing at her lips. Seawater blowing across the island. Through the open door she can barely hear the music swell at the end of the film. The table bangs hard against the balcony rail. A wooden board breaks loose and hits the ground below. Fran flinches. Nails protrude from the exposed gap. Another gust. The table shifts and she lets it go, clutching at a chair instead. Cold rain batters her arms. Fran shivers. Another chair hits her in the hip, making a path towards the edge of the balcony. She forces her way towards the door, letting her chair go and dodging another.
Not long before dusk the power goes out. Darkness swells. Fran lights candles, fills the house with flickering light and the warm tropical smells of papaya, mango, and frangipani. Resigned to thinking she’ll probably drown before morning she takes a book to bed and reads, immersing herself in images of luaus, cocktails on white sandy beaches, and good looking men twirling fire. She reads her book like an incantation. Her fingers shake as she turns the pages. Exhaustion breaks over her. She sleeps.
2 City of Metal

Full house at The Animal Bar. Bodies thrash. The mosh pit peaks. Acacia feels the throb of drums, the electric pulse of guitars. The lead singer screams into her mike. Acacia’s favourite song. Lilliput Drive, named after the street they live on. Pretty lazy name.

‘I’m a few screws short…’

Acacia’s elbow jabs someone. She doesn’t apologise. The guy’s already gone, lost to the throng. She struggles against the shifting crowd. A knee thumps her hip. A fist whacks into her arm. Jake grips her hand and they force their way forward to taste a better view. Sweat seeps into her bra. Music beating through her. She loves this sea of people. The thrashing music. The heat of bodies. She grinds her hips against a leg. Fingers squeeze her flesh. Then the drums intensify. Adrenaline rush. She jumps, thrusting her fist into the air. Something cracks against her temple. Numb silence. The room brightens. She falls against a guy and is pushed away. The roar of the band returns, the crunch of glass beneath her boots. Warm juice drips down her face. She can taste sweat, blood, rum. A small broken bottle rocks against the floor. Jake drags her towards him. His spiked hair has gone limp in the heat. She rubs her fingers through it, laughs, flicks her tongue across his cold lips. Her head throbs to the drum beat. She wants to dance. Jake pulls her through the horde. She is jerked, pushed. Not yet, she wants to shout, one more song, but Jake keeps pulling, leading her away from the stage.

On the way out, they find the rest of the group. Michael’s been thrown out for fighting. On the concrete sidewalk they laugh, examining themselves. Jake smokes in a corner, head down, doesn’t speak, like it’s her fault they left. Thursday night. The city pulsing with people, voices. Cool air amplifies damage: bumps, scratches. Martina looks at Acacia, raises an eyebrow at the blood streaked across Acacia’s cheek.

‘I’m fine,’ She murmurs wiping it away.

Then she stumbles, has to sit, resting her head on her knees. A car pauses on the other side of the street, honks, someone yells ‘taxi’. Jake lifts his head, grunts in annoyance but goes to her. His hands, like gravel, lift her. Acacia shuts her eyes. He
carries her the two blocks to the hospital, sits her in the waiting room, then leaves. Some of her friends follow. A few of them hang around just outside the door, smoke, joke, shout. They make the door shuffle open, closed, open. Voices enter. Bang. Her friends are muted. Over and over. Other patients glare from the seats in front of her. Acacia watches Martina through the window. She’s in the garden, bumming a joint off a man with a drip in his arm. Acacia leans on Michael’s shoulder. He’s telling her about a girl who put her stiletto through his toe. Then a security chick walks in, sticks her pointy fuckin’ nose out the door and says:

‘If you continue to disturb the other patients I’ll have to ask you to go.’

What a bitch. Michael says he has to get out of here. He means he feels like punching someone. Michael and the rest of their friends leave her, off to the pub. No big deal. She’ll catch up with them later. She lies across two seats. Emergency. Friday night. Could be a long wait. The man opposite frowns at her. Fragments of leaves, chunks of glass, stuck to her boots and on the seat beside her. She grins. He shakes his head.

Three hours later a doctor sees her. A small Indian woman in a blue shirt, white coat. Acacia is taken out the back to sit on a bed.

‘So what happened?’ The doctor asks.

‘Bad luck I guess. Rum bottle. You know the ones. Pocket sized. Perfect for concerts. When you’re done you throw them into the crowd right?’

The doctor washes her hands in a nearby sink, puts on rubber gloves and wheels over a metal trolley. She examines the cut, removes a shard of glass with tweezers.

‘And the scar?’

The doctor pats the wound with a cotton ball. Acacia winces. The cut stings.

‘Car accident. Got a plate in there. I’m a real metal-head,’ she smirks.

The doctor gives a brief smile but continues wiping her forehead.

‘You’re lucky the bottle didn’t hit the plate or you might have a dent in your head. Just a butterfly stitch for this one, I think. Did you lose consciousness?’
‘Nope. Just a cut.’

She sees the small tattoo on Acacia’s neck, like a brand, marking her as cyborg.

‘You have a small protrusion behind your ear. Would you like me to book an x-ray to check for damage to your device?’

Acacia flexes her hand. Phantom flesh. Metal through to the fingertips. She barely has to concentrate anymore. Just thinks of the fingers moving and they bend. The slight ache in the joints, a trick of the mind.

‘No damage. The chip’s working fine.’

Acacia is stitched up and sent off. She takes a bus heading towards the pub. Arms resting on the seatback in front. Lips against the metal frame. The smell of oxidising steel; like water, chlorophyll, blood. She’s starving. Her mouth salivates. She can’t help herself. Steel tastes like a car crash – that moment when the crunch of another motor vehicle eats into the spacious interior, the connection of flesh and tin. The pulse of blood, breath forced from lungs, an explosion of pain up her thighs. Fear. Excitement.

Acacia leans over and presses the button.
3 City of Gardens

In the park a woman was murdered. Violet browses through spices at the tea shop across the street. The heat is on and the air is pungent with flowers and spices, making her feel drowsy. Old wooden barrels are topped with transparent boxes, each containing a different flower, tea or spice. She looks at them like dried specimens. Each curled bundle a ravelled fossil. She opens pots, breathing in bursts of green tea, jasmine, cinnamon. Lavender: antiseptic, anti-inflammatory, hormone disruptor. She imagines them laid out under her microscope like ancient leaves.

Glazed windows and thick wooden partitions give a narrow view of the park entrance. Violet wonders if she ever saw the woman; just another stranger rushing by her at the bus stop or drifting through the park daydreaming about all the people in her life that would never come or go now, the places she’d never see, the jobs she’d never start. A man walks into the shop. Powder-blue suit, his face drowning in his beard. The smell of freshly-squeezed oranges from the juice bar next door drifts inside, mingling with the smell of incense and tea.

The murder surprised everyone. Violet stares into jars of black and green tea. These are the high quality teas to be portioned out by the shop assistant. Raison d’être are tightly curled moss green pellets. Sixty-four dollars for a hundred grams. People who never knew Delilah posted sentimental poetry on webpages, mourning the loss of someone so young. Knowing someone after their death has a peculiar effect. A mythical woman has been created. Too beautiful, too warm, too innocent. The shop assistant leaves the counter. Violet examines a wheel of black tea. Women weren’t meant to be murdered in well-lit parks while people barbequed and children played. On brightly lit screens people promised things would change. Russell had called her at work, told her to be careful on her way home.

The chai smells fresh. Violet studies the ingredients list on the box lid but it’s an insincere gesture; there’s still plenty at home. The tea shop owner asks if he can bag anything up. She’s lingered too long.

‘No,’ she says, ‘I’ll come back.’
She steps out into the sobering chill weaving through the stallholders setting up for the Saturday markets. Flowers laid out on tables. Baskets of cut spring-blossoms and pots frothing with sweet-smelling hyacinths. Sunflowers and long-stemmed roses in large white vases. Drops of fabric are folded on table-tops and draped on racks. Violet absently fingers some jade-coloured silk. The fabric feels like a scarf her mother used to wear. Her family spent a lot of time in parks when she was young. Her mother – studying clusters of fungus, seasonal changes, and the native creatures that came and went – her father lying in the grass with a book. Sometimes he wrote poetry. Violet would ask her mother questions all the way there but she had to sit quietly if she wanted to watch her mother work.

A couple of women heap piles of fruit and vegetables into woven baskets on a table set with red gingham cloth. Violet presses a plum between her fingers to test the ripeness. People at her mother’s university thought she was mad for researching such artificial places. In those days, ecology was the study of wilderness but her mother didn’t believe in wilderness. She said people had shaped the environment for thousands of years so city parks were just as natural as the bush these days.

Her father told different stories when they walked through this park and later, after her mother died, through the bush near the coast. Often these were stories her father had learnt growing up in Europe where magical creatures lived in open woodlands or snow-covered fields. She asked him to tell her stories about this place but he didn’t know any. Later, at the school library, she found a book about bunyips and they read it aloud together but he never retold those stories. He saw something else when he looked across the parks. Not the Australian place in front of him but another one, one from his childhood layered on top like one of those old encyclopaedias where bones and muscles were printed on separate pieces of transparent paper over a picture of the human body. He wanted Violet to see his history. When he told his stories he transformed the dry eucalypts into dense pine forest. He erased what was here before and replaced it.

Violet drifts past tables arranged with bottles of olive oil, specialty vinegars, jars of honey, crackers, and breads. The entrance to the park is an open space with trees circling the edge and several paths leading off into the bush. She will take her own kids here one day, tell them stories, let them play. Violet takes the trail to the left, The
Rainforest Walk, a manicured and mulched version of the real thing. Plants are hand-picked, weeds plucked and pests deterred. Pests are insects that give the trees frayed leaves, organisms that construct unsightly lumps, turn glossy green leaves yellow. Weeds are plants that grow too quickly, creep too far, have roots that push through paths or break into water pipes. Weeds are the plants that can’t easily be controlled. Violet doesn’t mind the native weeds and pests. They keep things in balance.

Two white butterflies flitter in the diffused sunlight beneath a kauri tree as Violet passes. Soft drink bottles and beer cans sprout from grass along the edge of the path. Insects lap at the few drops of sticky fluid. Violet picks up a bottle and a lizard dashes out from underneath it to snap its jaws around a fly. She leaves the bottle to him. She wonders if the people who threw these bottles away ever think about the future.

Violet pulls her coat collar up to protect herself from the sun when a strange throaty laugh echoes across the park. Violet looks around unaware it’s the call of a male Currawong imitating a Kookaburra for a female who flies on unimpressed. Water trickles through the Peace Garden, amplified in the quiet morning. Violet tries to picture poor Delilah walking along the path oblivious to the intentions of the man in the green polo-shirt. Delilah’s image was splashed across all the newspapers. Violet can almost see her. Long blond hair draped across her shoulders rushing through the park, eager to get home.

A screwed up paper bag catches the wind and rolls across the path like tumble weed. Violet breathes in the familiar damp mulch scent. A park is for slow walking. Paths wind past streams and sculptures shaded by gingko, secluded buildings lie to the sides on mown grass verges, trees sculpted and pruned so as not to encroach on the space. For Violet, city parks had always seemed like a refuge from pollution and noise, from the rush of feet, all the eyes darting over her, the hushed and critical voices.

Violet often walks home through the park after work. When she heard about the attack she felt somehow involved. A young woman discarded beneath the rotunda, naked and blue with cold, her body cut up, bruised, one gammy eye staring blankly out at the world. It could have been her. This is the first time she’s come this way since the murder.
The park has become a wild place in the imagination of the media. In the news, it wasn’t a man who murdered her but a pack of wolves, gnashing their teeth and snapping at her heels. Wolves stalking their prey – an instinctual act forced by hunger. They were monstrous horror-story animals, easy to dislike. In a land without wolves, men must suffice. People didn’t want to admit the killer was human – just a man like the one who serves them coffee or drives them home on the bus. The girl’s murder was easier to stomach if he was something else.

Violet’s not afraid of wolves. Her father once spent a year trying to get close to them. Hunted almost to extinction, the instinct to avoid people is now written into their genes. Sheep are another story. Still, like the dingoes who stalked children across the beach when no one expected them to, she might be cautious of letting small kids play in wolf territory. Violet’s afraid of a different beast, the flicker and rush of fire through a tinder-dry creek bed. A creature that keeps her up some nights.

Violet follows the path she presumes Delilah had taken. The Greek-styled building where people have wedding ceremonies in the spring is clean and white in the sun and lies in the middle of a clearing surrounded by ash trees, two symmetrical gardens on either side. An imitation of a house, the rotunda is entered through a covered portico resting on columns. Gardens say a lot about a city. Violet remembers her father talking about gardens in the sixteenth century. They reflected the cosmic order of things. Miniatures of the universe. This one Violet has noticed is styled with mathematical precision and geometric shapes – the divine method for improving nature, for civilising the city.

Violet had expected to find the park changed but it hasn’t, not physically. Birds still hop across tables, peck the lawn, rummage through the rubbish. A couple of languid wallabies nibble at the ground just beyond the building. Surely the smell of blood, the musk of bodily fluids expelled in death and the memory of her screams are etched in here. That’s what you’re meant to do when attacked – scream and fight but Violet can’t imagine herself that way. She hopes her instinct kicks in if it happens, the embarrassment of drawing attention out-weighed by her survival.

Violet approaches the rotunda cautiously. The police investigation is finished. She knows Delilah isn’t there but she braces herself anyway. A trail of flattened grass leads up to the building. Dirt has been scuffed bare in patches from the struggle and
then pressed back into the grass by the footsteps of her mourners. Violet can smell the ripe oranges from two trees framing the rotunda, hiding the building from the main path and allowing lovers to rendezvous without feeling exposed.

A couple of rust coloured spots on the steps. Violet stops. Flowers spilling across the bench now, as though flesh has become petal. Scratched paint visible beneath, a fist shaped hollow in the rotten wood. The place is still and quiet. Violet feels like she’s intruding, disrupting a dead woman’s privacy. Everything has changed.

An older woman with flowers, wrinkles along her forehead and chin walks over and stands next to Violet for a moment.

‘Did you know her?’ The woman asks

‘No.’ Violet crosses her arms, ‘it was supposed to be safe here.’

‘I’ve been asking the council to do something for years. I’ve seen them hanging around. Black buggers. Last year there were seven assaults. We got cameras but those were no help to her.’ She walks up the steps. Her brow softens as she gives a press-lipped smile and places the flowers down.

Violet hurries away before she returns. How does she know the suspect is black? No one knows anything yet. The park opens out to the left, a field full of more wooden tables with those dirty green shade sails over them. Violet heads towards the Bloom path, the closest way to her house. The park no longer feels like a sanctuary, cut off from the rest of the city.

She sees the group of men sitting at a table across the field, not talking, not smiling, just staring. Their heads turn to watch her. Eyes like suns. Violet crosses her arms and walks past, heads for the path, ignoring the tightening of her stomach muscles, her quick shallow breaths. Ahead, the path disappears into trees. Undergrowth inching across the concrete. Movement. A flicker of the eye confirms one of them has risen from the table. He’s walking casually but he’s tall, muscular, and can probably move much quicker than her if necessary. She walks faster. When she reaches the threshold, a gardener just off the path looks up, smiles and goes back to work. Violet relaxes, looks over her shoulder, nothing. An over-reaction.
The path is darker than she remembers, the canopy overgrown. Something moves through the trees and she expects the gardener but she sees a flash of fur. She can hear the trickle of the creek in the distance. Trees each way she looks. No one in sight. A crunch, twigs under a foot? No, just the wind blowing leaves. She keeps her pace.

The shifting of leaves becomes rhythmic like footsteps. She looks into the bush but there are too many trees to see anything. The snap of a twig. Violet runs. The dull thud of her steps echo in her ears and her bag wacks at her side. The path curves where the creek gets closer to the path. She waits until she’s around the corner then runs through the trees to the creek. Water bubbles and flows over rocks, shallower at this point. She wades in. Water up to her knees. Her coat gets heavy.

The rhythmic shuffling of leaves stops. She stumbles and reaches out to steady herself on a rock. The bank is steep on the other side. She has to pull herself out with some struggle. She looks behind her. Trees block her view. She doesn’t linger but runs along the edge of the creek, weaving through trees. A dog howls in the distance. Something splashes into the creek.

At the end of the path is Sylvia Bloom’s house, now a writer’s museum with an elaborate garden. Violet’s fingers tremble as she reaches for the gate. Water drips on the cobblestones. Her feet muddied from the creek. Violet’s only read one of Bloom’s books, full of rosy-cheeked young women and characters who said things like ‘ripe for plucking’. She focuses on her breathing, on her heartbeat.

The leaf design on the gate has been painted white since she was last here, like a fence you might find at an English cottage. A clear tent is erected over the garden and she enters into the damp warmth. Even in her state of shock, Violet notices the flowers. She’s always been told her name suits her. Maybe if she was a Kayla or a Delilah she wouldn’t have cared.

The point of focus Bloom’s beloved orchid collection. Purple tiger striped sepals and petals. The white central labellum petal curls like lips hiding the nectar in the middle. A yellow velvet line like an air strip points the way, inviting insects to dip their tongues. Orchids are erotic plants. That’s probably why Sylvia loved them so much. Violet watches as a wasp mates with a dark purple variety. The shrivelled flower dangles off the tip mimicking a female wasp. He lands, his head brushes the petals,
pollen sticks to his fur. Dusted from other flowers, pollen falls from his fur into the cup-like centre, the flower version of sex. He will mate with hundreds of flower-wasps in his life.

She plucks one of the wilting flowers, a bulb in the stem just below. Inside, the pollen will have settled in the ovary where the unfertilized cells split and fuse – two, four, seven – then two fertilisations. The fruit will grow ripe and fat with seeds, tiny saplings curled within each.
Acacia enters The Rabbit Hole, apartment building and mid-city labyrinth. Lost in the maze, her room. Studios painted in the seventies. The landlord had given her the choice, red and orange walls, or pink and purple. A red room has more energy. Acacia bites into an apple. Frees a hand. Manoeuvres around her shopping. Finds her keys. Inside, she drops an armful onto a chair. Adding to the pile. She crunches her apple. The air is thick with the stink of musty furniture; seventies décor, remnants. She opens the window, lets in the noise of the city, pigeons coo, traffic squeals, thumps with music. A child cries, a neighbour shouts, ‘Shut up or I’ll smack you again.’

She checks her new hair cut in the mirror, short, longer on the right, red as the walls. Her fingers prod beneath the strands. A bump behind her right ear, the scar well hidden, beneath, metal. She wonders where the hospital gets the steel from. Blacksmiths or scrap yards? Maybe she’s rocking a piece of Porsche, or the drum of a washing machine. She begins the daily drudge: washing, dressing, painting her eyes kohl, her lips red, filling the scratches in her black nail polish, the scars on her face. When she’s done she goes out into the dusk of the city, night creature of punk. Headphones in.

Music screaming.

Queen of Hearts – drinks, rock and poker. Acacia’s only been around a few months but she’s already a fixture, claimed by the pub, practically peeled from the wallpaper. Friday night: a live band and a card game. The only girl behind the bar and apart from a few women congealing in the corner, the only chick in the place. Men harden across the counter and flex their bodies. Ask her to: ‘Give me a shot of tequila and a rum, no ice … Vodka, lemon, lime and bitters … Schooner of whatever beer you have on-tap, and have a glass on me … Screaming orgasm? Meet us in the alley.’

Lame. Acacia winks, laughs. One of her many skills; a convincing giggle. She claims her free drinks and pockets her tips. She watches a few blokes. The one with the beard and glasses, puts a mechanical spider on the counter, and the legs begin to clack across the surface, heading towards the guy at the end, in a black polo-shirt, muscular arms. He picks up his beer, leans back on the stool. The others tease him.

‘Tommy, boy!’
‘Come on, you’re not scared of spiders are you?’

The spider stops on the edge, points a leg out, tilts. Then a leap onto Tommy. He throws himself back and his beer smashes to the floor in a sticky mess. Great. The other three laugh. The guy retrieves his toy, rolls up his shirt sleeve and shows them a thin piece of tape on his forearm. The next big thing. Non-invasive chips. Telekinesis, the party trick.

‘Still a few bugs,’ he says, chuckles, ‘I wanted it to jump straight away.’

Maybe there’s too much liquor in his veins. Hers used to hesitate after a few. Now she can move her hand when blind drunk.

A long night. Doesn’t end until five in the morning. The boys herd the last of them to the door with the traditional ‘Mmm Bop’ farewell song. Acacia sings, shakes her hips, wipes down the bar. The boys are smiling at each other. A customer whistles. Bit of entertainment for the road. She looks up.

‘What? I love this song.’

Laughter. Time to go.

She walks along the curb through the haze of other people’s cigarettes and spirits. A kebab in hand. Music in her ears. Sauce spills down her arm and she sucks it up. When she’s done, she squeezes left over kebab-mush onto the sidewalk. A one-legged pigeon and a bung-eyed crow descend. She likes these trampled and fattened city birds, just like her.

Acacia enters the lobby of her building. A guy sits at one of the low tables. He’s wearing a red shirt and Tripp pants, chains and studs along the legs, his hair spiked out like a hedgehog. Her kind of guy.

‘You know there’s no breakfast here right?’ She says.

‘What? You mean this isn’t the cafe?’ He feigns shock.

Mouth open slightly, she can see his lip-ring, a curl through the skin. She invites him up to her room, for coffee. He takes her stockings off in the lift and they discard them in the hall.
5 City of Gardens

Ten thousand leaves, each preserved between two pieces of glass. An entire rainforest encased in coal and unearthed by miners. The collection was donated to the museum almost two years ago and they’re still trying to identify them all. Violet takes twelve glass cases from their foam hollows in the archive, placing each on a lab table set up with microscopes. She’s been put to work examining leaves for the last few days, not the kind of work people imagine when she says she’s a palaeontologist – they imagine her out in the dirt, uncovering Jurassic thigh bones – but she’s given up trying to explain what a palaeobotanist is.

Light on the bench easily penetrates the brown leaves revealing their veins. They look fresh, as though someone has pressed the leaves from their garden. Violet is working with a selection that appear to be from the same family. Long thin bodies like the leaves on wattles. She pores through books, scans databases and sifts through hundreds of pictures of leaves from trees up in the tropical north, trying to match the ancient specimens with surviving species. So far, no leaves match the living species but no tropical rainforests are left where they’re from so extinct trees are a possibility. In some cases, they find the same tree up north. Fast growers move with the climate. Other trees have changed over time to become new species. But if a tree doesn’t move and can’t adapt, whole generations can be extinguished. Still, Violet must make sure. Placing one of the leaves under the microscope, she observes the waxy leaf cuticle. Stomata, like blinking eyes across the leaf surface, are actually mouths breathing in carbon dioxide and breathing out moisture and oxygen, giving us a liveable environment. Their size and amount suggest a warm, wet climate. Pages of stomata. No match.

‘Violet, how are you going with the leaves?’ Tom, the curator, walks in.

‘Good,’ she says still looking through the microscope.

A moment later she gives him her attention. ‘I’m working on the possible wattles, but I’m not getting any matches yet.’
‘I have a surprise,’ he says, ‘There’s a student team working out East at a lakebed. They’re asking for an expert for the students to consult.’ He pulls up a seat across from her. ‘They’ve started to find a few impressions of plant material, possibly fragments of leaf matter in the rock. If you’d like to go, we can get you out there tomorrow.’

Violet’s anxious to finish her analysis but she can’t miss the opportunity to be out at a dig site, to piece together evidence of a different world, tell a new story about the land. ‘I’d love to. Thanks Tom.’

The house is warm when she arrives home, despite the high ceilings. Russell must have had the heat on all day. He comes downstairs when he hears the door close. Violet tells him about the trip. They sit outside at their café-style table and sip wine from mismatched flutes found at an op shop. The back porch, a concrete square sheltered by a rusting tin roof. Violet bought the house long before she met Russell. There are still things to fix but she fell for the garden, a sprawl of vegetation. Russell is making plans to enclose the porch with glass windows so they can be in the garden on cold rainy days in winter or hot balmy days in summer when swarms of flies and mosquitoes appear. Violet imagines what the garden will become. Already the lilly-pillys tower, throwing dappled shade over the garden. An archway has been placed over the path, a trellis for a rose to grow up but the plant is unenthusiastically drooping. They had hoped to host a wedding later in the year but the garden isn’t ready. Violet’s brother Fin will have to find somewhere else. Violet had tried to grow a patch of orchids but the leaves had browned, burnt by a frost in winter, and had died without a single flower. The native violets and a few exotic pansies in the makeshift planter boxes are doing well. Violet pours another glass of wine and rests her head on Russell’s shoulder.

One of archaeologists from the dig picks Violet up at her place early the next morning. They drive out of the city past the fire break that marks the boundary and into the low hills and sparse grasslands beyond. The site is just outside a farming town, half-way to the east coast. Violet drops her bags off at a hotel near the site and gets to the dig not
long before the morning briefing. She stands towards the back. Markus, one of the head researchers on the project, is holding court. Violet remembers him from university. He’d been one of her teachers there. Glancing at her, he smiles. At the end, Markus introduces her to the team as an expert in palaeobotany to be consulted when needed. Violet smiles at their eager faces. She still gets nervous in crowds. When the others disperse to start work, Violet waits to talk to Markus.

‘You’re expecting to be here a while,’ Violet says.

‘We’re doing a thorough survey of the area. There are plans to put a road through here, maybe something more substantial. Nothing’s set in concrete yet but we may not get a chance to excavate here again.’

A woman calls Markus away and he excuses himself. Violet walks to the section she’s been asked to work on. The archaeologists have already started to chip away the layers. A makeshift examination and preservation area has been set up in a temporary marquee. Inside, several specimens have been wrapped, placed in storage containers, marked with details of their GPS location and any observations of the rock in which they were found.

When she was at university, Marcus had brought in a replica of a fossil for them to look at. Each student examined the plant under a microscope to see the tiny flower bud in the centre of the leaves. The fossil was a primitive version of a flowering plant with a tiny bud full of sticky pollen, an experiment in employing insects in the reproductive process, allowing the plants to inhabit more diverse environments, and to gain more possible breeding partners. The strategy was so successful flowering plants spread to every part of the world, specialising to fit unusual environments and developing relationships. First with insects who would move pollen from flower to flower and then with larger animals that would eat the fruit and disperse the seeds. This was what had hooked Violet, the idea people were just one of a number of species flowers attracted to propagate themselves. In fact, the relationship with humans was so beneficial, avocado trees are still going long after losing the mammoths, the only animal capable of eating the entire fruit and spreading the seeds.

By lunchtime, Violet is starving. Some people have brought their own lunch but most of them head to the pub. Markus offers to drive her and she accepts. The team is
small, considering the task, with only eleven people. Several research students have been brought in to help with the digging and Markus is in charge of co-ordinating them. She asks about the woman who’d called to him on site.

‘Linda. She’s an historian helping out with the history of the area. Close to the rock we also found an Aboriginal midden. Linda is helping out with that part of the excavation.’

The pub is near empty when they arrive but soon everyone is talking and laughing. Linda is a woman with permanent dimples which makes everything she says seem like a joke. She’d been the one called when the site was first discovered by construction workers who were advising the council about the road, one of them happened to be her nephew. This project was more of a hobby for Linda and as far as Violet understood, she wasn’t always paid, but everyone seemed to appreciate her presence. Markus orders her fish of the day and pays. One of the others shouts Linda a beer.

Violet asks Linda about the sites.

Linda smiles, ‘The midden seems to be around twenty thousand years old I’d say. Based on the kinds of things we’re finding. We’ve also got some footprints of animals, preserved in cooling mud from what looks like a lava flow so we can match that to an eruption in the area about the same time. Is the sedimentary rock from the same period?’ She looks to the head researcher, Phil, to confirm.

‘Mmm hmm,’ he nods before knocking back some of his beer.

A waiter brings over the meals. The fish looks good, pan fried snapper with salad and home-made chips. Violet eats. Linda takes a bite of her pie, swallows and then begins to tell a story.

‘The area from the farms to the hotel is called Two Fires. Back in the early days of farming this was all a cattle ranch. The farmers used to make mounds in the dirt to direct the cows and enclose them at night. Cheaper than fence wire and a traditional skill from the hunt and gather days. Farmers would sleep out in the fields with the cows, make sure the dingoes didn’t come in.’ Linda takes a bite of her pie and sips her beer. ‘One morning a hot wind from the south with fire on its breath blew down to the ranch.
At the same time a fire ignited just north of the farm and rushed through the grassland. The two fires met in the middle of the ranch, pushed through the same fields as the cows by the mounds of earth. The flames swirled and rose like a tornado. Those that escaped watched from a distance for the dance to end. Ten days it took.’ She points to a faded painting on the pub wall. A cow in the foreground tips its head towards a fire. ‘People are still talking about it.’ Linda laughs.

Back at the site, Violet finds Linda near the midden. She’s talking to someone, so Violet observes the work. Objects pulled out and categorised into plastic containers. In one the bones of fish, birds, and kangaroos. In another, stone chips and broken arrow heads, then discarded nutshells.

‘Look at these footprints.’ Linda addresses them all. She strides from one to the next, counting each print. The sand has turned to rock, footprints uninterrupted for thousands of years imprinted in them. ‘This person was fast, true. A lot faster than anyone today.’

Violet watches as students set to work in the rock, carefully hammering and picking. The surface chips away until a fossilised twig is revealed. The twig would have fallen from a tree hanging above the lake and sunk into the soft sediment at the bottom. Over the centuries the organic material would have decomposed as minerals filled the cells to create a stone replica. Amir, one of the post-grads, uses a pick to carefully cut away the rock in a three centimetre diameter around the twig before starting the detailed work of scratching the fossil free. He dabs a small amount of a glue solution over the fossil to keep it from cracking and breaking apart as he removes the rock that holds it in place. Violet picks up a fossil from one of the boxes. The impression of leaves on the surface appear darker as though stained by the decayed plant.

A yell erupts from near the road. Some of the researchers closer to the commotion run to see. Violet places the fossil down carefully before walking over. A young boy, dressed only in shorts and dripping with water is crouched on the ground holding his stomach. One of Linda’s students runs out of the marquee with a medical kit and Linda is on the phone asking for an ambulance. At first, Violet assumes the boy has
been stung by a jellyfish in the river. She’s heard there are a few irukandji around. When the medical kit arrives she sees the deep gash across his stomach, the blood on his fingers as he takes them away. Panic overwhelms her and she puts her fingers to her lips, willing herself not to throw up. The guy who ran for the medical kit presses bandages against the cut. Violet turns away.

Linda, still on the phone, asks the boy what happened.

‘It was an animal. Big. Grey fur.’ He gets out between clenched teeth before he cries in pain.

Linda relays the information to the operator. Violet finds a place away from the boy and sits. Sweat drips down her cheek. She breathes in deeply, puts her head in her hands. She’s never been good with blood.

A woman arrives in an old car with cracked paint and a broken light, his mother. Someone must have called her. The ambulance takes ten minutes to arrive as his mother screams and cries. Finally, the paramedics carry the boy to the ambulance and take them away.

Phil puts his arm around Linda.

‘Look at my hands Phil, I’m trembling.’ She sighs heavily. ‘That was a bit too much excitement for the day.’

‘Time to get a beer,’ says Phil.

They begin the process of packing up. Violet sits a minute longer, letting the cool air lick at her face until the faint-feeling fades. She goes back to her fossil, covers it with cloth and moves it to a storage container for the night. Others place cloth across the rock-bed to cover fossil material still in situ. Violet gets a lift to the pub with Markus.

‘Did you hear what the boy said?’

Violet shakes her head.

‘He said something had attacked him. An animal with grey fur.’ He shakes his head and turns to her for a second before looking back at the road. Violet is still pale.

‘Maybe it was someone’s overgrown house cat eh,’ he laughs.
They leave the car across the road and walk over to the hotel. Linda gulps down a stubby of beer and Phil hands her another. The bartender has already heard, his face stoic. He takes orders and pours. All the excited chatter from earlier is gone. They settle around a table in silence, sipping their drinks until Linda tells them another story.

‘There was a family that lived up by the lake in the sixties. One of the girls recalled her father had a huge scar across his back. When he was a child, he’d gone wondering in the swampy area around the lake. He’d been told many times that the lake was a dangerous area. He thought it was because kids might drown or be pulled in by some a kind of water spirit so he stayed away from the edge. There were frogs and bugs in the tall grass though, all the things kids are interested in, you know. So, he was crouched down trying to catch a tadpole in a shallow pool of water when he heard something move in the reeds.’

‘Oh god, there aren’t any crocs around here, are there?’ Jill, one of the excavators, interrupts.

Linda laughs. ‘Maybe it was a crocodile. Maybe it was something else. The boy ran but not quick enough. Something got him. He felt claws rip through his skin. All he saw was a glimpse of grey fur through the thick reeds. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? A woman even longer ago was reported dead, killed by an animal near the lake.’

‘So what was it, do you think?’ Jill asks.

Linda picks up her fork and shrugs her shoulders.

‘Because to me,’ Jill continues, ‘that story seems to suggest some kind of large predator or swamp dweller but we haven’t had anything like that around here for thousands of years.’

‘Bloody bunyips,’ Markus says.

Linda laughs and the table laughs with her.
Russell is home when Violet gets in. She presses her body against his. He lifts her onto the kitchen table, kissing her neck. His arms could easily hold her down if she refused him. One of his hands marks out her body like an artist working in clay.

‘Wait.’ She says almost expecting him to keep going.

‘What is it?’ He stops.

She whispers in his ear. ‘Let’s have a baby.’

She smiles, he kisses her and they have sex on the table. The fruit bowl tips and oranges role across the surface. An orange is both food and reproductive organ. Oranges used to be dull, hard and bitter. Animals are better enticed by sweet, fleshy fruit with bright colours. The fruit falls to the floor, evading consumption and the chance to reproduce. Russell and Violet’s own attempt has won out.
Ink Me tattoo parlour, an hour from home, near the coast. She grits her teeth. Half way there. Three thousand needle pricks a minute. Into the thin skin near her tailbone. Another hour to go? Rock music drums. Ink smears through her flesh in a pulsing dissonance of pain. Turn the music up.

Dada pauses. ‘You alright. Want a break?’

A tear grazes her cheek. ‘I like it rough.’ She laughs. ‘Got any whisky?’

‘Nope.’

‘Then turn up the music and get back to work.’

He sniggers.

Blood thumps with adrenaline. The breeze from an open window scuffs her bare back.

‘You’re a machine,’ He says.

The needle pulses, metal tongue darts in and out. Music to her ears.

Martina is waiting in the car. Acacia climbs in, lifting her top, shows off the new stain. Dada helped with the design. A clockwork owl. Skin-coloured cogs protrude from black ink. Looks like flesh has been carved out. A light metallic sheen to the shading: iron, nickel, ash. The bird was his idea. The coast is obsessed with owls. Holds a festival every year, something about owls hatching or fledging or mating. Pitch a tent in the dark. Pump punk music into the park but keep your lights off. Don’t scare the birds. Still, the festival has her excited. The darkness, the warmth, the damp. Music vibrating beneath her feet. Dada’s tongue in her mouth. He mentioned he’d be there. Told her to come along. The car pulls out of the parking spot and speeds towards home.

Almost one. Tuesday. The roads are empty. They speed most of the way, slowing for the cameras. Acacia winds her window down. Air whips her hair, stings her
face. Music blares from the speakers. People in other cars turn to look as they speed past. They turn off for the city, wheels squealing around the bend. A car brakes in front and Martina thumps her foot down, swerves, runs a red light. Acacia’s heart accelerates. When they’re out of sight Martina stops, turns the music down, and laughs.

‘Fuck yeah.’ She screams.

Acacia places her hand on Martina’s thigh. She’s wearing black leather tights, slashed. Acacia can feel skin, warmth.

‘Want to?’

Dimples form in Martina’s cheeks. ‘Because Dane would hate that,’ Martina giggles. ‘Nah babe, but I can’t, he’s waiting me for me at home.’

She starts the car, drops Acacia off. The lobby is empty. Acacia takes the east lift to her floor. The building is a rabbit warren. She goes right out of the lift. All paths seem to lead to her door. In the corridor, a pair of glossy red heels, her size. She takes them. Button mushrooms sprout from the damp carpet of room eighty-six A. At the end of the hall, a glass door opens into another corridor. Not far from her room. The floor slants downwards. From her door, the hallway seems like a dead end.

Inside, Acacia turns on music, opens the window. In the thin scrap of dirt, corner of the frame, a weed grows. Fat red and green striped leaves. Hair-like roots wrapped around a rusty screw. Better than pansies in a pot like the neighbour. Acacia takes an apple from the bench. Eats it all. Pesticidal skin. Smooth poisonous seeds: a dash of arsenic down the throat. She thinks of the way the car sped around the corner. Her cheeks redden. A bowl of ball bearings by the bed. She rolls one on her tongue. Smooth, hard. Acacia’s old car was red. Play the music loud enough, it would vibrate up her thighs. She never saw that car after the crash. Twisted frame, paint flaked from the carcass. On the way to the hospital she told the paramedic there was a piece of car in her hip. Now she’s full of it, metal pins and plates, pieces of reconstructed honeycomb bone. She swallows. Metal is good for her now.
Fran finds her car on the mainland where she left it. A film of dirt has settled on the top. She’ll stay with Joe for a couple of nights while she’s here. The car splutters to life. There’s still water in the windscreen-washer tank. The wipers smear dirty water across the screen and she has to find a rag to clean the window manually.

She pulls out on the highway. The city seems like a trick after living on the island. Fran can see the cracks. Beneath the roads and footpaths are flattened hills, water pipes, electricity poles. An illusion. Everyone has forgotten that electricity lines used to cross every street, the occasional dead bird or bat hanging from them. When the lines fell, people were cut off from power. On the island, electricity is still a luxury for some. Many houses in the village run on generators. Most in town have solar panels. The council says they’re considering building a small power plant but no one seems to know where it will go. Here on the mainland everything is hidden. Even the construction sites are draped with hessian, the buildings painted on until the real ones are revealed.

Traffic is heavy but Fran is glad to be in the slump of it, slowly drifting past familiar shops and streets. Joe is out and she has to ask the neighbour to let her in. She potters away the morning, delaying the drive to her mother Hilda’s place.

Fran stops at a bakery near the assisted living home to get a cream bun for afternoon tea. She’d never be forgiven for arriving without a cake or pastry. Hilda still upholds nineteenth century rules of etiquette. Being unhappy about the move, Hilda might fracture over the absence of a bun like a cold teapot filled with boiling water.

Hilda greets Fran at the door with surprise as though they hadn’t already spoken about her coming.

‘Oh I’m so glad you’re here darl. I’ve missed you since you moved.’

Fran hugs Hilda then puts the bun on the kitchen bench.
‘Oh you didn’t need to bring anything for tea.’ Hilda sings. The proper way to respond to the customary offering. No cake would result in an awkward look and an apology for having nothing to serve with tea in lowered tones to emphasise the misfortune.

Hilda gets a plate out of the cupboard and unwraps the bun.

‘Want a hand mum?’

‘No I’m fine dear. Should I make us something more to go with tea? Have you had lunch?’

‘No no. Don’t fuss. Ya might kill yourself.’ Fran laughs.

Her mother’s hands tremble as she fills the old-fashioned metal kettle and puts it on the stove. Reckons it tastes better than the plastic ones.

‘I’m not that far gone yet my love.’

Hilda slices the bun, scoops some butter onto a butter dish and arranges these on the dinner table. Fran sits in front of the butter and waits. Hilda pours water into a tea pot, swirls the leaves and empties the milk bottle into a jug. She places each on a tray with her good tea cups.

‘Why don’t I carry that for you?’ Fran gets up.

‘No, you sit. I’m the host here my dear.’ Her hands tremble and the cups rattle against the tray. She’s filled the pot and the jug halfway to avoid them spilling. Fran puts milk in their cups and lifts the tea pot to a height, making the water froth as it hits the milk. A French woman once did this for Hilda and she swears the tea is better this way.

‘Now tell me, how are ya doing on that island? You must feel like you’re always on holiday? Alright for some.’

Fran butters a slice of bread. Hilda disapproves of what she considers Fran’s indulgent lifestyle. ‘Exactly mum. I’ve rented a little shop space, sell me work and make enough to live there. Who says we can’t have it all?’
‘Oh good. Well I’m glad you’re having a good time.’ Then she says like a throw-away comment. ‘Did you manage to get the piano moved?’

Fran had hoped she wouldn’t bring it up. She hesitates. Hilda continues. ‘It’s got to go somewhere love. That old thing. I’ve had it nearly all my life. They tell me I can’t have it here. It can’t stay at the house because Aunty Trish keeps tripping over it. Why is it taking so long to move the thing out, that’s what I want to know?’

‘It’s tricky mum. The piano doesn’t fit through the front door. Joe knows someone that wants it though.’

‘Well you’ll have to explain to Trish. She’s not happy. This has been going on for months. You know Trish, she’s getting cranky at her age.’

‘I’ll have a talk to Joe.’

‘Well I hate to point it out love, but you’ve said that before.’

‘Let Joe take care of the piano mum. He’ll figure something out.’

‘And while you’re here you ought to go and see those grandkids of yours. I know you don’t like to hear it love but you’ve already lost a husband, you don’t want to lose those kids of yours. As a mother it’s your job to help.’

*Lost a husband,* she says it like he wondered off in the backyard. Fran might even find him at the bottom of her tea cup. She gulps down the too-strong brew.

‘Well it’s been lovely to catch up mum but I’ve gotta go. I want to visit dad on the way back.’

‘Okay dear. Well I’ve loved seeing you again.’

Hilda hugs Fran then presses a hundred dollars into her hand. Fran knows she can’t afford it. Stupid woman. Determined to be a martyr. Fran slips it back into her handbag by the front door.
Fran stops at the lawn cemetery. Her father’s grave is like all the others; a bare plot with a small stone lying flat against the ground. Only stark details:

Frederick Lee Bairn  
3/6/1933 – 3/12/1973  
Beloved of Fran and Hilda

She doesn’t need to bring flowers. The cemetery places pots of fake flowers at each grave as part of the service. Hilda has already reserved the plot beside him. Fran stands by the grave and thinks about all the bodies under the dirt, human and pet animal bones, the carcasses of bugs and trees. She hates the idea of being put underground, all the fuss and expense of coffins and burial space. They can’t keep reserving land for dead bodies. She’s told her kids, when she goes they can just cremate her. Save themselves the money. Have a big party instead, give her a proper goodbye.

Joe’s home. Fran finds him in the lounge, something playing on the TV. He presses stop and turns the kettle on. Fran curls up in the armchair closest to the kitchen. They wait for the kettle to fade and Joe leans on the breakfast bar to talk to her.

‘How’s grandma? Did you make her dinner or anything?’

‘You know mum, she won’t take help from anyone.’

‘But did you offer?’ He gets out a pan and puts it on the stove.

‘Course I did. Cheeky bastard. She insisted on doing the dishes if you must know. Only two cups.’

‘So I am a bastard. Who was he?’ Joe folds his arms, leans against the cupboard. ‘Or don’t you know? Were there just too many?’ He raises an eyebrow.

‘Oh stop it. You know exactly who your father is.’

‘The guy at the supermarket. The one who used to save you the good vegies?’

Fran throws a tea towel left on the coffee table. He catches it and laughs. She presses her lips together, frowns at Joe. ‘Frank would be hurt to hear you say that.’
Joe goes to the cupboard. His words are muffled as he mumbles to the pasta. ‘Yeah well he’ll never hear me say it, will he? Haven’t seen him for years.’
City of Metal

Brick hits glass at 5.05pm. A crunch and thump. People crouch, scream, run. Two middle-aged women huddle in a corner. Acacia has come to watch the CBD fill with dough-people. Most try to get away. Despite the designer shops and corporates, this street has a reputation for random gunmen, robberies, ram-raids. Easy to spot radicals – hoodies are a bit suss in October. Sweat soaks under armpits, and across lower backs. An act of reclamation. Some kind of Robin Hood shit. A mass of hoods fill out David Jones. A mad grab for clothes, jewellery, wallets, perfumes. Some shoppers realise, there are no guns. Looters multiply. A chick who was prepared to pay a hundred and eighty dollars for a dress fifteen minutes ago is stuffing it in a four-hundred-dollar handbag and walking out with it for free. A warm up.

The boys thought this would be a good time to protest. Street lights flicker on. A low whine drums along the street. Cooler air blows in from the coast. Not summer yet. Acacia meets Michael near a window full of diamante handbags and they walk to the end of the building. Jake and a couple of other guys leg it across the road in between traffic to meet them. They want to wreck The Meeting Spot, an outdoor garden café reserved for politicians and corporates while people down river live in half rotten houses, mud and sewerage in their yards. Floods had inundated the outer suburbs. Over and over, the rain kept coming. The boys are going to pour gasoline on the garden, kill the plants. This isn’t a crude act. They’re fully high-tech. Hackers disable the electronic gates.

‘Wanna’ help us?’ Michael asks.

He leans by the corner of the building, biting his tongue piercing, pulling at the metal with his teeth. Jake lights a cigarette.

‘Nah she’s a vegetarian. Aren’t you Kay?’ Jake uses her old nickname, one he knows she hates. ‘A tree hugger.’

Acacia punches his arm. He flinches, laughs.

‘Ferns are her friends.’
She kicks his shin. Too hard. The other guys are laughing and smoking. Michael is on his phone, hood up, cigarette between his teeth.

‘Thought you chicks were supposed to be caring,’ Jake says.

‘I’m not your fucking mum.’

Michael’s phone beeps. They walk the block to *The Meeting Spot*. Ross is already there. He wheels three red plastic bottles to the entrance. Gas fumes in the air.

‘How can you call yourself a true anarchist?’ Ross shakes his head. Michael must have told him she wasn’t going to help.

Acacia puts on her teen pop voice.

‘I’m like totally anti-establishment.’

Acacia leaves them. She wants to check out what else is going on. In an alley, piles of designer clothes, 3D solar TVs, unopened boxes of stock. Around the corner, shrieks come from the pet shop. Fuck cages. Acacia picks up a rock.

A CCTV camera whirrs above her, throwing itself around the black capsule like a trap-door spider with its prey. There will be screens in the city tomorrow, hundreds of partial faces on loop. No hood, she’s screwed.

At the end of the street, police lights. Acacia pauses, arm back, feels the weight of the rock in her hand. A van pulls up next to the cop cars, drops off police in riot gear, leaves. Batons drawn, shields up, guns holstered. Paddy wagons waiting to haul people away.

‘Fucking cages,’ Acacia shouts and throws the rock.
The house is quiet beneath a still dark sky. Violet is too anxious to sleep in. She spends the early hours wiping surfaces, putting things away, dusting. Untidy houses make her itch. She always finds a clean and uncluttered room helps her to think clearly. That’s what she needs this morning, a clean house, a clear mind. Violet’s brother, Fin, will marry in the park where Delilah was murdered. His fiancé, Meredith’s choice. The wedding is at ten so most people will be up at seven, to do their hair and make-up, to gather the bridesmaids. Her house is full of sleeping bodies, each room with an occupant. Violet enjoys the time alone. For most of the day she will be surrounded by people.

Violet puts her bridesmaids dress on at seven. The purple lace flowing down her body in vines and blossoms. Flowers fixed in a band around her head. Her dark hair is straightened, pinned and re-curl, a backdrop to the purple and white petals. Violet feels like a garden hedge being pruned; hands and implements brushing coloured powders over her face and plucking away stray hairs. After an hour and a half, she’s made up. In the mirror she can’t help but think she looks a bit like a bleeding heart, the purple detail on the dress creating a heart-shape at her waist.

The bridal party pile into cars and head to the park. Violet arrives and waits in the car with the bridesmaids until Fin, and the guests are ready. The whole day is about flowers, buds of new life, an implied transformation of wife, mother, reproductive vessel. The guests sit outdoors under two raised canopies framed with creeping plants covered in pungent white blossoms. The altar is Delilah’s rotunda, decked out with a trellis covered in large-leaved vines with bunches of purple grapes grown fat on the recent rains. By the edges of the altar are set large pots of white roses trained around heart shaped lattices.

When it’s time, Violet walks the path through the garden and up the path to the rotunda. She tries not to look at the rust-coloured blood spots staining the steps. She stands along the side and avoids looking at the seat where Delilah’s body had been. The rotunda is filled with potted flowers now like a memorial garden. Down the aisle past vases of white roses, over the guests seated on the lawn, the bride walks past stems of
violets and purple orchids, matching the posy she holds at her waist. Like most coloured orchids, these ones were dyed for the occasion. The plants, fed on coloured water, would have drawn it up through their veins and spread colour along the petals.

Violet climbs up to the altar and stands while people read poems and the priest reads the vows. The ceremony could be a funeral. The audience begins to look bored when Fin and Meredith move to a seat at the back of the stage to sign the forms. When the ceremony is over and the bride and groom are ready to walk down the aisle, the audience rises, ready to perform their role. They’ve all forgotten about Delilah’s death. Petals are thrown over the couple and get crushed beneath the feet of the guests trailing behind.

Violet remembers their own wedding. The honeymoon room had been filled with violets at Russell’s request. The pungent scent had made Violet heady until the ionone kicked in making the smell fade and return in waves washing over her. Petals on the bed fell limp to the floor when they got in. Exhausted from the flight, Russell told her the story of violets. Venus and her son Cupid had argued about the goddess’s beauty. He thought a group of young women were better looking than her. Venus was jealous, as all Greek and Roman goddesses seem to be, and she thrashed the women until they were black and blue – violets. This made violets popular as an aphrodisiac and a funeral flower for children. The petals on their bed were meant as an aphrodisiac of course. They slept instead.

Violet wakes from a nightmare just before dawn. Meredith was dead in the rotunda and something had been chasing her through the park. She was confused. First it was a man, then a dingo but when she reached the museum it was a fire licking at her in great swirling strokes.

She slips from bed and let’s herself out into the garden. The scents of flowers in the damp air sweep over her and her heart calms. In the cool night Violet removes her nightdress and walks along the path to the bottom of the garden like Eve or Venus. Her body emanates heat like the previous day had charged a fire running under her skin. Maybe the alcohol was still in her. A cabbage patch has gone to seed, tiny yellow
stamens dusted with pollen protrude from the heads. They would be bitter and inedible. She touches her hand to her flat stomach. If she went tomorrow she would leave nothing.
The CBD. People fidget, wait for the lights. Fingers flick at phones. Feet shuffle. Acacia has come to see the aftermath. Later she’ll meet up with the gang. See what’s on. A hot breeze blows through the heat. Leaves jitter on curb-side trees – addicts, high on all this sun. Winter wattle lingers, mixing with jasmine, frangipani: the aroma of approaching summer. Thick floral-scented humidity, what her mum would call claustrophobic. This is what happens when you grow up playing in the streets like a stray dog. Acacia loves this weather. The world tinted through sunglasses. She drums her fingers on her thigh. The light flashes green. Acacia walks.

People in hooded t-shirts hang at the corner. Not the ones from yesterday. Kids who pretend they’ll steal your phone right from your hands. Lame. Women go to work gripping their handbags. Glass swept up, windows covered with chipboard. Above the shop fronts, the buildings usually covered with ads flash through faces. Have you seen this person? CCTV footage of rioters. Acacia stops to stare. Above the bank a montage of videos, her face captured nine times: snippets of her stepping through a broken shop window. Damn.

Head down, she walks fast, to the end of the street, ducks into a coffee shop. A shack, packed between two massive multi-storied buildings. From one of the tables, someone’s hushed voice, glance over a shoulder. She orders a coffee and waits, taps her credit card against her leg. The police can’t charge her. She was afraid the rioters would harm the animals. That’s what she’d tell them.

A row of TVs on the wall. Acacia looks up the news. Front page, her face. The video plays, clips of her and others. The newscaster talks about the riot. A government official has already blamed the influence of the music industry. Several people flash onto the screen – piercings, spiked and coloured hair, dressed in black. Then rock, punk, metal bands; a confusion of genres and scenes. The video closes with a shot of her face amongst others and a comment from a journo.

‘The mayor has described the people responsible for the riots as parasites to the poverty crisis. He said he won’t support these efforts to exploit the recent floods so young criminals can cause destruction and make a profit.’
She raises her right hand to bring up the menu and flicks her wrist to turn the TV off. The screen fades to black.

Only a couple of others in the cafe. The barista makes her soy latte, places the hot paper cup on the counter. She takes the latte and leaves. She’ll catch up with the guys another time. The bitter coffee is like a shock of electricity. She sips as she speed walks home, glancing at people as she passes, looking for recognition, waiting for someone to point her out.

Acacia waits out the day at home. The pub has an event on. Local poker champs. She arrives early. Rick lets her in. He rubs his neck, says hi, looks away. She asks if the riots have affected the championship. He says they might have to close early if the rioters move south but it’s not likely. All depends on what the looters want: beer, clothes or jewellery.

The game kicks off at seven. Customers around the tables glisten from the humidity outside: pink cheeks, straightened hair contaminated by frizz. The cold air-con in the bar a relief for some swanning under the vents. Acacia would rather be out there in the delicious furnace of the streets.

At eight a guy walks in, whispers something to Rick. He was wrong. The looters want liquor. Someone’s already smashed the window of a McDonalds a few streets away, threatened staff. A different mood tonight. Simple tastes, more violence. The guys stop the music and Acacia announces to the room that they’ve got to close, reschedule the game. The guy winning isn’t happy. He gets up from his seat. An off-white wife-beater stretched across his massive body, already splattered with beer.

‘Fuck those cunts. I’ll fucking take them on.’

He flicks his tongue at the corner of his mouth, wipes his nose on the back of his hand. A couple of his mates pat him on the back, tell him, ‘Good on ya Locky but it’ll be you the police get.’

Someone jokes about how slow he’d run. Another friend calls him *The Tank*, some kind of reference to rugby. He laughs and forgets the cards. Acacia gently reminds
them the pub is closing and they leave. Locky clenches his fist, ready to meet the rioters. His friends’ problem now. The boys board up the windows with sheets of wood that Rick picked up yesterday. Acacia puts the alcohol in cupboards under the counter, locks them and cleans down the bar.

Something hits the door about 8.20. Shit. They weren’t quick enough. A brick shatters the last window, not yet covered. She can hear Rick outside shouting at the rioters. Two boys in balaclavas kick the glass in.

‘Where’s the fuckin liquor?’ He points at the empty shelves.

‘None left hey. Busy night. You know how it is.’ She knows he doesn’t. Punk looks twelve: his overgrown hood, his not-yet-deep voice. They look out to the street. Rick punches a man, older, maybe their father.

‘Just give us whatever the fuck you have.’ His friend pulls out a flick knife, fumbles to open it.

She doesn’t risk his inexperience. ‘Maybe there’s an old bottle or two around.’ She unlocks one of the cupboards. Gets out the cheap stuff.

Rick, Ross and Blake step through the glass, faces cut up and bleeding. The kids grab the liquor and climb out the window, waving the knife. Rick and Ross let them go, then put the last board up on the inside. No use protecting the glass now. She relocks the cupboard.

Rick is out the back when Acacia goes to get her things. The new roster is up. Her name isn’t on the list.

‘What’s up?’

He dabs his eye with ice wrapped in a bar rag. ‘Look Gus called me. He’s seen the news. You need to sort it out with the police before he’ll agree to have you back. Especially when you’re working tonight and the riots come this way.’

Acacia glares, hands on hips. What a prick.
‘I mean I don’t think you have anything to do with it but to Gus it looks like you do.’

Acacia just stares at him, her eyes drawn in, lips clasped.

‘Look I’m not firing you. I just can’t give you any shifts at the moment.’

Acacia takes the long way home. Winding streets, still-warm concrete, the beat of drums in her ears. She passes a wall stuck with posters, an unexpected image, her sister. Another poster pasted beside from the museum – a Freda Kahlo exhibition. Freda, bare breasts, cracked down her chest, beneath, a metal spine. Her sister’s poster is a council message. Acacia scratches at the edge of the Kahlo picture. Paper and dried glue under her nails, she rips, leaving a white shape as the paper tears. Almost intact, she rolls the poster up, continues. Her sister. What a stiff.

A gunshot echoes off the buildings. Acacia can’t tell where it comes from. She picks up her pace. Rain falls. The hot path steaming around her feet. A group of looters jog down the street, hoods up, heads covered. The purple sky illuminates with a fork of lightning. Acacia runs to her building, heads up to her room. The rain sets in, gets heavier. Another storm. Shouting, feet on pavement, police sirens. The rain intensifies. Hailstones glance off roofs. The streets go quiet.

Acacia lies in bed, listens to the beat of water and ice against metal eves. Shortly before two a hailstone pierces the window. Glass shatters onto the floor. Acacia rolls a metal ball on her tongue. Bed against the wall, covers pulled over her. She listens to the rain beating on the tiles. Electricity in the air. She can feel the current. Her hair stands on end. Another thunder clap echoes in her room. Across the city, hailstones smash windows, train tunnels fill with flood water, holes appear in roofs. By the morning the riot is over. The premier praises himself as though he was responsible.
Fran stumbles down a dirt road and across the empty paddocks behind her house. She’s been on the plonk since two. Carol’s daughter Margaret left her boyfriend and came to the island for a break. She found him cheating with a bird from his office. Fran brought them over some wine, told Margo she should have it off with one of the islanders to teach her ex a lesson. They talked for hours about life on the island. Carol and Margo had gone for a walk through the resort earlier in the day and Margo is dead keen to move here. Fran left a spare bottle of wine on their kitchen bench. If they like it, she’ll bring a few boxes to the island to sell. Greg sold her a dozen cheap the last time she visited the mainland. He said he’ll let Fran buy a dozen at three bucks each. Even if she only sold them for five she’d still make a profit. Maybe she could do up a nice label for the bottles, get Carol’s husband to print them.

Alcohol churns inside her, watering down her blood and making the world soft. She falls into the tree daisy at the corner of the house, scratching her knee on a prickle bush. Thunder in the distance. She lies there admiring the first open daisies, long milky petals and centres of yolk. Toma’s wife had offered her the cutting when she’d first moved in, after the storm wrecked her garden. Kohurangi, that’s what Tarni called it. Fran found out the English name, Kirks Tree Daisy. Toma told her which plants grow well here and which don’t. Anything that grows too slowly or is sensitive to wind risks being damaged unless you rig up a shelter. Her ears ring. She gets her stiff body up and stumbles. Fran laughs at herself for getting this sloshed on a Tuesday. She climbs the stairs, holding onto the railing and taking big slow steps. A flash on the horizon, near Mount Bogong. Another storm coming in. Frangipani undresses and climbs into bed. Her sheets are soft and white against her bare brown thighs.

The phone wakes her at seven the next morning. Her body aches. Drowsy, she answers to Joe on the other end. He asks how she is, then the line cuts out. The phone company said the signal had been improved but if it has she can’t tell. She wonders if she tried to call Joe last night, to tell him about Margo. She’ll invite him over to meet her. Fran tries to call him back. The phone just beeps so she goes back to bed.
Just before eleven a car pulls up outside. Toma has come to see her. He seems surprised when she answers the door wrapped in her dressing gown. A stink wafts in, like eggs rotting in the sun. Toma tells her it’s the sulphur released from the mountain.

‘Don’t tell me you didn’t hear it.’

‘What?’ Fran rubs her eyes. ‘What’s going on?’

‘The mountain.’

Her face stiffens.

‘Nothing serious. The old fella rolled over in his sleep and farted ay? Loud enough though. Woke everyone else up.’

The flash over the mountain? She’d heard thunder but can’t remember hearing any rain. ‘An eruption?’

Frangipani only knows one thing about eruptions. She’s seen those movies where lava lurches down the side of a mountain, a thick tar that envelopes everything below, like Pompeii. An ex had taken her to Italy when she was in her twenties, to see the ruined Roman town. Concrete corpses laid out in a garden near where they fell. Jerry had told her it was plaster not concrete, that the bodies were just empty spaces in the rock but what does he know? Her fingers tremble. She imagines her body buckled under the weight of ash and scratching at the sky, a hardened white corpse laid out at her front door for all the tourists to see.

Toma laughs, puts his hand on her shoulder and invites himself in. ‘Nothing to worry about. Bit of ash, couple of rocks, just noise. Wanted a bit of attention, ay? That’s all.’

Fran’s not so sure but relaxes in Toma’s presence. She makes a mental note to perfect her pose later. If she’s going to become a statue when she goes she may as well look good. He makes tea and they sit on the porch and talk. The garden reeks. Fran sits her tea down. She’ll have one later, inside.

‘This small eruption will stop pressure from building up and causing something bigger,’ he says. ‘We only worry when the volcano is silent for too long.’
She doesn’t want to talk about volcanoes so she asks about his family and work. Tarni had her baby earlier in the week, a little boy, Toma is proud to announce. Fran politely enquires of his health and then changes the subject. Toma has a big job later in the week, taking some researchers and their equipment out to the embedded canoe. Apparently they’re not going to dig the whole thing out after all, ethical reasons. They don’t want to damage a sacred site. Probably don’t want to pay the compensation fee either.

Toma leaves. Maybe she wasn’t quite as drunk as she thought last night. Easier to tell herself falling over in the shrubbery was the volcano’s fault.

On her last visit to the mainland Fran had bought some fishing line, clasps, and fake pearls. Yesterday she’d gone for a walk along the beach to find a few shells for necklaces. Most of the conical shells had hermit crabs or other creatures inside so she’d settled for some flat scallop shells. Next time she visits the mainland she’ll have some jewellery to sell at the markets. Her things are already laid out on the coffee table so she makes some toast and coffee for breakfast and beads in between bites.

Lynn comes by for tea in the afternoon. They sit on the balcony and smoke. Fran shows her a couple of the necklaces. The sort of thing you can buy at any market or souvenir shop near a beach. Silver clasps hold a shell in place at the centre of a string of the cheap pearls. The holes of the beads reveal the clear plastic beneath the pearlescent paint. Beaded together you can hardly tell they’re fake, but you can tell. Lynn reckons people would pay fifteen or twenty dollars for one. She’s staying next door, Rob’s girlfriend. She and Lynn call him Robinson Crusoe as a joke. Their cackling laughter mingles with the throaty gurgling of kookaburras. Sometimes Rob stays at Lynn’s house on the mainland for weeks, until they have a fight or he tells her he needs to come home. Fran gives Lynn a bottle of red, tells her if they like it she can get them some more. Lynn’s a beautician and Fran reckons she’ll get a free treatment if she keeps doing favours for them. She’s already started watering the garden while Rob’s away. Just before Lynn leaves, Fran gives her one of the rougher looking necklaces. She might even be able to convince Lynn to sell them at her salon.
Carol calls late in the afternoon and invites Fran to have dinner and a swim at the hot pools. The day is cool and they’re supposed to get frost overnight. Margo, Carol’s daughter, said it’ll be the perfect temperature to go. She used to live near some pools in New Zealand and knows. Fran’s hesitant after the eruption but the pools are near the bottom of the mountain and Carol has offered to pay.

Margaret hires a car for the evening from Lowanna, a woman who advertises on the notice board down by the docks. Lowanna drops the car off in the afternoon and walks home in the fading light. Carol and Margo probably should’ve offered to drive her back but Fran doesn’t mention that. The sea-green tattoo around Lowanna’s mouth and the scars along her shoulders make Fran wonder if she’s mystic. Maybe she’ll curse them for making her walk home.

Fog spreads across the road near the base of the mountain. They drive with the hazard lights on, the fog lights are broken. At least the road is sealed up here. Spirals of steam catch in the lights swirling from the ground at random. When they’re free from the fog they see more lights in the distance, a sign strung with fluorescent bulbs marking the restaurant. Steam billows out like breath, clearing and then obscuring the entrance again. Each puff, a damp blanket of warmth in the chilled air. She’s reminded of the mainland in summer, a moist tropical heat filled with the smell of the neighbour’s mango tree.

A walkway leads through the bush to the top of the hill and the restaurant, a large wooden building with a heavily angled roof. Fran, Carrol, Margaret and Phillip sit at one of the mango wood tables by a large glass window that looks over the valley and hot pools below. Dinner is a buffet of local seafood and vegetables steamed in the springs. The high mineral content and high temperature of the water give the vegetables a robust earthy flavour. Carol and Margaret talk about the potatoes like they talk about wine, analysing the flavours. Fran can’t tell the difference, she hasn’t become a connoisseur of spuds yet. Carol’s husband Phillip jokes, in his slight French accent, that they taste like a mashed romance novel, boring and pulpy. Fran always liked those cheap romance novels. She laughs anyway because he looks so serious.
After dinner, they walk along the boardwalk to get to the hot pools. Small lights along the ground marking out the walkway and signposts identifying sights in the distance that Fran can’t see: a champagne coloured spring to the left, tree ferns, pandanus palms, mutton birds and monitor lizards. A sudden laugh echoes from the bush, a mwa haha that makes Fran jump. Carol laughs.

“It’s a tree frog,” she says, “We get them on our windows all the time.”

There are several man-made pools and spas in the valley with water diverted from the springs, as well as a natural lake. Fran feels wrong changing into a bathing suit on such a cold night. Goosebumps trail across her arms and the brief walk from the changing rooms to the pool leaves her shivering. She’d wanted to get into the hottest bath straight away, forty-two degrees of tranquillity, but Margo said it would be better to get into the coldest and work their way up. Fran throws herself into the lake and the heat chews at her fingers and toes. The spring is only twenty-eight degrees but her toes are almost numb from the cold air and now they throb with the feeling of dozens of needles pricking. Her cheeks go red. She keeps her fingers out of the water but resists the urge to stick her feet in the air to cool them down.

After a short while her body adjusts and the water begins to feel lukewarm. She re-emerges and moves into the shallower bathing pool, a little hotter, thirty-two according to the thermometer. Once again the heat nips at her fingers and toes but not as severely this time. The water is silky and the stone tubs have a film on them that feels spongy against her back. Phillip tells her the minerals in the water are supposed to be good for your health but he’s a sceptic. Margo tells him that he already looks five years younger. He warns Fran about putting her head under the water.

‘There’s a parasite that lives in mineral springs. What it does is swim up your nose, lodge in your brain and kill you.’

‘You could have told me that before Phil. I just went for a swim in the lake.’

Carol laughs off his comments. ‘You’ll be right love. There’ve only been a few deaths in the last fifty years,’ she says, ‘So if you do catch it you’ll be famous.’ They laugh.
They leave at nine, the last ones out. Fran’s skin is wrinkled and pink. By the
time she gets out of the car at home she’s lost the glow of warmth. Something stirs in
the garden and Fran hurries up the stairs. She’s still not used to being in a place without
poisonous snakes. The kitchen is a mess of beads and bottles. On the fridge is a note and
a ticket for the ferry. The week has flown. Fran collects the finished jewellery and an
order form for the wine with several pieces listed and puts them into a box ready for the
morning. She’ll take the week, set up at the local markets and be back next Monday
with more orders to fill.

When Fran gets off the boat the next morning, a van is waiting for her in the parking lot
at the docks. She gets in in, starts it up and files into the morning traffic. Cars tailgate,
zip in and out of lanes, pass in front of her and then slow down. Saturday drivers. She
puts in a CD and turns up the volume, something Joe recorded for her as a joke, a local
band with thick islander accents and a metal drum in the background. She almost wishes
she was heading back to the island.
Part Two: Rupture

A continent moves in increments. Under water, land meets land and forces up mountains along the coastline lifting shellfish into the sky. Seawater is replaced with snow. Ripples reverberate across the surface in quakes and shockwaves. A bubble of magma beneath the crust erupts from the surface. Fissures open, an island splits off and part ways. A small jump becomes a trench. Land drifts out of sight towards the frozen south leaving a sheer rock face. The same forest is separated by three oceans. Small changes appear on the bare cliff. Water rushes through, eating caves into the rock. A drip in the roof builds silica towers, leaves calcium stalactites. Boats arrive, cities rise, families split apart.
Acacia knocks. Apartment 703, The Majestic. Water trickles from a fountain in the lobby. Signs point the way to the gym, indoor and outdoor pools, two spas. Hundreds of marble pots line the halls. Through the window Acacia can see the flood wall skirting the boundary of the property.

Near the concierge a model of the building’s drainage system is displayed like an abstract artwork. This place isn’t that close to the floodplains. Down river, the low lying ground of the outer suburbs is vulnerable. Natural catchment areas were drained, built on and are now inundated by rising river levels. The city is protected from the worst of the floods but it’s nice to know the rich are safe. The door heaves inwards, a lead weight. Rosella stares at Acacia, ushers her in, checks the hall.

‘How did you get up here?’

She hasn’t seen Acacia in years. Her pink lips are poised, teeth ready to gnash. They used to look more alike. The shape of Acacia’s face skewed in the accident. Head rounded out by the plate, cheeks sunken with scars. Rosella is taller, fitter, paled. Acacia can see where plastic surgery has smoothed out the imperfections. Sensible grey skirt and stockings, ponytailed blond hair – clean on the outside, like a politician.

‘Buzzed them all. Someone unlocked the door.’

Rosella’s apartment is stark, open-plan, cold. Straight from a design ad. White, black and red decor, a scarlet feature wall. The colour red may be the only thing they have in common.

‘What do you want?’ Rose stands by the door, blocking Acacia from going any further.

‘Nice place.’

‘It’s not really me but the apartment was prearranged. Did you come by to chit chat?’
Rose’s hand is on her hip. She sways her weight to the left, reminds Acacia of a wind-up doll. Acacia pushes past her and sinks into a red armchair. The place must’ve come furnished too.

‘You’ve probably seen the news but I haven’t done anything.’

Rose stiffens, both hands on her hips now. ‘You were there. Clearly you know those people. That’s enough as far as I’m concerned.’ She puts her fingers to her brow as though she has a headache, shakes her head, drops her hand and sighs. ‘I don’t know what you want from me Acacia.’

‘A sister who gives a shit would be nice.’

Rosella makes a small movement. Her shoulders drop, a crease across her forehead like she used to get as a child before she apologised. Rose goes to the kitchen, switches on the kettle. Busies herself with cups and teaspoons. A crack in her bearing, maybe she cares. Acacia gives her the sob story version.

‘I lost my job Rosy. I won’t find another until this is sorted out and the government doesn’t want to know. This thing about withholding services from rioters is a joke. Doesn’t matter that I didn’t do anything wrong. The police haven’t even charged me.’ Not a lie, the police haven’t had the opportunity. She’s been careful. ‘I’m running out of money.’

Rose stops, looks out the window. Then with a glance over her shoulder she says, ‘Of course. You want money. Well it’s not my problem anymore.’

Acacia gets off the couch. She can feel warm wood beneath her worn shoes. The floor is heated. What a joke. Just turn off the air conditioner, open a window, wear socks. She meets Rose’s gaze. Her sister – the automaton – cold, clean, controlled.

‘What a good little politician you are.’

‘We’re building a safe and sustainable city. I don’t know why you can’t see that Acacia.’ She sighs, a repetitive habit. ‘Maybe this isn’t the place for you.’

Acacia leaves and meanders in town, not ready to face home. The rent is due, has been for a while. She stops to check out the river district, the nice part. A wading pool mimics the twists in the river. Kids yell, parents shout, everyone’s having fun.
People just carry on. The river bank is steeper here, narrow. A catchment helps with any overflow. Acacia walks along the raised path skirting the river. A kid splashes in the shallows like there aren’t kids down river drowning in muddy fields.
13 City of Gardens

Russell and Violet arrive on the tropical north coast late in the afternoon, the fruit bowl of the country. The windows and doors have been left open and a bottle of wine on the table. The house is an old Queenslander raised on stilts. Russell’s aunt greets them from the garden where she’s watering the plants. When she’s finished she shows them their room. Violet, still feeling ill from the drive, lies on the sofa and sleeps while Russell has tea with his aunt. She lives next door but rents her second house out to people on holidays. This was her gift to them, a few weeks together.

Violet wakes to the chirping of cicadas, the kissing of geckoes and the warble of a bird waiting on the balcony railing for a morsel of food. The early morning sun spills across the kitchen from the open door. She takes a ripe avocado from a bowl of fruit, cuts into the jade flesh and removes the seed. This avocado should be extinct she thinks biting each chunk from the skin.

Violet leaves Russell to sleep. She dresses and leaves, walking through the bush. A dead tree has fallen and dragged up a stone plate with its roots. She takes out her camera. Termites have already hollowed out some of the bark, turning wood into pellets that will eventually become soil leaving cavities for animals to live in. Death as the catalyst to life. Violet bends to capture the weight of the rock held in place. Some of the roots were severed by the tree falling but there are thick coils still buried. They’ll extend deep underground, not just a means of transporting water and nutrients from the soil but also a connection to an information super highway, communicating with other plants down the line via a network of fungus.

Violet takes one more picture and continues along the path through the bush. Across a field are wooden steps leading onto the rocky cliffs running along the sea. The cold air blows over from the Antarctic, full of salt. Her stomach flutters, blood rushes to her head as she reaches the top and looks down at the water, metres below. This is the first time today she’s thought about her stomach, still empty.

The railing stops at a rocky outcrop allowing people to walk over the surface. The only protection from falling off the edge are warning signs.
Somewhere in Indonesia, she’d heard women were given flower names when they reached puberty. They’d be named after something blooming at the time. When they had their first child, the mother would take a new name. Violet would always be Violet.

Violet makes her way down to the rocks and sits looking over the sea as waves thrash against the rocks. Her hair spirals and knots in the wind. Her eyes sting from gusts of cold air and tears form. Her chest heaves and hollows with breath. A woman appears from over the side, a bucket in one hand and a fishing rod in the other. Violet had seen her on the way up, climbing down the rocks not far above the churning froth of the water.

‘You got water in your eyes love.’ She shouts over the sound of the wind and sea. ‘It’s cold out here.’ A black toothed smile. ‘Come on, back to my place. I give you a cuppa. Hot one. You can tell me about the broken heart.’

Violet stands and tries to explain but the wind is too loud and her voice is lost. The woman takes her arm. She sings a song as they walk but Violet can’t understand the words.

The woman’s house is like the one her and Russell are staying in but instead of a closed-in garage under the stilts, there’s an open platform with a TV and lounge chairs. She gently pushes Violet towards a chair then hurries up the stairs. The chair is still warm from the morning sun, now hiding behind the clouds. The garden is full of fruit: red strawberries, pink dragon fruit, yellow paw-paws and bananas. Bright ripe fruit. Another tactic to entice us to eat only when the seeds are ready. Ripe fruit is sweeter and easier to see, an incentive to wait.

The woman returns with a box of tissues under her arm and two cups of tea which drip onto the steps as she hurries back down.

‘I’m Josie. You staying near here?’

Violet takes the cup from her hands and feels the liquid soak into her skirt as she holds it against her leg.

‘Violet.’ she says placing her hand on her chest. ‘We’re staying down at Margaret’s bed and breakfast.’
‘Ah Margaret. She’s a nice one.’

Hot tea burns Violet’s tongue and they sit in silence for a couple of minutes.

‘Aren’t you worried someone will steal this?’ Violet asks.

‘No one would want my stuff. It’s old, cheap, not worth it.’ She waves her hand as though it’s not important. ‘Now tell Aunty, what happened?’

Violet is surprised by the woman’s affection. She balances the tea against her leg.

‘Did he hurt you love? Want Aunty to sort him out?’

Violet feels her eyes fill with salt water, another wave swells inside her. She tries to blink them back and speak.

‘No Josie.’ She pats her face with a tissue, gulps breath. ‘It’s not him.’ She says as though Josie knows her husband.

Violet holds her breath for a count of three, closes her eyes until her breathing returns to normal. ‘I lost the baby.’

Josie puts her arm around Violet.

‘Oh, it’s the baby. Don’t cry niece. You will have him again. Don’t worry. I’ll make you medicine.’

When Violet stops crying Josie goes inside. White and grey clouds roll over, engorged with water, about to deliver a downpour.

Josie returns with an old jam jar filled with a white and green paste.

‘You rub this one.’ She points to Violet’s skirt. ‘On that one. Before you love your husband.’

Violet thanks her and collects her things.

‘No no. Rain is coming. I give you a lift.’ Josie points to a car near the house. The blue paint is scratched and the metal rusted underneath. When Violet gets in, the car sinks with her weight and groans as Josie starts it up.
At the house, Margaret and Josie chat in the garden. Violet finds Russell inside, annoyed. He was worried, he says. He walked along the cliff, through the bush and couldn’t find her. She’d left her phone at the house. Violet wraps the jar of paste in a sarong and buries it in her suitcase.
Station is packed. Eight tracks, trains blow in and out. People hurrying past. Acacia stands on a platform, chewing a nail, staring at the yellow strip a half-metre from the edge. Yellow circles stamped on concrete: do not cross this line.

There’s a bed waiting for her in the suburbs, a bath, hot food, clothes. Michael has invited her to stay, keep her stuff there. A temporary move; she won’t get caught. The suburbs are a fishing trap, you swim in for food and rarely get out. The train approaches the station. Do not cross the line. People crowd next to her. Just a few nights, a change of clothes and she’ll be back. The train screeches to a halt. Her feet don’t move. The door opens in front of her. People rush out, in. Bodies brush against her. The conductor blows his whistle. Acacia jumps on the carriage.

The city moves by framed in the windows, like a dystopian film. Skyscrapers wind around the river, rise and fall in stories. The river splits, arteries flow through the city. Roads are veins mimicking the land’s curves, crisscrossing the water. Skyscrapers give way to single-storied industrial buildings, scrap yards, houses. An hour and a half on the train to get to the outer suburbs. Swampy flats emerge in the windows. Farms with cows chewing what grass is left in the fields, hooves wearing away in mud. Then houses on metal stilts. Washing draped on derelict balconies. Deconstructed cars in overgrown backyards, rusting metal leaches into wet soil. Acacia gets off at a station with a bare platform. A single corrugated-tin booth in the corner. An open-air bridge to the other side of the platform. No security cameras in the car park.

She walks along the river to Michael’s house. He opens the door, half asleep and shirtless. Mildew in the air; the smell of the ‘burbs. Flies hover around patches of grass where stagnant water pools. They land on their skin, drink their sweat and fly off.

‘I’m sick of nature.’ He says.

Afternoon pub visit: Acacia sits at a table and waits for Michael. Across the road her dad walks out of a shop. Track pants, singlet and thongs. Mop of sun-bleached hair in his eyes. Good on you dad. She moves behind the banister but he sees her.
'Acacia.' He hurries over. His unshaven face lights up.

‘What you doin’ here? Heard you got in some trouble.’ His shoulder bumps into her. ‘D’you get anything good?’

She rolls her eyes, doesn’t respond.

‘Come to dinner tonight. I’ll tell yer mum.’

Michael comes out with the beers. No choice. She’ll have to get it over with.

‘Hi Greg. How’s it going?’

‘You too Mike. Come to dinner.’

‘No thanks Greg. I’ve got other plans.’

He nods. Doesn’t attempt to change Michael’s mind. Waves his hand and leaves.

Acacia exhales, lets the irritation fade, her body relaxes.

Her parents’ house is the same. King and queen of their plastic castle. Acacia goes into the lounge via a doorway strung with beads. Her mother in an armchair in front of the TV. She struggles up, hand on back, and hobbles over to Acacia on her bad hip. Acacia endures the hugs, the smiles, the kisses.

‘Your sister is doing well isn’t she?’ The first thing her mother says.

Acacia holds her breath, stays silent.

Her father brings her a cup of water. She drinks. The clear plastic is scratched from years of scrubbing. They cling to these objects, made for temporary use back when plastic was cheap. Now the sea is smothered by a layer of soluble plastics and new laws have been made.
15 City of Mud

When Fran bought the house, the real estate had plugged several expected developments: an airport, a sewerage treatment plant, and a resort. The resort had already been built by the time Fran moved in but the sewerage plant was a work in progress and the airport was still just a piece of land marked out on a map, covered in rainforest. That changed things a bit. The resort was betting on international tourism but they mostly attracted couples from the mainland looking for a cheap holiday: wealthy retirees and bored southern honeymooners. There’s no coral reef so no scuba diving just sun, sand and surf. Even the temperature is not what those from the sub-tropics would consider hot. The island is not a perfect alternative. Like a delusion of grandeur, the resort sprawls across the western beach front. Vacant shops and restaurants circle the promenade. A small solar powered electricity station and sewerage system run the resort. The island’s first sky scraper only built to the sixteenth floor.

Fran sets up a stall in one of the empty shops. She got the place for free, temporarily though until the resort can get a Prada or a Gucci. She doesn’t expect much from these tourists. Not when the resort charges such high prices for recycled cabins decorated with milk paint. There’s a bed and breakfast in the village a couple of the men knocked up but they don’t talk about sustainable architecture. These tourists are more likely to question her use of sea shells than buy anything.

She covers a fold-out table with a white and gold cloth and places her necklaces in velour lined boxes on the table. A woman enters draped in a white kaftan, her floral bikini visible beneath. The sun has come out today and while the temperature is cooler than Fran is used to, the day is warm and there’s no wind.

‘Morning darl, how’s the beach today?’

The woman leans on the counter. ‘I don’t know how anyone can work on a day like this. Please tell me you’re not here all day. The water is absolutely divine.’

‘You know what they say. Just another day in paradise.’ Fran rolls her eyes as the woman turns her attention to the necklaces.

‘Oh these are gorgeous. My nieces will love them.’ She gushes.
‘How old are your nieces darl?’

‘I’ve got four. The oldest is thirteen and the youngest is five. I never thought I would find something to bring back for them but these are perfect.’

She chooses four necklaces and Fran puts them in their boxes. She stacks them in a paper bag and writes down the transaction in her book.

‘Four necklaces. I usually charge twenty each but I’m going to give you a little discount since it’s such a lovely day. So sixty all together makes one free.’ Fran winks and the woman hands over her money.

Fran sells necklaces to seven of the resorts guests and closes up by one with two necklaces left. She’ll have to make more for this crowd. If she makes a deal with one of the shops she could work from home most weeks and go to the mainland for the bigger markets.

Fran locks up the shop and changes into her bikini and sarong. The beach is on the other side of the resort. She walks across a series of boardwalks fanning out from the main hub. Weaving through the bush to the beach, Fran passes signs for the pool, bike hire and a vermiculture farm. She stubs her toe on one of the uneven planks, the dark wood warped, and stamped like an old shipping crate. Where the sand drops near the beach she can see one of the chalets cut off with a private fence. A short stone wall extends to the water. A sign: private beach. The chalets look settled with their aged wood, a stark contrast to the hotel and shopping district.

Sand stretches in clean white streaks across the beach. Water of lapis-lazuli blue laps at the shore in tranquil waves that barely break. Out in the distance stingrays jump from the warm water in arcs like primitive dolphins. Today feels like summer. Fran walks in the mild sunshine across the lightly warmed sand to dip her toes in the cool water.

A dog runs past her, spraying salt water into the air and all over Fran. Fur and water splash around her, then the dog drops a stick at her feet. His owner, a good-looking man in Hawaiian shorts jogs towards them. Fran picks up the stick and the dog stands, eyes on the wood. She throws it across the beach and the dog is off.

‘Sorry, he’s not bothering you is he?’
Drops of water on her skin drying in the sun leave goose bumps along her arms. He takes off his shirt and tucks it into his shorts like a rag.

‘Not at all darl’. He’s having the time of his life ay.’ He smiles, a black tooth in his grin.

The dog runs into the sea, swims in a circle and back out again then he takes off along the sand.

‘I’m Raro. He’s Simon the spaniel. Loves the water as you can tell.’

Raro whistles and the dog races back towards them, passes and runs along the beach in the other direction. Raro and Fran continue walking.

‘Do you need to go after him?’

‘Nah he’ll come back when he tires himself out. So, you’re staying at the resort?’

Fran laughs. ‘Nah I live in town. Just visiting this side of the island for a change. I got a stall in one of the shops.’

‘Ah, I’m down in the village. If you’re ever looking for a drink down my way.’

He winks than runs on after Simon.

Fran walks through the water back towards the shops. It might be summer but the water is still cold. She looks out against the glare of the sun and sees billowing clouds, plump with rain, pushed over the horizon by the wind. They move quickly. Fran knows what this means. She heads back up the beach to the shop, collects her clothes but doesn’t bother to change before getting in the car.

Toma is waiting for her when she arrives home. She pulls a towel around herself before she emerges from the car. She wonders if he knows Raro. The wind is already starting to pick up.

‘Thought you’d be staying in with this storm.’

‘Nah not a big one. We can have some tea ay. I’ll be home for dinner.’
Still in her bathing suit, Fran ties the tarpaulin across the stilts while trying to keep her towel in place. Toma moves what he can under the house. She wonders if he came for something more. Fran heads inside to dress. The filigree bench is now concreted in, so she can leave it amongst the fruit trees. Some of the more vulnerable plants: the paw-paw and banana have also been concreted in and staked up. The passionfruit vine is tattered but clinging heavily to the fence at the side of the house. Without the vine the fence might have fallen long ago but the tendrils twine around the wood and keep it together. Fran’s good fortune more than her forward thinking. She hopes they all hold out but there’s nothing more they can do.

When she’s dressed, Fran pours herself a double shot of gin. She finds Toma on the balcony, moving the table and chairs inside. She helps him pile them in an already crowded corner. Her casual attitude to tidying up the house is her own irritation in situations like this. Each time a storm comes she promises herself to put things away when she’s done with them, to vacuum and clear surfaces and each time she forgives herself for the mess.

The sky bruises, a purple and blue light fills the house. Fran puts the kettle on, gets some fruit and biscuits out for the table. She makes tea, a shot of gin in each. They sit in front of the television, chatting and drinking. She tries to ignore the bangs outside. Another shot of gin.

‘How’s Tarni and the kids love?’

‘Tarni was up most of the night. Some of the kids are sick. I left them sleeping.’

The floorboards whine beneath her. The wind moans through the walls. Another bad one. Fran jumps as a wave of water hits the house hard. Toma puts his arm around her. Fran leans into him. His body feels warm and hard beside her. She presses her lips to his neck. He doesn’t pull away.

She whispers in his ear. ‘Stay the night. You can tell Tarni you got caught in the storm.’

Toma stiffens and she pulls away. He gets up.

‘Sorry Fran, I gotta go.’ He laughs and nods at the bottle of gin on the table.

‘Too much gin ay. Maybe I should stock up if it has that effect on women.’
She laughs, putting on a slur. ‘Anytime love.’ She gets up to see him out. He drives into the rain, his car battered by the drops. She can hardly see him turn into the road before he’s blurred by the deluge.

The clouds blow out as quickly as they blew in leaving a clean sky the colour of a Kashmir sapphire. Fran opens the balcony doors and replaces the furniture. The island feels like it’s just risen out of the sea, water glinting off every surface. Her garden is tattered but everything is still there more or less. In the dusk of the day, Fran walks through the sopping streets to the pub, hoping to bump in Raro.
The CBD is busy. Acacia drifts through the streets in a daze. Her stomach groans. She needs to eat. There aren’t many coins on the ground today. Not enough for a vegetable pasty. She rests on a bench.

The other day Acacia found a mango tree in the park. She scared off a bird, devoured the sweet flesh of a mango. The fresh beak hole didn’t bother her. Others were rotting on the ground. She took the last unripe fruit from the tree and ate it when she got hungry. The sour juice dripped down her chin. She scraped the seed clean with her teeth. Acacia gets up. The hunger is biting. She could go back to Michael’s, stagnate in the suburbs with the rest of them. Not a life she wants.

Acacia waits at the lights near the main street. She watches a pigeon on the other side stumble outside a convenience store. Green. Acacia walks, watches the bird. Fishing line tangled around its legs. She considers picking it up, unravelling the string. Acacia slows, the pigeon coos. Her stomach gurgles. A man from the convenience store steps out, looks at her. She walks past him, past the bird, sits at a bench. She’s had a lot of experience with people staring at her since the accident but now it’s different. Her hair is greasy, her clothes dirty, her body smells. People expect her to ask them for money, for cigarettes. She can sense it, the way they hunch their shoulders, avoid eye contact. She can almost hear them willing her to keep walking. They expect her to be crazy, feed pigeons, collect rubbish and all that. Sometimes they notice the tatt on her neck. Call her a freak. Tell her to go back to the factory, get an upgrade. Fucking wankers.

Options for today: beg, look for change, walk half a kilometre to the food van and back. Last week the walk had gained two bread rolls and a cup of soup. She told the woman dishing out the soup that she was a vegetarian. The reply: ‘Beggars can’t be choosers love. This is all we’ve got.’ and a cup of hot soup in her hand. Pumpkin. If there was meat she couldn’t taste it. By the time she got back to the city she was hungry again. Martina or Jake would happily feed her but she’s been avoiding them more and more. They don’t get it. Hunger is better than being stuck.
She looks in her bag. Still a few things left: mascara, lipstick, a bottle of foundation – half full, several ball bearings, a phone, earphones, a stolen card to the 24-hour gym, a key to her old apartment, two dollars in silver coins. She places a ball bearing in her mouth. The metal will fill her up; strengthen the rivets holding her body together. She won’t fall apart today.

Her old apartment building is usually unattended after hours but she walks through the door and a security guard is sitting behind the desk. He recognises her, knows she no longer lives there. She walks to the seating area, looks at her watch, sits in a floral armchair. He won’t ask her to leave if she’s waiting for someone. A door opens to the stairwell. An old woman with messy hair and a hunch looks out. Wrinkles along her chin and forehead make her look like she’s scowling. She closes the door. Ah, the weird old woman that lives in the stairwell. Her teeth are in today. Acacia misses these randoms.

Around eight, she pretends to answer a call, leaves. The park is lit by a row of street lights. She walks beneath. Near the CBD she spots the pigeon twined with fishing line. She picks it up, sits with the pigeon upside down on her knee. It calms as she strokes its stomach. The string takes time to untangle. The bird has had this on for a while. Acacia gently pulls at knots. Half way through the bird tries to get up and Acacia lets it stand for a minute before turning it over again. The string is too entwined. Knots on knots. A gash in the flesh, wearing away the skin. Soon its feet would turn blue. Each knot rubs her fingers raw. She sits with the bird on her knee, considers other options. The bird is in pain. If she lets it go, the string will cut off the circulation, get infected, amputate one leg or both. A horrible way to go.

Tears fall, the pigeon coos. Her fingers fit easily around its neck and twist. The bird struggles for a second then goes limp in her arms. Feathers blur through tears. She can’t think. The hunger is still there, an emptiness in her whole body, drained of nutrients, feeling, thought.

She takes the bird to a barbeque in the park. Her stomach gurgles. Feathers singe against the metal top, flesh goes firm and holds feather shafts in place. She should have
plucked the carcass before cooking. After two hours the gas runs out. The bird is black and crunchy on the outside but cooked through. She digs her fingers in. Juices ooze out. No blood. Blood would be too much. She tears pieces off the bones, forces rubbery morsels into her mouth. Nausea rises, her chest burns. She forces herself to swallow.

Acacia curls into herself under a tree like a foetus. A dark spot, away from the lights. Away from the eyes of passers-by. She cries until she sleeps.

She wakes, her head like fog. Diffused light of pre-dawn. Acacia groans, her arm tingles, back aches. She’s been lying on uneven ground, raised roots of the tree digging into her side. She stretches her body. Dry tears cake in the corners of her eyes. She needs water.

The bathrooms further along smell but the taps are clean and Acacia splashes her face, rubs away the gunk in her eyes. Her face is puffy from crying. She dries her face on her top and takes the make-up from her bag. The foundation smears across her face, her fingers are not the best implement for applying. The lipstick and mascara sit thick on her eyes and lips.

The twenty-four-hour café is quiet, the morning rush still hours away. Someone has left a filled loyalty card by the serviettes. Acacia breathes deeply. A morning coffee is luxury. Sometimes the girls behind the counter let her sleep in the corner booth for a couple of hours. Sometimes they give her an out-of-date muffin. Acacia collects her coffee and sips it by the window. She looks out into the empty street.

Acacia swings by her apartment after coffee. She wants some time alone. One of the things she rarely misses since moving out. Usually she loves the crowds, the bodies, the rhythms of the city. The security guard is out. She sneaks up the stairs and takes the elevator to her old floor. The room is locked but the key still works. Inside, new sheets on the bed, clothes in the wardrobe. Someone is sleeping on the musty red chair in the corner. She sneaks out.

In the hallway where the mushrooms grow, Acacia tries the doors. One is open. A bare mattress in the middle of the room. Dust covers the windowsills. A pile of dirty
and ripped clothes gather cobwebs in a corner. A dead mouse, all fur and bones caught in the pile. Some remnants of the old furniture remain: a plywood wardrobe, chipped and flaking at the corners and a glass topped table with a single chair by the window. She sits and looks out. Pigeons shuffle on a ledge below. She opens the latch and pushes the stiff pane. Wings beat, feathers flutter and then rest. The air is car fumes and pigeon dust. She sits until the sky lightens then leaves. She won’t come here again.
Someone’s house is collapsing. Unaware of the event, Fran takes off her sandals and digs her feet into the cool sand of the eastern shore. Her and Toma haven’t spoken about the kiss. He assumed she was drunk and she left it at that. The piercing creak of unsettling wood makes her jump. Further along the beach, a shack balances on the edge of a cliff face, the sand and dirt worn away by the waves and now the weight of the house rests on posts sinking into the soft shore. The building leans dangerously toward the precipice. People gather along the top of a ridge gouged out by the rise and fall of last night’s king tide. A loud crack echoes across the beach and the two front stilts break.

Fran waits, letting the sea spill across her feet and watches as further down the beach the same rising water rushes around the remaining legs of the house, sucking and gulping until the wood gives way and the whole building crashes into the sea. Wood dust swirls in murky circles on the surface of the water. The sun inches up the sky, drawing warmth across the sand and sharpens early morning shadows. The sandy slopes shift under Fran’s feet as she walks up towards Toma and Tarni’s house. A few people standing around at the top. One woman stroking tears from her cheeks.

‘Is this your house love?’ Fran asks.

‘My grandfather’s. He died last year and now the sea has come for the rest of him.’ A man pulls the woman into a hug.

The cove has been transformed by the tides into a crescent shape. Further along mangrove roots are exposed but the sand dunes are held in place by a network of grassroots. In the night, sand trawlers must have cleared the debris for sunbathers. The bare sand is eaten away by the water.

By the time Fran arrives in the village, people are busy moving huge buckets of fish, crabs and prawns from the boats on the beach to big stone tables set out in the village square. A huge hole has been dug in the ground and a fire lit within. Some of the young
men are throwing in smooth grey rocks. She watches, one man in particular. He lifts hot coals from a stone oven with tongs, his muscular arms tensing with the strain. Toma drops a basket on a table, his hair tangled, sweat dripping from his brow, his shirt speckled with bits of sand. Fran wanders over, her woven beach bag balanced on an elbow, sandals in hand. She raises an arm against the morning sun.

“You guys been out fishing this morning?’

Toma sharpens a knife along the edge of a stone.

“Nah last night. Was a full moon. Good for fishing.’

He takes a fish from a bucket and disembowels it in one slice. The guts splatter into an empty bucket and emit an oily metallic smell that makes Fran queasy. She turns away.

“Tarni’s inside.’ Toma tells her.

Fran has been invited to a party. She’s not quite sure what it’s all about but Toma said they have a yearly celebration.

In the kitchen, Tarni is preparing vegetables. The baby is slung across her body in a shawl. Fran offers to help cut the potatoes, taro and kumara. Some of the other women are pressing leaves and flowers, or grinding roots and nuts in large stone bowls. The powder fills the kitchen, a sweet and woody fragrance.

“So what’s this all about love? Something to do with the dragon in the mountain?”

Tarni smiles and tucks her hair over her ear. Her fingers are wet from washing the vegetables and the water streaks her hair. ‘A dragon?’

“You know, the man who caught too many fish and got turned into a mountain by the dragon. Is this party about him?’

Tarni puts her hand over her mouth as she laughs. The other women giggle as they grind.

“Where did you hear this story?”
Fran puts her hand on her hip. ‘Toma was telling me out near the canoe. Bloody cheek.’

Tarni giggles. ‘He’s a romantic, my husband. There’s another story about the people who came to the island. They were travellers without a home to go back to.’

Tarni picks up another potato and her words take on the rhythm of chopping.

‘They got, in their boats, and the sea, came rushing under them, bringing the island, to them.’

The women sing as they grind the spices and Tarni joins in. The rhythm of the chopping and grinding creates a beat behind their voices. They sing in soprano in a language Fran still doesn’t understand and as they reach the end, their eyes lift at the inner corners as though they’re looking at something in the distance. Fran looks out the window, but there is only the square and then men preparing fish.

Fran helps the women boil and mash the sweet potato. They mix in some of the ground powder and spread the mixture into heavy ceramic pans. Too big to fit in the oven, the pans are cooked in a stone barbeque outside. The potato mixture thickens into a firm jelly.

When the food comes out of the ground it’s placed in large trays. At last they hoist up the meat. Large chunks fall apart in trays. The cloths separating each layer of food are brown and oily, dripping with juices. Fran serves herself some vegetables.

‘Want some long pig?’ One of the men, still dressed in hi-vis, asks her, looks to his friends and laughs. They’re all fit, dark from working outside and young enough to be her sons. Fran isn’t familiar with the phrase but she smiles and continues to select vegetables.

‘Are you on a diet?’

‘Are ya’ a vegetarian?’ They all laugh again.

They want her attention. Fran adds a couple of pieces of the meat but she isn’t a fan of pork. There’s a flavour that lingers like the taste of a man’s skin after he’s been working in the hot sun. The group of young men sit on the bench closest.
‘Nah, she’s a man eater.’ She can see the bloke’s chipped front tooth as he sings the Hall and Oats chorus. His friends join in. ‘Oooh here she comes, she’s a man-eater.’ They’re voices are ripe like hip-hop singers.

Fran laughs, playing with the idea of taking one home. She takes her plate and sits with Toma’s family.

After eating, Fran helps Tarni and the other two women finish the dessert. The potato jelly is cut into small squares and Fran spoons them into bowls. Tarni pours over coconut cream, heated and mixed with brown sugar. The other two women hand out the bowls. A couple of the men slash open coconuts with a machete and distribute them with straws borrowed from the restaurant. Fran loves the smell of coconut water like new babies.

When Fran returns with her own warm bowl of pudding and coconut, she notices an old man sitting alone near one of the fires. A cloak is fastened around his throat. Black and white feathers and fresh flowers woven into the fabric. An old tradition from tribal times. Green paint swirls across his face like waves and a jade pendant lies against his bare chest. Fit enough for an old man. She hasn’t seen him around before. Maybe he’s come to perform.

Some of the men and women make space in the middle of the square. The women in flax dresses, black and white paint slashed across the men’s chests. They beat out a rhythm with their feet and begin to trill and bombinate like birds ducking and weaving amongst each other in a complex series of moves.

After the group have performed several of these dances they sit in a circle and a group of teenagers get up. They’re dressed in black with skulls painted on their faces, stylised flowers painted around the girls’ eyes and fresh flowers weaved into their hair and clothes. One of Tarni and Toma’s boys, Komba is there.

‘They chose the costumes this year at school.’ Tarni laughs. ‘I think they saw footage from a party on the mainland. Mexico is popular at the moment I suppose.’ Tarni yawns. ‘The teachers thought it captured the spirit of the day.’
The kids perform a dance similar to the adults beating their feet against the ground. The old man rolls his eyes and shakes his head, his arms crossed as he watches their performance. When they’re finished, he stands and says something to them. Fran recognises one of the girls, a young waitress from the restaurant. She looks at the ground but some of the boys are laughing. The old man’s nostrils flare, his eyes bulge. Everyone has gone quiet. His chest is puffed out and though he seems older than her with his grey hair and leathered skin, his body moves without constraint like a much younger man.

‘This is your culture not a joke.’ He spits the words and his eyes swell, addressing everyone now. ‘These tourists,’ he looks towards Fran, ‘are trespassing on sacred places and you’re all responsible. For money but not for any benefit.’ His voice booms across the square.

A couple of the young men who work on the mainland laugh.

‘Go to bed old man. We work hard. Let us have some fun.’

The old man spits at their feet.

‘Bogong is warming up. He will teach you all a lesson.’

Toma goes over to him and rests a hand on his arm but the old man throws him off and walks away muttering. He looks frailer as he leaves, his body relaxing into an arched pose and slow shuffle.

Fran asks Tarni how old he is.

‘Old enough to speak the ancient language. A hundred years at least. I remember him being an old man when I was a child.’ She jigs, rocking the baby. ‘He just doesn’t understand the world is different now. Probably he’s never left the island. My grandmother used to say he would die if he didn’t have the warm soil of the island beneath his feet.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Matakite. Tagai. Many names. Most of us call him the old fella.’ Toma slips the baby from her arms. ‘Our parents always said he was descended from Bogong, that he
was sacred to us. Many of the young ones don’t see him that way anymore. Some feel he’s lost touch.’

One of the children curls into his mother’s lap.

‘My friend at school says he’s a cannibal. The last one. Isn’t he mama?’

‘It’s just a story,’ she says.
Acacia walks to the park by the river. Day is the best time to sleep. She lies under a tree until the hottest part is over. Wattle flowers fill the air with their buttery scent. Lorikeets swarm in the park for the mid-day chatter, nibbling at the fluffy pink and yellow buds. People picnic, barbeque, swim. There’s a few people sleeping in the park. A regular occurrence now. You can’t tell with some of them, like the woman in the business suit. She walks the park every day, no job to go to. Acacia’s seen her sleeping in waiting rooms and nodding off behind a newspaper at the cafes. She keeps herself clean though. Even the charity stalls are fooled, ask her for money.

When she wakes in the afternoon she walks to the 24-hour gym. Someone swipes their card. Acacia walks up, card out. The woman holds the door open for her. The shower room is empty. Someone has left a sliver of soap in one of the cubicles. Acacia undresses, turns the tap on, lets cold water wash over her until the heat kicks in. Dirt swirls in the bottom. When she’s clean she takes her clothes, rubs the last piece of soap into them, holds her foot over the drain, swirls them in the water that collects in the bottom of the shower, rinses them and wrings them out. Water gurgles away. Acacia dresses in her damp clothes and walks out into the heat. Her wet clothes lose most of their moisture within an hour.

A group of alternatives in home-made clothing are gathered around a couple of trees near a grassy outcrop. Some have woven baskets, others mesh bags with fruit in them. Acacia wonders towards them, hoping none are anti-tech. A man with a strong Italian accent talks, all attention on him. He picks up a spiky green fruit from the ground.

‘… so you get your cone and break it open. Inside, will be a white flesh with the bunya nuts nestled in there. Now, these are pretty special. They only ripen once every three years so you don’t want to rely on these as a staple food…’

Acacia sees a couple of women her age near the back of the group. One has a spike through her eyebrow, a black mesh top on. The other is all floral tattoos and vintage hair like a 50s pin-up girl. Acacia moves over to them.
‘What’s this all about?’ she whispers.

‘Urban foraging. Free food, no supermarkets.’

‘Sustainability and all that.’ The vintage girl interrupts in her day-dreamy voice.

‘Living beyond the system.’ The girl with the spike finishes.

The group starts to walk along the river, the Italian man in front. Acacia follows near the back with the girls. They offer her a yellow apple.

‘I’m Amanda. That’s Krissy.’

When the tour finishes, they all stand around and talk. A man who wasn’t part of the tour comes over and speaks to Amanda.

‘I need a place to stay for a few nights. Do you think there’s room out your way?’

Uneven stubble across his chin. A hack job on a blunt razor. Breath like a mangrove swamp.

‘You might have to claim a space on the couch but we can fit you in Mick.’

‘I’ll check the shelter first but it’s good to know the house is there.’

He excuses himself and heads towards the bridge to the museum precinct.

‘We help run a squatter in the inner rim.’ She explains.

The inner rim circles the CBD. A thin band of urban decay: boarded up houses, overgrown gardens. Not worth enough to fix and too expensive to give away.

‘We’re having an open day tomorrow. You should come by.’

Amanda gives her a card with their address. Acacia agrees and leaves them. She slips the card in her bag.

The house is the same as all the others skirting the city. Grey brick, gravel drive. A bunch of guys sitting on the front steps, one in weaved pants, another in a singlet and
braces with hair slicked into a mohawk. A sign directs her to the garden. Behind a scratched and rusted gate, a path winds through a jungle of vegetation. People are dotted about the garden, chatting, laughing. A woman in fairy wings brushes past her. If they start talking about chakras, she’s out.

Acacia stays, settles into the rhythm of the inner ring. The house becomes a nest. Surprisingly quiet at night. She’s used to the hum of electronics, the many oscillations, thumps of beds against floorboards, the throb of distant music through the walls. Even the rush of cars sounds far away, muted by the empty street. No one lives here anymore. There is only breath. Not just of people but electronics. They have one of those old espresso machines in the kitchen, the manual ones that steam. A kettle and an iron seem to be in use all through the night. The house is a mass of damp breathing bodies.

She feels like she lives in a distant future where production has stopped. Everything in the house is recycled. Ice cream containers are soup bowls. Old tarnished spoons are spades. An object is what you imagine it to be.
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Violet fiddles with the corner of her book. She glances at the window. The driveway is empty. Her face is red and puffy but the tears no longer come. A bunch of fresh carnations loll in a vase on the table, she rearranges them, placing a purple rose in the centre. Funeral flowers fill the house. Their perfumes catch on the breeze and waft around the room. She puts her nose right up against the velvet petals of a rose, breathes in then sits back in her chair, lifts her book: The Great Australian Garden. Her fingers flick at the curled corners of the pages. Her eyes trail across the page, reading the words as though they were meaningless. She can’t concentrate. Violet and Russell’s relationship had been cut short. The abruptness of his death shocked her. The undramatic way he went felt inadequate. She still listens for the sound of his car in the evenings. The slight squeak as he’d brake on the corner of their street. A little too much acceleration as he took off again.

She leaves her book on the table and goes outside. The long wide backyard, with wooden fences on both sides, stretches from the backdoor to the front of the shed. Violet walks to the corrugated tin box and retrieves a watering can from the dust, a tin pot which just fits between the outside tap and the wall. The tap is stiff and leaves brown streaks on her palm. She begins to water. First the trees, a lemon and a hibiscus planted near the shed. The lilly-pillys are too big to need water. Closer to the house, curved concrete pavers mark out two garden beds in abstract shapes. An assortment of edible herbs, flowers and vegetables mixed together in one, in the other a mixture of flowers: intertwined branches of purple roses and white gardenias shade marigolds and pansies creeping across the ground in bursts of gold and blue.

They’d been fighting the day he died. She was in the garden when he got home still angry from the night before. The front door banged shut, and she watched the light turn on in one of the rooms and then the next – the lounge and the kitchen. The bathroom window lit up and Violet had watched through frosted glass as Russell undressed. Flashes of his white coat, lilac shirt, then that pallid shade of his skin. Water pattered against the wall.
Violet finishes watering, making the garden glisten in the moonlight. After a few deep breathes of the cold clean smell of wet plants, she goes inside. Picking up her book and flipping through the pages, Violet finds where she was up to.

After his shower, he’d calmed down. She remembers what they said to each other. Something ordinary:

‘I thought you were out,’ he rubbed his hair with a towel before leaving it draped on a kitchen chair.

‘I was just in the garden.’

‘I should’ve known.’ Russell moved towards the kitchen. ‘I think you love that garden more than me.’

Later he cooked, they ate and he cuddled her from behind while she washed the dishes. An apology. She could smell him, the shea butter and coconut soap. He knew she couldn’t stand the antiseptic smell of the clinic on him. His warm fingers crawled under her top. Those sudden moments of contact with his skin shocked her, cutting something off in her brain so she couldn’t think. She forgave him for whatever it was they were fighting about.

Then, just like that, he was gone.

Violet sinks into her cold sheets in the dim light of the bedroom. She still finds herself tucked up on one side, leaving room for Russell. She misses curling into him. Sometimes he couldn’t sleep, an insomniac. He’d go for long walks at night. Once he told her he’d fallen asleep in a field near the abattoir. She closes her eyes, listens to the dull thump of blood rushing through her head.

He had waited until her breath deepened. Her mouth dropped open. The rise and fall of her chest slowed. Russell unravelled her from his arms, slow, gentle, trying not to wake her. The aubergine coloured covers smoothed down over her body. He crept out through the bedroom door, out through the kitchen, out of the house. He followed his feet, memory buried in his muscles. The path two houses down leads to the creek and a
walkway skirting the water’s edge to a park – a nowhere sort of place. A huge concrete slab in a square in the middle of an overgrown field and edging it on one side, is a tall barbed wire fence leading to an abattoir.

Russell breathed in: metallic scents, herbal, floral, something sweet, something fleshy. A circle cut from the centre of the square clasps an old rusted merry-go-round. Weeds climb over the seat and encase the turning wheel in the middle. Little purple flowers running along the metal. Grass inside the cracks in the concrete, fingering the surrounds. Bats chattered in the trees. Frogs, like bubbling mud, burped from a bunch of tall weeds. Everything rustled and murmured. Something was knocked from a tree and landed in the scrub below. Russell slapped his leg as a bug bit down and then he lied on the cold concrete, hard and rough, stretching his fingers across course lumps of gravel. His heart was slower. His breath deeper. He thought of Violet. Of bringing her there, of lying with her, their naked bodies pressed into bruised blades of grass. Her thigh wet with dew under his hand. Goosebumps rippling along her flesh.

Violet wakes, her heart racing. If only she’d woken that night and gone to find him. Almost every night is the same. She dreams of him, as though he was there now, as though there was still time to save him. Violet looks at the clock. Two in the morning but she gets up and dresses in track pants and a crop top.

Stepping from the front door, she crouches to put on her shoes, and notices a crack running at a diagonal across the edge of a tile, dark with dirt, daisies sprouting from the gaps. How long has it been since she left the house at night? She thinks of Delilah and the park, years ago now. Afterwards, she’d stopped walking home in the evening but the murder hardly scares her now. Her body jitters like her blood is full of caffeine, the adrenaline elevated. She needs to run. She needs to sleep.

Violet runs along the road and finds herself heading towards that vacant concrete place, that place of wild things. The cold air brushes against her provoking a flutter of goose bumps up her arms. Something pricks at her nose and her eyes widen. The pungent meat smell. Pine needles and a hint of blood. The abattoir. She gags on the air, stops and breathes. She rests her hands on her knees. Closes her eyes and swallows.
He wouldn’t have felt the fall, consumed by the pain in his chest. Maybe he stared up from the ground, looking around at the trees, trying to drink in life before it trickled away. A sign, discoloured and frayed at the edges hangs off the wire fence – *staff wanted*. She imagines him, reading the words over and over, trying to make sense of them, numb, tired, before he closed his eyes.

The dew collected on Russell’s cool skin. His weight pressed into the softening dirt. His body: a marching ground for ants, a warm resting place to a solitary mouse, his arm, a momentary perch for a tawny frogmouth that had just missed her prey. A piece of fingernail, fallen flakes of skin, an eyelash resting on his cheek – accepted, claimed by a variety of insects. When the sun rose a new process began. He didn’t stir under the brightness and warmth or fill his lungs with breath. His body shivered with the movement of insects and slipped further into the earth.

One of the workers found him. It had rained heavily and Russell was covered in a film of dirt, his right side half submerged in leaf litter. Violet opens her eyes, her breath back to a regular rhythm. Familiar purple flowers growing near the path. She picks some and puts them in her pocket. Violets steeped in water ease a broken heart. Or is it pansies?

Russell isn’t here and so she runs back around the block, the cool air numbing her skin. Her lungs burning. At the front door she takes in deep breaths of damp air. Cobwebs glitter across the wood, stretching over the joins, mauve strands in the streetlight, like museum ropes. The house has rejected her after being allowed to rot at the edges, neglected. At the bottom of the door frame the wood has crumbled. Termites might be eating the walls. She turns the door handle and breaks the web.
An old man sits in the library. Deep creases in his forehead. He never stops working. Acacia met him when she moved in to the squat house. Some of the residents were into crystals and astrology but the rest were alright. This guy’s weird though. He only leaves the library early in the morning before the sun comes up. Acacia might be the only person he’s spoken to all year. She catches him in the kitchen one early morning. She’s sitting at the dinner table in the dark. He doesn’t turn on the light. Near the window his hands catch in the moon light. His fingers are dry, oil stained, cracked as he reaches for a glass.

‘Why do you work so hard in the library?’

Her voice in the dark kitchen startles him.

He moves his head oddly. A pelican trying to gulp down its food. A couple of stammered letters. Eventually he splutters out an audible sentence.

‘To understand how they work.’

‘What works?’ Acacia is quick to respond.

‘Th... Th... Fish. Animals. Our b-bodies.’ He gets out a few words pouring milk into the glass, an old pasta sauce jar. His emaciated hands look like they’ll break under the weight.

‘Can I see them?’

He nods, takes a bowl from the fridge. Amanda’s vegetable soup. She always leaves him something. With the soup in one hand and the milk in the other he goes back to the library. Acacia follows. Mechanical creatures look at her from all corners of the room. She takes a frog on her hand, winds the key. The eyes move, tongue darts, a fly appears at the end, the frog pulls its tongue back in. She puts it down and it continues the motions until the clockwork winds down. Everything is life size, including a girl he refers to as his daughter. Her features are eerie. Phantom Flesh skin, blue glass eyes, human-hair wig. Too real. He winds a key on her side and the girl starts drawing on a piece of paper. Her eyes move across the page, she hums. Acacia shivers.
Part Three: Renewal

Leaf litter swept from paths settles on the grass verge. Insects and mushrooms eat the dead and decayed. Only dirt remains. A fire spirals through tree and house alike. Plants erupt from seared ground, tiny spears tipped with red like lava. Coastlines reform, rock hardens, sands shift. A cicada breaks free from its carapace. Shell hardens, claws embed in the tree bark. Legs of a butterfly break up in the fluid of a chrysalis hanging from a leaf. The metallic surface like a Christmas bauble hides the change. Wings – speckled in red dry in the sun; shiny and translucent grow across a grasshopper’s back; emerge from the shed skin of a dragonfly creating a purple glint above a lake. Frog spawn frolic beneath the water’s surface. Hind legs emerge from tadpole tails. Forelegs press behind gills. Jaws reabsorb. Eyes, lungs, tongues grow. The tail is drawn back into the body and a frog emerges from the water.

An eye wonders across a fish’s back so both eyes look at the sky marked out between raised towers of glass. Flowers bloom and change colour, seed, fruit, grow mushy in the warmth of the sun. Once ripped from the flesh of the plants, seeds settle in soft soil after the rain and seedlings spring forth. Glassy, elver, eel makes its way down a creek. Oyster spawn clouds seawater. Tiny spats settle on a rock, excrete shell. A female oyster surrounded by other females, changes sex. The temperature rises and a walking fish emerges onto land. Gills turn to lungs, scales harden, a salamander scurries away. Human spat settles on the side of the uterus. Zygote like a human tadpole curls into the cell wall. Tail shortens, legs form. Veined like a leaf, the foetus is mottled in red and blue. Hormones release and the female-looking baby turns male. Translucent skin becomes dense, sheltering an ecosystem of organs. A first breath, the baby cries, dry air burning in newly inflated lungs.
Fran soaks in the heat of the natural spring. Her body relaxing against a submerged rock outcrop, like a bench in a spa. She swirls her feet against the silt and dirt at the bottom. Before moving to the island she’d avoided swimming in lakes or creeks. Apart from sand she couldn’t stand the feel of grit between her toes or the murky water and the thought of things stirring within. One look at the colour, a tea steeped with fallen leaves, and she would never step in. This was different. The natural springs were clear, warm water with nothing but bubbles and rich sediment under her feet. Mangroves growing around the edges, their trunks white with minerals. Fran wonders why they persist here. Because they can, she supposes. The morning fog is disappearing. Rainforest emerges beyond the steam. Fran closes her eyes. Water chokes in the troughs running from here to the pools. The cold air scratches at her shoulders and she slips further, deeper into the water.

Carol had taken her here a while ago. They’d gone skinny dipping in the cloudier pool down the hill because they didn’t have their bathers. Then Raro had come along, the islander around her age with a blackened front tooth and a dog.

‘Hello ladies.’ He’d said, ‘I didn’t know this place was so popular or were you just looking for me.’

He flashed them a smile and flexed his muscles. A charmer. The women had stayed in the water chatting to Raro for an hour or more until he left. If he knew they were bare beneath the tea-coloured water he never said anything. She might have flashed some skin if she were younger, less wrinkled and scarred. Maybe he stayed so long because he was hoping to catch a glimpse. He never did.

The water coming in from the spring slows to a trickle. Nobody notices at first but after lunch the attendant comes to drain the water and the tubs don’t fill back up. Fran has been soaking all morning so instead she goes for a walk around the park. The sites are all visible along the boardwalks. Mutton birds scrabbling in the dirt. Local song birds flittering in the trees. Flowers in reds and pinks seem to glitter in the sunlight. Then she comes to an open mud flat where the champagne pool bubbles and steams. This is the first time Fran has walked the trail in the day and she’s amazed by the bright
coloured waters, almost peach and like a glass of Blanc de Noirs, the rising bubbles make it look fizzy. A wooden sign warns people not to swim. The water is hot and full of minerals that will kill you.

‘Where’s the bar?’ she asks another woman standing by the edge and they cackle, creating wisps in the steam with their breath.

She leaves the woman to take her pictures and walks along the barren path through steam like she’s passing into another world. On the other side, the path winds through pools and bubbling mud pits. Raro might be good for a laugh but he’s too much like all her ex’s. They were all charming at first. A geyser goes off in the distance with a loud bang and Fran jumps. Water sprays into the air.

A green pool in the entrance of a shallow cavern gives off a stench. Another shallow pool of clear water has rust coloured streaks in the sediment creating a mottled orange marbling. The temperature is estimated to reach a hundred and twenty in this pool and the large bubbles froth along the surface near the centre. Fran’s not up for one of those intense all-in relationships. Things are different at her age. She reckons Rob and Lynn have it right. They don’t have to lose anything. When they get sick of each other Rob comes to his place on the island. Lynn’s got her own on the mainland.

Towards the back of the park are the Clear Springs, large but shallow lakes that flow through to the hot pools which apart from being too hot would be safe to swim in. The edges around the lake are wet and the fine mud shines where the water has receded.

‘I didn’t know lakes had tides.’ A man by the edge says to Fran.

The pools are surrounded by stalks and other birds foraging in the newly revealed mud flats, where insects, reptiles and larvae hide and where the water is cooler. The water looks like any other cold water lake but eerily nothing moves in the centre apart from a few streams of bubbles rising from the sediment. A cold breeze sweeps down making Fran shiver. The lakes steam. An empty wooden canoe floats along the surface, just like one of the canoes in the museum with carvings along the sides and red ribbing along the top. A totem creature thrust out from the bow, eyes oil-slicked with inset abalone shells. The oars are still in place at the sides of the boat. The canoe moves noiselessly past. A woman on the other side of the lake screams and begins to cry. Fran runs to her. Someone she knows must have fallen in. They’d be boiled alive.
‘Bogong.’ She cries and falls to her knees in the squelching mud.

Fran bends to her and places a hand on her shoulder.

‘Who is it? What’s happened?’ She asks her.

‘Something bad.’ The woman continues to cry.

An older gentleman from town has also come to investigate. ‘Has someone fallen in?’

The woman doesn’t respond. Fran stands up. The gentleman raises his eyes like a question and she shrugs.

‘I’ll go back to the restaurant and call someone. She must be in shock.’ He tells Fran.

Fran waits with the woman until a couple of park rangers and an emergency services officer arrive. They pull the canoe from the water and take the woman away. By that night the story is all over the island. Toma calls.

‘Is it true Fran? They say a phantom canoe was on the lake?’

Fran laughs. ‘A phantom? No.’ She says, ‘Just a canoe. I watched them pull it out. Some poor bugger must have fallen in.’

Something clicks. The name the woman used, Bogong like the mountain. No wonder she was so upset. Thought she’d seen a ghost.

‘That’s good.’ Toma says and repeats himself.

‘I could use a drink though if you’re offering?’

Toma coughs, hesitates. ‘Why not?’ He says.

The pub is busy for a Sunday. Toma is at a table with a group from the village. When he sees her he gets up.

‘Another round?’ He asks the table.
Everyone nods and Toma goes to the bar. The chatter stops as Fran takes off her coat and drapes it around a chair before seating herself. When she looks up they’re all gawking at her.

‘Well.’ Says Aiya.

‘What?’

‘The canoe. Is it true you saw the boat disappear in a ghostly fog?’

Fran laughs.

‘Yeah it disappeared,’ she waits for the gasps before continuing ‘when the emergency officer took it away.’ Fran laughs again but no one joins her.

Toma puts the tray of beers on the table and Fran takes hers. The local brew is a dense golden stout Fran found bitter at first. Now she down’s them like all the others.

‘Are you sure?’ Insists Aiya, her eyes wide.

Fran smiles and gulps her beer.

‘Okay.’ Aiya says and her face relaxes into a slight smile.

Raro arrives with his mates around nine. Fran singles him out for a beer and a dance. She never can resist the charmers.

‘So what should I know about you?’ Fran asks Raro at the bar.

‘I’m single, I have a yacht and I’m yours.’

Fran cackles. What a flirt.

They dance until one and Raro walks her home. Inside, they go upstairs. The island is quiet and still around them. The house echoes with their moans and their undulating movements. An earthquake, a storm in the quiet night.

Fran wakes to an empty bed and loud banging. She finds Raro in the garden. He said her tap was leaking and it bothered him so much he had to fix it. That was the beginning.
Raro was a handyman by habit and Fran thought she could use someone like that. She misjudged herself.

Two months later Fran arrives home from a trip to the mainland. Her lights are on and she finds Raro tucked up in bed.

‘Fran.’ He says. ‘I’m sick. Will you make me something to eat?’

Fran puts her bags down in the bedroom. The kitchen is empty, clean. She picks up the phone and calls Toma.

‘Hi Toma, you working tonight? I need you to come and take Raro home. He’s sick.’

‘Sure I’ll be there soon. Is everything alright Fran?’

He’s concerned. Toma doesn’t know Raro too well.

‘Everything’s fine. I just need him to go home.’

Fran puts the kettle on and makes tea. She brings one to Raro but drinks hers in the kitchen. This isn’t the kind of thing she was hoping for. She dislikes these needy men who want mothers not girlfriends. When she was nineteen she found herself stuck at home with a newborn baby and a husband while her friends partied, went on road trips, hung out with bands. At twenty-two she left her three kids – Joe crying in his father’s arms – and went to the beach for the day. Her mother found her by the water.

‘The water is a beaut mum. Come join me.’

‘You gotta’ go home love. Your family needs you. Frank must be at his wits end to call me.’

Toma’s car pulls up in the driveway, he toots. The car goes quiet and then he’s at the door.

‘Is my passenger ready?’ He asks.
When Fran goes upstairs Raro gets out of bed reluctantly and heads out to the car. He doesn’t kiss her goodbye. His cheeks red, frowning, scowling. He’s not happy but Fran doesn’t care. The moment he leaves the house her shoulders relax.
Acacia settles into the mass. More space in the bush, different crowd. The heat is thick and humid. Dada has gone to get them some beers. Acacia pulls her hair back to cool her neck. A guy behind her sniggers, pushes her. She gets her footing back and turns. Three or four guys in flannel shirts staring at her. She doesn’t know what’s up. Not letting them ruin her night she lets it go, moves further towards the stage. The music gets heavier. The drums quicken. Acacia rides the rhythm. The park is a wave of people jumping.

Pain in her arm, she stumbles. Turns. The same guy from earlier. She gives him the finger turns back to the music. A moment later another fist, this time to her ribs. When she looks at him, he raises his hands in a flippant gesture.

Dada interrupts, slipping an arm around her waist. He puts his mouth close to her ear and yells over the music. ‘I think it’s the tattoo. On your neck.’

Damn, her hair usually covers it.

When the music stops and the park empties Dada takes Acacia to the tent site. ‘Some people around here are anti-techs. Live with as little as possible. Believe it’s responsible for all the world’s problems.’

Acacia spends the night in the tent Dada shares with a couple of other guys. This is his town. Says he’ll show her around. One of the guys from the tent helps her to cover up the tattoo on the back of her neck.

On the second day, they go to a commune. Thirty people high on Perception. A network of slime moulds laid out on a table, each connected with a mushroom. In the centre a bonsai fig tree also connected to the tendrils of a mushroom. Several people sit around the table, fungus grows up their arms and into one ear.

‘What’re they doing?’ asks Acacia.

One of the ‘members’ pulls Acacia close to him. ‘These are the oracle. We bring them food. We ask permission from the plants before we do anything. He’s a native, a Morton Bay Fig.’
‘Augmentation is the future.’ She tells Dada. ‘Until humans give up some of themselves, they’ll never see the big picture. Deep down, they only see the details, the next meal, the next holiday, the next rush. Environmental consequences are too far away and too slow for them to act. Cyborgs are the future.’

Dada kisses her neck. ‘That’s why I’m going to Japan. The future is already there.’
23 City of Gardens

Violet stands looking up at the grey memorial building. Great slabs of stone along the bottom grow a range of lichens. It’s unusual to see buildings go green so close to the city where the air quality is poor. Two Grecian vases, taller than Violet, at each end of the building under a raised portico. A hanging garden sprawling in each. Flowers spilling out over the rim in flowing bunches like tangled hair.

The memorial high on a hill, visible from most places in the city, is closed. A plaque outside acknowledges everyone who’s died in a bushfire during the city’s history. A reminder and warning for the future. Inside, traces of the events: fire-fighter’s helmets and clothing, an old fire-engine, photographs – some with burnt edges – waiting for someone to claim them. Objects saved from people’s homes. Violet had looked through the objects in the museum over the years hoping to find something of her mothers.

A man with a backpack walks and stands by her. She’s seen him before, in town.

‘Are you local?’ he asks.

She tells him she lives in the western suburbs, not far away. She notices the powder of dirt on his shoes, his messy but washed hair, his neatly trimmed beard. His skin is pale, almost transparent from the icy wind and lack of sun, like many people who’ve lived in the mountains all their lives. She wonders if this is a pick-up line.

‘This is a museum now but the building used to be a prison in the nineteenth century.’ He raises his hand against the sun glinting off the windows. ‘Then it was converted into an orphanage around the turn of the century to house Aboriginal children from the nearby communities.’

Violet’s never heard this before. She’s not sure whether to believe him but she looks interested so he continues.

‘The children used to make dresses for the local hospital. In some op shops you can still find them, white linen with a green trim and a little tag sewn on the inside with a picture of the orphanage.’
She looks at the building and back at him smirking. ‘I’ve never heard that before.’

‘There’s a real nice memorial here people don’t normally see it but it’s been here since they closed the orphanage.’

He leads her towards the end of the building. Not much to look at, just a block of misshapen stone, a memorial for the stolen generation, erected by the local Aboriginal community with permission from the museum. Violet has been coming here for years. How did she overlook this? He tells her his name’s Herb and offers to show her something else, street art recounting a battle fought over the city, something most people miss. She agrees and just around the corner beneath the motorway is a concrete bank painted with men on horseback and people with spears. Violet’s driven over the motorway many times but she’s never seen this.

‘When the colonists first arrived they thought the country was empty, people were around but they didn’t build houses so they thought they didn’t really live here or that they must be closer to animals.’ He stands hands behind his back like a tour guide. ‘They discounted the Aboriginal people and their complex society because it didn’t look like theirs. People were just adapted to the land. Houses were costly in terms of resources and staying in one place all year didn’t make sense because seasons changed and they needed to go where the water was.’

They walk through the city to the central district. Pots of native flowers droop from hanging baskets on light poles and in rectangular bins along the walkways. Drought tolerant greens interspersed with the flowers. Ash and Maple trees, all two metres tall or more, line the streets. Part of the city’s initiative to keep the place cool. An increasing amount of days were over forty degrees the last few years. The flat surfaces of buildings, roads and pavements hold in the heat, making cities hotter than the places surrounding them.

It’s getting late but there’s a pub around Herb says has live music on Friday nights and an interesting history. She follows him to the street full of bars and restaurants and people laughing. Between a Mexican pub and an Italian restaurant is a sign for a Mr Chang’s bar and a concrete stairway. Water oozes from the bricks and drips down the wall. Moss grows wild along its path. At the top of the first set of stairs
is a band cage in the centre of an empty bricked space. A couple of guitarists smoke doused in dim blue and red lights.

Herb stops on the steps and leans against the wall just above her, his height accentuated. Dimples in his cheeks. ‘This used to be the house of a rich stockman. He was sent here as a thief and became wealthy through the wool trade.’ She watches his lips not paying attention to what he’s saying. She misses kissing.

Up the next set of stairs is a large open space with a bar in the middle and restaurant tables to the side. The high stone ceiling is hung with elaborate chandeliers. The tables fashioned out of reused boat planks and old workbenches. Violet orders a local wine. They take a seat in the corner. He tells her more about the stockman. She gulps her drink and orders another, happy to be delayed from returning to her empty house. Music drums, Herb talks and all she can think about is Russell. The waiter tops up her drink and she spills her change all over the table.

‘… the bricks in most of these buildings came from the prison brick yard.’ Herb says.

Violet interrupts. ‘I lost my husband in a field.’ She just about spills her drink as she swigs it. A drop of red wine trickles down her chin and she wipes it away. ‘Dead I mean. He had a heart attack.’

At first Herb widens his eyes in surprise. Too personal she thinks. Too soon. Then he speaks. ‘That’s the best way to go, I reckon. Just lay down in a field somewhere. I think I’d like to go like that, be turned into compost and fed back to the plants. It’s probably not very practical but I can dream.’

Violet smiles at the absurdity of the thought. She doesn’t tell him what really happened to Russell. At the funeral home his parents wanted to help dress the body. They encouraged her to wash him, cold and soft. The chemical smell coming off him made her gag but she forced herself to touch his skin. Her fingers shook as she helped dress him, first in his suit pants and shirt and then on with his jacket. An open casket at the funeral just as his parents wished. The mortician explained the process they used to preserve him. His fluids removed and replaced with formaldehyde. Make-up, to restore his living appearance. His body would take years to decay. If he was dug up, he’d look like he was sleeping.
Suddenly Violet needs air.

She heads for the balcony and Herb follows her out. They stand looking at the buildings on the street and the older architectural style one floor up. Herb tells her most of these were houses or shops when the city was still new. Then he tells her this street way down underneath all this concrete is older still and the site of many corroborees and ceremonies.

Violet folds her arms and chews her lip. Then she asks him, ‘Don’t you sometimes feel like this city was cut from another place? Like it was just uprooted from the other side of the world and dropped here to smother the land and people already here?’

He says, ‘Are you always so philosophical when you’re drunk?’ And they go back inside into the loud warm bar to dance.

Violet orders another wine and drinks it too fast. Pungent and warm, the alcohol goes straight to her head. She feels herself sway as though she’s on a boat, the rhythmic tide swelling beneath her. Time to go home. Herb walks with her to the tram station. The cool air sobers her up. While they wait he points to the church towering above the city, ‘The gargoyles on the church are real interesting. What do you think? Hippopotamus or badly-sculpted griffin?’ They’re too far away to see properly but it reminds her of something from the museum. The large nose, round head and inward-facing toes.

‘A diprotodont maybe?’

He raises his eyebrows.

‘A giant wombat.’

Violet thinks about inviting him to stay but the house is a mess. Dust and cobwebs. Books and magazines piled on almost every surface. Spare rooms have become places for memories, old pictures, belongings of Russell’s, things she’s sure he would want her to keep.

‘Let me know if you want any more history lessons. Or your lawn cut.’ He unzips his backpack and fishes out a business card.
The tram arrives and she makes the journey alone.
The sun warms Acacia’s neck as she watches the entrance of Rosella’s apartment building. Quiet. Most of the residents work a nine to five. She’s done this before. All she has to do is buzz them all and go up to Rosella’s apartment. Then she’ll need the receptionist to let her in. Left her keys at work? Reasonable enough. She’ll say she rushed home to get something. The only problem – how well the receptionist knows Rosella. She probably talks to them a lot. Politics was in Rosella even as a kid. She had a habit of getting her way everywhere they went. Once she dipped her head at a shop assistant and said, ‘I wish I could have a brooch just like yours.’ The shop assistant had grinned. They always thought she was cute. Then the middle aged woman unpinned the brooch, some charity thing and gave it to her.

Acacia is passable for Rose in her borrowed pink blouse and stiff white skirt but her walk is a little off. Her face isn’t quite the same either. She walks with a slow click-clack across the concrete path, presses the buttons. The door beeps and slides open. She goes in. The elevator is empty. She’s glad to ride up alone. At Rosella’s apartment, she knocks. No one home, as she expected. In character, she sighs into her hand bag as Rose might. No keys. Back to reception. The guy behind the desk is in his thirties. Black hair kept short. Suit and tie like a waiter. She wouldn’t be surprised if her sister fancied him.

‘Hi, I’ve just done the stupidest thing.’ She furrows her brow and tips her head slightly. ‘I’ve rushed home to get some paperwork and left my keys at work. Could you let me in? I just need a minute.’

‘Rose isn’t it?’ Acacia nods. ‘Yeah no worries. Remind me, which apartment is it again?’

‘Thanks so much. It’s 120.’ He reaches for the key.

‘There’s a charge as you know. I’ll add it to your rent receipt.’

Fuck, she hadn’t considered a cost. She’ll have to leave the city soon. They ride the elevator in silence. Acacia tries to think of something to say. She asks the obvious. ‘Have you been busy today?’
‘No. Not usually during the day. Just the morning and evening when everyone’s home.

‘Of course.’ Acacia holds her hands at her waist.

The door opens. Acacia follows the receptionist to the apartment. He unlocks her door and leaves.

Acacia goes to Rosella’s bedroom. Lacy pink lingerie and a tie left on the floor. Someone’s had company. In her dresser drawer she finds a small stash of money and a spare credit card. Same place she kept her money as a kid. On the bedside table is a pair of earrings – diamond and gold. A pearl necklace is thoughtlessly dangling from a drawer handle. She places these in her handbag. In the bathroom, Acacia also takes a small jewellery box, and a watch. In the walk-in wardrobe she feels around the clothes, opens bags and searches a suitcase. She finds Rosella’s passport tucked in a travel bag. The picture is a little old but looks enough like Acacia. She leaves, waving to the guy at reception on her way out.
Violet hardly wakes as a possum patters along the windowsill, a snake not far behind. Her eyes half-open, body frozen in a half sleep she watches, willing the possum to go outside. The snake strikes, the possum wraps itself around her yoga mat, jumps onto her dressing table and scrambles through a hole in the plaster but not quick enough. A young possum clinging to her fur slips into the snake’s mouth and he swallows. Satisfied with the morsel, the snake slithers back across the windowsill and out, curling itself around a branch below.

Violet’s brother Fin stops by before breakfast. He notices the hole in the plastic sheeting when he goes to get the kettle. She tells him it happened yesterday but it might have been there for a week or more. A mouse has chewed its way through, she suspects.

‘You need to get that door fixed. Any word yet?’

‘Not yet. Don’t worry Fin. I’m going to patch it up today. Or tomorrow, after I finish my poem.’

‘A poem?’

He disapproves. Maybe it’s because she’s let the dishes and the books pile up and the hole. He already disapproved of the sheeting and now it has a hole.

‘I was asked to submit something for a book.’

He grunts and places a cup of tea on the table for her. His reaction is different when she’s writing a research paper. That he considers work, understandable if she doesn’t get to the housework, but poetry was a pastime.

‘How are the kids? Meredith?’

‘They’re good,’ he says on his way back to the sink.

‘Candice just started school so Meredith has been helping out in the tuck shop there.’
He fills the sink with hot water and begins to wash the dishes.

‘You don’t have to do that. I can wash them later.’ She gets up but he waves to tell her to sit back down.

‘The boys are the same as when you saw them. Driving us crazy.’

After Fin leaves she sits outside with a pot of tea. The garden has overgrown. Water drums against the tin roof and drips through a small hole, pooling on the concrete. Violet puts her feet, still in slippers on an upturned washing basket. A possum has chewed through most of the lemons on the tree. Violet is aware of its presence in the evening when the dog next door barks as the possum runs along the fence. She has another tree to plant, a she oak that’s sat in a pot for a couple of months. She knows all about the benefits of planting on a full moon when the groundwater rises and the roots can reach into the deeper soil. Plants are supposed to grow bigger, have more flowers, bigger fruit and stay in bloom longer. So she waited and has missed the moon twice.

When the rain stops, Violet changes her shoes and walks down to where the other chair has been placed with a bowl of birdseed on top, full of water and sprouting seed. She tips the water and seed onto the grass. Under the chair, in the middle of the pebbled path is a new feathery shrub. She breaks off the tip of a stem with a cluster of spiky leaves and small green-white flowers and takes the bowl and the stem with her inside.

Violet heads out the front. The family across the road has their garage door open, a large TV blares the soccer game and several friends lounge on a couch and shout. Tony waves as he walks out with a freshly opened bottle of beer. Their children and others play in the street with someone’s new toy, an electronic car that zooms past her and flips on the edge of the gutter.

Two blocks away Halim lives, an old man now, retired. He’d worked with her mother. He looks at the stem, the small white flower and recognises the plant.

‘You’ve found yourself a peppercress.’ He laughs, shakes his head. ‘A peppercress in suburbia. They do turn up in unexpected places, don’t they?’
‘Is it native?’ She asks.

‘And quite a rare one too.’

After saying goodbye Violet walks a few more streets to a large second hand store. There, she finds two green metal doors, a filigree design of vines and flowers. They’ll let in light and air but remain securely locked at night. Perfect replacements for the sheeting.
26 City of Metal

Acacia gets on the train heading north into the heat. The city rushing by. She’ll go to the airport. Make her way to the big crowded cities of Asia, full of music, people. There, augmentations are already sold as accessories. She sends Dada a message. He tells her to get to Hong Kong. He’s got a friend for her to stay with. Says he’ll meet her when he’s done in Japan. The train pulls in to the underground station. International airport—up the escalators, third floor. Acacia makes her way through the crowd, people rushing to and away from gates. Multi-layered terminals, bag pick-up, services desks and airlines. She takes the stairs to the service desks. Acacia talks to a man in a turtle neck sweater, beard, no hair on his head. Nearly forty degrees outside. They breed them odd up here.

‘Anything left for Hong Kong tonight?’

He consults his computer, scrolls noisily down the page.

‘Nothing.’

His fingers type. His eyes don’t leave the screen for a second.

‘I can get you to Kuala Lumpur tonight and Hong Kong early Sunday.’

‘Can you get me somewhere in East Asia tonight? China, Japan, Singapore?’

More keyboard clicking.

‘There’s a flight to Tokyo…’ more typing ‘check-in closes in half an hour. You’d get to Tokyo late tonight.’

Acacia pulls out Rosella’s credit card. She’ll just meet up with Dada sooner.

‘Book it in.’

The process takes longer than she estimates. He fills in her details. Prints her tickets. Processes her money without urgency. Acacia taps her fingernails on the acrylic benchtop hoping everything is fine. He hands the documents to her within ten minutes of the check-in.
She bolts up the escalators. The sterilised spaces of the airport give way to a barren runway and the sterilised spaces inside the plane. Food is served as they hover above the clouds. Acacia is squashed next to a man who laughs loudly. She puts her earphones in, turns up the music and lays her seat back to sleep.

Acacia steps from the plane into the cool night air. A short walk to the terminal. Inside a garden winds itself around the airport building. Vines drop along railings. Shrubs create barriers, raised flower beds usher people towards the exit. On the way she exchanges money then stands in the twisted snake of a customs line.

Acacia enters the country with an e-stamp in her passport. She takes a lift down to the train to get into the city, buys a tickets, gets on a crowded train. Buying a seat, she finds, doesn’t mean you get a seat. People pool around her and she stands in their warmth. Unlike a train at home this one is eerily quiet, despite the number of people. Windows flash with advertisements on a backdrop of night sky, city buildings are rising shadows behind. In the city Acacia jostles her way off the train. People canter across the platforms in all directions. She finds her way out of the station. Her stomach rumbles.

People walk head down, umbrella’s up. Barely a drizzle of rain falls. Acacia looks up at a man who pushes past her, one eye blue rimmed with metal. She’s heard of the implants here, made to look like retro cyborgs from those old films.

Streets glisten, the rain falls heavier. Acacia walks along the sheltered footpath. An internet café gives her a chance to contact Dada. He’s in the city, says she can sleep at his. He gives her directions. She buys a hot coffee and walks. The streets are lit. People in business wear file along the paths. She takes a right near the train station, past shops, restaurants, vintage record stores and art houses. Above a row of comic stores a set of stairs lead up to an apartment block on the street above. Elevator – level seventeen. Dada’s the second door on the left, already open. Inside, the space is filled with people drinking, dancing, getting high. Dada pulls her from behind as she enters, taking her hand. She can see people with implants all around the room, the tattoos on their necks like hers, the international symbol for cyborg. Dada gives her a thin metal strip. Tells her to put it on her tongue. The latest drug – android.
‘Works best in cyborgs,’ he says ‘but I can feel it in my tattoos. The ink is all metal.’

Acacia places the tab on her tongue and lets the strip dissolve. The feeling starts in her lower back and moves up through her stomach to her hand. A surge-like pulse tingles under her skin as though something is alive there and wriggling. Heat pools within her, deep in her arms and legs where the metal pins are. She takes off her jacket. Her body feels like more machine than meat. Her mind working on overdrive, a computer sifting through information. She takes a ball bearing from a benchtop and sucks at it like a lolly.
The letter has a red ‘Urgent’ stamp printed on the front, return address for the council. Violet leaves the letter on the table and pours a glass of wine, a local red made with organic grapes. Aged for a few years but the real secret to a good wine is the climate. Warm summer, cold winter and the rain must hold off until after the grapes are ripe so they don’t swell with water, diluting the flavour. Funny, how some plants have manipulated us so we take care of their reproduction. Today the rare and threatened plants are those that don’t attract us, without fruit or flowers or enzymes to make people hallucinate. She sits at the table, ruminating on the wine, not yet ready to open the letter.

After a glass and a half, Violet takes the letter and runs her finger through the opening. Just as she feared, the heading reads ‘Notice to Comply: Unsightly/Overgrown Property’. She’d ignored an anonymous letter threatening to report her to the council. One of her neighbours had complained of the lemon tree being too tall, leaves falling into the guttering. But they are my gutters, thinks Violet. There’s also the matter of native animals living in the shrubbery, deemed pests by the neighbour and now the council. Though the main complaint from the council is the risk of fire. According to the letter, vegetation should be kept well-trimmed, gardens should be weeded often and lawns mown so that if a fire were to break out it wouldn’t grow in her yard and endanger the lives of her neighbours.

Violet sits back and stares into space. They’ve given her four weeks to tame the garden or the council will clear the yard for her. She sighs and gets up. She decides to start with the house first. The garden will be easier in the afternoon, once the sun starts to go down. She thinks of calling Herb, asking him to sculpt some shrubs. The embarrassment of him seeing her cracked walls might be too much.

The day drifts as Violet stacks books, puts away clothes, sorts through letters that have been piling up on the table by the door. She puts on a load of washing, a load of dishes and pours another glass of wine. The stereo plays a mix of soft music full of pianos and violins, songs about love, gardens and coffee shops. By the afternoon, the house is tidier, all the books she can’t fit on the shelves piled neatly in the hallway.
Outside, Violet moves the garden table and one of the chairs closer to the house. She wrestles the second chair from grass tangled around the legs, the metal seat. The hose is curled under the garden tap, a vine with small yellow flowers has wrapped its tendrils over the hose and put its roots down on the other side. Violet rips the roots from the ground, easily pulling up the pipe. She connects the hose to the water and finds the nozzle in the longer grass with a clump of dirt crusted on one side. The dirt is still a bit damp from the rain last week and crumbles off as she rinses the nozzle under the water. Maybe she’ll call him once the house is all fixed up. They could go for a drink somewhere.

She begins with the windows, the hose on a blast setting so cobwebs and dust slip down the windows. The house shines beneath the water as the film of dirt washes away. The hard work will be mowing and weeding. The grass has grown but so have her plants, their branches pressing into each other, the carefully considered spaces between have been lost. She has been removing the morning glory however several other vines coil across the yard, purple trumpets erupting along the fence line. The peppercress has been quarantined for some time, surrounded by wooden planks and weeded but now the plant has grown and some of the planks have fallen over.

Violet pulls at weeds in front of the door. The sun is starting to fade. A rat runs out of the grass and across Violet’s shoe. Violet screams and falls backwards but the rat has already climbed over the fence into a neighbour’s yard. This would be funny if she didn’t land on her hip and scratch her back on a branch. She scrambles to get up from a new patch of morning glory and shakes herself just in case there are bugs on her. Under a clump of grass near the side fence she finds several pots and a pumpkin growing.

From down amongst the plants the yard seems to stretch for miles in all directions. Violet pushes through the trees and loses sight of the house. Where to begin? There is a vine of marigolds growing towards the back. She decides to start there. A big job but the vine is the worst of it. Violet makes her way through trees and shrubbery. The back fence is entirely covered in vine. The nice thing about the yard is that it feels like she’s in the middle of nowhere even in the middle of the city.

Clouds have covered the waning sun. Violet doesn’t bother going inside to eat. There’s food in the garden – quandong, lilly pilly, apples. Violet takes a lighter from her pocket. She could burn small piles of the vegetation instead of bagging it up and
lugging it out. She sets up a clear space of ground, surrounds it with rocks and shovels out the top layer of grass and dirt leaving a hole lined with sandy soil. She places a small heap of leaves inside and lights it. Smoke curls up through the tree tops.

By evening, Violet has cleared an area a couple of metres wide. The light fades and possums rummage through the canopy so the garden is full of squeaks and falling fruit. Violet heads back towards the house. A shrub blocks the path so she pushes her way around. The house is further away than it should be. Winding past trees and plants, she can’t see anything but bush, the house seems to be engulfed. After an unusual amount of time she stops. A chair sticks out from a patch of violets ankle deep. Her legs are getting weak from all the kneeling and squatting. Her thighs have had a good work out. She sits down and pants. Getting herself out has proven more difficult. She tries to recollect how she got into the garden, maybe she’s gone around in circles when she should be pushing forward but the plants have made their own paths it seems. She looks up at the sky. A pink and orange streaked cloud billows above, promising rain. This is ridiculous. She gets up again. The house should just be there. She walks in the direction she thinks the house is in. If she hits a fence instead at least she’ll have something to follow. She pushes through bushes, rips weeds to clear a path and ends up at a wall of marigold – the fence line.

Violet turns left and hears rustling. Something big is living in her garden. She pauses and listens trying to work out what it might be and whether it could harm her. The last thing she wants is someone’s escaped stag in her garden. The rustling dies down and she continues. Further along in front of her, moonlight glints off something in the grass. When she gets closer she sees a pool of water. Strange. Maybe a pipe has leaked up through the ground? The water like a small lake extends too far and seemingly too deep for her to walk through it so she concedes and walks around. A scratching sound from the trees behind her. She walks faster. By the time she gets around the lake the sky is dark. Something is moving towards her from behind, the sound of something pushing through vegetation, breaking branches. Whatever it is sounds big but Violet knows sometimes the smallest things can make a racket as they search the undergrowth for bugs. She continues without concern. The house should be close now. Violet walks for what seems like hours but it must just be the darkness, the effort of pushing through scrub draws out time and makes it seem much longer than it
has been. The creature begins pushing forward again. Getting closer. She wishes her body was more adapted to this.

Violet stops to look and sees movement far off in the low light, trees shake. She can’t make out any details in the dark but it’s big, at least as big as her and its running towards her. Violet waits, curious to see what’s living in the garden. As it gets closer, she can make out a shape – a large barrel of a creature, a side-to-side gait wobbles its massive frame. Violet turns and runs but it’s too late. The creature is upon her in no time and knocks her to the ground. She tries to scramble out of its way but it’s clear it’s looking for her. She stares up into the face of an animal she’s never seen before. The grey fur, long face and large teeth in the jaw. Ears stick up on its head and whiskers sprout along jowls. His hot breath rancid on her face. The smell of damp fur. She struggles but the creature opens its mouth and bites down hard on her head. Blackness.

Violet falls through darkness, a nauseous feeling in her stomach. She concentrates on her body. She’s heard of the illusion of limbs felt long after they’ve been amputated. Can she really feel her body or is this just the lingering sensation of a body? She wriggles her fingers and brings them up in front of her face but her eyes can’t see through the thick dark. She touches her face, runs her fingers across her head. Everything feels normal. She can hear things below her, murmurs far away and her body continues to fall. Her whole body relaxes, she closes her eyes and lets herself feel the sensation of falling.
Dada introduces Acacia to Seiko and Nami. She smiles, shakes their hands, then presses her bare fingers deep into her pockets. Her breathe, like steam in the cold night. They walk across the empty carpark to a mesh wire fence. Behind is an empty field stretching into the distance. Dada has taken her to see why it’s fenced. He reckons the government is testing something, maybe weapons. The women speak to Dada in Japanese, look at Acacia. Dada nods.

Seiko gets out a pair of wire cutters, snips a line down the fence. When she gets to the ground she pulls the metal out at an angle leaving a gap for them. Acacia slips a ball bearing into her mouth, swallows. Dada and Acacia follow the women through the fence. Nami and Seiko light the way, their shoes glowing and watches beaming a path across the field.

After ten minutes of walking something flashes. Nami shines her watch light across a structure to their right. A metal pole rises about five metres into the air. After a few seconds flames shoot from the top then extinguish.

‘What is this?’ Acacia asks.

Nami points in front of them.

Dada whispers back to Acacia, ‘We can talk later.’

They continue on. Every few metres a pole rises. Seiko takes out a camera and shoots the structures. After ten minutes of walking they reach the end of the poles. Up ahead they can make out a circular tower like the traffic controllers at airports. Lights project across the grass illuminating antennas set out in a grid. They rise like electricity poles. Crossed rods near the top connect cables. Look like Hills Hoists. Acacia looks at Dada, raises an eyebrow. Nami puts a finger to her lips. Solar panels are raised on pillars creating a sheltered walkway below the antennas. Someone leaves the tower. Security uniform, gun slung across his chest. Seiko points behind them. They retreat across the field.

They rush across the carpark as though someone’s chasing them. Nami and Seiko head for their car. Dada and Acacia climb into Dada’s rental and pull out.
‘What’s going on there?’ Acacia asks.

‘Nami and Seiko will meet us at mine. They can explain better. I’ll translate.’

Dada squeals around the corners. His apartment is more than an hour away, closer to the city. Seiko and Nami arrive just after them. Dada takes them inside.

Acacia is keen to know about the field but Dada offers tea. He’s told her politeness is important here but this feels deliberate. She’s not used to waiting. He even lets the water cool to the right temperature before pouring it over the leaves. Acacia sits on a tatami tapping her fingers to the beat in her head. She wishes there was music. Dada has nothing to play it on.

Dada places the tea on the lowered table, takes his place. He pours, blows his tea, sips, places the cup down.

‘They’re antennas?’ Acacia asks.

Dada looks at her as though he’d forgotten she was there. He speaks to Nami and Seiko in Japanese.

‘Yes. They project radio waves into the ionosphere. The others Nami isn’t sure about.’

Seiko says something to Nami and she screws up her face.

‘There’s a rumour they’re changing the weather.’ Dada scratches his head.

‘Why?’

He speaks to Seiko.

‘She’s not sure. Seiko works at the factory that makes the parts. They send things to Australia too. If they’re changing the weather here, they’re doing it at home.’

Seiko finishes her tea. Nami speaks to her and then Dada. They get up, bow to Acacia, leave.

Dada gives Acacia a strip of android. She puts it on her tongue followed by a ball bearing chaser. Her body feels strong. She brings her fist down on the table.
‘Ready for the rally?’ Dada places a drink in front of her. ‘Nami will release the footage tomorrow morning. People won’t be happy.’

‘We have to go.’ Acacia answers.

Nami calls in the morning. The rally starts at two. Dada and Acacia find Seiko in the crowd. Acacia rolls a ball bearing on her tongue. She needs more these days to feel normal. Clouds cover the sky, the cold bites through her. She can’t seem to get warm. Nami stands on a bench and yells into the crowd. People hush then yell something and raise their fists. Acacia misses the moment. When Nami steps down everyone marches towards parliament. Someone close by plays Japanese metal. She feels like moshing.

Her body aches. She can feel the metal in her bones, cold and hard. She moves through the crowd like she’s wading into the sea. Pain swells in her chest and she wonders if the rumours are true. Does android enhance the cyborg body? She pushes past people to get to the front. She wants the best view of the skirmish. Officers stand outside of parliament, guns on their belts. They ready themselves. An officer shoots into the air. The crowd runs towards them. Acacia feels herself hit the ground. Her body limp. A dull thud, her head against concrete. Everything goes white.
The island shakes. Fran freezes at the kitchen table. Beads roll across the surface and bounce on the ground. A book falls off the shelf near the couch and Fran can’t think. Doorways are supposed to be safe. She gets up but can’t avoid the beads as they shudder on the floor. Fran stumbles to the door, presses herself into the wood. She feels too exposed.

A wooden shelf falls. DVD cases crack beneath the weight of the wood. Fran thinks of the stilts. She picks at her nails. Book pages flitter with the movement. A vase and an ornament wobble then shatter. Fran takes a deep breath. The floor beneath her groans. Are houses with stilts built to take earthquakes? Fran has made it through the storms but this is her first real quake. The shuddering stops.

‘Thank god,’ she says.

Then as if in response a rumble echoes beneath the floor boards and the house starts to shake again. Surely someone would have told her if these houses couldn’t take it.

The house shakes more violently this time as though the island is trying to hurt someone. Fran presses herself against the architrave, closes her eyes and tries to imagine herself on a warm beach, her toes in the sand and a freshly opened coconut in her hand. The tremor is short and when it ends Fran runs from the lounge to bathroom climbing into the large tub, a refuge. She closes her eyes, waiting for the next set of tremors to rip through the house. Her fingers tremble like tiny aftershocks travelling through her. If the house falls she prays for a quick death.

Fran stays there, curled in the bath for two hours until the phone rings. She almost believes the ringing is another quake. She lifts herself and heads to the kitchen, stopping every few steps to make sure the house is still. She picks her way through the lounge room, the broken glass, ceramic shards and books. Toma’s voice peals from the phone.

‘How’re you doing?’

‘I hope that’s the last of them. I’m still shaking.’
She holds out her hand and watches it tremble. Her French-tipped nails are chipped and worn.

‘Haven’t had one of those in years. Is the house still standing?’

‘I’ll have to see. I’ve been in the bath since it happened.’

Toma laughs.

‘Is that the worst of it you think?’ She asks.

‘Nah, it was nothing. You’d know if it was a big one. That was just a baby.’

When she gets off the phone, Fran goes outside to check on the house and the neighbours. The stilts are still in place. Rob and Lynn are on the mainland but his house is a mess. Rob is one of a few people who’d paid extra to get bricks to the island. A large crack runs the length of the kitchen, one half of the wall raised above the other.

Fran calls Carol and Phil. Another brush with death. She needs a bit of company. Carol drives over in the afternoon, in her new car, a sleek black shiny thing. Fran has a bag packed for the night.

Not long after dawn breaks along the coast the next morning, a silent cloud rises above the island. Fran wakes in Carol and Phil’s spare bedroom. Loud knocking at her door. She wraps a nightgown around herself and answers. Phil is standing there with wet hair, pyjama shorts and a shirt only half buttoned. The loud voices of Carol and Margaret alerts Fran – something is wrong.

‘What’s going on love?’

‘We have to go.’ He says.

Fran looks past him through the lounge-room windows and into the grey hush of twilight. A fog has clouded the view across the garden. The air is unusually still. Birds are not yet chirping or screeching.

‘It’s a bit early isn’t it? The sun isn’t even up.’
‘The volcano…’ He turns to look out the windows and sees it’s already too late. The ash is falling thickly. Phil doesn’t try the car. The engine will clog with ash and leave them stranded. They’ll have to wait it out.

On the other side of the island, people are boarding the boats with a few essentials. Toma calls Fran’s house one more time, letting it ring out before heading to the boat. She’s probably safer staying where she is for now. He meets Tarni on board. She wasn’t able to convince the old fella to leave the island. An evacuation hasn’t officially been called. The volcano might just spew ash.

The old man sits in his shack and prepares. He paints white and black marks across his face. He works to thread fresh flowers into his cloak, flowers he picked in the middle of the night when he heard the first rumbles from the mountain.

By the afternoon, the island is blanketed in a grey-black residue. The windows at Carol and Phil’s house are smeared with a fine greasy ash making it difficult to see out. Fran and Carol sit at the kitchen table and drink wine. Phil and Margaret stand in the bathroom trying to pick up an internet signal on their phones.

‘They just announced an evacuation alert,’ Phil calls out. ‘Emergency service crews are on the way.’

A loud rumble carries across the island and ends with a bang. In the magma chamber beneath the mountain a crack has formed, letting water and sediment from the lake seep through. This sets off an explosive reaction and causes the side of the mountain to blow out, throwing hot mud high into the air.
Fran puts her hands over her ears and rushes for a doorway, expecting another earthquake but despite the noise the floor remains still. Phil’s bloodshot eyes widen and tears form in the corners. He walks to Carol and holds her to him. At first the mud falls like rain on the roof but then the shower sounds louder, mud slides down the windows and Fran presses herself into a wall, eyes closed. Rocks ping against the outside tiles. Leaving the house, they’d be pummelled. She hopes the ceiling holds.

The roof groans. They can only just hear the slopping sound of mud muted by the thick layer piling up. Fran sinks to the ground, knees to her chest. Margaret, Carol and Phil sit on the other side of the door, leaning on each other. The hours pass absurd jokes. Forced laughter. Not long after two the power goes out and Margaret scrounges in drawers in the dark of the kitchen to find some candles.

Just after three, a beam brakes leaving a hole in the roof. Large dollops of mud splatter inside. The candles go out and they’re left in a dim hazy light. The walls are tinged in red. They stand as the mud slides across the floor.

The mud moves up Fran’s thighs like a warm bath. Held in place she tries to move her legs but fails.

‘We’re going to die, aren’t we?’ Carol whispers in Phil’s ear.

He kisses her forehead and holds her against him.

‘Yes darling.’ He says.

The mud reaches their waists and stops. Sunlight peaks through the ash and then the sun sets. Exhausted and hungry Fran drifts in and out.

Emergency services crews arrive on the island in the early morning. Toma and several others have volunteered their boats, coming with the crews to search for survivors. Fran shivers in her half sleep. The mud is cooling. When people appear on the roof Fran thinks she’s hallucinating like someone lost in the desert. Phil and Carol are blocked
from view by fallen rubble. A rope is flung at her and she grasps at the air, expecting to feel nothing, but the rope materialises. Fran puts the noose around her waist and clings as the workers pull her free from the thickening silk. The house is quiet and Fran assumes the others have already been taken away. Outside the crews give her a cloth and tell her to breathe through it. Ash is still falling in a fine powder like warm black snow. Her eyes itch and she has to keep rubbing them to get rid of the grit. The world blurs behind watering eyes and Fran struggles along, insisting on walking. The rescue crew are wearing knee high gumboots with broad soles to help them walk over the mud, thick like dirty cake batter.

The dock is a long hike and Fran almost collapses as they reach it.

‘The others in the house. Did they get out to?’ She says to the woman on her arm.

‘I don’t know. You can ask on the boat.’

Wrapped in a blanket, she sits by the dock and watches two emergency services workers carry the old man to the boat on a stretcher. His hair is sticky with mud and his body looks frail as though he lived all his hundred years today. His protests are muffled by a respiration mask and his weak arm movements barely register to the workers who place him on board. Fran coughs black liquid from her lungs. Someone gives her a bottle of water, her nose runs and everything is black.

Fran is helped onto an SES boat. No sign of Phil or Carol. They’ll get the next one she tells herself as she lies on a seat inside and lets the current rock her to sleep. Several times over the next few hours, she stirs, opens her eyes and falls back to sleep. Just as the boat docks on the mainland several people start yelling near the back of the cabin. Fran gets up but can only see emergency workers crowded around someone on the ground. A man in SES uniform prepares a defibrillator machine and as everyone moves away Fran can see the old man, his pale face. An ambulance arrives on the dock and he’s the first to be rushed off. Too late, Fran suspects. He was already gone on the boat.
Joe and Mercedes are waiting at the dock on the mainland.

Mercedes has tears in her eyes. ‘I thought we’d lost you.’

‘I’m fine babe. Got nothing to worry about apart from the mud in me bra.’

Fran cackles, coughs and embraces Mercedes.

‘I’m sorry for being such a cow to you all these years.’ Mercedes cries into Fran’s shoulder.

Toma waits until she’s finished hugging her children before he says goodbye. His family are staying at a makeshift shelter in the city. She can’t see the baby. Tarni’s arms empty. Their faces streaked black from ash and tears.

‘The baby.’ She whispers to Toma and hugs him hard.

His eyes red. ‘Ash in his lungs. He smothered, just went blue in Tarni’s arms.’

Fran gets Mercedes to give him her number. They get in Joe’s car and drive. For the first time in a long while Fran is homeless. Leaving her island feels like leaving a violent lover. Bogong, another charmer. Even as Joe tells her they’ve got a place all sorted out Fran knows she’ll go back to the island. She lays her head against the car-door and sleeps.
Acacia wakes. White sheets pulled over her. The smell of antibacterial soap. Years compress. Dazed in a post-op, drug haze she thinks the car accident has just happened. Her stomach stings as she shifts her weight. A bandage across her waist. The surgical cut fresh. Last time, her body had been filled with pieces of metal. This time metal had been removed: ball bearings, coins, hoops, unidentified balled up strips of copper. The infection had started in her appendix, a ball bearing lodged there. Bacteria breeding, the organ walls engorged. Her anaemic body unable to fight the infection. She tries to get up. A nurse enters, fusses with the sheets, tucks her back in.

‘You’ve got a catheter dear. Don’t get up.’

‘What...’ She starts. Her head drowsy. Her body relaxes against the bed. The nurse keeps talking.

‘You were admitted yesterday with a severe...’ She drifts. ‘doctor will come this...’ She gives in and sleeps.

Acacia opens her eyes. Out the window, afternoon sun spills shadows on the park. More lucid now, glucose in her veins, she slides up to sit. Magazines on the bedside table. A cup of ice. She takes an ice cube between her teeth, crunches. Cold tingles through her molars. Her mouth stings from the chill. She wants a ball bearing to roll on her tongue. She wonders if the nurse has fed her.

Jake wakes her. Morning sun on the bed. Jake has pulled back the curtains. She’s back in Australia she realises.

‘Where’s Dada?’ she asks.

Jake shakes his head.

‘You have a problem Acacia. You’re not invincible like you think.’

She tries to sit but pain surges through her stomach.
‘What happened? Why am I back here?’

‘You flew home, remember? You have to realise Acacia, you’re just like the rest of us.’

The nurse comes in. ‘She needs her rest now.’

Jake lifts his hand, a goodbye. He leaves. Her head aches, the sun makes her close her eyes. She drifts…

Someone leaves the TV on. The anaesthetic wears off, Acacia listens.

‘…investigation into floods. Claims that weather modifying technology could have been used to increase the frequency and severity of floods not yet confirmed…’

Dada must have done something. A nurse wheels in a trolley, switches off the news, takes her blood.

‘Do you know why you’re here love?’

Acacia shakes her head, still woozy.

‘You’ve had an operation to remove some metal from your stomach. A compulsive disorder we believe.’ The nurse places a band around her arm, checks her blood pressure. ‘You’ll be monitored and someone will come to see you. A psychologist. One of the metal joints in your hip was replaced, damaged by a fall?’

Acacia nods. She remembers the fall.

‘That’s the problem with implants. They don’t heal like bone.’

‘How did I get here?’ Acacia asks.

‘You were dropped at the hospital unconscious. A lot of painkillers in your system. Your memory might be fuzzy for some time but I’ll make a note for the doctor.’

The nurse leaves. Acacia examines the cut, all flesh and blood under the staples. The drip in her arm pulses sugar into her veins. She pulls the chart from the side of her
bed. A signature. Rosella signed her in. Acacia tries her number on the phone. No answer.

Rosella wakes Acacia in the evening.

‘What’s going on?’ Acacia sits up.

‘You were pulled out of a protest in Japan, put on a plane. They thought you were me.’ She balances cross-legged on a metal stool. Artificial light bounces off the window reflecting them like a double exposure over the city.

‘Who? Why? Where’s Dada?’

Rose swallows, rubs her lips together, looks away. A nervous habit. ‘Special ops. They couldn’t let a minister be caught up in the Japan mess. Some of the radicals were arrested. You’re lucky.’

‘Was Dada one of them?’

Rose gets up off the stool. Her eyes flick to the open door. Acacia grabs at her skirt.

‘Tell me.’

Rosella sits on the edge of the bed awkwardly and speaks, voice lowered. ‘An Australian, amongst others was charged with terrorism. The details haven’t been released to the public yet.’ Rose studies Acacia’s eyes. ‘He was planning to flood our city, kill hundreds.’

Acacia furrows her brow, shakes her head. ‘He’s just a scapegoat for you, isn’t he?’

Rose puts her hand to her temple, closes her eyes, shakes her head. ‘You think you’d survive, on the streets, when the water’s rising? Look at you.’ She throws her hand over the bed. ‘You might have implants but you can’t breathe water any better than I can.’ An accusation. Rosella gets up, straightens her skirt. ‘Fuck, Acacia. The only reason you’re not rotting in prison with him is because of me.’
‘Stop lying. He went to stop the floods. Your people, they’re the ones who should be locked up.’

Rosella takes a deep breath. ‘Believe what you want Acacia. Maybe you weren’t in on it but the rest of them were.’ She stands deep in thought for a second then walks out.
31 City of Gardens

Light from a full moon splashes Violet’s face. She wakes in the garden, her skin smeared with soot and dirt. Smoke has settled in the cool night air like fog. The fire has burnt itself out. Her body is heavy, sore. She pulls herself up. Sweat drips down her chest. Her head throbs and she remembers the animal. A nightmare. Pain up her side. She lifts her top and sees the scratches like claw marks. From one of the plants, she thinks, or her own nails. She presses a hand to her face and wipes away drops of sweat and dew. The house lights are off. Moonlight glints off the kitchen window. She goes to bed.

Rain is falling. The sky is dark again when Violet wakes. Damp and sweat, stale in the air. In the kitchen is food, her body growls and she’s forced to consider the cold walk down the stairs.

The phone rings. Violet opens her eyes to a sunny day. Monday, the day she should be getting up for work. The phone call’s probably the museum wondering where she is. She should get up but her body is heavy, muscles weak. Her hair is beginning to tangle and thicken like vines. She is in no state for work. Tomorrow will be better. She’ll get up feeling fresh from all the sleep, dress and wash and be ready to go back out into the world. Strangely she’s not hungry or thirsty anymore.

Violet lies listening to the sound of water dripping on the floor. Another leak. The house needs cleaning again. No doubt this will be undone by a possum running around in the night, breaking pots, stealing food and leaving paw prints everywhere. The garden should be weeded but it will just grow again. Groceries need to be bought and put away and eaten so they can be bought again. Violet has decided the best thing to do today is stay in bed and sleep. She moves and the bed creaks with her weight.

The world is slipping. Violet falls, the bed gives way and leaves her in the dark. Her hair seems to be drawing up moisture and it trickles into her mouth. Her body no longer moves. At first she felt like a strait-jacket was holding her down but the sensation no longer bothers her. Something strange is happening to her feet, they seem to be longer than they were before. She wiggles her toes and they rustle. Days go by in the quiet solitude of darkness. No more knocks at the door, no phone calls.
A possum breaks a hole in the roof. Light sprinkles the house. Violet’s toes, now sprouting leaves pull toward the sun. Her hair, roots press into the ground.

Her father comes to see her. The front door has fallen off and he climbs over it to enter. He still looks young. The body that used to be Violet stands tall. Roots now connected to an underground network.

‘My dear, you’ve changed. You’ve found your legs again. How beautiful you are, now you’re standing.’

He reads her a poem but she doesn’t listen. She can hear the other plants whispering through her roots, messages delivered by fungi. Something filters through from far away asking for nutrients, for water to regrow. She responds with a small contribution, plentiful water drawn in from the water pipes. The fungi transport it along the network. Her branches grow towards the sun. Her father is no longer there.

Someone scratches at her trunk, carving out letters inside a heart-shape. The roof is gone now. The walls have crumbled to piles of brick and debris. Below her, plants have reclaimed the ground.

Whispers close, coming in from the northwest, warnings. She gulps up water, holds it inside. Sunlight fades but heat descends. A fire is coming. She prepares herself for the impact.

Fire licks at her trunk, charring the bark. Leaves burn through. Flowers shrivel and the cones at their centre prepare to release seed. She retreats deep inside and waits for the fire or herself to die.

Someone leans against her trunk, his hands covered with gauze-like gloves. Rain falls sending smoke swirling into the air. The fire crackles its way out. Silence descends on the city. Houses have fallen, animals have fled and all that’s left is a light wind that blows no leaves.

In the cool silence of night Violet erupts with shoots. New branches and leaves form and grow as she pushes towards the sun. The cones have opened their eyelets and released dozens of seeds. The water rushes in rivulets across the blackened garden. Seeds press into the soft ash and the water prompts them to open, shoots sprouting and
pushing upwards helped by nutrients encased in the seed. Soon their roots will join the network, feeling out for water and nutrients. Violet will let them take from her.