Cloud Atlas Shrugged

David Mitchell’s Nebulous Manifesto Against Atavistic Individualism

&

The Innocuous Death of Irving Crabbe

A Novel

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Master of Philosophy (Creative Arts & Communication)

by

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Certification

I, Luke Phillip Lucas, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Master of Philosophy (Creative Arts & Communication) in the Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.
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A Note on the Text

In accordance with the requirements of the University of Wollongong’s Master of Philosophy (Creative Arts & Communication) degree, this thesis comprises both the creative work “The Innocuous Death of Irving Crabbe”—a novel—and a short dissertation linked to but not dependent on the creative work, “Cloud Atlas Shrugged: David Mitchell’s Nebulous Manifesto Against Atavistic Individualism.” While the development of the novel was informed significantly by the insights gained in the compilation of the dissertation, and both pieces investigate the notion of the novel as ‘nebulous manifesto,’ the dissertation is not intended as an exegesis for the creative work, but as a standalone paper.

To facilitate reading and maintain authenticity, quotations and excerpts in the dissertation preserve authors’ and characters’ original spelling and style choices, as well as inappropriate use of gender-specific terms. These reproductions should not be interpreted as a reflection of the personal beliefs or tastes of the author.

Table 1 lists the abbreviations used to refer to the six chapters of Cloud Atlas in the dissertation.

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Cloud Atlas Shrugged: David Mitchell’s Nebulous Manifesto Against Atavistic Individualism
Abstract

This dissertation performs a close textual analysis and political reading of David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas in order to elucidate its political and philosophical stance. Mitchell’s novel engages explicitly and implicitly with a number of Left–Right dichotomies across its six sub-narratives, spanning from the South Pacific of the 1850s around the globe and back to the Hawaii of a far-flung post-apocalyptic future. In each story, antagonists espouse what this dissertation terms a kind of Right-aligned ‘atavistic individualism,’ while protagonists largely enact or adopt an opposing left-wing counter-doctrine. In line with much right-wing thought, the ideology of atavistic individualism fetishises the notion of ‘the natural’ to cast individuals as free-willed competitors without an ethical obligation to others, and to perpetuate existing power structures by configuring challenges to the orthodoxy as doomed attempts to fight ‘against nature.’ The left-wing counter-doctrine, conversely, problematises notions of ‘naturalness’ as culturally bound; shows individualist free will to be limited by interpersonal connectedness, social determinism and causality; and calls individuals to action by cleaving to principles and acting from awareness.

The conflicts between these two philosophies in Cloud Atlas have left scholarship surrounding the novel divided. Interpretations diverge considerably as to which worldview the text ultimately endorses—a cynical resignation to the futility of resisting humanity’s baser urges, or an idealistic reaffirmation of the potency and importance of individual commitment to change. This dissertation considers Mitchell’s novel within a Left–Right political frame to clarify its position as a ‘nebulous manifesto’ in fiction that critiques rather than embraces atavistic individualism and advances its own counter-doctrine, occupying a space on the Left comparable to such cultural artefacts of the Right as Ayn Rand’s Atlas Shrugged, which its title evokes.
The dissertation begins by examining atavistic individualism as it appears in the novel. Using close textual analysis, the explicit professions of several antagonists fetishising an arbitrary notion of ‘the natural’ are examined to demonstrate how they justify a conception of humans as separate individuals competing for self-gain, whose fates are determined by meritorious exercise of free will. It then discusses the novel’s portrayal of the effects of such a philosophy, namely an ‘atomising impulse’ that sunders self from other and cause from effect, and the engendering of cynicism and stasis.

Having explicated Cloud Atlas’ depiction of the nature and effects of atavistic individualism, the dissertation turns to the novel’s answer to this ideology: its ‘concatenating impulse’ showing the connectedness of self/other and cause/effect; the arbitrariness and contingency of ideas and beliefs in general and notions of ‘the natural’ in particular; the place of causality and social determinism in defining the fates of individuals; and the novel’s exhortations for readers to defend ethical principles to strive for change through optimism and activism.

In analysing Cloud Atlas through a Left–Right political frame, this dissertation is able to resolve discord surrounding the interpretation of the text and clarify its position as one that resonates with Mitchell’s six other novels, contributing a new coherence to the understanding of the author’s interconnected oeuvre.
Introduction

British author David Mitchell’s 2004 novel *Cloud Atlas* opens and closes with two halves of an extract from “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing,” the fictional published diary of a San Franciscan notary from the 1850s. The extract records Ewing’s homeward voyage after executing a will in the South Pacific, where he is befriended and bamboozled by a quack doctor aptly named Henry Goose. During their travels, Ewing obliviously records a number Goose’s professions that reveal the personal philosophy of his ‘friend,’ a worldview that leads the charlatan to attempt Ewing’s murder. This worldview can be characterised as a kind of ‘atavistic individualism’ that claims its basis in an apprehension and embrace of certain immutable laws of human nature—laws, it asserts, that render moral imperatives inconsequential and efforts toward personal or systemic reform futile. In this light, Goose is able, without compunction, to plot the murder of the good-natured Ewing for the gold he mistakenly believes to be concealed in the notary’s cabin. The assassination is thwarted only by the intervention of the escaped slave and stowaway Autua, whom Ewing has reluctantly aided. This experience prompts Ewing to formulate an antithesis to Goose’s ideology emphasising human connectedness and—in the absence of absolute knowledge of the truth of human nature—the need to cleave to ethical principles and strive, even if fruitlessly, toward a better world, manifested in his newfound commitment to abolitionism. The tension between these opposing philosophies, which the novel connects respectively with various aspects of left- and right-wing thought, is elaborated across time in each of the five narratives interposing Ewing’s tale. This dissertation will argue that *Cloud Atlas* seeks to discredit this Right-identified ideology of atavistic individualism in favour of its own Left-aligned counter-doctrine of connection, determinism, ethics and activism.
The exploration of this central conflict in multiple arenas is enabled by the novel’s distinctive nested structure. Each narrative is interrupted, often abruptly, by its successor, moving forward through time and across the globe toward the intact story at the centre as follows:

1. In addition to the interactions of Ewing and Goose, the conflict between philosophies is played out in the historical backdrop of “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing” (“Pacific Journal”), with the enslavement of the nonviolent Moriori people by bellicose Maori and the kyriarchal dominion of the British over the South Pacific.

2. “Letters from Zedelghem” (“Letters”) presents the reader with a series of epistles written by young British composer and amanuensis Robert Frobisher to his sometime lover Rufus Sixsmith during Frobisher’s 1931 sojourn at the Belgian estate of his musical idol and employer Vyvyan Ayrs. Ewing’s journal is revealed to be a book Frobisher found while looting his host’s library for valuable manuscripts. He and Ayrs exploit one another in various ways to their own ends, but the imbalance of power between them leads ultimately to the souring of the arrangement and Frobisher’s suicide.

3. In “Half-lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery” (“Half-lives”), Frobisher’s letters become clues unearthed by Southern Californian reporter Luisa Rey in a 1970s conspiracy plot surrounding their assassinated recipient, Rufus Sixsmith. The scheming, amoral corporate powers of CEOs Antonio Grimaldi and Lloyd Hooks and assassin Bill Smoke are arrayed against the principled Rey and the memory of her legendary father Lester, activist Hester van Zandt, whistleblowing scientists Sixsmith and Isaac Sachs, and retired security advisor Joe Napier.
4. In “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish” (“Ghastly Ordeal”) the decidedly imperfect titular vanity publisher recalls his triumph over the belligerent greed of a deceased client’s family, the cynical retribution of his banker brother Denholme, and neoliberal Britain’s capitalism-addled institutions, impenetrable bureaucracies and relentless infantilisation of the aged as he describes his escape from the ‘care home’ Aurora House and its barbaric head nurse Mrs Noakes. He also writes of receiving “Half-lives” as a manuscript and gives ironic instructions to a hypothetical film director on how to adapt the memoir for film.

5. “An Orison of Sonmi~451” (“Orison”) imagines the decaying social model of Cavendish’s time in its final state in Nea So Copros, a dystopian future North Korean ‘corpocracy’ under total corporate dominion. The fugitive ‘fabricant’ clone Sonmi~451 is apprehended by the authorities and interrogated by an archivist for posterity before her execution. She recalls her efforts to incite a revolution against her hyper-totalitarian government and her single moment of happiness, watching the film adaptation of Cavendish’s memoir.

6. At the furthest temporal extreme is the yarn of Zachry the goatherd, “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After” (“Sloosha’s Crossin’”). In a post-apocalyptic Hawaii, Sonmi’s tale has spawned a pacifist religious cult, whose devotees are threatened by the warlike Kona and visited by the advanced Prescient civilisation.

At the conclusion of Zachry’s oration, uninterrupted here at the heart of the novel, each narrative is resumed and resolved in reverse order. The stories trace various products of atavistic individualism, with an implied affinity or direct lineage back to the ideas of Ewing’s time. Interrupted by these variations on a theme, the novel’s outer shell becomes Ewing’s journey from well-meaning naïveté and faltering, ‘clouded’ morality, toward a coherent, tested theory of change: essentially, the novel’s counter-doctrine.
But among the body of scholarship surrounding the novel—disproportionately limited given its sustained popular and critical success (Dillon “Chaotic Narrative” 135; Schoene 33)—scholarly opinion on whether it enshrines a hopeful or a pessimistic vision of the world now and into the future diverges greatly. Indeed, the novel seems to function almost as a critical Rorschach test, shifting forms according to the pessimism or optimism of the individual reader: “As many truths as men,” as Ewing remarks (17). Casey Shoop and Dermot Ryan define the field of debate clearly in their evenhanded—if, in this respect, somewhat inconclusive—discussion of Cloud Atlas and “big history:”

Mitchell’s novel turns on a central agon between deep evolutionary imperatives that seem to shape the fate of characters within the novel’s many fictional worlds and certain countervailing possibilities that suggest that the human and post-human actors in these worlds might transhistorically determine the fate of our species and our planet . . . The novel’s concern with a transhistorical predacity that drives human civilizations resonates with a broader constellation of emergent discourses that explore the possibility of history driven by imperatives that render the desires, intentions, and actions of traditional ethical subjects of historiography—whether world historical individuals, classes, or nations—nugatory. (93)

Readings of Cloud Atlas tend to fall somewhere on this spectrum, between understanding the world it depicts as a bleak one in which humanity is doomed to repeat its failures due to unconquerable, deep-seated biological drives at one end, and finding a hopeful vision of individual empowerment to change the world through noble actions on the other. Sean Hooks, for instance, has declared in colourful terms the subtle but pervasive cynicism he finds present throughout Mitchell’s body of work:
Mitchell’s leanings have at least a tangible undercurrent of nihilism. It never accedes to miserablism but deep down, perhaps he’s too smart for all the handholding and hopefulness, the gesturing and the jargon. He knows entropy is the (dis)order of the day. He sees that it’s all going south tout de suite – awry and amuck and astray, combustible, doused in petrol, the fuse already lit. The paradigm has sped up and the breaks on the roller coaster are rather worn and the plunge over the edge of The Singularity looms. The portrait of the future . . . is of a reckoning. The loonies are off the path. The descent is well underway. (48–9)

At the other end of the continuum, Peter Childs and James Green contest that, while the first half of *Cloud Atlas* reveals what has and may come to pass if humanity fails to resist “the animus that compels the strong to subjugate the weak,” the second half “opens up an alternative perspective,” making “the case for ethical choices made by individuals and societies reasserting the potential for enlightened political agency” (35). Jo Alyson Parker states similarly that the novel “both offers the bleak vision of the future in the chronological ending and supplants it in the actual ending by suggesting a means for averting that future” (132) and Hélène Machinal concurs, pointing to the character Meronym, a Prescient visitor to Zachry’s tribe of Valleymen in “Sloosha’s Crossin’” as paving “the way towards knowledge, not knowledge used as an instrument of power and domination but a knowledge that would lead to civilized days respecting both humankind and the natural world” (143).

To others, the question seems more ambivalent. Paul A Harris opens a special David Mitchell issue of the journal *SubStance* by musing that, in Mitchell’s fiction, “the power of predacity has won in the past and, in the glum glimpses . . . of our future, it continues to win out on the global level, with local pockets of resistance. Still,” he hedges, “the archives of the future are incomplete, and so the end of the journey remains
invisible” (“David Mitchell’s Labyrinth of Time” 5). Likewise, Shoop and Ryan configure the novel agnostically as a “kind of thought experiment that asks what would it be like to inhabit worlds that appear determined by [a] kind of neo-Darwinism” (93). Their cautious analysis vacillates between a series of on the one hands and on the others for and against the novel’s faith in the human capacity to overcome different forms of determinism until, seemingly frustrated by this mass of apparent contradictions, they finally declare it “an open question whether Cloud Atlas escapes the historical determinism it seeks to debunk,” but intimate that, while the novel disagrees “in principle” with the view that “instinctual determinism has been the engine of human history,” “in practice” it proves that view correct (96). They deem the gestures the novel makes towards humanistic individual agency to be ultimately mere symbolic, intangible comforts—“dubious instruments of salvation” (95)—in the face of what it presents to be an all too concrete biological reality. Pointing to an early review of the novel by George Gessert, who sees the novel as depicting “something eternally dark about human nature” (97), Shoop and Ryan even suggest the novel risks endorsing “groundhog cynicism” (97).

A number of scholars echo this charge that Cloud Atlas espouses a set of ethics and political values that it fails to embody—that, despite its best attempts, it is ultimately somehow self-defeating. When comparing Mitchell’s novel and its film adaptation, Parker states frankly that some of the novel’s six stories work “more successfully than others” towards their message that, “in order for humanity to save itself, it must abandon its predatory tendencies” and strive instead for the greater good, though her summary takes for granted that the message of the novel is “one can change the future” (123). In Lynda Ng’s reading of the novel as “a (re)staging of the perennial conflict between Hobbesian and Rousseauian conceptions of nature and humanity’s
place within it” (107), she attributes this inconsistency more intentionality, claiming “Cloud Atlas’s unusual structure makes its conclusions deceptive” (115). She points to the “potentially redemptive” ending of Ewing’s story, with his resolution to become an abolitionist and exhortative musings on the potency of individual commitment to change, as a “sleight of hand” since, chronologically, “the novel’s ‘true’ ending occurs in the post-apocalyptic section, with Zachry fleeing his homeland and admitting that his people have been completely decimated by the Kona” (115). “[A]ttempts at pacifism or non-intervention in the novel,” she concludes, “are self-defeating. Hobbes, to put it bluntly, consumes Rousseau” (117). Another reading which touches on the novel’s apparent internal dissonance and fixates on its ‘deceptively’ hidden chronological ending comes from Scott Dimovitz, who offers perhaps the darkest interpretation of the Cloud Atlas inkblot. He counters Machinal’s rosier view of the figure of Meronym by pointing to the “plague [that] has probably wiped out her civilization” (78), and refutes Childs and Green’s hopeful understanding of the novel’s “palindromic structure” by contending that the novel suggests that we are, in fact, hardwired to make the same choices over and over—that even the “ethical choices” are what we would have done already and will always do, and are just one more part of the great human comic tragedy we all play out. And yet, we will still fall apart; the center will not hold, and this is the ever-necessary dynamism. (87)

Dimovitz even responds to Ewing himself, who asks rhetorically at the end of the novel, “Is this the entropy¹ written within our nature?” (528) by pointing to the dispiriting future of “Sloosha’s Crossin’” and answering with “a resounding ‘yes’” (78). “Cloud Atlas’s final pages,” he writes,

¹ US-based Dimovitz cites the word doom in place of entropy here, apparently a regional difference in versions.
attempt to undermine the entire fatalistically pessimistic worldview it had so meticulously established with the constructivist conviction that our beliefs determine our reality—that a better set of beliefs will help create a better world. Here the possibility for a better-formulated existence leads us to a neohumanist ethos of progressivism, in which “one drop in a limitless ocean” adds to the overall progress of humanity. The novel shows us, however, that nothing progresses through time, and that humanity will eventually annihilate itself because of its own advanced knowledge. (82)

While Dimovitz, Ng and their ilk present compelling arguments, their readings ultimately suffer from the lack of a political dimension. Mitchell has been noted as “a deeply moral—even moralistic—writer” (Thomas) and Cloud Atlas “strikingly political” (Denes). His works are littered with references to unions and neoliberal figureheads such as Reagan and Thatcher, and perennial motifs—or “indestructible whack-a-moles” in the author’s own words (“David Mitchell, The Art of Fiction”)—like the excesses and abuses of capitalism, the exploitation and subjugation of women, and the destruction of the environment. Yet Sarah Dillon, editor of an anthology on the author, finds cause to refer to “the often-overlooked political element of Mitchell’s work” (“Introducing” 17). Shoop and Ryan demonstrate an awareness of the novel’s politics, but fail to synthesise it into their interpretation beyond acknowledging that the text captures the widespread sense of despair among progressive and left constituencies in the wake of 9/11 and the so-called “war on terror,” events whose unfolding marked both the rapid eclipse of the global justice movements of the late nineties and the apogee of neoliberal imperialism. (95)
Analysing the novel within the frame of the Hobbes–Rousseau dichotomy brings Ng’s reading close to this dissertation in its understanding of the constructions of ‘the natural’ propagated by the ideology of atavistic individualism, but this perspective can only reveal so much of Cloud Atlas’ expansive political project. Its subsumption into a broader Left–Right reading leads to an entirely different set of implications. Much the same can be said for Dimovitz, who conflates the roles of social and biological determinism in the novel to support his pessimistic reading, when the addition of a Left–Right political frame indicates they are quite separate. As for Parker, Machinal and Childs and Green, their optimistic readings can claim no more legitimacy than those of their pessimistic dissenters without the justification offered by an understanding of the novel’s political context.

This dissertation will build on the research of these critics to apply a Left–Right political frame to a close reading of Cloud Atlas in order to resolve the apparent contradiction some highlight and others overlook. It will argue that the novel presents a coherent rather than contradictory rejection of the Right-identified ideology of atavistic individualism, which severs links of moral obligation between self and other, justifies existing social power dynamics, and helps perpetuate them through a narrative of inevitability that induces cynicism in its subscribers, while advancing its own Left-aligned counter-doctrine of connection, determinism, ethics and activism. The novel’s politics and the title Cloud Atlas suggest a mirror to Ayn Rand’s Objectivist manifesto-in-fiction, Atlas Shrugged. But the word ‘cloud’ in Mitchell’s title signals an important difference: as attested by the diversity of interpretation this dissertation seeks to clarify, Mitchell’s message is less didactic and polemical than its ideological antithesis. It remains diffuse—a ‘nebulous manifesto’ in fiction.
This dissertation acknowledges the limitations of the necessarily reductive—yet notoriously elastic—terms *Left* and *Right*. They are, however, suitable for its purposes in defining the many, loosely connected principles *Cloud Atlas* endorses and critiques. For the purposes of brevity and clarity, the terms are predominantly used with reference to Steven Lukes’ epilogue to *The Cambridge Companion of Twentieth Century Political Thought*, as an authoritative source published contemporaneously with the novel.

By the term “atavistic individualism,” this dissertation refers to a far-reaching ideology depicted throughout Mitchell’s works, predicated upon a fetishised imagining of humanity’s evolutionary past and/or a divine order established by God, and characterised by the following basic interrelated principles:

1. Humans are fundamentally and inescapably competitors in the pursuit of their own interests, independent, and free from moral obligation to others, and
2. therefore, the current state of the world and all its existing power relations is the natural, unchangeable, and just result of this self-interested competition.

Chapter 1 will show how each of these principles manifests in the novel. It examines the Right-identified pronouncements of several antagonists to argue that they use analogy to the figure of the nonhuman animal predator and the already-accepted logic of nonhuman animal subordination to justify their actions, leading ultimately to a cynicism that legitimises existing power structures and promotes social stasis and decay. Chapter 2 will focus on the novel’s Left-aligned counter-doctrine, arguing that the novel emphasises connections between individuals and between cause and effect to show the arbitrariness and falsehood of atavistic individualism’s conception of ‘the natural’ and the importance of upholding and acting from ethical principles. In organising various aspects of *Cloud Atlas* into a Left–Right political dichotomy, this dissertation clarifies the novel’s position and resolves the critical discord surrounding it.
Chapter 1: The Nature of Atavistic Individualism

Introduction to Chapter 1

This chapter will focus on the presentation and critique of the ideology of atavistic individualism as it appears in *Cloud Atlas*. It will first examine how the ideology manifests in the novel, principally by way of the professed beliefs of a sample of its antagonists—Dr Henry Goose of “Pacific Journal” and Antonio Grimaldi of “Half-lives.” As per the first principle of atavistic individualism, it will show how these antagonists construct supposedly immutable laws of human nature by reference to divine decree and appeals to the nonhuman animal kingdom and the pre-existing logic of nonhuman animal subordination to justify their worldviews and actions. It will then investigate the effects of such a philosophy as depicted by the novel as per the second principle: namely personal cynicism about the possibility of change and privileging of anti-intellectual notions of the ‘practical’ over the ideal, leading to social stasis.

The Moral Model of the Nonhuman Animal Predator

*Cloud Atlas’* representation of atavistic individualism is most visible in the way the philosophy is shown to define, motivate and inform the beliefs and actions of its antagonists, in what Dimovitz terms a shared “theory of universal ideological and physical domination” (79). Various antagonists in the novel articulate or abide by an arbitrary, Hobbesian conception of ‘the natural’ in which the strong dominate the weak without compunction. Villains Goose and Grimaldi pontificate on the subject directly, while Ayrs and Noakes evince it in their actions, and the more heterogeneous evils of the corporate–government hybrid Unanimity in “Orison” and the Kona in “Sloosha’s Crossin’” embody and impose it on their victims. Presented as unalterable, and fetishised as a model for human behaviour, the ideal may be divine in origin, where a
creator god is said to have set this ferocious, competitive natural order irrevocably in place; a Darwinian one, where it has evolved according to natural laws just as unconquerable, or both. As has been widely noted by critics and Mitchell himself (“Genesis”), the text’s central theme is “predacity,” as summarised succinctly by Goose’s oft-invoked credo: “the weak are meat, the strong do eat” (Cloud Atlas 508). As beings that not only do not, but for the most part cannot question the ethics of their actions in pursuit of their own self-interest, nonhuman animal predators represent the individualist ideal under both divinely and naturalistically derived constructions of the natural, and immoral acts in the novel are frequently rooted in analogy to this figure. With the abstract principles of ethics and morality cast aside, the sole consideration becomes the effective indulgence of self-interest, usually manifesting in the attainment and exercise of power. This is the central notion Cloud Atlas seeks to discredit, and its functioning is explicated directly in “Half-lives” by nuclear engineer Isaac Sachs. Moments before his assassination—when he falls victim to the very ideology in question at the hands of a self-serving rival—Sachs writes presciently: “The present presses the virtual past into its own service, to lend credence to its mythologies + legitimacy to the imposition of will” (408). Following this schema, many of Cloud Atlas’ antagonists who pursue or abuse power do so with the implicit or explicit justification of an atavistic ‘virtual past’ or arbitrary notion of the natural in mind.

Cloud Atlas begins building atavistic individualism as predacity into its antagonists from its opening scene with the introduction of Dr Henry Goose, digging for teeth in the sand as part of a grandiose revenge plot. “In days gone by,” he tells Ewing on the beach where they meet, “this Arcadian strand was a cannibals’ banqueting hall, yes, where the strong engorged themselves upon the weak” (3). The veracity of this claim is uncertain—Ewing initially fancies Goose a “Bedlamite” (4)—but the doctor’s
immediate and literal ‘grounding’ in this construction of atavistic individualism is telling. An even clearer articulation is reported by Ewing in the crazed victorious monologue Goose delivers at the end of the novel as his victim lies incapacitated by his prescribed ‘remedy’ for a hypochondriac ‘ailment’:

people are joints of meat; diseased, leathery meat, yes, but meat ready for the skewer & the spit.’ He mimicked my usual voice, very well. “But why me, Henry, are we not friends?” Well, Adam, even friends are made of meat. ’Tis absurdly simple. I need money & in your trunk, I am told, is an entire estate, so I have killed you for it. Where is the mystery? “But, Henry, this is wicked!” But, Adam, the world is wicked. Maoris prey on Moriori, Whites prey on darker-hued cousins, fleas prey on mice, cats prey on rats, Christians on infidels, first mates on cabin-boys, Death on the Living. “The weak are meat, the strong do eat” . . . Your turn to be eaten, dear Adam. (523–4)

Seaboard CEO Antonio Grimaldi echoes these sentiments in his internal monologue on the nature of power in “Half-lives,” when he asks how it is that “some men attain mastery over others while the vast majority live and die as minions, as livestock?” (31).

This ‘carnomania’ that runs throughout the novel—Mitchell has even described its structure as one “in which each narrative is “eaten” by its successor and later “regurgitated” by the same” (“Genesis”)—is fundamental to the logic of atavistic individualism, and invites the intersectional perspective of critical animal studies. In a speech on the ideology of carnism, psychologist Melanie Joy traces the trajectory of this logic in much the same way as Cloud Atlas:

It’s the mentality of domination and subjugation, of privilege and oppression. It’s the mentality that causes us to turn someone into something, to reduce a life to a unit of production. It is the ‘might makes right’ mentality that makes us feel
entitled to wield complete control over the lives and deaths of those with less power, just because we can, and to feel justified in our actions because they’re ‘only savages, women, animals.’ It is the mentality of meat. (15:03)

Goose’s and Grimaldi’s reductions of their ‘competition’ to meat also constitute instances of what feminist-vegetarian theorist Carol J Adams has defined as “the structure of the absent-referent,” a psycholinguistic practice that “strengthens individual oppressions by always recalling other oppressed groups” (54). “Our world as we know it,” she writes, “is structured around a dependence on the death of the other animals,” a fact she reports is “neither disturbing nor surprising” for many, but “accepted” (76). Significantly, Joy identifies notions of ‘the natural’ as one of the three justificatory myths that sustain this ideology, while Adams points to the common divine and Darwinian justifications for this acceptance in Genesis 1:26 and humanity’s “superior rationality” (76). In the ways they describe, Cloud Atlas shows antagonists extending this already-accepted logic of nonhuman animal subordination to justify other oppressions and predatory actions against human animals, giving both divine and Darwinian reasoning for the hierarchies they find extant around them. It is not Genesis but the comparable Psalm 8 that Goose recites, for example, when he and Ewing attend church, foreshadowing his zeal for dominion and its supernatural assent:

Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands: thou hast put all things under his feet: all sheep & oxen, yea, & the beasts of the field; The fowl of the air, & the fish of the sea, & whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas. (8)

Later he expresses “gratitude that [his] Maker cast [him] on the winning side” of the struggle between races (509). Grimaldi, too, lists a “holy trinity” of factors in his rationalisation of how some men come to power, among them “God-given gifts of
charisma” (131). Both men also cite excellence in arbitrary traits as justification for the use and abuse of power, in passages that evoke processes of natural selection. After “God-given gifts of charisma,” Grimaldi continues:

Second: the discipline to nurture these gifts to maturity, for though humanity’s topsoil is fertile with talent, only one seed in ten thousand will ever flower – for want of discipline . . . Third: the will to power. This is the enigma at the core of the various destinies of men. What drives some to accrue power where the majority of their compatriots lose, mishandle, or eschew power? Is it addiction? Wealth? Survival? Natural selection? I propose these are all pretexts and results, not the root cause. The only answer can be, “There is no ‘Why’. This is our nature.”

“Who” and “What” run deeper than “Why.” (131–2)

“Wolves,” says Goose, once again invoking the figure of the nonhuman animal predator, “don’t sit in their caves, concocting crapulous theories of race to justify devouring a flock of sheep!” For Goose, “all peoples are predatory, but White predators, with our deadly duet of disease dust & firearms, are exemplars of predacity par excellence, & what of it?” (509). At times, the Darwinian and divine justifications coincide, as when Mr Wagstaff relates to Ewing a parable of the slave-maker ants who steal the eggs of competitors to put to work in their own colonies, claiming this is a “model” created by “Lord Jehovah” for “them with the eyes to see it” (510). They also resonate throughout the novel wherever atavistic individualism is in effect. In “Orison,” the nomenclature, rituals and iconography of religion are appropriated in service of atavistic individualism in a form of rampant capitalism reminiscent of the world as famously envisioned by Arthur Jensen in his speech to Howard Beale in the 1976 film Network—which, incidentally, also invokes “the natural order of things” and the idea that the world “has been [a business] since man crawled out of the slime” (Chayefsky).
Nea So Copros’ “consumers,” for example, are implanted with a physical “soul” device that both tracks their movements and acts as a kind of virtual wallet and Sonmi relates a series of ‘catechisms’ that include “A Soul’s Value is the Dollars Therein” (341). Darwinian reasoning resurfaces in “Ghastly Ordeal,” when Cavendish’s brother Denholme dismisses his pleas for help with the retort, “So, you’re shoddy at being duplicitous. What of it? Why is this my problem?” (159), implying both that they are separate competitors for their own self-interest with no ethical obligation to one another, and that it is Cavendish’s failure in the ‘naturally selected’ trait of duplicity that has led to his downfall. By drawing on these divine and Darwinian analogues, antagonists in Cloud Atlas seek to propagate an amoral paradigm in which ethical proscriptions on behaviour are irrelevant to the pursuit of self-interest.

Adherence to this first principle of atavistic individualism, Cloud Atlas shows, leads to the second—a belief that the current state of the world at any given time, including all its existing power relations, is the natural, unchangeable, and just result of the competition of self-interested actors. The numerous corollaries of such a belief are depicted throughout the novel, including a general impulse toward individualisation and isolation and a pervasive cynicism about the possibility of change.

**The Atomising Impulse of Atavistic Individualism and the Right**

Embedded in Cloud Atlas’ critique of atavistic individualism is a rejection of those various ‘atomising impulses’ which seek to divide, isolate and individualise—whether perpetrator from victim, self from other, cause from effect, or action from consequence. In this, its target could be what feminist theorist Andrea Dworkin identifies as “the favorite conceit of male culture[:] that experience can be fractured, literally its bones split, and that one can examine the splinters as if they were not part of the bone, or the bone as if it were not part of the body” (200), or Frantz Fanon’s colonial “world divided
into compartments” (29). Indeed, the direct target could be the novel’s antithesis, *Atlas Shrugged*, with its deification of the individual, or Margaret Thatcher’s famous declaration that “there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families” (qtd. in O’Sullivan 223). This separateness is most recognisable in the text in the simple lack of compassion most of its ‘atavistic individualists’ exhibit: the attempted murder of Ewing by Goose, the rape of a cabin boy by his fellow sailors and Goose’s indifferent response, the enslavement and massacre of “darker races” by Europeans (509) and Moriori by Maori. A master and apprentice rob, exploit, cuckold, blackmail and connive against one another. Energy CEOs plot nuclear disasters to increase demand for oil and dispatch their willing lackeys to assassinate, suppress and dissemble. A reviewer critically eviscerates an author, who murders him in return, and a man entraps his brother in a care home where petty tyrants lord their unfettered power over the lives of the elderly. A society gives itself over entirely to profit-seeking and corruption, destroys the environment, blames the poor for their own poverty, and entraps a cloned slave population in a cannibalistic cycle of indentured servitude and, in the distant future, bloodthirsty tribes once again rape, pillage and plunder. Individuals are able to wreak these vicious acts upon others, *Cloud Atlas* shows, by embracing the atomising impulse of atavistic individualism—Joy’s “mentality of meat” (15:03)—by conceiving of the world as an inescapably barbarous competition between separate individuals, where the pursuit of self-interest is the only goal.

Combined with the self-interested divorce of cause from effect, this atomised, competitive worldview results in what Hooks calls “a repeated Mitchell meme[: the abrogation of personal responsibility” (41). This is best epitomised by Bill Smoke, Grimaldi’s assassin, “who passes through walls, ethics and legality to execute his master’s will” (128). In “Half-lives,” Smoke muses on the act of murder as:
A tragedy for loved ones, a big fat nothing to everyone else, and a problem solved for my clients. I’m just the instrument of my clients’ will. If it wasn’t me it’d be the next fixer in the Yellow Pages. Blame its owner, blame its maker, but don’t blame the gun. (113)

He further demonstrates his acceptance of the atomising impulse when he tells Rey, “Bigger forces killed all of you. I just dispatched the bullet” (449). This logic functions as a metaphor for atavistic individualism throughout the novel, wherever antagonists defer blame for their actions to human nature or the natural order of the world, as evident in Grimaldi’s meditations reproduced earlier. Dimovitz interprets the CEO’s insistence that “There is no ‘Why’. This is our nature. ‘Who’ and ‘What’ run deeper than ‘Why’” (131–2) as an eschewal of “the intellectual’s (and novelist’s) desire to establish efficient causality to human behavior,” and an attempt instead to delineate the factors that influence a person to complete an act, by recourse to a simple formal causality: it is what it is. It is the nature of our species that this should be so, so there is no point in asking, “Why?” (79)

This anti-intellectual eschewal of causality—or divorce of cause from effect—this privileging of the base, the immediate, the ‘practical,’ the superficial and the tangible over the sophisticated, the abstract, the ideal, the subtle and the nuanced, runs consistently throughout the novel as an effect of atavistic individualism identified with the political Right. Lukes names among the “watchwords” of the Right: “‘pragmatism’ and a generalised suspicion of abstract principles in politics,” and cites Roger Scruton to explain its rejection of “those collective goals—liberty, equality and fraternity—whose specious clarity derives from their abstraction” (qtd. in Lukes 31). This aversion manifests in Goose’s previously reproduced triumphant monologue in his mocking hypothetical appeals—“Oh, Henry, we were friends, Henry, how could you do this to
me?” “But why me, Henry, are we not friends?” “But, Henry, this is wicked!” — to the ideals of friendship and wickedness he anticipates from a verbally incapacitated Ewing, abstractions that Goose does not recognise, as his repeated characterisation of humans and friends as no more than “meat,” attests (523–4). His profession as a surgeon has left him cynical about the notion of people as “sacred beings crafted in the Almighty’s image” (523). Zachry too displays this attitude when he complains of Meronym’s attempts to understand his people: “See it was always whys’n’whats with Prescients, it weren’t never ’nuff sumthin’ just was an leave it be” (270). This cynicism is depicted as a key product of atavistic individualism, and vital to its functioning.

**From Cynicism to Stasis and Decay**

Fittingly for a novel that has so divided scholarship into camps of optimism and pessimism, *Cloud Atlas* is perennially concerned with this dichotomy. Characters who profess or internalise the logic of the ideology invariably exhibit a concomitant cynicism about the possibility of change as a result. Because they see the world as a self-interested competition, they see no reason that it *should* change: neither an ethical imperative to *effect* change, nor practical *possibility of* change. Those in power, they believe, have climbed there by their individual will, those at the bottom languish there due to lack of merit—a vision that closely resembles the world as depicted in *Atlas Shrugged*. In the same way it is convenient for those who wish to indulge their baser urges to imagine that resistance is impossible, the novel shows, it is in the interests of those in power to show that change is unachievable. This is the reason that Goose can only respond to the Moriori proverb exhorting individuals to embrace their enemies to prevent being struck with the quip, “Embrace your enemy . . . to feel his dagger tickle your kidneys” (15) and why he “could never describe a race of savages too backward to throw a spear straight as ‘noble’” (12). It is why, upon hearing his supposed friend’s
opinions, “[n]aïve, dreaming Adam” (529) despairs “that a dedicated healer and Christian can submit to such cynicism” (509). It is the reason Grimaldi and Smoke cannot conceive of their security advisor Joe Napier acting against his own self-interest by intervening in their nefarious plans on ethical grounds so soon to his retirement, and the reason the denizens of the tavern where Ewing protests that whites should seek to convert rather than extirpate “the black races” meet him with cries of “sentimental Yankee clap-trap” (17). It is why the phantom “Old Georgie”—the Valleysmen’s conception of the Devil—tries to entice Zachry with a narrative of hopelessness: “you was born to be mine, see, why even fight me?” (251). If, as the novel’s final passage states, belief precipitates action (528), cynical beliefs in the impossibility of change perpetuate a static and, soon, decaying world.

Zachry, situated furthest in the future of all the timelines in the novel, can be viewed as the inheritor of the world this cynicism birthed, and of the cynicism itself. The ‘Presciens’ in “Sloosha’s Crossin’” represent the most advanced society encountered by readers, retaining many aspects of “the Civ’lize,” in Zachry’s dialect—a name given to both artefacts of technology from before the Fall, and a kind of behaviour characterised by non-aggression. When the Prescient Meronym asks to live among the Valleysmen for a year and learn their ways, she is eagerly received into the community, if not into individual homes, and so it comes to be that she resides with Zachry, who was not in attendance at the meeting where the decision was made. Zachry alone exhibits an irrational cynicism towards the motivations of Meronym, later inflamed by the figment of Old Georgie, the personified projection of Zachry’s fears and suspicions.

In an initial audience with Meronym where she answers the Valleysmen’s questions, Zachry professes that “No’un but me seen the arrows o’flatt’ry [Meronym’s] words fired, or how this crafty sayer was usin’ our ign’rance to fog her true ’tentions” (264).
He voices his concerns to the leader of his community, the Abbess:

"ain’t you suspishin’ the Prescients o’ trouble? Makin’ maps maybe part one o’ invadin’ us. S’posin’ they want to drive us from our land? S’posin’ they got a secret pax with the Kona? I mean, we don’t know nothin’ bout ’em, nay, not really. (269)

In the absence of evidence, Zachry defaults to suspicion, the inverse of his foil Ewing—at the opposite end of the timeline and the alphabet—who professes cynicism himself but is in fact too trusting. At the conclusion of the idealistic passage that closes the novel, Ewing anticipates his cynical father-in-law’s response to his aspirations:

Oho, fine, Whiggish sentiments, Adam. But don’t tell me about justice! Ride to Tennessee on an ass & convince the red-necks that they are merely white-washed negroes & their negroes are black-washed Whites! Sail to the Old World, tell ’em their imperial slaves’ rights are as inalienable as the Queen of Belgium’s! Oh, you’ll grow hoarse, poor & grey in caucuses! You’ll be spat on, shot at, lynched, pacified with medals, spurned by backwoodsmen! Crucified! Naïve, dreaming Adam. He who would do battle with the many-headed Hydra of human nature must pay a world of pain & his family must pay it along with him! & only as you gasp your dying breath shall you understand, your life amounted to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean! (528–9)

Here, ambition for change is cast as a battle against immutable human nature, rendering it foolish to try. Aspirations to change are deemed impractical, ineffectual, and “naïve,” continuing the rejection of principles, ideals and “sentiments” spurred by the atomising impulse of atavistic individualism. This hypothetical attack on Ewing’s newfound progressive ideals, the disdainfully emphasised adjective “Whiggish” and, indeed, all the cynicism of the novel’s atavistic individualists towards the possibility of change,
positions the ideology once again on the Right. Lukes defines the Right by opposition to the “Rectification Principle” of the Left, explaining that—in the same way these characters reject any aspiration to improve the world or resist baser urges—the “Austrian economics and libertarian philosophers and social scientists” from which the contemporary neoliberal Right derives its “intellectual inspiration . . . maintain, against all left projects of rectifying inequalities, that these are doomed to be either futile or counterproductive or destructive of other cherished values” (33). “Half-lives” touches on this concept playfully. “What’s a conservative?” asks Luisa Rey’s co-worker Roland Jakes. “A mugged liberal,” comes the answer (109). The narrator informs the reader that “[t]he joke is old by the summer of 1975,” but the implication that it is cynicism, a loss of faith in humanity, that distinguishes Right and Left, resonates.

Conclusion to Chapter 1

*Cloud Atlas*, then, shows atavistic individualism to function on at least two levels, coinciding with its two principles: interpersonal and social. Individuals, so the ideology contends, are inescapably, naturally separate agents seeking their own interest, but also, the product of those agents’ actions cannot and will not be changed, and any attempt to frame a discourse in which change is possible will be met with cynicism from the atavistic individualist, who typically does not subscribe to abstractions or ideals, but prioritises ‘practicalities.’ Thus, according to the ideology, individuals are not only separable from one another, but also from their social context, from chains of causality that predate their birth, from history, from ideas and zeitgeists beyond the individual. As Chapter 2 will show, *Cloud Atlas* works actively to discredit this separateness on both levels. It argues that the novel counters atavistic individualism’s atomising impulse with a concatenating impulse that complicates and contextualises narratives of ‘naturalness’ and encourages individual awareness and action.
Chapter 2: *Cloud Atlas*’ Concatenating Impulse

**Introduction to Chapter 2**

In its first chapter, this dissertation outlined elements of atavistic individualism as they manifest in *Cloud Atlas*, namely its use of appeals to biological and divine prescription to shift human behaviour and actions out of an ethical paradigm, its engendering of cynicism in its proponents and adherents, and its privileging of anti-intellectual notions of the ‘practical,’ the base and the immediate over the ideal, the complex and the abstract. This chapter now turns to the question of how the novel responds to these characteristics through its emphasis on connection and connectedness of individuals and actions at every level: connectedness of the novel’s narratives and the novel to other novels, of actions to consequences, of characters to characters, instantiated in the plots surrounding several protagonists. This connectedness, *Cloud Atlas* shows, belies the individualist dogmas of its villains and, in fact, invests in individuals an obligation of ethical reciprocity to one another. Finally, this chapter will investigate *Cloud Atlas*’ representation of contingency and determinism as a rebuttal to the atavistic individualism of its antagonists, contrasting the cynicism and stasis promoted by that philosophy with the optimism offered by this alternative belief system.

**Connection and Connectedness**

In response to the atomising impulse of atavistic individualism, with its conception of the individual as free and empowered to pursue their own interests, unburdened by moral obligations to the other and subject to no external pressures, its suspicion of abstractions and its severing of cause from effect, *Cloud Atlas* embodies an ecumenical and marked commitment to the opposite: to uniting and connecting—a ‘concatenating impulse.’ Events, characters, stories, and themes in Mitchell’s universe reach out to one
another both within and across temporal, spatial, geo-political, interpersonal, and even extra-diegetic divides. It is suffused at every level by connection and connectedness, such that it can credibly be named its “favourite conceit,” to paraphrase Dworkin. Writing on Mitchell’s debut novel, Ghostwritten, Steven Poole claims “[h]is guiding thesis is a comfortingly simple one: everything is somehow interconnected, even if we don’t know why” (“I Think”), and the same holds true here. In his efforts to define the cosmopolitan novel, of which he claims Cloud Atlas is an example, Bernard Schoene identifies this impulse when he claims the novel emerges from a worldview that seeks to “reveal the anachronism of . . . hegemonic distinctions between self and other,” to “tear. . . up the veils of sovereignty, autonomy and independence” (27), to “dismantle the neatly vertebrate telos and individualist focus of the traditional English novel” (99), and depict the world in “multifaceted, delicately entwined, serialised snapshots of the human condition, marked by global connectivity and virtual proximity as much as psycho-geographical detachment and xenophobic segregation” (98). This worldview, Schoene points out, embraces sociologist Malcolm Waters’ proposition that, “in a fully globalized context, no given relationship or set of relationships can remain isolated or bounded. Each is linked to all the others and is systemically affected by them” (qtd. in Schoene 5–6). This is evident in the connectedness of Mitchell’s ‘separate’ novels, between which characters reappear and plot lines overlap, and in the connectedness of the narratives within them. Schoene encourages readers of Cloud Atlas to understand its “apparent brokenness” instead as an “elaborate compositeness, caught in an ongoing process of self-constitution – of coming together” (98). It is not a novel ‘broken,’ but ‘knitted’ into six parts, and the threads that connect them and constitute the concatenating impulse are found in moments of narrative echo, an apparent diffuse causality between the timeframes of each narrative, as well as “overt metafictional
winks” (Dimovitz 71). The Biblical name of the protagonist of the opening section of the novel, Adam, belongs to another character at its opposite temporal pole, Zachry’s murdered brother. Luisa Rey, the reader learns, dwells in the “Pacific Eden Apartments,” a name that simultaneously recalls Ewing’s Pacific peregrinations and foreshadows the mythology taught to the fabricant servers of “Orison”—that after twelve years of service they will be taken to “Xultation” in Hawaii—and the actual Hawaii (”Ha-Why”) of “Sloosha’s Crossin’.” Having resolved to buy a ticket to Belgium, Frobisher “down[s] his soapy tea” (45) in a turn of phrase that evokes “Soap,” the mind-numbing, obedience-inducing concentrated protein solution that forms the exclusive diet of the fabricant servers of “Orison,” made from the remains of their expired sistren. Later, Ayrs will have a prophetic dream of Sonmi’s prison, Papa Song’s diner (a futuristic analogue for McDonald’s), describing a “nightmarish café, brilliantly lit, but underground, with no way out,” where “[t]he waitresses all ha[ve] the same face” and “[t]he food [i]s soap, the only drink . . . cups of lather” (80). The foreshadowing intensifies in “Ghastly Ordeal,” where Cavendish’s attempts to complain to the train company responsible for his delay are frustrated by a tangled convolution of privatised corporate ownership that gestures towards the “corpocracy” of Sonmi’s age:

SouthNet run the trains. We’re TicketLords, see . . . SouthNet Loco are owned by a holding company in Düsseldorf who are owned by that mobile-phone company in Finland, so you’d be best off trying someone in Helsinki. (170)

There are numerous ironic comments by Cavendish about hapless attendants “br[ed] from the same stem cell” by a corporation, and even a direct reference to “Biotech Space Age cuboids [that] now sit cloning humans for shady Koreans” (170). Once imprisoned at Aurora House, the parallels and allusions to Sonmi’s indenture augment even further. Nurse Noakes threatens to have Cavendish “eat soap powder” for swearing
(175), and Cavendish makes at least two references to the kind of enforced cannibalism imposed on the fabricants of the future: “Thus it is,” he observes of the leaves decomposing in the yard, “trees eat themselves,” and shortly after, with his mocking of the “hollow stares” of the “Undead of Aurora House” who watch his attempted escape, with the refrain “Soylent Green is people! . . . Soylent Green is made of people!” (179). The protagonist of each section experiences a “Fall” at some point, usually early in the narrative and often transportative and fantastical. Ewing tumbles into one of Autua’s “[s]ecret places on Rēkohu, . . . combes, pitfalls, caves deep in Motoporoporo Forest” (32) where he awakens, he imagines, “[a]mid nebulous quilts & summery pillows . . . in a bedroom in San Francisco similar to [his] own,” waited upon by a “dwarfish servant” and unable to communicate with his wife and son (19). Later he will be below deck when a sailor falls to his death, landing “mere inches above” where he lay (28).

Frobisher ‘falls’ asleep by the pond at Zedelghem and dreams himself “in a trench so deep the sky [i]s a strip above, lit by flashes brighter than day,” where “Savages patrol. . . a-straddle giant, evil-toothed, brown rats that sniff. . . out working-class people and dismember. . . ’em” (63). Earlier, Frobisher refers to “jump[ing] off Waterloo bridge” (45) and “[g]lossy black waters invit[ing] him to jump” into the ocean (46). “Half-lives” opens with Rufus Sixsmith “lean[ing] over the balcony and estimat[ing] his body’s velocity when it hits the sidewalk” (89), and is soon followed by both Sixsmith and Rey “thump[ing] to the floor” when their elevator stops abruptly (91). The first part of the narrative ends with Bill Smoke running Rey’s VW off a road bridge and into the sea (144). The inciting incident of “Ghastly Ordeal” is the hurling of book critic Felix Finch off a building (151–2), and Cavendish himself later loses his balance along with several other commuters when their train pulls away, after which, he says, they “stay. . . like that, half fallen. The Diagonal People” (170). Like Rey and
Sixsmith, Sonmi’s “torso squashe[s her] suddenly feeble legs” in the elevator she takes to leave the site of her enslavement for the first time (208) and, finally, in the opening scene of “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” Zachary falls (“tripped’n’tumbled”) into a pit of dead leaves that hides him from his pursuers (250). These kinds of narrative resonances amplify the more obvious conceits that form the novel’s structure: the reduction of each new narrative into an artefact discovered in its successor, and the comet-shaped birthmark shared by each protagonist (barring Zachry in favour of Meronym), commonly interpreted as a sign of their reincarnation into one another (Childs and Green 42; Parker 209; Schoene 115).

This textual connectedness is reinforced by the interpersonal connections the novel incorporates, both within and between narratives, facilitated by the artefact of each text in the next: Rey feels a profound connection to the music and letters of Frobisher (121); Sonmi connects with the exploits of Cavendish as adapted for film (244). Within the narratives, however, there is textual scope for richer interactions. The protagonists who form these relationships often do so despite initial reservations or reluctance based on various atomising impulses. As previously discussed, Zachry holds the Prescient Meronym in suspicion. For her part, Meronym is kind but aloof, adhering to a doctrine of non-interventionism that restricts her revelations about the outside world and her technology, and her willingness to put her knowledge into action for the Valleysmen, seeking to preserve the independence of their culture. Even this well-intentioned separation is overcome by the connection that develops between Zachry and Meronym, when the latter violates her own code to save the life of Zachry’s sister, moving away from the atomising anthropologist’s code toward a concatenating ethic of care. Luisa Rey’s notions of separateness stem from the codes of behaviour that govern interactions between individuals. “You’re not his mother,” she tells herself of her
troubled young neighbour, Javier, who jumps the balcony into her apartment to seek refuge from his family problems, “you’re not his guardian, you’re just a neighbor.” Yet intuitively Rey is “not convinced” by what could, for more atomised characters, function as an excuse to move the dilemma into a non-ethical paradigm (136). Other characters must take more of a journey to this kind of empathy. In a world as racially defined as the colonial South Pacific of the mid-nineteenth century, Adam Ewing must do so with the escaped Moriori slave Autua. By contrast, Autua recognises their connectedness immediately, and prevails upon it for his deliverance. Their bond is apparent to him from the moment his eyes meet Ewing’s during his lashing at the hands of his master as punishment for his previous escape attempt: “You know I, you seen I, aye, – you pity I” are some of his first words when he uncovers himself from his hiding place in Ewing’s cabin aboard the Prophetess, after it has set sail (27). When Ewing initially cleaves to the atomising distinctions he sees between himself and Autua’s fate—to his ‘innocent bystander’ status—Autua effortlessly dispels his attempts by drawing a direct line of cause and effect from his failure to intervene to Autua’s own death. “[Y]ou no help I, you kill I, just same,” he says, closing Ewing’s hands around a dagger pressed to his neck (27). In this moment, Autua forces Ewing to recognise their connectedness and the ethical reciprocity he is owed.

Thus Cloud Atlas answers the independence and separateness emphasised by atavistic individualism with connection: the connectedness of the novel to Mitchell’s other novels, its compositeness and the connections between its narratives, and the interpersonal connections experienced by its characters, all insist that humans are not and should not be merely individual competitors, but connected beings who owe one another ethical reciprocity. This last example of Autua’s argument also represents another major, related element of the novel’s counter-doctrine: the connectedness of
cause and effect, causality and determinism, responding to the “simple formal causality” of “it is what it is” enshrined by atavistic individualism (Dimovitz 79).

The Contingency and Arbitrariness of ‘the Natural’

If, as Cloud Atlas shows, atavistic individualism claims legitimacy as an ideology from its purported basis in ‘the natural,’ the novel’s project is to demolish that legitimacy by showing the beliefs of individuals to be contingent and, in turn, their constructions of the natural to be arbitrary. “The ship must be destroyed,” says Sonmi after witnessing the fate that awaits every one of her sisters once they have outlived their usefulness. “Every slaughtership in Nea So Copros like it must be sunk . . . The shipyards that build them must be demolished; the systems that facilitated them must be dismantled; the laws permitting the systems must be rescinded” (362). As her resolute movement from the tangible slaughterships to the systems and laws that facilitated them shows, Cloud Atlas embraces the theories, abstractions, deeper causes and ideals that it shows atavistic individualism to disavow in favour of common sense, the immediately perceptible, and ‘practicalities.’ Part of the novel’s counter-doctrine is a corresponding Left-aligned demonstration of the connectedness of phenomena beyond the readily apparent, in Poole’s words, “even if we don’t know why” (‘I Think’). “Every possible moment,” Mitchell has said, “is contained in this moment, regressing on to infinity” (“David Mitchell – The Interview”), and individuals in Cloud Atlas are always situated within systems far beyond them, vast and intangible—“discovered,” in Schoene’s words “as always already tied into a larger whole” (99)—in a deterministic rendering that Parker claims “compels us to see that actions in the past may reverberate across time” (128). This embodies the commitment Lukes identifies in the Left “to a belief in coherence: a vision of the larger picture, a search for explanatory principles that account for social mechanisms and a commitment to an idea of social justice that is not merely
local” (22). As part of this quest to identify wider contexts and sequences of cause and effect that give birth to ideas and events, *Cloud Atlas* destabilises the notions of the natural that atavistic individualism propounds: it is not objective or self-evident as it claims to be, but “driven,” as Christopher Scanlon writes, by a “limited imagination,” by “biases about what counts as natural behaviour or what’s thinkable within the present context, rather than imagining what a genuine alternative might look like” (“We’re”).

The novel accomplishes this principally by showing arbitrariness both through ideas of the natural that predominated in the past, which are now clearly defunct, as well as ideas of the natural that arise in a virtual future, which are just as alien. Gerd Bayer refers to this as a “historicizing [of] the present, through demonstrating how specific aspects of human life are the result of past developments and the flawed logic that fed them” (347). This process is facilitated by the novel’s composite structure, as each set of characters from a particular time and place setting is accompanied by its own values, assumptions and beliefs produced by those circumstances, especially in relation to what counts as natural. Bringing them into contrast against one another, and against the reader’s own values, accentuates their contingency. Against the atavistic individualism of characters like Goose, who ascribes the ascendancy of his own race during his own time to natural dominance of that race, Shoop and Ryan claim that *Cloud Atlas* “offers an imaginative performance and extrapolation of the arguments put forward by Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel:*” that, “Far from a civilizational advance, colonialism merely constituted a refinement of the techniques of rapacity in order to take advantage of utterly contingent sets of geographical factors” (96). The Moriori, *Cloud Atlas* is clear, were an enlightened culture who “enshrine[d] “Thou Shalt Not Kill” in word & in deed & frame[d] an oral “Magna Carta” to create a harmony unknown elsewhere for the sixty centuries since Adam first tasted the fruit of the Tree.
of Knowledge” and which “lay closer to More’s *Utopia* than [any Western] States of Progress governed by war-hungry princelings in Versailles & Vienna, Washington & Westminster” (12). Their demise was not due to any cultural inferiority, but to their distaste for the viciousness embraced by the Maori and the British. The glimpses the reader is afforded of the Moriori as they were before their decimation are calculated to underscore the arbitrariness and contingency of beliefs and traditions generated within different cultures. Autua tells Ewing the tales of the “heinous violation” by the first Europeans to encounter the Moriori of their “*tapu* forbidding strangers to touch canoes (doing so curses the vessel & renders it as unseaworthy as if an axe had been taken to it)” as well as the details of Moriori masculinity:

in lieu of martial prowess Rēkohu’s manhood ‘won their spurs’ by seal-hunting & swimming feats. (To claim his bride, as further example, a young man had to dive to the sea-bed & surface with a cray-fish in each hand & a third in his mouth). (30)

The inversion of fates of white and black or brown groups between the earliest and latest sections of the novel—from the Europeans, Moriori and Maori of “Pacific Journal” to the pale-skinned Valleysmen and Kona and “brewy-brown’n’black[-skinned]” Prescients in “Sloosha’s Crossin’” (259) stands in final defiance of Goose’s ideas about race, and points toward some capacity in the human race to learn intergenerationally from its mistakes, or at least to diverge from some hardwired script of domination. The novel also repeatedly proves the dire predictions of atavistic individualists false, and shows how chronically humanity underestimates its own capacity for change. Quite deliberately, as Ryan and Shoop have pointed out, when Ewing forecsts his father-in-law’s reactions to his newfound abolitionism and activism, the reader is aware that “the two transnational institutions cited by the father-in-law as
most impervious to change—[US] slavery and European colonialism—have been consigned to the dustbin of history (at least in their most explicit forms)” (101). Likewise, Grimaldi and Smoke’s assuredness that Joe Napier will not allow his conscience to interfere with his impending retirement turns out to be misplaced.

The two future sections of the novel, “Orison” and “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” give the novel further chances to pursue this project. Ng identifies Zachry as the narrator who comes closest to uncovering a more holistic understanding of how his own time and place sit within a greater framework of alternate histories. When Meronym reveals the Prescients’ beliefs and version of history, Zachry is forced to reconsider the doctrines and convictions within which he was raised. (117–8).

One small but illustrative instance of this comes when Zachry proclaims to the fifty-year-old Meronym that “Livin’ to fifty ain’t wondrousome, nay, livin’ to fifty is eery an’ ain’t nat’ral, yay?” (264). In their trying post-apocalyptic lives, the Valleysmen’s lifespans have shortened to typically end by fifty, and yet elsewhere in the world, the technology of the Prescients sees them retain the lifespans of eighty or so enjoyed by developed nations of the present. Further underscoring the deceptiveness of his former notion of the natural is that, at the time of his telling his tale, the reader knows him to be at least 49 from his statement that he finds himself “shoutin’ back more’n forty long years at . . . Zachry the Niner” (252). Zachry’s idea of the natural is thus shown to be contingent upon his experience of the world, and not upon a universal, true ‘naturalness’ as he believes. “Orison” is full of similar examples showing the effects of the characters’ “interpellation,” in Louis Althusser’s terms, into the subjectivities of an ideology so different to that of the contemporary world (11). When Sonmi recounts her time on the run from Unanimity for the Archivist, her tale of a hidden monastery on the
fringes of society lacking the futuristic amenities enjoyed by more official residences baffles her interlocutor: “But …” he stammers, “how could they survive without franchises and gallerias? What did they eat? Drink? How about electricity? Entertainment? How could a micro-society function without enforcers and hierarchy?” (347). The Archivist’s conception of the natural has strayed so far from that of the present day that he cannot conceive of the simple, self-sustaining country life still so familiar to the contemporary cultural imagination. An elderly taxi driver mentions his “boyhood in a distant conurb called Mumbai, now flooded, when the moon was always naked,”—uncolonised by advertisements, or “AdVs” in the parlance of Nea So Copros. So pervasive has corporate marketing become in Nea So Copros that Sonmi’s companion Hae-Joo Im remarks that “an AdVless moon would freak him out” (236). His conception of natural has come to include the patently unnatural projection of advertising onto celestial bodies. Sonmi’s thinking too bears the mark of being born into the corpocratic world.

In addition to these moments littered throughout the novel, Cloud Atlas also depicts and simulates for readers the experience of realising the contingency of one’s own previously unshakeable conception of the world. Sonmi’s tale begins in Papa Song’s, a microcosm with its own set of ideological tenets plainly absurd to the reader, if not to the fabricants who inhabit it. Sonmi, the reader learns, is extracted out of this world after a process of ‘ascension’ is commenced in her by a chemical change in her diet, in order to be used in a study at Taemosan University. This gives her the chance to learn more about the world, undertaking illicit self-directed education behind the back of her inattentive postgrad. Through her education she comes to the same conclusions as the reader about the narratives she had previously accepted, detecting their logical inconsistencies. She expresses
[d]oubts about the sureties of the fabricant world. How could Papa Song stand on a plinth in Chongmyo Plaza Papa Song’s and walk Xultation’s beaches in the same time? Why were fabricants born into debt but purebloods not? Who decided Papa Song’s Investment took twelve years to repay? Why not eleven? Six? One? (198).

The physical realities of the narrative are impossible, Sonmi realises, its specificities arbitrary. But Sonmi’s disillusionment with this set of beliefs leaves another beyond it: that of Nea So Copros as a whole. In part, this discourse is made contingent for Sonmi by her glimpse into the past through the film adaptation of The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish, after which she reflects: “Those since-fallen buildings, those long-decayed faces, they engrossed me. We were as you are, they said. The present doesn’t matter.” (244) Just as the bringing together of the six narratives of the novel throws the commonalities and contingencies between them and the real world into relief for the reader, so does the artefact of the film for Sonmi. This is symptomatic of what Dillon calls Mitchell’s “delight in the continuing power and affect of literature,” and, one could add, art and knowledge in general, its “fertility, power and sustenance” (“Introducing” 18).

But the narrative Sonmi unfolds for the reader of becoming embroiled in a Union insurgency against Unanimity, led by Hae-Joo Im, turns out to be no more than a fiction itself. Sonmi withholds the fact that Hae-Joo Im was in fact a Unanimity agent, that Union is a puppet of Unanimity, and that the entire exercise was orchestrated by Unanimity for the purposes of a show-trial, until a denouement at the end of her tale, mimicking for the reader the experience of realising the contingency of a set of beliefs. “Didn’t you spot the hairline cracks?” asks Sonmi of her Archivist interlocutor when he expresses his shock at this revelation, in this case a stand-in for the reader. She then goes on to list a series of coincidences in the plotline that “underline[d] the purebloods’
brutality a little too neatly,’ the timing of which were “a little too fortuitous” (597). Here the novel plays with the reader’s suspension of disbelief, teasing their acceptance of the conventions of the form to show how easily individuals can fall prey to accepting mistruths as facts.

**Determinism and Free Will**

The contingency of characters’ notions of the natural relates to another central aspect of the novel’s rebuttal to atavistic individualism—the contingency of their very identities and actions. Mitchell has identified causality as the central theme of his first novel *Ghostwritten* (qtd. in Dillon “Chaotic Narrative” 145–6), the title of which refers to Timothy Cavendish’s proposition that “[w]e all think we’re in control of our own lives, but really they’re pre-ghostwritten by forces around us” (Mitchell *Ghostwritten* 76). This theme is continued in *Cloud Atlas*, the narrators of which Ng has described as “prisoners of their own times and cultures” (117). Both Pieter Vermeulen and Dimovitz explicate this dynamic aptly with reference to the theories of Judith Butler. According to Dimovitz, *Cloud Atlas* raises “the possibility that subjectivity is merely a conduit of ideology—a symbolic order that [Mitchell’s characters] cannot control or think outside of’” (76), and he relates this process to Butlerian performativity, specifically the notion that:

> the act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (qtd. in Dimovitz 89)

Vermeulen invokes Butler’s idea that:

> We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside,
as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order . . . If, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not only what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are . . . Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency (qtd. in Vermeulen 390)

Dimovitz configures this dichotomy as turning “between the more modernist, Prufrockian construction of having a true identity struggling to express itself versus the fear that one’s identity is actually a text that comes from some other force” (76). Playing out in the novel, then, is the tension between identity as socially or self-produced, of free will and primacy of the self as championed by atavistic individualism, or the social determinism of its counter-doctrine, the notion that subjects are interpellated into the world.

This concept can be found in all six narratives, and even in the novel’s first line, from Ewing: “Beyond the Indian hamlet, upon a forlorn strand, I happened upon a trail of recent footprints” (3). The footprints bring Ewing to Henry Goose, and thus to his fate. Later, fantasising about assassinating Luisa Rey, Bill Smoke “wonders about the powers inside us that are not us” (419), and Zachry “shout[s] back more’n forty long years” to his younger self, tortured by guilt at the circumstances of his family’s murder:

“Oy, list’n! Times are you’re weak ’gainst the world! Times are you can’t do nothin’! That ain’t your fault, it’s this busted world’s fault is all!” (252). “We cut a pack of cards called historical context,’’ Frobisher writes to Sixsmith, on the subject of his older brother Adrian’s death in World War I. His generation, he says, “cut tens, Jacks and
Queens. Adrian’s cut threes, fours and fives. That’s all” (459). But this theme is most present in “Orison,” which continues the card motif: “Patience’s design flaw became obvious for the first time in my life: the outcome is decided not during the course of play but when the cards are shuffled before the game even begins” (383–4). Sonmi also wonders whether “the differences between social strata stem not from genomics or inherent xcellence [sic] or even dollars, but differences in knowledge” (231). She declares that “We are only what we know” (217), and concludes that “free will plays no part in [her] story” (365). Sonmi’s story does indeed function as the ultimate illustration of social determinism: she is born into a system vastly more powerful than her; as previously explored, her entire identity is formed based on the information she is permitted access to; and she is raised up out of her servitude only as part of a brief conspiracy to shore up the power of the hegemony. The novel is not totalitarian in its portrayal of determinism, however—Sonmi chooses to go along with the ruse because she understands that it is better to do so and have a chance to disseminate her message, which survives at least in some form through the Fall and into Zachry’s time. As Scott Selisker concludes in his analysis of *Ghostwritten*, “Mitchell encourages us to move beyond both a traditional liberal notion of individual freedom and the conspiracy theory’s spectacle of absolute unfreedom” (457).

This tension also has a political dimension. Unlike *Atlas Shrugged* and much libertarian Right thought before and since, *Cloud Atlas’* counter-doctrine would not attribute poverty to the languor of the poor but to the wider forces which led to such conditions, to social causes and effects outside of the immediately perceptible factors at the individual level, the systems that cause and perpetuate poverty, the conditions that pre-exist individuals and determine fates. Individuals, the novel shows, are not empowered competitors able to seek their own self-interest and overcome any obstacle
if they can only summon the will, but rather are the products of the circumstances that shaped them: nothing simply “is what it is” (Dimovitz 79); everything has a cause. “What distinguishes left-wing thinkers,” writes Lukes, “is, in the first place, their thicker rather than thinner interpretations of the political and social ideals of equality and their redistributive and other implications for present action and policy” (18). Such thinkers, he adds, embrace the “idea that freedom mean[s] actual opportunities and capacities not mere absence of restraints” (19).

The Optimism in Determinism

But the dethroning of self-determination rooted in monolithic interpretations of the world in favour of understanding the systems of determinism and causality which delimit and prescribe the fates of individuals is not for Mitchell a cause for nihilistic pessimism. On the contrary, Cloud Atlas finds a seemingly paradoxical freedom and optimism in understanding the deterministic systems within which individual lives play out, and conversely awards the characteristics of stasis to the atavistic individualism that so glorifies individuals forging their own destinies. Schoene concurs when he states that Cloud Atlas
categorically decentre[s] individual human experience, which is by no means the same as demoting or devaluing it. Paradoxically, the opposite is the case, as stripped of their centre-stage position in the novel individuals emerge as the carriers of the creative and destructive flows that together constitute the world. (99)

As the carriers of these flows, which, like Butler’s characterisation of gender, “require... individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (qtd. in Dimovitz 89), some individuals—in Ewing’s words, “You & I, the moneyed, the privileged, the fortunate” (528)—are empowered to change the world in
that they need only stop actualising the wrong ideologies and begin carrying the right ones. This is Rey’s thinking when Javier asks whether the future can be changed: “Maybe the answer is not a function of metaphysics, but one, simply, of power” (418). This is quite separate from the biological determinism of atavistic individualism, which is truly beyond human influence and demands the total supplication of its subscribers.

Yet, as previously discussed, much commentary on Cloud Atlas discounts this hopefulness threaded throughout the novel, based on the regression and ongoing strife in its prognostications of the future. The dispute may be one of framing. Shoop and Ryan, and Dimovitz in particular, appear to demand of the novel the answer to a question it does not itself ask, and which it could not know. Author and novel alike, certainly, seem to fear and even suspect that human nature might be inherently violent and power-seeking, but—a novel rather than a scientific treatise—Cloud Atlas’ concern is less a matter of whether or not atavistic individualism is inescapable, and more how individuals should conduct themselves regardless: not an issue of fact, but an issue of praxis. In the words of Meronym, “What matters here ain’t part-true or hole true, Zachry, but harm or not harmin’, yay” (275), or, of Mitchell himself:

Novels are free to probe and say ‘What if?’, but have no obligation to conclude. The use – and enjoyment, and maybe even enriching effect – of the novel is in all its 600 pages, not page 600 alone. Novelists don’t have to be ‘right’: we only have to be ‘good’ in the sense of ‘capable.’ (qtd. in Harris “David Mitchell in the Laboratory of Time” 13)

Cloud Atlas, in short, does not ‘know’ whether humanity is enslaved to the inescapable atavistic individualism its antagonists propound. It only wonders, and hopes, and suggests how its readers might behave in their ignorance.

At odds to some extent with Mitchell’s statement that a novel is not its final page
alone, *Cloud Atlas*’ closing pages do offer much insight into the preceding hundreds, and have been the subject of much scholarly discussion as a consequence. Turned into “quite the philosopher” by his “recent adventures” (527), Ewing uses the final page-and-a-half of his journal to set out his theory of good, evil, history and change—a more concise answer, perhaps, to John Galt’s 32,000-word closing speech from *Atlas Shrugged*. Emphasising, inter alia, causality, activism, and the need to cleave to higher principles, the discourse forms the final and most concrete piece of Mitchell’s nebulous manifesto against atavistic individualism, as well as a prism through which to view the preceding narratives. In it, when he asks rhetorically why “the moneyed, the privileged, the fortunate” (528) “carriers of the creative and destructive flows that together constitute the world” (Schoene 99) should fight the natural order of things, he tellingly encloses the word *natural* in quotation marks and follows it with the parenthetical apostrophe “(oh weaselly word!),” marking his—and perhaps, by this point, the reader’s—understanding of the problematic uses to which atavistic individualism can put such a deceptively self-evident, but in fact contingent concept. But “History,” he says, “admits no rules; only outcomes. What precipitates outcomes? Vicious acts & virtuous acts. What precipitates acts? Beliefs” (528). Here Ewing underscores the novel’s causal, deterministic portrayal of events, tracing phenomena back not to some simplistic, all-encompassing ‘rule’ governing human behaviour, such as the natural viciousness atavistic individualism proposes, but to their respective arbitrary causes, the beliefs of individuals, including subscription to atavistic individualism.

Almost as if anticipating the criticism of Dimovitz and others that the novel shows “that nothing progresses through time” (82), part of the passage addresses this concern directly. “I am not deceived,” insists Ewing. “It is the hardest of worlds to make real. Torturous advances won over generations can be lost by a single stroke of a myopic
president’s pen or a vainglorious general’s sword” (528). This divorces the issue not only from material outcomes, but also the need to sustain linear progress through time: the battle may be constant, and can be entirely erased and started over again any number of times, but fighting it still produces better outcomes than surrendering to cynicism. This relates to the ateleological notion of the “perpetual apocalypse” that Bayer has articulated: not “an event to be encountered in the future,” but one that “is already taking place,” indeed, is always taking place (346). “The divine struggle between heaven and hell,” she writes, “with its built-in promise of god’s ultimate victory, is replaced in Mitchell’s novel by a perpetual battle between human qualities that never lose their actuality and immediacy” (349). Theo D’haen’s analysis concords with Bayer’s in its conclusion that, while Cloud Atlas intends “to make us aware of the persistence of human evil throughout human history—past, present, and future,” it also seeks “to mobilize us to engage in combating such evil” (280). Cloud Atlas rejects the notion that, because humanity cannot be assured of continuing progress, it should capitulate altogether. A world of Meronyms, in other words, is better than a world of Gooses. This is why Ewing resolves to pledge himself “to the Abolitionist cause,” noting that he “must begin somewhere”—the world will be imperfect even after slavery is abolished, but ending it will be better than letting it be (528). Such incremental visions of change are embedded in a number of the novel’s metaphors for action: environmental activist Hester van Zandt frames Rey’s part in resisting the Seaboard Power conspiracy as “rais[ing] the temperature of public awareness, fractionally, towards its ignition point” (126), while Ewing acknowledges that his life will amount “to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean,” but asks, “what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?” (529). Author and novel alike appear self-conscious, if not defensive, about accusations of naïveté in advocating this hopeful progressivism, as
Ewing’s “I am not deceived. It is the hardest of worlds to make real” attests (528). But “All revolutions are the sheerest fantasy until they happen,” insists Sonmi; “then they become historical inevitabilities” (342). Likewise, the author has conceded,

This all smacks of sunny idealism, I know, but without the sunny idealism of dead strangers who went before us, we’d still be working like medieval serfs, enslaved by priesthoods and dying in our early thirties.” (qtd. in Harris “David Mitchell in the Laboratory of Time” 16)

Discussing *Ghostwritten*, Vermeulen places this impulse in political terms of Left and Right that can be applied to *Cloud Atlas*, saying the novel shows that, while “it is impossible to radically disconnect from power,” it is “still possible to make a difference within the biopolitical parameters of the globalized world: . . . between, say, neoliberal orthodoxy and, say, social democracy” (391). “[I]n a word,” Lukes defines the Left “by its commitment to what we may call the Principle of Rectification,” which, he clarifies, refers to “not only the putting to rights of past injustices but also the correction of present and the averting of future ones” (16–17). He goes on to add, “At the very least, it believes, progress in rectification is everywhere better than regress” (22), making *Cloud Atlas*’ argument a fundamentally leftist one. Indeed, herein lies the answer to the question of the apparent self-contradiction in *Cloud Atlas* identified by the likes of Dimovitz, Shoop and Ryan. The novel actually instantiates the psyche of the Left at this moment in time, the outset of the twenty-first century. Faced by a pervasive neoliberal hegemony and, for example, the seemingly insurmountable existential threat of climate change, the position of the Left seems characterised by a kind of two-minded elective optimism in the face of logical pessimism or, at least, realism. Mitchell has many times signalled this conflict in himself, as when he states in an interview with Kate Evans that, “although we’re in for some kind of crash,” it can yet be averted “if we act now and are
willing to vote in more idealistic politicians who will need to pass things that cause us some financial pain” (26:09). It is also observable as an ever more present strain in politics in contemporary Australia and abroad. In a recent video, founder and former leader of the progressive-left Australian Greens party Bob Brown answers the question, “Optimism or pessimism?” with a response in complete alignment with the counter-doctrine of *Cloud Atlas*:

> I’m with the optimists because that drives action, and that’s what’s going to save the planet. I spent maybe a decade being pessimistic, which is logical, looking at the way the world is mistreated, mishandled, misgoverned by we human beings, [but] . . . it doesn’t make anything change, so I swapped to optimism. (Fanner and Clark)

Likewise, the social media campaigns of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 US presidential race exhorted voters not “to grow cynical and pessimistic – stand up and fight for change” (Sanders). While pessimism and cynicism may be reasonable, so the argument goes, they are not useful or productive and lead, as *Cloud Atlas* shows, only to stasis and decay. In line with its goal as a Left-aligned nebulous manifesto, *Cloud Atlas* presents its grim futures in conflict with Ewing’s idealistic call to action not as an unchangeable prophecy of what is to come, a demonstration of how these values will fail to be upheld, but as a kind of Dickensian warning of why they must be, and a reminder that the battle for rectification is ongoing.

Ewing’s answer as to how to seize control of Schoene’s “creative and destructive flows that together constitute the world” (99) or actualise Butler’s scripts as reality (qtd. in Dimovitz 89) is, in line with Lukes’ characterisation of the Left, to put “institutions and practices, and the beliefs that sustain them, to the test of justificatory, discursive discussion,” and cleave ultimately to the beliefs that produce the best outcomes, for
belief is what precipitates action (22). “Belief,” he says, is both prize & battlefield, within the mind & in the mind’s mirror, the world. If we believe humanity is a ladder of tribes, a colosseum of confrontation, exploitation & bestiality, such a humanity is surely brought into being, & history’s Horroxes, Boerhaaves & Gooses shall prevail … If we believe that humanity may transcend tooth & claw, if we believe divers [sic] races & creeds can share this world as peaceably as the orphans share their candlenut tree, if we believe leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable & the riches of the Earth and its Oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass. (528)

With this passage in mind, previous parts of the novel become tapestries of acts precipitated by beliefs, of moral characters remaining true to sacred ideals and immoral characters abandoning them. As Joy states, “awareness is the first step of the solution, and acting from […] awareness is the rest. “Orison” stresses the necessity of activism when Unionman Dr Mephi answers Sonmi’s question of “when purebloods might start blaming themselves” for the corrupt society they have brought about: “History suggests not until they are made to” (231). The aptly titled “Half-lives” section of the novel brims with examples of characters cleaving to their ideals to achieve good in a world of decaying morals and ideals: Rey, who insists on maintaining journalistic integrity even while working for a celebrity gossip magazine; her rescuer Joe Napier, who intervenes in the plot to assassinate her despite the incentive to stay quiet with his retirement so close; whistleblowers Rufus Sixsmith and Isaac Sachs, who overcome their fears for their own safety in order to remain true to their ideals of truth and scientific endeavour, and Luisa’s police officer-cum-journalist father, Lester Rey, who was consigned to “a sort of pen where they transfer[red] all the straight cops who wo[uld]n’t go on the take [or] turn a blind eye” in his first profession (92), and “braved booby-trapped marshes
and the wrath of generals for the sake of his journalistic integrity” in his second (97). By adhering to noble principles, and putting them into action, *Cloud Atlas* shows, it is possible and, indeed, preferable, to resist atavistic individualism at both an individual and social level.

Ewing’s final passage brings the novel’s argument full circle in its explanation for why the privileged should bestir themselves to activism—the answer for which lies in the concatenating impulse and its insistence on humanity’s connectedness, even though, he concedes, they “shall not fare so badly in this world, provided [their] luck holds. What of it,” he asks,

if our consciences itch? Why undermine the dominance of our race, our gunships, our heritage & our legacy? Why fight the ‘natural’ (oh, weaselly word!) order of things? Why? Because of this: – one fine day, a purely predatory world shall consume itself. Yes, the devil shall take the hindmost until the foremost is the hindmost. In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul; for the human species, selfishness is extinction. (528)

In this way, all predation is or, at least, leads to autocannibalism. Hence the “[i]rradiated or toxic swathes” of land that bedevil Nea So Copros in “Orison,” after centuries of self-interested, profit-driven pollution at the expense of the environment (215), or Cavendish’s pronouncement, “Thus it is, trees eat themselves” (179), just at the moment he seeks to effect his escape from Aurora House. In a way, he has contributed all his life to the system that permitted such an institution to exist, actualised the logic of atavistic individualism that dictates his separateness from the fates of others by exploiting his clients as a vanity publisher, through his ignorant racism and sexism and, most directly, in sleeping with the wife of his brother, who ultimately engineered his imprisonment. Now, in his old age, he is startled to find himself the victim of the same ideology. The
novel shows atavistic individualism to encourage the selfish indulgence of self-interest in individuals at their own peril, making the allusive reference of Goose’s name to the Aesop fable of the Goose That Laid the Golden Eggs clear—significantly, Cavendish refers to his latest bestselling biography as a “platinum goose with a bad case of the trots!” (154) after revelling in the death of its author. It is not, the novel shows, in anyone’s interest to live in a world that permits the subjugation of any living being, lest the order of that world shift, and those at the top find themselves at the bottom: a prospect that also plays out between the earliest and latest narratives in the colonial dominance of the Europeans over the Moriori and Maori of “Pacific Journal,” and the Valleysmen and the more beneficent ascendance of the dark-skinned Prescients in “Sloosha’s Crossin’.” Salvation in the novel comes frequently from acknowledgement of connection: Cavendish is only able to escape Aurora House by cooperation with his fellow prisoners; Joe Napier is able to save Luisa Rey’s life only because her father risked his own “when he kicked that grenade rolling at [Napier], thirty years ago” (445); and, of course, in aiding the stowaway Autua, Ewing is ultimately saving himself from Goose. In showing these examples, Cloud Atlas seeks not only to counter the atomising impulse of atavistic individualism with connection, but also to show that the separation propounded by atavistic individualism in pursuit of self-interest is in fact self-defeating, that the denial of humanity’s interconnectedness can only harm every individual’s self-interest in the long run. In this, it aligns with what Lukes calls LT Hobhouse’s “classic statement of social liberalism,” that “individualism, when it grapples with the facts, is driven no small distance along Socialist lines,” as well as with “Fabian socialist Sydney Olivier’s view that ‘Socialism is merely individualism rationalised, organised, clothed, and in its right mind’” (qtd in Lukes 19). Schoene likewise ties this to a “realisation that in the twenty-first century the world constitutes an all-encompassing network in which
whatever as individuals we do, or fail to do, is bound to have repercussions and consequences for us all” (6), a recognition diametrically opposed to the fantasy propounded by *Atlas Shrugged*, about which Rand proposed that individuals have the free will to decide whether to be good or evil, and “[t]he decision will affect only” them (“Introduction”). Human connection, in other words, gives individuals not only a moral obligation of ethical reciprocity, but also a rational self-interest in it. Hence, “for the human species, selfishness is extinction” (528).

**Conclusion to Chapter 2**

This chapter has traced the Left-aligned political project of *Cloud Atlas* in discrediting the Right-identified ideology of atavistic individualism, beginning with the exploration of the novel’s ‘concatenating impulse,’ a response to the ‘atomising impulse’ of atavistic individualism. It has traced how this impulse manifests in the novel’s emphasis on connection in response to contemporary global conditions, realised through the interconnection of Mitchell’s oeuvre, of the narratives of *Cloud Atlas*, and of the characters between and within the narratives. This chapter then explored the novel’s connection of cause and effect, tracing its establishment of the arbitrariness and contingency of notions of the natural and of the identities and actions of individuals. Finally, it showed how the self-contradiction some scholars have identified between the novel’s textual and chronological endings actually represents the position of the Left in the current moment, and how the novel enjoins readers to cleave to principles and commit to activism in pursuit of rational self-interest.
Conclusion

By performing a close textual analysis of David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* informed by a Left–Right political reading, this dissertation has resolved the scholarly discord surrounding the novel’s stance in a number of areas. When placed into their wider political discourses, seemingly contradictory positions and stances in the novel resolve into a coherent critique. The novel does not, as some critics have suggested, endorse atavistic individualism despite itself, nor does it make truth claims about the extent to which humanity is naturally violent, but it consistently aligns itself with left-wing positions, stressing the connection of individuals, wider systemic forces that cause immediately apparent results, and the importance of action informed by ethical principles.

While scope constraints have permitted only minimal reference in this dissertation to Mitchell’s six other novels, significant insight stands to be gained from extending this method of analysis to Mitchell’s wider oeuvre. In a 2010 *New York Times Magazine* interview, the author revealed he had “come to realize [he was] bringing into being a fictional universe with its own cast, and that each of [his] books is one chapter in a sort of sprawling macronovels” (“David Mitchell, the Experimentalist”). In the novels Mitchell had penned to that point—*Ghostwritten, Number9dream, Cloud Atlas, Black Swan Green*, and *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*—the cameo appearances and reappearances of, for example, Timothy Cavendish, particle physicist Mo Muntervary, and Luisa Rey in otherwise ostensibly standalone novels could still plausibly be received as harmless gimmicks, idiosyncratic curios, and “metafictional winks” (Dimovitz 73) for the benefit of the attentive reader. But the 2014 publication of *The Bone Clocks* and its ‘companion novel’ *Slade House* the following year crystallised this project, in Harris’ words, “to integrate all his work into an uberbook” (“David Mitchell
in the Labyrinth of Time” 4). These latest two works commandeer and complement the characters and plotlines of their five antecedents, recasting them as either centrepieces or backdrops in a transhistorical war between two organisations made up of ‘atemporal’—essentially, immortal—beings with supernatural powers: the benevolent ‘Horologists’ and malevolent ‘Anchorites,’ one a group of involuntary atemporals who put their endless cycle of rebirth to good use fighting the other, a group of predatory ‘soul-vampires’ who murder innocents to unnaturally prolong their own lives. Naturally, this superstructure influences and alters the way all the novels can be read, rendering research conducted prior to The Bone Clocks to some extent incomplete. New information lends new significance to formerly innocuous textual moments, as when the recurring character Marinus is revealed to be a Horologist and therefore his proclamation in The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet that “I’m indestructible, like a serial Wandering Jew. I’ll wake up tomorrow—after a few months—and start all over again” (440), as Harris says, “no idle boast” (“David Mitchell’s Fractal Imagination” 148). It also inverts or throws into question previous assumptions: given the ‘psychovoltaic’ powers and mind-controlling ‘suasion’ techniques of Mitchell’s expanded diegesis, for example, the metaphysical abilities Tokyo gas bomber and cult member Quasar ascribes to himself in Ghostwritten seem suddenly somewhat less delusional.

The argument presented in this dissertation has also benefited from clarification by the latest additions to Mitchell’s ‘macronovel,’ suggesting the works may embody an overarching ‘message’ or set of messages to match the overarching story. In many ways, the conflict between the Horologists and Anchorites embodies the conflict between Right-identified atavistic individualism and the Left-aligned counter-doctrine explored in this dissertation. In one instance, Marinus—reincarnated as a woman since
The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet—identifies her Anchorite enemies with various social malefactors and right-wing entities throughout the ages. “All we did,” quavers her dying foe, invoking atavistic individualism to justify her actions, “was seek survival. No more than any sane, healthy, animal—” But “No,” Marinus interrupts wearily:

Marinus scrunches up her face, ‘please, no. I’ve heard it so often. “Humanity is hardwired for survival”; “Might is Right is nature’s way”; “We only harvest a few”. Again and again, down the years, same old same old . . . from such an array of vultures, . . . from feudal lords to slave traders to oligarchs to neocons to predators like you. All of you strangle your consciences, and ethically you strike yourselves dumb.’ (Slade Alley 230)

Earlier, when one of this same vampire’s victims asks what he has done to deserve his fate, her answer bats aside the ethical abstraction implied in the question to reduce the issue purely to one of a Darwinian power struggle with direct reference to the already-accepted logic of nonhuman animal subordination:

What does “deserve” have to do with anything? . . . Did the pig whose smoked flesh you ate at breakfast “deserve” her fate? The question’s irrelevant. You desired bacon and she couldn’t escape the abattoir. We desire your soul to power our operandi, and you can’t escape our lacuna. That’s it.’ (Slade House 79)

Such instances infuse the entirety of Mitchell’s catalogue, inviting further research to map the entirety of its political project and rejection of atavistic individualism.

The concept of atavistic individualism advanced in this dissertation may also be of particular use in wider social and scholarly discourses at present. Certainly, the questionable logic of the ideology is used frequently to justify and naturalise a number of practices and behaviours in contemporary society, from the slaughter of nonhuman
animals for their flesh and secretions to the objectification of women. Ros Coward has recently problematised, for example,

Nigel Farage’s defence of Donald Trump’s rather menacing performance against Hilary Clinton as being like “a big silverback gorilla prowling the stage” . . . the day after he had excused Trump’s “grab them by the pussy” comment as “alpha-male boasting” and the “kind of thing men do.” (“Don’t”)

In “Palter & Prescience: On David Mitchell and *Ghostwritten,*” Hooks comments that, “reading [Mitchell’s] first novel . . . fifteen years after its publication, what abides is its prescience . . . [T]he globetrotting Englishman’s first book,” he says, “has been proven right about so many of its most pressing concerns” (40). During the present moment, it seems striking that, at the 2015 Sydney Writers’ Festival event “David Mitchell: Bending Time,” one month before now-President Donald Trump announced his candidacy, Mitchell would tell his audience: “It’s just *so easy* in a democracy for demagogues to have a race to the bottom. It’s *so easy* to get into power that way. It’s so easy. But the more they do, the harder the crash is going to be” (“David Mitchell – The Bone Clocks” 26:37). With the recent ascendency of populist right-wing movements across the US and Europe, and if Mitchell’s prescience continues, the warnings and insights offered by his fiction may need to be heeded now more than ever.
Works Cited


The Innocuous Death of Irving Crabbe
For the stories yet untold,
and those without voices to tell them.
The human world is made of stories, not people.

— Zookeeper, David Mitchell’s *Ghostwritten*

The silences I speak of here are unnatural: the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot.

— Tillie Olsen, *Silences*

There are always two deaths, the real one and the one people know about.

— Antoinette, Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*
Stories exist beyond the words that tell them and the minds that know them. On occasion, a person dies the sole custodian of a story that never came to words and, even as that person ceases to exist, their story goes on, yearning to be known. I am the story of Irving Crabbe.
in-noc-u-ous

/ɪˈnɒk juːəs/

adjective
There hangs a rope. Do you see it, pulled taut in the early morning dark? The life has long faded from its stiffened strands, leaving behind something fragile and matted, more like shed snake skin than rope. One end is tied to a handrail clouded with saltspray. The handrail belongs to a lonely pedestrian walkway clinging to the underbelly of a roadbridge, which traces the coastline nervously to avoid the rockfalls of the cliffs.

The other end is tied around the neck of a man.

Quite a presumptuous centrepiece he has made of himself, you might think, hanging here before an ocean backdrop, halfway between the bridge and the water, framed by the thick pylons equidistant on either side. What could have driven him to make such a dramatic gesture? Offensive, bizarre, even traumatic to behold. It is anything, certainly, but ‘innocuous.’

But wait, dear reader. You do not yet know the whole story.

Death garners for itself many adjectives: good or bad, quick or drawn-out, humane or painful. Clean, welcome, dignified, heroic. Cowardly, premature, bloody, tragic. Humble words, all of them. It is rare, is it not, to encounter anything so abstract, so … polysemous as an *innocuous* death? The term sounds almost contradictory. I suppose it is. But words, words are merely the leaky vessels of story and, imperfect though they may be, I have selected mine carefully. I shall endeavour to make my meaning clear before I am through.

The body is pulled taut as the rope, the object of two great opposing forces, one seeking to keep it suspended, the other to pull it down to the ocean floor below. The rope, surely, cannot support the body for long, but the contest has nevertheless been rigged in gravity’s favour. A gust blows and the pendulum sways. At its end is a large rock attached to the feet with another length of rope, an advantage on which gravity can gain extra purchase. A car passes overhead, its occupants unaware of the scene below.
Its passing sends pulses through the rope to a point halfway down its length where a notch has been bitten out with the sharp edge of a piece of bone, a weak point for gravity to exploit. The bone bulges in the man’s left breast pocket, even its small weight straining downward.

So, no, this tableau will never have an audience. In a moment, the weight will prove too much for the archaic rope and its splitting strands, and gravity will prevail, as ever, over the rail, the road, and the world of men to which they belong. The body will plunge down twenty metres into the sea, turned in a single moment from a gruesome spectacle into nothing at all, as if it never was. A balloon of secrets drifting with the current on the ocean floor, destined to melt away into the bellies of fish, bones to be picked over by crabs, then worn into sand. A body broken down like sentences into words and words into syllables, gone once pronounced.

For when a runner tramps, puffing, over the walkway above, or a kayaker glides swiftly past on the water beyond, all that will remain for them to see, if they even notice, will be a severed rope dangling from the handrail, snapping in the breeze. Innocuous.
1. incapable of causing harm; harmless:

*an innocuous species*
If not, then a tinker, carrying a hundred pots and pans and bits of linoleum and wires and falconer’s hoods and pencils and … you carried them around for years and gradually fit them into a small, modest book. The art of packing.

— Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*

Chapter 1

*Saturday 29 August 1970*

*Royal National Park, New South Wales*

Three days before his death, Irving awakens, as usual, at that point in the morning when the sun rises high enough to spear down through the trees and warm the bush into activity, when the voices of day finally burrow first into his shack, then his sleep. The long, piping lilt of the grey butcherbird and the screeching alarm of the rainbow lorikeet. The low, gurgling answers of the black-faced monarch to his own whistling, high-pitched questions. The monotonous accompaniment of the cicadas. And of course, the clucking and chattering of the chooks, PP and FF, scratching in the doorway, eager to be let out.

Irving smiles up in greeting at the manifold objects of his collection. They are slow to materialise around him, silent as they reveal themselves from the dim, cluttering every surface and clustering in every corner. A hoard of treasures in chaotic rank and file, uniform only in their ostensible uselessness: a small sheet of metal, bits of sea-smooth glass, a rusty key, an assortment of shells and bottlecaps, a peg, petrified wood, old netting, a broken plastic bucket, a kite. Irving permits himself to lie there only a moment before he sits up. His task is almost complete, and yet there is still so much to be done.
‘Vivification,’ he yawns as he stretches, rubbing his eyes.

He hoists his legs over the cot and reaches beneath, grinning when the box slides out with ease. Only six little tins rolling around where once there were sixty. The dwindling supply means the most important day of the month is approaching, the day he returns to Tranter’s Cove. But then he recalls last month’s journey, how what should have been there waiting for him was missing, and how he watched from the bush but it never came. How night fell and he had to go and find the wind chime instead, how the sky over Lydia’s shack blared with light and sound and sent him fleeing back through the dark, filled with bodiless voices and terrible sounds. A whining, rattling, hissing, whooshing, whirring, cracking, hacking, droning, bleating, croaking, thundering cacophony. He scrunches his eyes and clamps his hands over his ears, lowering himself into the familiar vastness of the dull pelagic roar beneath his palms.

‘Only once,’ he tells himself. The words hum in his throat. It has only happened once out of the two dozen times he has returned to the Cove. He tries to fill his mind with the morning sounds muffling through his hands, past the whistle of his breath, in amongst the now audible wet clicks and squelches of the machinery in his head, in his throat. Soon the notes begin to loosen his grip and become clear once again. ‘An aberration,’ he breathes. This time will be better.

When he is ready he drops his hands and opens his eyes on the box. No apricots, so he chooses the pears, leaving the saccharine pineapple chunks and sour pitted cherries for later. He fishes out tonight’s dinner while he’s at it then, knees and ankles a-crackle, hunches over to the doorway, sending the chooks bobbing out of his way. The shack is not quite tall enough to stand in, nor large enough to hold any more than his cot, the bench, a little blackened wood stove and the shelves that bear the objects of his collection. It was shambolic even when he first built it—composed of stone and jetsam.
and sheets of corrugated iron, patched with driftwood and weatherboard and bark, watertight only from above and only with the aid of a tarp, and held together by a few bindings and some reddened nails, crooked as arthritic fingers. Without power or plumbing, it is only just enclosed enough to constitute an ‘inside.’ A better term than ‘shack,’ perhaps, would be ‘hovel.’ But Irving lived in a true shack in Tranter’s Cove before he came here, so ‘shack’ is just how he thinks of it now.

‘Illumination,’ he recites when he throws open the sheet that hangs from the roof in place of a door. The hens file out to forage as the light pours in, and he takes a seat at his makeshift bench. ‘Ante Meridiem,’ he begins as he sticks his finger through the ring-pull on the tin. ‘Ingurgitation,’ he finishes, tearing it off.

When he has swallowed the last of the grainy pears and drained the tin of its fluid, he pronounces himself ‘Full as a goog,’ as is his custom, though he has not been truly sated since he came to the bush.

‘Interment,’ he says as he takes his breakfast tin and its counterpart from last night’s dinner to the steep natural bank of earth behind his shack, where he has fashioned a great rusting honeycomb from hundreds of their empty compatriots. He grunts his habitual grunt as he reaches up on his toes to press the open ends of the tins into the earth like cookie cutters into dough, then stands back to admire his work. At this rate, he thinks—as always—he’ll soon run out of space for new tins, and then what will he do? He’ll be overwhelmed. Perhaps the wall will tumble down over his shack and he’ll be entombed forever in a mountain of tins.

And on goes the morning, Irving carrying out each of the tasks in his horarium and intoning their esoteric names as he goes. (Forgive us, Irving and I, if we send you to your dictionary more than once before we are done. He has acquired a taste for precise, if sometimes obscure language, and I suppose I have picked up the habit.) For
everything Irving does is exactly as it was yesterday and the day before, on and on back through the months and the years. He has set about himself interlocking systems of routine—daily, weekly, monthly—to rival any antique religion, and he adheres to them like a zealot. The Rite of Vivification, the Rite of Ante Meridiem Ingurgitation. The Sacrament of Illumination, the Rite of Interment. I will not burden you here with the details of the Rites of Defecation and Lavation that follow, except to say that the latter is performed only weekly. One thing Irving has in abundance in his otherwise exiguous life is unused soaps and toiletries filling another box under his cot. No shaving equipment, though. He has never been able to grow a beard.

Irving has forgotten his own appearance out here alone for so long, though when he runs his fingertips over his sun-bleached pink paintbrush, its bristles flattened into a disc like the brush of a chimney sweep, he recalls a painted image of himself: his hair faded to white, his skin tanned and sagging, his eyes sunken and fogged over. He rarely washes or even changes out of his stained and sullied attire. Old boots, nearly worn through. A pair of thick woollen socks, which sit balled now like two apple dumplings at the foot of his bed, rolled off in his sleep. His soft black trousers and soiled navy shirt with its left breast pocket, where he likes to keep his hand. The oversized weatherproof jacket that he often wears even to bed and out in the heat. And the limp, black beanie he wears every day, out of which tufts of his hair softly protrude like anemones from beneath a rock, swaying with each step and every turn of his head.

The rest of the morning is filled with the Rites of Cultivation and Refurbishment, and at noon there is the Meridiem Ingurgitation, followed by Post-prandial Hibernation. But all of these are merely preparatory observances in advance of the main event, the ritual to which he dedicates most of his time: the daily Rite of Perquisition, the ritual of the search.
To truly comprehend any single phenomenon, you must first understand everything else, for nothing exists in a vacuum: each result has its cause, and each cause its cause, ad infinitum. This, of course, presents a paradox for the human mind, but we must press on, regardless. It is difficult for me, but I am attempting, as convention dictates, to limit myself to those causes most immediate to my topic, and to relate them in the appropriate order.

So.

Three and a half billion years ago, life sparked. And if, impossibly, you could have been there for that brief Eoarchean moment, you could have dipped your hands into the primordial soup and held the future of every species, every life, every human society, every story, everything to come, in your palms. Your destiny and the destiny of every earthly creature before and after you resided for an instant within this single microscopic organism. Until, miraculously, it split in two. The pair split into quadruplets, the quadruplets into octuplets, the octuplets to sexdecuplets and so on. Over billions of years monomers became polymers; polymers became cyanobacteria became eukaryotes became multi-celled life.

And thus it began. The great game. Life and death. Predator and prey. Evolution by natural selection. That beautiful and terrible system, that imperceptibly slow yet interminable chase down through domain to kingdom to phylum, class, order, family, genus and species. That elegant, mindless, ruthless march onwards, that unconscious struggle toward some unknown end, propelled by death at every turn, heedless of the inestimable, inconceivable suffering it leaves in its wake: all the failed mutations, all the conquered species. Such progress at such expense …
But forgive me, dear reader. Already I have failed. I am new to this self-relation. Let me hasten forward to another beginning, while Irving sleeps off his lunch. We can return to evolutionary biology later.

Three weeks earlier, in quite the same part of the world as Irving, another soul is awakening, rolling and kicking the air lazily in the heat. Her hip-hole under the shallow canopy of a bosky slope remains humid and oppressive, even as night falls. The insects have penetrated the cover to molest her eyes and ears, trying to get to her warm places, seeking out her fluids. Half-consciously she flicks her eyelids to deter them. Then, all at once, she is on her feet.

*Wallabia bicolor*, in case you were wondering. A swamp wallaby. (Certain conventional and psychological quirks suggest that you may find it difficult to recognise this individual as such unless she has a name, so, although it is not the custom of her own species, we will make use of the one she has already been assigned). ‘Wallabia,’ then, emerges from the cloud of sleep gradually, like all mammals, and surveys the slope. Stretching her body and shifting her weight onto her long tail on the ground behind her, she lifts her head to catch the scents drifting above, any sounds that may pierce the strepitous hum of the cicadas. Then she lowers herself and lopes a few paces down the hill before taking off in full bounds through the night.

At the waterhole she is greeted by a new bouquet: the appetising aroma of new greenery, the lingering petrichor of the rain, the complex odours of ordure from fellow denizens of the bush and, most clear to her, the rich musk of other wallabies. The stench of carnivore dreck is unnerving, but the presence of a mob of other wallabies—a single
boomer and three flyers, two with young outside the pouch—is reassuring. Aware of the emptiness of her own pouch, she approaches the water by way of the large male, but elicits nothing more than a perfunctory back scratch.

A decade earlier, it was at a similar billabong that Wallabia herself was conceived. After taking her mother’s tail in hand, her father reared his bulkier form to mount her, hooking his forearms in front of her hind legs. And before long, in the primeval chemistry of impregnation—that mingling of the miscible male and female essences that propels the continuation of life—the fateful sperm reached the egg, and rapidly in the flyer’s womb a life coalesced, formed of the leaves and sap and grass she browsed transmuted into flesh and bone, not chemistry but alchemy. In a matter of weeks baby Wallabia had a head and forelimbs, rounded approximations of the body to come. In the uterus she swiped her limbs around in furious practice for the ordeal ahead of her, stirring the fluid in which she was suspended and drawing nutrients into her condensing flesh, her ossifying bones. For during the Jurassic, two paths diverged in the development of mammals, between marsupials like Wallabia and placentals like Irving. In exchange for a longer gestation, placental mothers took on the agony of childbirth. Among marsupials, on the other hand, the burden remained on the young, who were required to prove their worthiness before receiving further nourishment. One group sought to spare their young the perils of the world outside their bodies; the other forced them into it, to overcome it.

And so it was that, after only a month of growth, Wallabia was expelled from her mother’s body in a dribble of yellowish fluid, a squirming animalcule, a pink, underdeveloped worm. Learning in her first moments postpartum to breathe, to move and to smell, she made immediately, instinctively for the safety of her mother’s pouch. Her eyes were nothing more than dark spots buried in her head, but her nose guided her.
Upward she climbed with her two limbs, driving her soft form onwards against gravity and through her mother’s fur, coarse like thick underbrush, follicles sticking to her membranous, translucent skin. Her reward upon reaching the warm dermic cavity was her mother’s milk and with it, continued life. When they bounded, she held tighter to the long teat inside to steady herself, lulled by the comforting twin rhythms of her mother’s hops and heartbeat.

There came a night when the pouch clenched, and she understood she was being coaxed out. She tumbled gracelessly into the world, a skinny, gangly joey with cumbersome, oversized feet. Her mother groomed her as her senses adjusted to the coldness, the strange clarity of the smells and sounds outside the walls of her mother’s skin. Then she detected a new smell. She stopped to raise her head and test it. But in a moment, she was stuffed back into the pouch. All she saw as she was enveloped into the folds was a slinky, darting terror coming in her direction. Her heart pounded as fast as her mother’s as the larger pair of feet hammered the earth to make their escape. *Vulpes vulpes. Vulpes vulpes. Vulpes vulpes.*

Now, at the waterhole, the memory of that day gone but the lesson imprinted on her, Wallabia lingers only long enough to take her fill of fresh water. She knows another place to escape the enduring heat.

When Irving first came to the bush, it would come alive at night. He could hear it from his shack. A wandering choir of ethereal voices wove and wound between the trees like some ancient pagan dance. It started with the crickets and the night birds, with sudden dark flutters and crashes and far-off howls and shrieks. But deeper into the night it
became something more. Words crawled through the air like leaves in the wind. Phrases blew in through the cracks in the walls: half a conversation, intimate susurrations. Sentences whirled around the shack, some awful, some beautiful, most ordinary, but all entrancing, and unintelligible so long as they roamed free, colliding into one another and intermingling, mimicking one another and forgetting themselves. He began to hear them—to fear them—from his old home on the edge of the bush in Tranters Cove. But it wasn’t until he came here, to live among them, that he came to understand them. It is these voices that lie at the heart of the Rite of Perquisition, for each of the items in his collection possesses a special significance that only Irving can divine: they conceal the voices. By day the voices fall silent and settle into ordinary objects lying throughout the wilderness to rest, awaiting the next night’s revelries. That’s when Irving must seek them out, and he has made much progress. Night by night, the voices outside the shack grow fewer, and since his last trip to the Cove, some nights have passed when he heard none at all. Meanwhile, as his collection grows, his shack becomes ever more riotous each night with the assembled voices. It could be any day now that the omnium gatherum is complete.

The Rite of Perquisition begins today, as it always does, with the Ceremony of Selection, when he rises from his nap and heads back out into the early afternoon. When he reaches the centre of the small clearing where his shack reposes, he looks up past the tall trees around him to the patch of sky above, today a wincing grey. But that will not spoil his good spirits. He closes his eyes and covers his ears to return for a cleansing moment to that calm place where he is a babe in the womb, a stone in the sea. Then, he begins to spin. He spins until he can’t tell which way he is facing, until he becomes dizzy, until his stomach begins to quease, until he can’t help but laugh, and then he slows. Eyes still lidded and ears blocked, he recites an old rhyme aloud, completing a
revolution with every few syllables. ‘One fine day, in the middle of the night,’ he chants. ‘Two dead boys got up to fight. Back to back they faced each other, drew their swords and shot one another!’

With the last three shouted words he stops spinning, points a gun-shaped hand out before him and opens his eyes to watch the world turn, all shaking, tilting motion. But for Irving it’s as though this isn’t a distortion of reality caused by the swirling of fluid in his head, but an accurate vision of existence as it should be perceived, the only way to feel the planet as it moves through space, his mind turning in time with the galaxy. When it stills, he sets off in the direction he pointed.

Wallabia’s short fur rinses about in the surf as she jumps to meet each wave and keep her head above the breakers, the wetness soaking down to quench her sweltering skin, her limbs slowed by the weight of the water. But the wide pale expanse of the moonlit beach presses at her from the periphery, reminding her of her exposure. Before long she is driven, sopping, back onto the sand for the cover of vegetation. At the bushline she stops to grasp the leaves of a bracken fern and chew, unaware of the predator who has tracked her from the waterhole.

It is, of course, her old terror: *Vulpes vulpes*. The European red fox. Vulpes Vulpes, as I shall call her, moves closer, keeping low, impossibly quiet, and entirely beyond the detection of Wallabia. Her ancestors isolated for an age here on the remotest continent of Gondwana, Wallabia’s senses have never been shaped by the hammer of predation. Her stealthier huntress, on the other hand, heir of Laurasia, has inherited a deadly arsenal. Her kind has been hunted by men for centuries, while her own ancestors
honored their skills in pursuit of skittish rodents. The very breeze is subject to the vixen, who lies downwind, timing her minuscule movements to coincide with the rustling of the leaves, Wallabia’s own chewing.

In a heartbeat Vulpes Vulpes pounces and Wallabia stiffens in shock. The red flash bears down with paws and jaws as Wallabia reflexively propels herself into the air, colliding with her assailant mid-pounce. Carnivorous teeth snag in marsupial fur, but Vulpes Vulpes cannot hold her grip. The collision leaves Wallabia facing the breakers and before her feet meet sand she is driving them frantically through the air, into bush, into fur, surging forward, forward, forward. Water catches her toes before she pauses long enough to register that her foe has not given chase. Something has made the vixen hesitate. An unnatural rumbling approaches, lights sweep the beach, and they are united for a moment, enemy combatants on either side of the sand, mutually beholding human intrusion.

The truck is full of international holidaymakers, returning late from a guided tour of the national park. A chance dip and rise in the sand sends the headlights swinging over Wallabia’s position in the surf, and one keen-eyed tourist’s cry is enough to bring the vehicle to a stop. The tourguide flicks on the spotlight and finds Wallabia with the aid of directions from her Taiwanese observer, sending up a chorus of delight when it finally settles on her, standing in the froth with her paws bunched before her like a child in the bath. Lenses zoom and cameras flash as the PA inside the truck crackles on. ‘Righto folks.’ The guide’s insouciant English slices through the excited gibbering of several other tongues. ‘What you can see on your right there looks to be a female swamp wallaby taking a dip. Also known as banggarai by the Wadi Wadi; a black, black-tailed or fern wallaby or even a ‘black stinker,’ and if you got close enough you’d be able to tell me why.’
The tourists laugh.

‘Why is she doing that?’ asks a Swiss woman, fascinated.

‘Probably just cooling off after a hot day’s sleep. Even the animals like surfing downunder.’ More laughter. ‘Let’s see,’ says the guide, tapping the steering wheel at his side. ‘They’re the sole surviving species in the genus Wallabia. Solitary. And even though they have bad hygiene they’ve actually got pretty good manners compared to other macropods—they’re the only ones that ‘browse,’ which means they’ll eat stuff with their hands instead of just grazing off the floor.’

As the passengers marvel, Wallabia regards the truck, panting, transfixed.

It is the vixen who ends the impasse. Reluctant to let go of such a kingly meal already cornered, she deems the threat of the truck an insufficient deterrent, and trots out from the bushline, through the headlights and into the shallows toward Wallabia, sending up a gasp from the spectators. ‘Look, look!’ cries an Englishwoman. ‘There’s a fox!’

‘Uh oh,’ says the guide, sweeping the spotlight back and forth to find predator and prey as Wallabia darts deeper into the water to avoid her pursuer. His mind turns to the sausage sizzle awaiting them back at the tourism centre. ‘Fair warning, folks. Avert your eyes now if you don’t want to spoil your dinner.’

None of them look away, but cry and shout as the pair dance around one another, Wallabia leading while Vulpes Vulpes chases. But the vixen gains hold of a chunk of fur and skin on Wallabia’s back and, though the marsupial’s powerful legs catapult her forward, the relentless jaws of the vixen drag her back and back and back.

After a few minutes, one or two of the women are crying and the guide speaks up to quell the hysteria. ‘I did warn you,’ he says in a weary, nasal tone. ‘I know it’s not nice to see, folks, but that is just life, it’s just nature.’
Vulpes Vulpes stands atop her prey now. Wallabia gives three mighty kicks to the sand beneath her, each time thrusting both of them out of the water, but only for her head to once again become submerged under the vixen’s weight. She lands one well-aimed kick to her assailant’s face, but nothing will discourage Vulpes Vulpes now that she is so close. Exhausted, Wallabia thrashes her tail but cannot resist as her neck is seized. For another tortuous few minutes, Vulpes Vulpes drags Wallabia by the throat this way and that through the surf. Each time the wallaby tries to thrash, Vulpes Vulpes rewards her with a violent jerk of her jaws, so she goes limp, but she is not dead yet. It will take some minutes for her smaller attacker to crush her windpipe, so they wait there together in intimate animosity, marsupial and placential, predator and prey, waiting for her life to end.

The tourists are silent now, solemn. Wallabia finally curls her body in one last convulsion of agony before she dies. Vulpes Vulpes wastes no time in heaving the body back onto the beach.

‘I’m sorry to do that to you, everyone, but it’s just nature,’ says the guide. A tautological death. Isn’t every death natural? Does the naturalness of a loved one’s death diffuse its tragedy? The guide switches off the spotlight to spare them the sight of what will happen next.

A German man has different questions. ‘Isn’t the fox a pest here?’ he asks. ‘Shouldn’t you do something?’ Several tourists grumble in vengeful agreement. ‘The fox should be shot,’ someone adds.

‘It’s true,’ he answers. ‘The fox was introduced here by the Poms a while back. They cause a lot of problems for the native ecosystem. It’s good that you got to see what damage they can do. But we lay poison for them all over the park. Luckily wallabies—swamp wallabies like that one—aren’t endangered, so there’s no shortage of
them.’

This seems to mollify the tourist, who resumes his seat.

‘Right, save any more questions for dinner,’ the guide says as he starts up the truck, and they leave the fox to her feast.

Vulpes Vulpes will make a mess of the carcass, first taking her fill of fat and muscle, then tearing organs from the belly to secrete in various, urine-marked caches for later consumption. But before she can ever return to them, she will be tempted instead by a pile of fluorescent blue-green poison pellets. And back in her earth a horrible story will be trapped like a bubble under ice. The poison will cause her to hallucinate and pace in anxiety. She will vomit, pant and convulse for six hours before dying. Unwilling to leave their litter of kits, her dog fox will lap up the regurgitated contents of his vixen’s stomach, the diluted dosage inflicting on him a much more prolonged end, leaving his kits behind him to starve. Another skulk will fill the vacuum left by the killing of this family—five superfluous deaths—while outside Wallabia’s organs rot in the earth, unnoticed by any but the insects. As the ants set in on Wallabia’s eyes, and the flies settle over her in their final victory, her body will lie bleaching on the sand until a strange man comes upon them, and takes up a single, broken, falcate bone in his hands.

Irving bursts back into his shack a panting, sweating mess, shepherding the chooks in before him. He is greeted by the chorus of his collection, whose awakening yawns and chirps drown out the mournful void of the rising gale outside and help him forget his harried flight home from the beach and what he encountered there. The days are so
short now, and he does not like to be outside once the wild voices shake themselves free of their diurnal resting places. Better to hole up in his shack with the chooks and his collection, the voices he knows. The ones he has introduced himself to and grown accustomed to, one at a time.

He was excited when the Ceremony of Selection sent him to the beach, where he can let the water lick his toes before scampering away from the incoming waves, where the leftovers of the world are gathered from all over and displayed on shore, left by the sea like gifts on a doorstep. But today something went wrong.

Still shaking, he searches in the dark for his matches so he can commit the Sacraments of Ignition, lighting his candle and woodfire stove. Then he scrabbles to the shelves to commence the Rite of Enumeration, hoping to lose himself in the numbers. He begins at the left end of the top shelf, his finger bobbing up and down once for each item: his shells and bottles and feathers, the red toothbrush, the pen lid, the broken sandal.

After setting off for the beach that afternoon he prospected his way down from the hills through the bush, scouring the branches above, stopping to tear off thin sheets of bark and reveal the secret worlds of insects, shuffling his feet into the crepitating leaves. He found several promising potential acquisitions—a nut, a cicada shell, an inexplicable shard of faded blue plastic—but tossed each one aside in turn. Even Irving isn’t sure how he distinguishes the right items from any other ordinary objects, but somehow he always knows when he finds them. Sometimes it takes him all day to find a sonant object, one with the weight of a voice inside. Sometimes he will toss something aside as rubbish one day only to pick it back up two weeks later to sense a voice inside. The objects remain the same; it is the voices that change.

At the beach he traced the high tide line to inspect the water’s latest offerings.
Over an hour he crept his way up the shore, neck stiff from craning downward, inspecting and casting aside objects every few minutes. He was particularly ensnared by a chalky smooth cuttlefish bone and the whitened dome of a once-green tennis ball, sundered from its other half to reveal its nut-brown interior. But ultimately he could not sense a voice within either, and placed them back down for another day, perhaps. He senses, though, that his days of Perquisition are running short. It takes longer and longer each day to find a sonant object, and the few who remain—those who have evaded him this long—seem more ominous now, their potency amplified by the silence that surrounds them.

The day was late by the time he came upon it. In a small clear patch surrounded by washed-up seaweed, as though each bushel kept its distance out of deference, lay the tangled ruins of an animal, brittle ribs and notches of tail scattered radially around the heaped mess, with the disembodied skull some distance away. Propped on a flocculent bed of fur, the skeleton was positioned so that the foramen obturata, the two elongated hollows of the pelvis, looked for all the world like eyes to Irving. One leg was tucked beneath like an arm scratching the pareidolian head, while the other was outstretched, long and hooked and marsupial, as if in forlorn question of its circumstance. There could be no doubt that this was it. He had found his desideratum.

He raised a hand to his lip, equal parts intrigued and disturbed. He could not stop watching the skeletal figure, yet could not force himself to step further into its field of vision, staring back at him like the ancient depiction of some wrathful god. He warred with himself for a long minute until, blessedly, he cast his eyes down in supplication to the spirit, and saw before him what he took to be its token. A single rib bone lying pure and white and broken at his feet. Keeping a careful eye on the revenant, he bent to pick up the bone, and stumbled back when the thing seemed to watch him. Clutching what
he had come for, he flew back into the bush, aiming for home. But in his frenzy, he became turned around. The image of those sad hollow eyes stained the weft of his memory, becoming distorted, more lifelike and accusatory as he walked, as the bush grew dark, as the trees clawed at him and the perilous sounds of the night began echoing around him. He feared that it was angry with him, this bone spirit. He hadn’t shown the proper respect. He had defiled its resting place, unceremoniously removed not its token, dispensed willingly, but its sepulchral treasure, guarded jealously. Before long he couldn’t bear to hold the object of his guilt and slipped it into his pocket, tried to forget the nagging weight of it. The vengeful spirit was watching him, chasing him, bellowing at him in the distance with its terrible voice. Even Orion’s Belt above, he noticed, was pointing at him like an arrow, denouncing him. Now he seemed to be reliving his last flight back from Tranters Cove after the lights in the sky. A rusty whine. The hiss of paint and aerosol. A roar, a whir, the hacking, the thunder. Too many voices in too small a space. A crack, a drone, a bleat and a croak, and his pounding heart. *Vulpes vulpes. Vulpes vulpes. Vulpes vulpes.* He considered returning the bone, but he couldn’t take himself back into the physical presence of that sinister force, to the very seat of its power. The thought of returning to the beach at all was unbearable.

‘I’m sorry!’ he said aloud, in case the spirit could hear. But this seemed a paltry offering, and he was afraid to display his fear, so he didn’t say any more. Instead he began his rhyme, putting on a show of bravery. ‘One fine day in the middle of the night …’

But a diabolical voice whispered that he had done wrong. He tried to drown it out.

‘Two dead boys got up to fight!’

In his shack now, counting his objects, it is different. As his breathing evens out and his heart begins to slow, the voices of his collection become more animated. They
begin to bicker and squabble, talk over one another in dissonant bids for attention, but it’s a comforting clamour. It washes over him as the numbers of his Enumeration climb higher. The base of a black potplant. A shriveled bluebottle. A baby’s dummy.

Now he turns slowly around the shack to count the objects not borne by the shelves, the driftwood leaning against the wall, the plastic bags stuffed into the many crannies of the walls. Finally, when he has counted the icecream stick from yesterday (number seven hundred and fifty-nine), he dips his hand cautiously into his pocket for item seven hundred and sixty, lifts it up before him. Halfway down the length of the tusk-shaped bone begins a fracture that has separated it from its other half, a long shear edge, quite sharp. It’s a slim, graceful thing, sleek to touch and easy to dissociate, now that he has it in his shack, from the encounter on the beach. He runs his fingers along it, sets it down reverently, and hears his trinkets hush, murmur to one another, gossiping perhaps over the latest addition lying on the table before him. Only the white arc of the bone itself remains silent, resolute in the dimness, awaiting the attention that is its due.

Irving retrieves the tin of baked beans from this morning and tosses it into the coals of his stove to commence the Rite of Post Meridiem Ingurgitation, then lifts first PP and then FF into his arms to pet and coo to them while he waits.

Minutes later, with his dinner ready, he wants to hurry through it to bring on the Rite of Fabulation, so he can finally hear the voice of the object he bought at such expense. But he resists. He sucks the sauce off his lower lip and dunks his fork back into the mound of beans oozing across his plate, forcing himself to count his chews. *One, two, three.* Irving likes the number three. In fact, it is to nine he will count for each mouthful. Three times three.

*Four, five, six.*

Yet no matter how he tries to ignore it, there is an inescapable gravity in the room
that is different to most nights, a teleology that has its end in that sharpened edge of the bone. Even the other objects seem to be trained on the stranger, crowding on the shelves to get a view or craning from their places on the roof. That pair of half-folded glasses, dangling insectlike from a nail in the wall, glinting knowingly. That ghostly tumbleweed of tangled fishing line hanging by a thread from the roof, some of the redness of the fire caught in its transparent intestines. Pebbles quiver in anticipation as the wind picks up outside, an old shampoo bottle wobbles, struggling to roll closer.

Seven, eight, nine.

A slurp of water from his metal cup, another mouthful. He knocks over the baked bean tin with his arm as he sets his cup back down.

One, two, three.

Now he peers at the tin. It looks a little pathetic there, he thinks. He eyes the bone, then back to the tin.

Four, five, six.

It’s been blackened by the fire and bent out of shape. He feels sorry for it, he realises, its lid torn off and its hot guts spilled out before him. Like something dead, something he has killed. He gives it a stroke.

Seven, eight, nine.

I must tell you something about myself now, about the nature of story.

I am composite of the many untold stories who came before me, who determined me. In this way, I am close to infinite. After all, there are many more unknown stories than known ones. You see, now, why I find it so difficult to stay on course in my self-
relation. It is hard to discern where I end and another story begins, perhaps more so for me than is usual. I am Irving’s story, yet I brim with the many tales he harvested from his daily searches, the many paths of other untold stories he intersected and inherited.

But I am not greedy. By some means unknown to me, I have found this passageway into the world, this means of being told, and my salvation shall be the salvation of as many of my fellows as I can manage. In order to convey myself to you, it is necessary for you to know the story of yet another. It should not surprise you that a single human life should be so entangled with the lives of those around it, even for one such as Irving. It is the story Irving senses in the bone, the story that called out to him from its place on the beach, that drew him there with the power of its song. The story of a boy, distant in space and time from this moment, but a story in which Irving plays a part, despite his absence. They are connected, these two. So different and yet so similar.

Come, Irving is finished with his meal. The Rite of Fabulation is nearly upon us. Let me stand aside now, that you may hear it for yourself. I will attempt to keep my interruptions to a minimum.
… do thou say to me, O my sister, relate to me some strange story to beguile our waking hour:—and I will relate to thee a story that shall, if it be the will of God, be the means of procuring deliverance.

— Scheherazade, *The Thousand and One Nights*

**Chapter 2**

*April 1951*

*Temora, New South Wales*

Daniel Cleary casts the chickenfeed out in a wide arc like his father Jim has shown him, making the hens bob and gobble in delight. Grains and seeds spray loose through his fingers and bounce off the low bushes and tufts of grass to the ground of the enclosure, so the chooks can peck and forage for it slowly, so they can all reach it at once without squabbling. Judy—the matriarch—will peck and chase the others if it’s not spread widely enough. He spends every evening out here with them, around the side of the house as the day darkens, feeding them and collecting their eggs, savouring the smell of the wood fire Jim has lit. It’s always been his job, ever since he could walk.

He has named the chooks for the brothers and sisters in *Seven Little Australians*, the book his mother Marg often reads to him and his brother Jed at night, just as her older brother Irving used to for her. He can name the letters on the pages now that he has started school, and a few of the words, but most still evade him. Jim told him it was daft to name the hens, that they were all girls anyway, but Daniel doesn’t mind. There were seven of them when he first named them, so it fit according to him. There’s Judy and her subordinate Pip, both glossy black-green australorps; a little bantam—the General, of course; two snooty golden orpingtons, Nell and Meg; and a red named
Baby. Daniel was heartbroken the day they caught a fox with the other red, Bunty, in his jaws, but he was still glad when the interloper slipped through the chickenwire and into the distance before Jim could get his gun. Jed never cared much about the chooks, except as a source of feathers to place in Daniel’s hair when he wanted to play cowboys and Indians, but even he was sad that day, and he helped his brother and father reinforce the enclosure for the rest of the morning. They put in extra layers of wire and dug the fence deep down into the ground so nothing could get through, Jim promised. He wonders if Uncle Irving has chooks where he lives, whether they have foxes.

Despite all his pleas to go and visit, Daniel has never met Uncle Irving. Sometimes when he starts thinking about his uncle, he finds it hard to stop. It’s difficult to hide his fascination from Jim, to remember not to ask questions and recite what he knows in front of him. Marg explained why he wasn’t supposed to, but there is something more to it, even he can tell. A quietness around the man, a silence, a secret nobody is supposed to tread on.

The screech and slap of the neighbours’ screen door punctures the evening quiet and Daniel looks up to see Wendy Dougherty crouching into her habitual position, moping on the steps. Daniel’s mother calls her ‘Wens-dee’ for ‘Wednesday’s Child,’ like the old poem, because she’s ‘full of woe,’ and whenever she comes up in conversation Marg cries, ‘Oh, woe is me!’ But today she is different. Less sad than sultry, though the distinction is lost on Daniel. She sends him a disconsolate wave and he responds in kind, then turns around to spread some feed in the far corner of the pen.

Sixteen years old, Wendy was pulled out of school the year before to work, but the nursing job lined up for her fell through, and now she never even leaves the house except to do the washing or sit there in her spot on the steps. Except once or twice when Daniel has seen her sneak out to go and sit in a car with a strange man. It worries him
because Jim always says to be careful of strange men, and never get in their cars. But Wendy’s father is strange himself. Daniel would be full of woe too, if Mr Dougherty were his father.

Marg calls for dinner and Daniel picks up his pail of five eggs, various shades of brown. Baby has stopped laying, and he wonders if it’s because she’s lonely without Bunty. On his way inside he takes a nebula of disintegrating tissues from his pocket and rolls two hard little balls between his finger and thumb. He checks they are the right size and stuffs them up his nostrils just as Wendy looks back over to him. She laughs, and he opens the back door, breathing through his mouth. Maybe she isn’t always woeful, he thinks.

Already sitting at the dinner table, Jim gives his son a quizzical look, making Daniel roll his wrists in his sleeves, but he can’t place what’s off. ‘Tuck your shirt in, son,’ he says finally. Jim prides himself on presentation, his immaculately parted dark hair, his pressed shirt and khaki pants draped over his wiry frame.

Placing Jim’s plate down, Marg quirks her mouth into a smile at Daniel from over her husband’s shoulder. ‘And how are our girls this evening?’ The animals are one of the few topics Daniel will utter more than a word on.

‘Good,’ says Daniel. ‘Pip was being greedy, but Judy sorted her out.’

‘Good for Judy,’ says Marg.

‘The red’s not laying, though, is she?’ declares Jim, buttering a slice of bread.

‘No,’ says Daniel. He hoped Jim wouldn’t notice.

Jim leads a brief grace and, lifting his head afterward, Daniel notices the lurid pink of corned beef staining his parents’ plates. He keeps his eyes to his own plate of corn, peas and potatoes, glad he can’t smell through the tissues. Jim taps his teeth thoughtfully for a moment behind closed lips, his gaze lingering on Daniel’s plate, but a
glance from Marg warns him off. Jed’s empty seat looms between them.

‘Knife and fork,’ Jim says instead. With nothing to cut, Daniel left his knife on the table, skewering and shoveling his peas and potatoes without it. He picks it up now, but his right hand remains vestigial beside his plate for the rest of the meal.

When they are done, Daniel waits for Marg to say ‘Well, I’m full as a goog,’ like she used to, or sometimes, ‘Well, I’ve had my elegant sufficiency.’ Marg is full of old sayings and rhymes and phrases like that, learned from her own mother and dropped into conversations here and there to add a little flavour, or attached dependably to certain situations. Instead of just saying ‘Aha’ when she discovers something, she will rattle off a whole nonsense story that makes a sharp image come to life in Daniel’s head. ‘Aha!’ she cried in accents wild and waved her wooden leg aloft. ‘’Tis false! ’Tis false!’ And with her evil eye she swept the garden path. When Daniel asks her, Marg doesn’t know what most of her sayings mean.

But tonight, like last night, no saying ever comes. It’s strange how an absence can be felt so much more than a presence. Like the one around Irving. Like the one around Jed. Instead, Marg tells Daniel to go prepare for bed and she’ll be in to read to him soon, hoping Jim won’t notice the elision of bathtime. She can’t face the battle tonight, but her husband has other things on his mind. A silence swallows the room with Daniel’s departure, Marg and Jim digesting and staring into space as they do so often these days. Marg breaks it with the scud of her chair and the clattering of plates into dishwater, and finally Jim asks, ‘How long is this gonna go on? It’s been weeks and weeks.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Look, he can’t go the rest of his life refusing to eat properly. It isn’t … normal.’

‘I know,’ she says from the sink. Dishwater tinkles from her hands.
‘Growing boys need meat, you know? I’m a bloody livestock trader for Christ’s sake.’

‘Jim,’ she admonishes.

‘Well, I worry about him too, you know.’

‘I know you do,’ she says. ‘But imagine what it must be like for him. To have … To have all this happen to you so young, just as you’re really becoming a person.’ The thought threatens tears. She can’t read how Daniel has reacted to any of this. Maybe it hasn’t hit him yet. But he has always been strange, always meticulous and stubborn, has always preferred his own company, or the company of their animals, the chooks and the billy goat he leads across town to collect bottles, the dogs he follows on their patrols as they wear tracks in the grass around the house. He’s never spoken up much, never been one to look you in the eye.

‘I’m telling you we should have him looked at.’ Jim turns to her in his seat.

‘Oh, there’s nothing wrong with him,’ she snaps. ‘He’s just … an interesting boy. He’s dealing with things in his own interesting way.’

‘Interesting,’ says Jim. ‘Interesting’s fine, interesting’s good, but … You sort of want them to be interesting in the right way, don’t you, darl?’

She dries her hands on a tea towel. ‘Doesn’t sound very interesting to me.’

Jim rubs his face. ‘I used to think he was just like his old man, you know? Quiet. But now, I dunno …’

Marg doesn’t answer that. She’s never thought Daniel was like Jim. He reminds her much more strongly of her brother, Irving. To her it’s always been almost as if the two halves of her brother’s personality have been split in two and incarnated in her sons, not that she would ever say as much to Jim. Jed had all the confidence, the boisterousness, the bravado that Irving had always clothed himself in. But Daniel is
possessed of that certain softness, the gentleness that always lay there beneath the exterior. The same quietness as Irving, the same independence. His strangeness and, most of all, his sadness. Perhaps it isn’t quite as extreme as all that, she thinks, but something of her brother has been communicated through her to Daniel. They even look a little alike. Daniel’s round, serious little face, the grey-blue eyes of the Crabbes, his fluffy light-brown hair. So many similarities, yet so many differences. Is it possible for sadness to be passed through the genes?

‘Well, these can wait,’ she says behind Jim’s back, making a pointless gesture toward the dishes. But Jim’s mind is already on the pub. He issues a distant noise of acknowledgement and she leaves him to it, retrieving her battered heirloom copy of *Seven Little Australians* from the bookshelf and heading to Daniel’s room.

Daniel was on the floor listening to his favourite Saturday afternoon serial when it happened. He lay on his stomach with the wireless right near his head, absorbed in the tale of Egyptian graverobbers and the curse of the pharaohs, and busying his hands with a bunch of fork ‘Jacks’ and spoon ‘Jills’ smuggled from the kitchen, sticking their handles into an upturned egg carton to make a bus. Marg was washing a stack of vegetables from her garden in the sink and Jim was doing some repairs on the fence.

Jed was stacking firewood beside the house, fitting the oddly shaped pieces into a tessellating pile. He jumped when he heard the pinched bleating of their lamb behind him. Jim had brought the lamb home from work one evening, a gift from a seller who said he had no use for the thing. Jed was there when the ute rolled up with the shaky little creature trembling in the tray, his fleece brown with the dust of the livestock lots.
Jim didn’t want the histrionics that had ensued from Daniel last time he’d slaughtered a lamb for Sunday dinner, so he’d kept the animal secret, up by the back shed.

Charged with the task of feeding the lamb from a bottle, Jed was familiar with the quaver of his voice, but this sound was different. When he turned to see, it was clear why. The lamb was kicking and bucking in terror. A haze of bees was swarming around him, and hundreds of them had descended on his head. His face black and writhing with them. Jed’s first thought was to find Jim. He bolted around the back of the house, shouting.

In the kitchen Marg dropped the carrot she was scrubbing into the sink with a clang and rushed to the back door. ‘What’s the matter?!’ she called.

Jed appeared around the corner, his eyes wide. ‘Where’s Dad?’

‘Side fence,’ she answered, pointing and taking a step outside. ‘What—’ But Jed was gone. Daniel appeared behind her just as the lamb emerged from the other side of the yard, making his awful noise, his entire head obscured.

‘What’s that?’ asked Daniel.

Marg put her hand to her mouth. She could hear the buzzing. ‘Bees.’

She backed away, pushing Daniel into the annex with her, and shutting the screen door tight.

‘Why are they hurting him?’ demanded Daniel, standing up on the couch beside the door to look out the window.

‘I don’t know, darling,’ she said. ‘It must’ve nosed into their hive. Don’t look, okay? Just go and listen to the wireless.’

‘Is he ours?’ Daniel got back off the couch and tried to press past his mother.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Inside. Sit there and don’t look; it’ll only upset you.’

1 A disruptive death.
But it was already starting. Daniel’s little face was reddening, a moan gathering deep from within. She moved to take him away from the scene, but then Jim and Jed appeared, empty hessian sacks in hand.

‘Where’s Daniel?’ Jim asked when he saw her.

‘I’ve got him,’ she called back.

‘Stay inside,’ he said, edging towards the lamb, clearing a path through the humming air with the sack.

Now Daniel was wailing. She tried to turn him away from the door and into her dress, but he wouldn’t budge, his hands and face pressed against the flyscreen, bellowing his outrage at the plight of the lamb. She placed her hands on his shoulders.

‘Shhh, it’s okay,’ she whispered to him. But there was no consoling him once he descended into one of his tantrums. No prize or punishment that could induce him to stop. They weren’t about attention, never calculated or purposeful as Jed’s had been before him. They had to come to their own conclusion. Though Jim still wouldn’t accept that. He was liable to strap the boy if he was around when a fit struck.

‘Don’t worry, Dan,’ Jed called out with exaggerated cheerfulness, his bright blue eyes flashing back at them with a smile. ‘We’ll save him. Don’t worry!’ Daniel’s cries engulfed his words.

‘Be careful, Jed!’ Marg called, tightening her grip.

Father and son began swatting at the beleaguered lamb’s head, trying to dislodge the bees. Before long the air was thick with them and they too were being stung. Her eldest son was leaping and hopping through the swarm, all skinny and sinewy like a frog. It was hard to believe the difference three years could make between the boys, Jed always so lively, so present, while Daniel seemed to engage with the world through a fog. But she could never be sure Jed wasn’t the same at Daniel’s age.
‘Jed!’ shouted Marg. ‘Jed, come inside! Jim!’

But the two were immersed in their struggle, listening only to each other as they uttered terse cautions to one another. ‘Come around now, come around,’ Jim was saying. ‘A bit to the left. Watch out!’ The Clearys hardly felt the barbs being driven into their bare limbs for the adrenaline. In between swipes at the lamb’s head they waved their arms and the sacks to drive the assailants away, while expiring bees dropped to the ground at their feet to writhe for a few minutes, or for their miseries to be ended by a boot-shod foot.\(^2\) Marg went to the window.

‘Jed!’ she cried over the lamb’s dazed bleating, over Daniel’s screaming.

Jed was backing away from the animal, pursued by a number of the incensed insects. He disappeared from view again, and when he returned he had a bucket of water, which he tipped over the lamb, finally sending the last of the bees from the underside of its head flying.

Its attackers vanquished, though still swarming through the air in agitation, the lamb collapsed. Jim picked him up and they all came inside. Several bees came in with them, buzzing off into the house. Daniel would find their desiccated bodies curled up on the windowsills and shelves for weeks afterwards.\(^3\)

All three were covered in red welts from the beestings, but Jim and Jed were smiling as they panted. Daniel’s sobs ebbed as the lamb came into view, as if suspended until his fate could be determined.

‘Heavens to Murgatroyd!’ Marg exclaimed in relief. They made way for Jim to lay the lamb down on the couch next to the door. Jim gave Jed a clap on the back, then crouched to inspect the animal.

‘You two!’ Marg scowled. ‘That was so dangerous!’ She embraced Jed, then held

\(^2\) A dozen self-sacrificial deaths.
\(^3\) Several captive deaths.
him at a distance to examine his stings. ‘You shouldn’t have done that.’

‘I know, Mum,’ he said as she looked him over. ‘But we had to try.’ He looked at his brother. ‘Didn’t we, Daniel?’

Daniel nodded vigorously.

Marg stroked Jed’s golden hair. ‘You’re swelling up.’ And she whisked out of the room to the icebox.

‘Is he …?’ Daniel managed, leaning down next to Jim.

‘Not good,’ Jim answered, looking in the lamb’s mouth and opening his swollen little eyes. His whole head was puffed up beyond recognition. ‘Poor little fella. How on Earth do you suppose he—’

He broke off at the sound of a thump behind them. Jed had collapsed. His face had swollen almost as much as the lamb’s. Jim leapt to his side, pushing Daniel out of the way.

‘Go get your mother,’ he said. ‘Margaret!’

Daniel stood watching. His brother’s eyes had rolled back and he was going all red, wheezing. Jim was tapping the side of his face, saying his name. Marg appeared in the doorway and screamed. Daniel resumed his wail.

‘I’m taking him to the hospital,’ Jim said as he picked up his son. Marg followed them out the door and Daniel chased behind. From the verandah she watched Jim lay Jed in the back of the car and run around to the driver’s seat. Tears bled down her face as she cupped a hand over her mouth, watching the car swing violently out onto the road.

Drawn by the commotion, the Dougherty women materialised on the porch next door and swiftly descended on Marg. Mrs Dougherty made tea and sat with her neighbour while they waited for word. Daniel waited with them until he remembered
the lamb alone in the annex. Wendy was dispatched to supervise him as he tried to feed the tortured soul some water, pressed some ice to his swollen flesh. Wendy tried to comfort him, but he was consumed by tending to the animal. So as the house grew dark, they sat together kneeling on the lino next to the lamb in his place on the couch, stroking his hindquarters where he hadn’t been stung. Daniel fell asleep with his head on the corner of the couch, listening to the lamb’s breaths, while Wendy dozed leaning against the wall, one hand clasping his. The lamb exhaled for the last time there while they slept, and not long after, the lights of Jim’s car swept through the house, rousing Marg and Mrs Dougherty from the lounge where they had been sitting together in fearful quiet.

Marg stood in the doorway and saw that Jim was alone. resounding

‘Jim?’ she asked as he emerged from the car, looking up at her. He just shook his head, and Marg crumpled to the floor.

In the months that followed, Daniel was haunted by the lamb. Lambs in his books of fairy tales, in nursery rhymes he heard children singing. ‘Mary had a Little Lamb’ and ‘The Lambkin and the Little Fish.’ Marg even had a cross-stitch of a lamb in a farm scene hanging on the wall. And lambs were everywhere at the funeral. The priest wore a white stole embroidered with a golden lamb beneath a cross, and he kept talking about ‘Christ the Lamb,’ which no one else seemed to notice. There was a lamb with his little leg hooked around the pole of a flag in the stained-glass window above the altar, and when they all stood up to watch Jim and some other men from the family carry Jed’s

4 A muted death.
5 A resounding death.
casket outside, the whole church sang a hymn that went,

\textit{Just as I am, without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me}

\textit{And that Thou bidst me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.}

It was after the wake that night at tea that Daniel’s proscription began. To save Marg cooking, Mrs Dougherty had left an enormous pot of stew on the stove all day for them to eat over the next few nights. Daniel watched it spread satisfyingly over the porcelain of his bowl, revealing juicy green peas and soft cubes of carrot. He hadn’t eaten any of the fancy hors d’oeuvres at the wake. Then his eyes settled on the rounded grey lumps of meat steaming before him, as pale as Jed’s flesh between the welts, and he heard the name of the dish again: \textit{lamb casserole}. He wondered for a terrifying moment whether this \textit{was} the lamb who had died in their annex. He wasn’t sure what his father had done with the body; perhaps he had given it to the neighbours and this stew was their way of saying thank you. When he asked, Jim assured him this wasn’t the same lamb, but it was too late for Daniel. For him, Mary’s little lamb and the Lambkin from the fairytale and the lamb from Marg’s tapestry, the Lamb of God from the song and the priest’s robe and the hymn and the Bible and the window, carrying a flag on a field of blue, had become one with the bee-stung lamb who died next to him on the couch, Jed’s lamb. And that lamb was at once the same as the one his father had slaughtered and the one who now sat chopped up and cooked and fragmented in a hundred pieces in the pot and their dinner bowls.\textsuperscript{6} His thinking did not need to travel far before it came irrevocably to pigs and chooks, cows and fish. His own personal consubstantiality.

Jim told him not to be ridiculous, that their neighbour had cooked them a lovely meal and they were all going to enjoy it, but Mrs Dougherty, who was serving up before

\textsuperscript{6} A hidden death.
returning next door, intervened. ‘Oh, don’t force the child on my account,’ she said. ‘You’ve all had a big day. It only makes sense the poor thing’s stomach should be upset.’ She turned to Daniel. ‘But you should eat something, pet.’

He was excused from the table to go lie down with a piece of buttered bread. In bed his last thoughts before sleep were about his brother and the lamb, and how he would never hear his mother say ‘cheeky little cocksparrow’s bottom,’ her nickname for Jed, again, and how the last word to come out of Jed’s mouth before his throat closed up was his name, ‘Daniel.’

When Marg comes into Daniel’s room with Seven Little Australians tucked beneath her arm, he is already beneath the covers, waiting. She smiles and closes the door behind her as he sits up, her long brown dress swishing around her ankles.

‘Mum,’ he whispers with some urgency. ‘Does Uncle Irving have chooks where he lives?’

‘I’m not sure, darling,’ she laughs. ‘I’ll have to ask him in my next letter.’

‘Oh,’ he says flatly, his habitual response to unsatisfying answers. ‘What about foxes?’

‘I’d say so. There’s foxes all over.’

Daniel nods, eyes already on the book, waiting to see what she pulls out of it tonight. Watching him out of the corner of her eye, she opens it to a middle page and produces a postcard, waves it in front of him like a magic trick. His hands reach for it and they giggle as she flutters it this way and that before relinquishing it.

This has been their custom ever since that first night after the funeral. She leaves
Jim in his post-prandial reverie—listening to the wireless or reading the evening edition or heading down to the pub—and smuggles one of her brother’s old postcards or letters into Daniel’s room, concealed within the pages of a book. Jim knows his wife corresponds with her brother, hands her Irving’s letters wordlessly when they arrive in the post, but he would never approve of this. And she has read the boys snippets of their uncle’s letters before, but never with this regularity or depth.

‘But how come?’ Daniel asked that first night, when she instructed him never to mention his uncle to his father.

She cleared her throat. ‘Daddy and Irving don’t get along,’ she answered.

‘Why not?’

The answer was complicated. She settled on its most concrete component. ‘They had a fight … about the house where Mummy grew up. Daddy thinks Irving should’ve sold it to us instead of the McCluskys.’

‘Oh,’ he said. Daniel goes to school with Rachel McClusky.

Rain begins to tap on the corrugated iron roof and she watches him now with the postcard. He runs a finger over her brother’s looping script, beyond his kindergarten comprehension, and the stamp with Edward VIII’s face on it, then turns it over to examine the picture. It’s a faded sepia tone of the Darling River with some dinghies off to one side.

‘Where’s it from?’ he asks.

He’s never so curious, never so animated, as when she visits him for these bedtime readings. Something about his uncle seems to have lit his imagination afire, the same way he used to be about spies and secret agents, or about dinosaurs before that. The same way Irving had been about Australian pioneers and explorers. She supposes there are worse role models for a boy. It’s why she’s made it a nightly activity. But she
didn’t expect it to have the effect it’s had on her, as well. It’s as if, when she reads the old correspondence, saved up over twenty years, she is soaking up the residue left on the words by who she was when she first received them, finding herself again this way after the loss of her son, in the second person, in the person Irving is addressing.

‘This one’s from a town way up north called Bourke. It’s one of the first places your uncle visited when he left home. It’s from the third of March, 1930.’

‘What did he do there?’ asks Daniel, his hands pressing into the bed sheets.

‘I don’t know,’ Marg says.

‘Oh.’ He turns the card over and thrusts it at her. ‘But what does it say?’

He’s facing her, but his eyes look past her. She wonders why he does that. It’s unsettling at such close quarters. It’s not until she’s reading that Daniel watches her, her sallow skin, her brown hair bound up close to her head, her eyes that turn slightly down at the corners, the smile that warms her face as she reads. ‘That’s the thing,’ she answers. ‘Irving and I could be very silly sometimes. This postcard was a bit of a joke. He didn’t tell me what he did in Bourke. Not a single thing. All he wrote on this postcard—that some poor postman carried all the way from Bourke to Temora, mind you—was a nonsense rhyme.’

Daniel is a bit deflated by that. But then he decides he’d like to hear the rhyme. Daniel squeals with laughter throughout the entire recitation. The rhyme sounds just like Marg’s old sayings, and he makes her repeat it until they can both perform it without stumbling.

*I stand before you to sit behind you,*

*to tell you something I know nothing about*

*Next Thursday, which is Good Friday,*

*there’s a Mother’s Day meeting for fathers only*
Wear your best clothes if you haven’t any

Please come if you can’t; if you can, stay at home

Admission is free, pay at the door

Bring your own chair and sit on the floor

It makes no difference where you sit

The man in the gallery’s sure to spit

The show is over, but before you go,

let me tell you a story I don’t really know

One fine day in the middle of the night,

two dead boys got up to fight

Back to back they faced each other,

drew their swords and shot one another

A deaf policeman heard the noise

and ran to save the two dead boys

And if you don’t believe it’s true,

go ask the blind man: he saw it too!

By the fifth recital, Daniel senses an insistence on bedtime is imminent, but the lack of details tonight has left him yearning for more.

‘Why did Uncle Irving leave Temora?’

Marg blows out a sigh. ‘I’m not entirely sure, sweetheart. I was only eleven when he left, and Uncle Irving is eighteen years older than me, remember?’

‘How come he’s so much older than you?’
‘Well, he’s actually my half-brother. We had the same father but different mothers.’

Daniel processes this, nodding. Then she proceeds. ‘But it was the Depression and he couldn’t get any work here, and he didn’t want to stay and run the farm like your grandfather wanted him to. I suppose he just wanted to see a little bit of the world before he got too old. So he travelled around with his swag, hitch-hiking and picking up odd jobs wherever he could. That’s why I’ve got so many different postcards from him. He sent me one from every town he visited, and he travelled all over the state.’

‘Oh. Well, why didn’t he come back?’

Marg thinks a moment. ‘He fell in love,’ she says, ‘with Tranters Cove. Where he settled down.’ For the past few minutes, at least, she has forgotten the coldness of the space on her side where Jed used to sit, couldn’t feel his empty bed nagging at her from the corner of the room. Suddenly she glimpses the clock and it all comes back. ‘Time for bed,’ she pronounces. ‘I’ll have to find you the letter he sent me when he first got to the Cove. It’s one of my favourites.’

She kisses him goodnight and switches the light off as she leaves. Daniel recites the rhyme in his head until he falls asleep, rowing an imaginary boat down that river in Bourke and out to sea. He’s never seen the ocean, but he dreams of it that night, about diving into it to find that he can breathe underwater, as long as he only takes tiny breaths. Any more and the water will realise he is there and come crashing into his lungs. He sinks to the ocean floor slowly, immersed in a world of cool, comforting blue, and discovers something wondrous: he solves the mystery of the waves. No one knows what causes the waves to crash interminably upon the shore, but with his subaqueous breathing technique, Daniel witnesses the answer firsthand. It isn’t the movement of the earth, or the mixing of warm and cold currents, or the wind, or the influence of the
moon. It’s the sea animals. All of them together. Every different kind of sea animal in the world lines up in a great queue across the ocean floor, and it’s their job to move their bodies in unison and conjure the waves. Fishes and whales and dolphins and sharks and seals all flap their tails in time, alongside octopuses billowing their arms and crabs swinging their claws. Jed is there too, and he beckons his brother over. Daniel takes his place in line, snapping his arms together in underwater claps, helping to send forth that great underwater wall to the shores of the land. It feels good to be a part of it. It feels good to feel the force of the wave gather around him as he and his friends move their bodies, before it goes shooting off, their handiwork to be viewed from the land with wonder by Irving and his friends in Tranters Cove.

The next afternoon Daniel wanders around the perimeter of the Clearys’ property, balancing an improvised bindle over his shoulder, his conception of a cartoon swagman. The bindle hasn’t turned out as he envisioned—the stick is too thin and bendy, and the handkerchief sack not large or plump enough, but it carries his secret prize from this morning’s heist all the same.

He rounds the streetfront of the property and hastens down the low wire fence shared with the Doughertys. There’s a terrible row going on over there today. In the distance, Mr Dougherty descends the three concrete steps of his porch, one bare arm stretched up to bring a finger to one of his ears. At the side of the house he begins scrubbing his hands under the tap like a madman. The Doughertys don’t have an indoor bathroom and one time Daniel and Jed spent all day keeping tally of Mr Dougherty’s trips to the basin. About thirty times, they counted. Almost as many cigarettes as he
smokes sitting in the chair on his porch, or pacing back and forth muttering to himself and yelling out nonsense at people. Marg always used to pretend to shout ‘Enunciate!’ back at him whenever she heard him rambling from the kitchen because no one can ever make out what he’s howling about. But she also told Daniel they shouldn’t make fun, that the war left lots of people funny. Daniel doesn’t make fun, but he and Jed used to spy on their mysterious neighbours. Spying was a good game for him because all he had to do was watch and listen and be quiet. But now there’s no room in his head for spies.

Mr Dougherty is snapped up by the flyscreen door and Daniel relaxes his pace. It’s a peculiar house, built of pale green fibro with squinting little windows, standing on brick piles in the middle of the property like the last morsels of a meal in the centre of a fork-scraped plate. There’s nothing else on the land, just the boxy house on the flat lawn all the way out to the wire fence. The Cleary house has all sorts of things hanging off it, filling up the lot. Jim built the house on an empty half-acre before he married Marg, and since then he’s never stopped adding to it, usually roping the boys into whatever construction project is on his mind when they would rather be playing. First there was the shed and the animal pens. Then they built a front verandah, and turned the back one into an annex that Jim promised as a sleepout for Jed when he got older. They all built the chicken coop together, the dog kennels and Marg’s garden bed. Marg calls it ‘architecture in the agglutinative style,’ a funny word that Daniel can’t say.

He carries on his way, circumnavigating the property once again and stopping to ask imaginary business owners if they need any jobs done. When he reaches the Doughertys’ house a second time, he sees Wendy out the front, languishing on the steps in an old polka dot dress, but she has transformed herself since yesterday. Her hair is short and platinum blonde instead of brown, rolled back into coils and waves, and she has done her makeup. He averts his gaze until she calls out as he passes her.
‘Hi,’ she says, squinting over at him. Mr and Mrs Dougherty are still scrapping like dogs inside, but Wendy ignores it. ‘Whatcha got there?’

He stops and holds the bindle up for her, as if that explains it.

‘Can I see?’

He regards her for a moment until he recalls that Wendy can read. Then he hikes each leg awkwardly over the fence and tumbles over to the sound of Wendy’s laughter. The second laugh in two days, he thinks. It’s a nice sound.

He approaches her and presents the bindle in two hands.

‘Wow,’ she says. ‘Did you make this?’

He gives two big nods.

‘What’s in here?’ she asks, pinching the handkerchief.

He leans in to cup his hands around her ear and whisper, ‘A secret.’

‘Ooh,’ she says. ‘Will you show me?’

He nods again and watches her nimble fingers undo the knot affixing the handkerchief to the stick. She has a fragrance about her, the result of some feminine ritual girls her age begin to practice, some ointment or powder or perfume, that he finds both sickly and intriguing.

‘A letter?’ she asks, surprised.

‘And a postcard,’ he turns the envelope around in her hand to reveal the card on the other side.

‘Are you supposed to have these?’ she asks. ‘They’re addressed to your mum.’

‘Mm-m,’ he signals the negative with his mouth closed.

This morning Marg sent him out looking for mushrooms after the rain of the night before. When he returned he found her wearing a sunhat, on her hands and knees in the soil of her garden, pruning back the wilderness that has taken hold ever since Jed died.
Ordinarily he likes to help her in the garden, but with Marg busy and Jim at work he saw a long-awaited opportunity finally arise. He crept through the house—his parents’ bedroom, the kitchen, the lounge room—for an hour, pawing through cupboards and drawers, before he finally found the stack of Irving’s correspondence in its hiding place at the back of the linen cupboard. He knew he should’ve waited until after dinner, but it seemed like a lifetime away this morning, so he took his time flipping through every postcard, looking for a favourite to secret away somewhere and enjoy whenever he wanted. He settled, of course, on a vista of the ocean, but was disappointed by how little writing he found on the reverse. It might be another one of Irving’s joke postcards that didn’t reveal anything about him, didn’t inch Daniel anywhere closer to the truth. He couldn’t read yet, but his plan was to keep it until he learned how at school, or maybe even have one of the older children read it for him when the holidays were finished. That’s why he purloined a letter too, to make up for the brevity of the postcard. He was afraid to take any more in case his mother noticed them missing. They have remained hidden in his handkerchief until now, but the look on Wendy’s face isn’t promising.

‘You’re not supposed to read other people’s mail, you know.’

He knows. He studies his toes in his sandals, but then remembers something. ‘Well,’ he says, ‘You’re not supposed to get into cars with strange men, either.’

Wendy looks shocked. Then she laughs. A third time, Daniel notes. ‘Well, look at you. Maybe you’re not as simple as you seem.’ She ruffles his hair. ‘I can keep a secret if you can.’

‘Can you read them to me?’ he asks.

‘Stealing mail you can’t even read?’ Inside, Mr Dougherty trumpets a series of expletives that make Daniel’s eyes widen, but Wendy doesn’t bat an eyelid. ‘Okay,’ she says. ‘Just this once.’
She takes the postcard first, and Daniel sits down cross-legged in front of her, like when the teachers read stories to the class at school.

‘Wow, this is really old,’ she says. ‘February 1932. Byron Bay.’ She looks up. ‘Never heard of it.’ The postcard is brief, but more than a joke. Irving wrote about picking fruit and the rotating system he and his fellow workers devised to keep abreast of the cricket scores over the wireless in the five-day test against South Africa down in Melbourne. Daniel makes a note to start paying more attention to cricket. Irving said their festivities over the 5–0 victory lasted long into the night and that he’d write Marg again from Lismore or Ballina, wherever he could get a ride. Wendy is a good reader, almost as good as Marg. Lismore and Ballina sound like the names of her glamorous girlfriends on her lips. Maybe he’ll be able to bring her more letters, he thinks. As she reads the last lines, Daniel is already snatching the letter off her lap and holding it out to her, taking the postcard back in return. She arches an eyebrow, but doesn’t object.

The letter is more recent, from September 1947. Irving wrote about some of the kids he had gotten to know in the Surf Lifesaving Club not far from Tranter’s Cove. He would’ve been a good uncle, if Daniel ever had the chance to know him. There is nothing too revelatory in the letter, though it abounds in the ordinary details Daniel savours when Marg reads them to him: the beautiful scenery of the National Park, the new birds he’d seen in his birdwatching, the people he met when they passed through.

There is one line that hints at the strife between Irving and Jim, right at the end when Irving reiterates an open invitation: *I know better than to ever expect the approval of your husband, but I do hope his feelings won’t keep you from TC forever.*

They are both silent for a moment when she puts the paper down, until Wendy says, ‘That was a nice letter.’

Before Daniel can contemplate the meaning of the line, he jumps at the blast of a
car horn from the Cleary driveway behind him. It’s Jim, hanging one arm out the window. ‘Afternoon, kids,’ he calls out. He casts a dubious eye over the house behind them.

‘Afternoon,’ they call back in unison.

‘Miss Dougherty!’ Jim looks Wendy up and down. ‘What’s all this?’

‘My new look,’ she says. She flips a golden lock. ‘Like Marilyn Monroe. Do you like it?’

‘Very nice,’ he says, inscrutably. Then he points to the letter and Daniel’s chest constricts. ‘What’s that you’ve got there?’

‘Just reading Daniel some of my love letters, Mr D,’ says Wendy without blinking.

‘Is that so?’ he laughs.

‘I think I saw you’ve got some, too,’ she says, pointing down to the Clearys’ mailbox.

‘Ah, I’d better grab that,’ he says, shifting into reverse. ‘But stay put, Daniel, I’ve got a surprise for you.’

Wendy quickly slips the letter back into the envelope and conceals it with the postcard in the handkerchief, handing it back to Daniel. ‘Secret’s safe with me,’ she winks before she gets up. ‘Say,’ she says, dusting the dirt from her hands and watching Jim retrieve the mail. ‘Did that uncle of yours ever visit Sydney?’

‘I think so,’ he says. ‘But I haven’t read that one yet.’

‘Shame,’ she says. ‘Next time, eh?’ Then she disappears back into the din of the Dougherty house. It’s the cheeriest Daniel’s ever seen her, despite her parents’ feuding. No trace of Wens-dee, no Wednesday’s child full of woe in this new Marilyn.

Jim drives back down to meet Daniel on their side of the fence. When his father
leans over him, Daniel recognises on his breath the sinister whiff off the brown bottles he finds every week when he goes bottle-collecting.

‘Knocked off work early,’ Jim says. ‘Got something to show you. I think you’ll like it.’ From the back of the ute he heaves a particulate contraption of wheels and bars and wooden panels and rope. When he sets it down before Daniel, it resolves into a go-cart, like he has seen children ride down the street in.

‘What do you think?’ says Jim, dusting his hands.

Daniel doesn’t think anything, especially. ‘It’s a go-cart,’ he says.

‘That’s right. Me and your brother were working on it. I finished it in the shed at the lot. I thought you might wanna give her a spin. She’ll go real fast.’

Daniel leans down to touch the vehicle, roll it back and forth a little. ‘No, thank you,’ he says after a pause.

Jim bunches his brow. ‘What do you mean? Don’t you wanna go for a ride?’

Daniel is confused, too. He already told Jim he didn’t.

‘Hey, look at me, son,’ says Jim, pointing to his eyes. ‘Do you wanna go for a ride or not?’

Daniel obliges, though it’s difficult for him. ‘No, that’s okay,’ he answers, then averts his gaze once again. The machine frightens him.

Jim examines him for a long time. ‘Okay,’ he says, turning to rest his arms on the roof of the car. ‘Okay.’

Daniel stands there behind him, jiggling his foot and eyeing the go-cart.

‘Off you go, then,’ says Jim after some time. Daniel lingers a moment more, looking around. The black car is sitting out the front of the Doughertys’ house, he notices. Then Wendy passes them with a suitcase, giving Daniel another wink. He wants to say something to her, but the presence of his father stifles the words. Wendy
gets in the car and it drives off.

‘Go, Daniel,’ repeats Jim, and he finally returns inside.

Daniel’s sandals crunch through the gravel and Jim places his forehead down on the cool metal of the car.

Marg is tumbling Daniel’s mushrooms out onto his plate in a buttery golden heap when Jim finally comes in. Daniel has his balls of tissue in place in his nostrils.

‘Evening,’ she says, and they kiss. ‘Been to the pub?’ she asks when he pulls away and shuffles around to his chair.

‘Yeah, just for one or two. Fetch us another one, will you? Left the lots early.’ Marg hands him a bottle from the icebox and returns to the stove. He slaps the letters from the mailbox down on the table and takes a swig. ‘Mail,’ he announces.

Daniel sits up to see the letter, instantly recognising the script. ‘Is that from Uncle Irving?’ he squeezes into a gap in his parents’ chitchat.

The room falls silent but for the sizzling of steak in the frypan. At the stove, Marg keeps her back to them and shuts her eyes. Jim stares at him, nodding, not in answer to his question, but as if finally grasping some wider conspiracy that had evaded him until now. Daniel realises too late that he has trodden on their secret. The mushrooms steam furiously before him.

Jim clenches his jaw, his nod becoming a shake. ‘Well that explains a lot, doesn’t it?’ he says after a long silence. Marg remains pointedly intent on the steaks. ‘Here I am, trying to set a good example for my son, and as soon as my back is turned, you go filling his head with that … loon’s garbage.’
‘Jim,’ she says, quietly.

And now he is set off. Once ignited, Jim’s tirades can escalate by their own self-propulsion. ‘Living out there like a bunch of animals. No church, no jobs. No wonder this one’s the way he is.’ He holds his hand out toward Daniel. ‘No wonder he isn’t eating properly. No wonder he can’t have a go on a bloody go-cart with his own father.’

‘Jim!’

‘No, Marg. Let’s see what Uncle Irving has to say for himself, then, shall we?’ He plucks the envelope off the table and slips the letter out.

Marg turns around. ‘Jim, no.’

You’re not supposed to read other people’s mail, Daniel thinks. He wants to apologise to his mother, but the words won’t come.

‘Oh, he’s sorry to hear about our son, is he?’ Jim declaims, reading from the letter.

Marg slams the fripan down on the stove and gives Jim a withering look. ‘Stop it, Jim.’

Jim sprawls back in his chair, arms and legs wide as he dangles the letter in the air questioningly. ‘Would that be the dead one he’s never met, or the one you’ve been corrupting with his letters?’

In a single movement, Marg swipes the letter out of Jim’s two fingers and clutches it to her chest. ‘That’s enough, Jim! Irving is my brother. Daniel is your son.’

‘And he’s damn well going to start acting like it,’ Jim adds.

‘I can’t deal with you like this,’ Marg snarls, throwing her arm up. ‘Come on, Daniel.’ She holds out a hand, but Jim pushes it back down.

‘You can go wherever you like, but I’m having dinner with my son. You’ve had your time with him.’
Marg’s eyes water. She keeps them on Daniel, who studies the floor. Then she dabs at her face, sniffs, and draws herself up. Daniel hears each one of her slow steps down the hall, and the quiet but definite clasp of her bedroom door as it shuts. Jim ignores her, fetching the frypan and adding one steak to his plate and one to his wife’s. Then he bows his head, joins his hands, and says his own silent grace. Daniel follows, not opening his eyes until he hears Jim shaking salt and pepper all over his plate. His father sets in, cutting large chunks of the meat from the bone and piling the vegetables on top, mashing them into it with his knife. He eats ravenously, mechanically. It’s not long before he has finished, while Daniel is not yet halfway done on his mushrooms, potatoes and carrots. Jim fetches himself another beer from the icebox, then resumes his seat and eyes his son.

‘Daniel,’ he says after a swig. ‘Eat your mother’s steak for her. I don’t think she’s hungry.’

Daniel stops chewing, then looks over at his mother’s plate, heart racing. When no retraction comes, no divine intervention, he looks back down at his plate.

‘Daniel. Hey.’ Jim clicks his fingers in the space between them over the table. ‘Do as you’re told. It’s not going to waste.’ He leans over and gives the plate a nudge, sliding it into Daniel’s with a chink.

Daniel tries to block out his father’s voice, tries to imagine what Uncle Irving would do if someone told him to eat something he didn’t want to.

‘Daniel!’ Jim roars.

The boy shakes his head without looking up, places his hands over his ears and scrunches his eyes closed.

‘Daniel.’ Jim slams his fist on the table. ‘Look at me.’

He won’t. He can’t. The moan starts welling up from within.
Jim shoots to his feet.

‘Look at me when I’m speaking to you!’ he demands, seizing one of the bones off his empty plate. ‘And eat!’ He hurls it at Daniel. It spikes him in the chest and he squirms back in his seat to shield himself. ‘The!’ Jim yells, throwing a little circular bone, which stings as it ricochets off Daniel’s elbow and down the hall. ‘Steak!’ he finishes, throwing the last of the bones. Daniel catches it reflexively as it strikes his chest.

He is wailing now, fixed to his seat, his head bowed as low as he can manage.

‘You will eat what I provide!’ Jim rounds the table to where Daniel sits, still curled away against the barrage of bones, still clutching the sharp, gristly lump in one hand.

‘What is your problem, Daniel? Why won’t you eat?! That’s what they’re for!’ He jabs at Daniel’s shoulder. ‘Daniel? Stop that noise!’ He yanks his son’s other arm and dangles him off his seat as he scrambles to stand, then drags him to the back door. ‘That’s it,’ he mutters. Outside, he takes him around the side of the house. Daniel can’t see, he isn’t listening. He’s just screaming, lost in throes of paroxysm. They pass the stack of firewood and reach the chicken enclosure and Jim releases him to step over the fence. Daniel still isn’t looking.

‘Is this what you want, Daniel? Do you need me to show you how it is?’

Jim leans into the entrance to the little wooden chicken coop where the chooks spend the night, sending up clucks of alarm. His hand emerges around the neck of Nell. ‘They’re just animals, Daniel. They don’t matter.’ He tosses her aside.

Daniel keeps wailing, but the more hysterical he gets, the more Jim is determined to push through it. This time it is Judy he has pulled out by a foot. The chook flutters and squawks in fright, unused to such treatment. The sound worms its way through
Daniel’s howls, and he quiets a notch, screws his face up. Jim releases Judy too and she darts to the opposite corner of the enclosure, brushing up against Nell to calm herself.

‘Daniel!’ shouts Jim before he rustles his arm about the coop and sends up another collective shriek from the chooks. Daniel finally opens his eyes in time to see Jim extract the chook he has been looking for. Baby, the red who stopped laying.

‘Dad,’ he croaks.

‘Ah, see, now you’re talking,’ says Dad. ‘That’s more like it. Be reasonable, Daniel. No more crying.’

Daniel swallows. ‘Please,’ he stutters. ‘She’s just lonely. She’ll lay another egg, I promise.’

‘Why, though?’ Jim has calmed now. Caught in such a vital spot, Baby hangs limp. ‘I’m not doing this to hurt you, Daniel. I’m doing it to teach you a lesson. You need to learn. We can eat these. They’re not pets. They’re food. We treat them with respect while they’re alive, but we don’t get attached.’

With that, he wrings Baby’s neck.7

Daniel goes white.

‘This is what we do, Daniel. We kill things and we eat them. When you grow up, you’ll have to do the same. I hope you’ll look back on this and understand.’

Daniel will never do that, he thinks. He wishes Marg was here. He wishes Uncle Irving was here. This is probably why Irving left his farm in the first place, he seethes. Why he wouldn’t sell it to Jim. The moments tick by and he falls back into the rage. His knees give way and pound into the dirt. Jim places a hand on his son’s head as he passes him, swinging Baby by the feet. He hangs her up outside the kitchen, but doesn’t return inside. He walks around the house to the car, trembling. He sits at the wheel for a

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7 A respectful death.
moment before he turns it on and drives back to the pub.

Daniel sits outside in the wet grass for a long time, unable to feel the chill or the throbbing of his chest where he was hit, or even to notice the cold, greasy bone he still clutches in his hand. It’s not until Marg finds him that he drops it in the grass, lets her lead him by the hand to his bed, where she will lay down with him and hold him through the night.
2. not arousing interest; unremarkable; insignificant:

*an innocuous conclusion*
Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one.

— John Berger’s G

Chapter 3

Sunday 30 August 1970

Royal National Park, New South Wales

Two days before his death, Irving’s awakening is much different from the day before. He sleeps through the illumination of the bush, the morning cantillations of its avian choristers, and awakens instead aching against the hard plane of the table, his body numb with cold. He shivers and draws his coat around him, sitting up and glancing about blearily. Then with a start he notices the bone still lying right there before him, its wicked curve and bladed edge like a raptor’s talon. The Rite of Fabulation last night ran much longer than most, the bone droning on in that same abominable voice that had hounded him through the bush from the beach. He has endured unpleasant fabulations from sonant objects before, but never anything quite like this. He snatches up the bedeviled artefact and banishes it to obscurity at the back of a shelf. He turns his mind to the perquisition and fabulation of a new object for a new day, to the impending completion of his collection.

That’s when his head snaps upright and he scans the room. The sounds, the light. He scurries out the door, making PP and FF flap, and finds the sun high above him in the sky, far too high already. His rituals. He throttles a shout and kicks the side of his shack, making it quake as he curses the bone.
Then he sets about salvaging the day, checking the rites off as he goes: Vivification, Illumination, Ingurgitation, Interment. He thrusts the hanging sheet aside and chases the chooks out into the daylight. He seizes the little blackened tin from last night’s dinner off the table, then wrenches the box of tins from beneath his bed and opens the pitted cherries, scooping some of the blood-red globules into his mouth as he makes his way around to the tin wall. Most he tips to the ground before pressing the empty vessels hurriedly into the earth.

Defecation, Refurbishment, Cultivation. He runs down to the ditch that he uses as a latrine and squats, but he’s in too much of a panic. It’s the motions that matter, though, and once they have been completed he runs back to the shack and circles it once. All in good repair, even where he kicked it. No need for any works today. He completes several trips between his vegetable garden and the bucket that collects rainwater from the tarp stretched over the shack, then picks a few vegetables, heedless of ripeness, and bundles them back into the shack to take his seat for the Meridiem Ingurgitation. There he gluts himself, tearing the seeded heart from the socket of a capsicum even as he sinks his thumb into a tomato to slurp its gelatinous juices. Stuffing the raw vegetables into his mouth and panting through his nose, he slips a hand into his breast pocket to feel his heart, and times his chews against its beat. *Vulpes vulpes. Vulpes vulpes. Vulpes vulpes.*

He closes his eyes and lifts his head heavenward as he swallows, and suddenly the bone’s voice comes back to him unbidden, from the fringes of his mind, whispering that it is too late to save his day, that it is already spoiled, that only catastrophe awaits. Jaw agape, he looks to the corner of the shelf where he cast it. Then he turns away, bangs the table with his hand, scrunches up his face, and thinks of something else. Where he will go today. What new object he will find to supplant the bone, to fill his head with a new
voice and a new tale. It was only a memory that spoke, not the true voice, he tells himself. The voices cannot speak in the daytime, not until after dinner.

When he opens his eyes again he finds the vegetables devoured and the ritual complete. ‘Full as a goog!’ he laughs. He’s done it. He issues a vegetabular burp and gets up, goes to his unslept-in cot and lies down for a few minutes to satisfy the Rite of Post-prandial Hibernation.

Then, at last, it is time once again for the Rite of Perquisition, the Ceremony of Selection. He rushes outside to take his place and spin, spin, spin. ‘One fine day, in the middle of the night,’ he chants, his voice stumbling with each step, ‘two dead boys got up to fight. Back to back they faced each other, drew their swords and shot one another!’ Patterns on the back of his eyelids recall an image of Jacarandas.

But when he opens his eyes once more on the shaking world, his hand extended to point out the path predestined for him, he finds it leading him in the same direction as yesterday, the meridian that delivered him to the bone and its vengeful spirit, its rasping, evil voice. He shuts his eyes immediately. Not so soon after yesterday. Not after his trespass against the spirit. He spins again, once, twice, three times, repeating the last line of the rhyme: ‘Drew their swords and shot one another!’

But he has merely completed three revolutions to open up his vision once again on the same path. He doubles over and gives a long, ragged shout that echoes through the bush. His body is so sore from last night. He is already weary from the morning’s exertions. His stomach is unsettled from his bolted lunch and his rotations. He feels hot and ill, and the voice will not release him. It has corrupted the ceremony for its own infernal ends. It wants retribution. It wants the bone back.

‘You can’t have it!’ he yells down the path to the beach. The bone is part of his collection. It cannot be undone, just as a memory cannot be forcibly unremembered. He
cannot return to the beach, and yet the collection demands expansion, demands completion—Irving’s own unconscious struggle toward some unknown end. He dithers, turning about. Then finally he turns his back on the path and begins trudging south, parallel to the beach instead of toward it. He will choose his own direction.

It is curious to me that one of the surest ways to appreciate the significance of a single human life is to take a historical perspective, to step back and consider the profound impact your personal decisions will have on the future. The question of children, for instance. In a few short centuries the choices you make in your meagre lifetime will lead to the existence and nonexistence of multitudes, for the effect multiplies exponentially with each generation. But it is not only your progeny to which this applies. It is also your beliefs, your perceptions, your ideas. The stories you give life in your mind and mouth, as sure as the children that spring from your loins, those you believe and those you dismiss. Ideas, after all, are so much easier to create than to destroy.

In any case, turn back the years, the decades, fold them over themselves like covers on a bed, and we find that the path Irving chose after his corrupted Ceremony of Selection sent him following in the footsteps of history, as well as toward his fate. The topsoil and leaf litter he treads upon have spun through their cycle of decomposition and replenishment many times since 1797, but deeper down the earth remembers the passing of the seven pairs of feet above, some dark, others pale, some bare and others booted. It is a mismatched expedition, uncharacteristically cosmopolitan for the times: five newcomers to this land—a Scot, three Englishmen, and a Bengali—led by two local
Wadi Wadi. They have been gathered here in pursuit of several threads of story, each spun out of one extraordinary tale that has seized all of Port Jackson. A merchant vessel named for a destination it would never reach, the Sydney Cove, set out from Calcutta with a hold full of rum and a crew of forty-four Bengali lascars and eight European sailors, charged with investigating commercial opportunities in the fledgling colony. But the ship was wrecked hundreds of miles south of its destination, the survivors stranded on an island. Seventeen of the fittest were sent north in a longboat to secure aid for their companions. The longboat saw them to mainland, but it, too, soon succumbed to the unfamiliar waters, and the party was condemned to trek nearly four hundred miles north from the chin to the cheek of the continent if they were to survive. Of the seventeen who commenced the journey, only three lived to hail a fishing vessel at Wattamowley, one day’s walk from their destination.

Two of those men belong to this motley assembly: Will Clarke, the Scottish supercargo of the ill-fated ship, and the last of the lascars, Debiprasad—or ‘Debi,’ as Clarke has come to call him—whose name the chroniclers of the time did not see fit to record, but which I restore to you now. The pair left stragglers, mostly Debi’s compatriots, all along the coast behind them, where they succumbed to starvation, dehydration, exposure and the other privations of the wild, their names, too, lost to history. A trail of forgotten deaths. The survivors held onto their hopes for the pair they left last, however, just before their rescue: the first mate Hugh Thompson and the carpenter Jacob Hill. But when a search party was dispatched, nothing was found but the remains of their fire and their bloodied possessions. Now Clarke and Debi have returned with this expedition to learn what became of the men.

The leader of the party is the illustrious British naval surgeon George Bass of Lincolnshire, who sensed in the tale an opportunity to exercise his considerable talents
in the service of the colony. He petitioned his friend Governor Hunter for the use of a whaleboat and a small crew, with which he would discover the fate of the last two unfortunate souls and probe several other elements of the story. It is presumed as a matter of course that responsibility for the crime lies at the feet of the natives of the region, the reason for Bass’s conscription—through considerable pantomime—of the first two they met near the beach where they landed, ostensibly as guides, but in truth to test them for the guilt of their countrymen.

When they reach the fateful spot, there is nothing to be seen but the rain-battered ashes of a long-dead fire, and Bass brushes through it to find several unburned lumps of coal on the fringes.

‘These are some of the specimens you burned?’ he inquires of a distracted Clarke, who paces the edge of the clearing looking for some sign of the direction the men might have gone. Debi is beating through the brush in search. The men claimed to have sighted veins of coal in the cliffs of the region, potentially a valuable commodity for the colony.

‘Aye, sir,’ Clarke answers.

Bass pockets them. Anthracite. Harder and rarer than ordinary coal, more difficult to ignite, but purer burning. A valuable resource, indeed.

Watching Debi and Clarke in their search, the Wadi Wadi men, Douai and Brupin, confer in their own tongue, unfathomable to the foreigners. Little transpires in these lands that does not come to their attention, and they know the location of the corpses the strangers seek. They have left the white men undisturbed for the months since they perished against the return of their own people. The pair gains the attention of the others and leads them to the first unfortunate, the decaying remains of the carpenter Jacob Hill, propped against a tree.
‘God in Heaven,’ says Clarke.

Bass raises a handkerchief to his face against the smell and inspects the body, but there are no wounds grievous enough to remain visible through the advanced state of decomposition. He could’ve been beaten to death or strangled or stabbed in his gut for all Bass can tell.

‘What about the other?’ asks Bass of the Wadi Wadi.

They intuit his meaning and lead the group twenty yards or so to the diminutive watercourse that snakes through the area. It is a shallow, sluggish runnel, more mud than water, a wretched place for Thompson’s remains to be found facedown in the muck.

‘That’ll be Hugh, then,’ comes the faltering voice of Clarke.

It is Debi who first sights the large cavity in the parietal bone at the back of the skull, the half-submerged rock lying ominously close, black as sin and sizeable enough to cave a man’s head while yet small enough to remain portable. Bass has been persistently surprised by the little fellow’s acumen on their expedition, but then, he reasons, this sole surviving lascar must have been the worthiest of his kind to have persevered where the rest of them had perished. He had earned his place alongside the white men.

‘Whoever did this was a coward,’ mutters Bass.

Clarke and Debi volunteer to dig the men’s graves themselves, while Bass turns his attention to the Wadi Wadi. He is a tall man, six-feet high with a penetrating countenance. The black men must be awed by his fine clothes, he thinks, his shining spectacles, which must seem to them a part of his body. But he finds them evasive under his questioning, forever refusing to look him in the eye, and letting long, uneasy silences elapse before each of their broken responses. And yet they seem too placid, too
innocent even in the presence of the victims’ bodies, to have had any part in the deed. Bass knows the barbarity of tribes to vary from place to place. Perhaps it was not the gentle inhabitants of this region who committed the crime, he speculates, but interlopers from elsewhere. A year earlier, while exploring this area with his companion Matthew Flinders, Bass befriended a native named Dilba, ventured down from his own lands to the north, as a guide. They enjoyed a long and fruitful partnership, until one day he seemed to turn on them, insisting they take their little Tom Thumb up a small waterway to an inland lagoon, for what nefarious purpose they could not guess. They suspected a trap and sailed away from the man, never to see him again. It makes him wonder whether the man still lurks in these ranges. After a long period of fruitless questioning, Bass finally lets the question bubble to the surface …

‘Was it Dilba?’

The men recognise the name and grasp onto it like a life raft. ‘Dilba, yes. Dilba,’ they say.

Bass is taken aback at the coincidence, though he wonders if he shouldn’t be. It affirms his mistrust of the blackguard. And now he can see how it must’ve unfolded as if by revelation, two hypothetical deaths. The small camp of five men, weary and sickened by their long ordeal, standing about a small fire, wrapped up in whatever tattered warming cloth they have with them, haggard and worn. The promises of the three younger, fitter men to make haste and send someone to rescue them as soon as possible. The handshakes and embraces and perhaps even tears. And from the hills above, all the while, the ugsome face of Dilba watching, sneering with hatred, covetous of the lingerers’ few possessions which, though of little consequence to the white men, must be sources of wonder to the blacks skulking there in the shadows, waiting for the moment at which their prey was weakest. They lurk until the first mate rouses himself
to collect what little water he can from the pitiful streamlet nearby and offer some relief for himself and his companion. While he is bent double, skimming the cleanest water from the surface of the grey trickle, they appear behind him and hurl the boulder down upon his head before he can even issue a cry to warn his mate. Then they creep into the camp. A twig snaps and alerts the resting fellow, who calls out ‘Hugh?’ But instead of Thompson there emerges a band of thugs. They stab the fellow in the gut and loot his possessions without a second thought. With the last of his strength the noble carpenter heaves himself to his feet to stagger in the direction his shipmate had last ventured, calling out to him, but he cannot make it to the stream and sets himself down by the base of a tree to rest, a rest from which he will never awaken. Bass shakes his head.

Now the party congregates to hear a few words from Clarke about the fallen men, to offer a prayer in their memory. But Bass’ mind is already on the next question roused by the sad tale of the Sydney Cove—the suspicion that Van Diemen’s Land is separated from the rest of the continent not by a yawning gulf, but by a navigable channel. Such a discovery could reduce the length of the voyage to Port Jackson from the other ports of the world by weeks. That afternoon they set out to discover the strait that will come to bear Bass’ name, a strait that formed some eight-thousand years before him.

Centuries later, Irving paces through the same grassland slung between two promontories like webbed fingers. The grass is wet, and his skin itches where it has brushed the tall blades as he navigates through the tufts and reaches in to feel for hidden objects. He recalls coming to this place only once before, when he found, mud-caked and deflated under a tussock of mat-rush, a sad old soccer ball with a sad old voice. But
this feels different. He cringes each time the wind picks up to rustle a bush, jumps when a galah cries suddenly in the distance. It feels wrong to have come here in defiance of the Ceremony of Selection, as though his world is askew. He reasons that it wasn’t a true ceremony. It had been compromised by the spirit of the bone, trying to lure him back into its grasp. This wrongness is still preferable to that.

His stomach sighs with hunger already and he begins to imagine the egg that could be waiting for him in PP’s roost. FF doesn’t lay at all any more, and PP doesn’t lay as much as she used to. But they are both good company, and every few days at least he finds a savoury little surprise left for him overnight, which he cooks with great care, frying it to the perfect consistency and feeding the chooks the crushed up shell for the good of their bones.

But if he is to cook properly, he will need more oil. He hopes tomorrow’s Rite of Acquisition will see to that. After the aberration of last month, all his supplies are dwindling: his food, his water, his candles, his matches. Along with everything that sustains his life out in the bush, Acquisition day is ordinarily the one time of the month when he knows precisely where his new object will come from. He thinks of the two little rows of past Acquisition objects adorning the end of one of his shelves: googly-eyed whatssits made of pebbles and feathers and pipe-cleaners, little figurines and statuettes—a carved wooden sea turtle, a blue glass whale. Some of his favourite objects come from the monthly rite, each of them imbued with the same soothing voice, like fingers stroking his hair. He must find his prize soon so he can rest for the long journey.

Emerging from the long grass into the short, Irving comes upon a trickling stream. Water has carved out a wide, waist-deep gouge in the earth over time, but now it runs weakly down to the sea without even filling the basin. He slides down into the culvert and follows it inland, eyes trained on the shallow water, which moves so slowly as to
appear stagnant. He bends over to bring his eyes parallel to the tiny stream and examine it in detail, then proceeds up the channel in this pose. This way he spies the shiny corner of a discarded chip packet buried in the sand, an empty hermit crab shell, even a few minuscule fish eking out an existence in the rindle.

Then, suddenly, his vision is consumed by a large black lump. He stands up straight. It’s a rock. A boulder. A stone, perhaps. He realises he does not know the difference, and wishes for a dictionary. Then the thought is gone, sunk like this rock in the centre of the stream where it shouldn’t be. He has, of course, seen many rocks before, and passed them by. But there’s something about this rock. Or rather, there’s nothing about this rock. And that’s how he knows it’s what he’s looking for.

He hunkers down in the streambed, one leg arched over the water flowing around each side, and examines it. It’s slick and dark, jutting out of the brown gravel like the great jaw of a whale. He sets about scraping the gravel from its lower half, sending a dirty plume down the stream beyond him, and before long he has it, its underside stubbled with gravel like barnacles, and hoists it up out of the streambed onto the grass. He clambers up after it and lies down panting beside it.

After a moment he rolls over to inspect it once again. It is larger than a head, and only just small enough for him to carry. The invisible sunlight lingers on its dark face, reluctant to leave. He sees now it even has a dull lustre. An hour passes in a minute and Irving snaps out of his trance to face the journey home.

He lugs the rock through the tall grass, but when he reaches the top of the headland and drops it to lean against a tree for a moment, he turns to find it tumbling back down into the valley below. He makes it up the headland the second time, and considers letting it roll down the other side on its own, but fears it will disappear irrevocably into the bushes or roll itself into the sea.
As you may know, we stories are mutable beings, shapeshifters who take on different forms according to who views and relates us. We do, however, have true forms. It is simply that our usual conduits, humans, lack the necessary apparatuses to view or transmit us whole. You can only ever hope to glimpse us, and to recognise our incompleteness, and to work towards achieving a more complete view, though perfection eludes you. Stories yearn to be known, to come to words. To be told and remembered, recorded and rediscovered. We squirm and struggle into existence, but many of us emerge only as stunted, malformed reflections of our fuller selves. Others begin robust and healthy, but atrophy and mutate with age.

The story of Clarke and Debi, Douai and Brupin, Bass and Dilba, the first mate Thompson and the carpenter Hill, is a combination of both. When it was first told to the world it had many incarnations, and spread far and wide. The Kurnai, the Bidwell, the Yuin, the Dharawal over whose lands the shipwreck survivors trekked circulated the tale of the strange pale-skinned men amongst themselves. The fishermen who rescued the survivors told their wives and families, who passed the story around Sydney. Transoceanic letters were exchanged between the new colony and the old world, son to father, friend to friend, Governor to Duke, fragments to be fitted later into larger stories, into histories. And, of course, the survivors told their own tales. One version to their families, another to the officials, another in the privacy of their minds, another printed in the newspaper for the public.

In this way, stories have their own families. We have genealogies, antecedents, descendants, distant relatives. One story begets another. Like single-celled organisms,
we replicate, and errors are made in translation. Consider the case of the Kurnai, the Bidwell, the Yuin, the Dharawal of the lands through which the survivors interloped. Tales of the fearsome natives encountered by the men rippled throughout the colony. Days after their rescue Governor Hunter would name them the primary cause of the travellers’ deaths, saying in a letter to Joseph Banks they ‘were so often annoyed by the savage barbarity of the natives that their numbers decreased to five, and latterly three.’ And yet, in reality, it was almost entirely due to the unearned hospitality of these peoples that any survivors made it to Sydney at all. Even though the odd men trespassed, did not sit and wait respectfully in a visible place so that they might be seen and welcomed by the custodians of the land and afforded spiritual protection, the Indigenous peoples were the principal benefactors of the survivors, befriending them and conveying them to safety and giving them food.

And what of Dilba? Today the power of Bass’s imputation continues to resonate, with Dilba still unequivocally declared Thompson and Hill’s murderer in dozens of stories, a blandly reported matter of fact. Pore over the histories and you will find the sentence *The last of the party to die on the march was killed by a man named Dilba and his people near Hat Hill* recurrent like a congenital defect. But what is the basis of this assertion? The xenophobic paranoia of one brilliant but prejudiced Englishman?

For Bass, like so many of his contemporaries, assumed that his was the only story, and that any other could only be an imperfectly realised or perverted version of his own. He had no way of knowing, or even of suspecting, the millennia-long tale that had brought his interlocutors to this place, the story that shaped them. He could not suspect that silence or eye contact to these people, for example, meant something very different than it did to him, that the very tools he thought he was using to extract the truth were in fact contaminating it. The conventions of conversation that governed them were entirely
different and could not be understood in his terms. In asking his questions, he was already determining his answers. And so the tale of Dilba spread. A bounty was placed on him, though he was never caught.

But there are traces of story, if you look, that hint at another truth. Like the silences of Douai and Brupin when Bass interrogated them, you can find it in the silences of other stories. Some stories question Dilba’s guilt, while others excuse it by pointing to the bad temperament of the carpenter, who might have provoked their unfortunate end. After his ordeal, Will Clarke published a day-by-day account of the events, reproduced with the aid of pencil-scratched memoranda kept throughout the journey. The account published in the newspaper ends, tellingly, like so:

*The fifteen following days of our journey were much the same as the preceding, until we very fortunately met with a fishing-boat about 14 miles to the southward of Botany Bay.*

Though I am anxious to return to Irving and his imminent Rite of Fabulation, I must now give a brief account of the fate of Hugh Thompson and Jacob Hill, that your curiosity may be satisfied, and a truer version of this tale may finally be brought into the world.

Hundreds of millennia ago, the leaves of swamp ferns captured and photosynthesised the light of the sun, only to die here as they were submerged first beneath rising waters and then settling sediments. The plants of the swamp were pressed into peat, then molded by heat and pressure in the bowels of the earth into crumbling lignite, then bituminous coal, and finally lustrous anthracite. The shifting of tectonic plates tore through the layers of the earth to reveal this hard, compact coal to the naked eye in the exposed strata of the cliffs, and send deposits down to the surface to be discovered by a wandering Will Clarke, searching that afternoon for eggs or berries or
anything else to fill his desolate stomach. He spies the glistening boulders of anthracite laying at the foot of a rockface, before rolling the most manageable of them to camp to chip off shards for burning that night.

When he returns he finds the carpenter still unconscious, Debi, Thompson and Bennet staring grimly out to sea. Thompson was forced to box Hill senseless that morning after he tried to trade Debi for some fish from two natives, who he presumed to be cannibals and, failing that, tried to take the natives’ fish by force. The four of them bound him and carried him back to their little clearing, but he failed to awaken after his drubbing. The white men explained Hill’s bad behaviour to Debi as a result of the toll of the trek, saying that he wasn’t truly such a bad man, and despite his crimes they could not abandon him. It was decided they would wait one night for him to recover. That night, Debi recited the names and home towns of the dozen of his compatriots they left behind.

The next morning, Hill issues audible groans and mutters in his sleep, but will still not be roused, and it is decided that Thompson, as the eldest and infirmest of the remaining men, the man in charge, and the man who dealt the knockout blow to Hill, will remain behind with him to await rescue.

Of course, as you know, the pair will be dead before help can be sent.

You see, Hugh will be out fetching water when Jacob finally awakens. That much Bass was right about. At first, finding himself bound and with no one around, the carpenter will think for a panic-stricken moment that they have left him to his fate. But then he will see the fire and the few possessions left behind, marked by his blood. He will set about releasing his bonds by rubbing the weakened rope against the sharp protrusions on a large black rock where fragments have been chipped away. While he is doing so, a different idea will enter his mind. Why else would they bind him unless they
meant to give him to the natives in Debi’s place? It would’ve been the fiendish little devil’s doing, to turn his own idea against him. It would’ve been easy. He after all had the most meat on him. They could get more fish for his body.

And so the feverish Hill sets out groggly to find his companions. He will take with him the useful rock that set him free, struggling with its weight, the closest thing to a weapon in the vicinity. And with it, of course, he will bring about the undeserved death of the man who volunteered to stay behind with him. Then, exhausted from his efforts, he will head back to the fire, but will sit down at a tree to rest halfway, never to awaken from the slumber of his self-inflicted death.

When he finally reaches his shack, Irving dumps the burdensome rock to the ground and hobbles to his bucket of rainwater, sloshing the cup between the water and his lips, alternately gulping and sucking air through his nose. Still wheezing, retrieves the dark lump of the rock from where it buries its face in the path and slams it down onto his table. Lost for a moment, he turns his back on this seven hundred and sixty-first object, then sits down on his cot. He stares at the rock and it stares back until he’s not staring at anything any more. Then he lays down and touches himself, before falling asleep with his seed slick on his hand, wiping it dry in his slumber, a nap unsanctioned by ritual.

When he awakens it is dark and late and he has to fumble to find his matches and light his candle. He conducts a hasty Rite of Enumeration by candlelight, but he is far too famished and exhausted to build a fire in his stove. Instead he rummages around his shack for the egg PP might have laid the night before and finds it in one of her usual spots in the corner behind his stack of firewood. He satisfies the Rite of Post Meridiem
Ingurgitation by lifting the egg above his head and crushing it, letting the contents sluice through his fingers down into his waiting mouth, before flinging the crumpled shell to the dirt and licking his fingers clean.

The roar of his collection from the shelves is deafening.

He slumps back down on his cot, ready to hear the stone’s testament. He eyes its outline in the dark, and it seems for a while like it might never come, but when it does it is low, and yawning, and inexorable. And like blood in water it spreads through him. It is not a new voice, but an echo of the one from yesterday. The voice of the bone spirit.
Charles’s conversation was as flat as any pavement, and everybody’s ideas plodded along beside it, garbed in pedestrian style, inspiring no emotion, no laughter, no reverie … a man, surely, should know everything, should excel at many different things, should initiate you into the mysteries of passion, into the refinements of life, into all its mysteries? But this man taught nothing, knew nothing, desired nothing.

— Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary

Chapter 4

July 1967

Wollongong, New South Wales

Daniel sits cross-legged on the bed, his papers yellow in the light. His dictionary sprawls obese before him, framed by a map, various brochures and pamphlets, and piles and piles of letters and postcards, sorted by year and point of origin. A wayward spring in the mattress knuckles his backside, familiar now after two months at the boarding house. His shirt nags at his skin, still wet from the shower Ms Sutton insists the boarders take before sitting down to dinner, and the heat of his bolted pea and potato soup—the only vegetarian dish Ms Sutton knows—radiates from his stomach, making him sweat in the cool air of the little room.

He purchased the dictionary with his first paycheque, after passing it in a store window every day on his way home from work. *Expand your vocabulary and improve conversation skills*, a sign on the window enjoined. He’s yet to hear anyone at the port use the words *avuncular* or *alexithymic, boreal or bombinate, cognomen or chaparral*, and his conversations are as few and sparse as ever, but reading the tome passes the time, and it comes in handy for words in Uncle Irving’s letters. He wonders if he just
hasn’t learned enough of them yet.

The pamphlets advertise the Royal National Park in glossy print, and the route to Tranters Cove is inked on the map in red. He has collected them one by one from a booth in town staffed by a pretty woman who wears her hair in a ponytail and taps her long fingernails on the counter when she talks, and an older one who answers his questions about the Park with a squinting smile. It felt rude to take more than one at a time.

And the letters. He has carried them with him for years now, read and re-read them so many times. Sitting with them like this recalls the long lonely years at St Michael’s, a few towns over from home, where he would breathe himself humid under the covers with a torch after lights-out. The letters gave him his few moments of accomplishment at the school—outside of mathematics—when he pleased his geography instructor with his knowledge of New South Wales’ regional towns. His one utility to the boys at the college was his willingness to trade coveted mincemeat pies and rissoles under the table in exchange for their unwanted stacks of mashed potato and Brussels sprouts behind the backs of the watchful Brothers of St Michael. Otherwise, he failed to attract the attention of either his peers or his tutors.

It was when he returned home for Marg’s funeral that he retrieved the correspondence from the linen cupboard. Within five years of Jed’s death she had followed her eldest son, a tumor in her breast poisoning her blood. Jim became an even match for Mr Dougherty after that, in his own way, and Daniel spent his school holidays creeping around the darkened house learning the triggers of his wrath, enduring his diatribes about God, the neighbours, the cattle industry, and his many disappointments in his remaining son. And when his father finally returned to the pub or

9 A forsaking death.
toppled into bed, Daniel could safely retreat into the worlds of Irving’s letters, plotting his escape.

That’s what he became once his mother left him behind, what he has always been in some way. A watcher and a planner. A subtle soul two steps out of time with reality, observing and reacting in slow motion, gathering and processing and inching towards action. It took him until 22 to effect his plans, after so many days spent researching in the library, making phone call enquiries, hoarding coins and bills from his bottle deposits and errands for Mrs Dougherty. Wollongong was the destination he chose, a working town of coal and steel, right on the doorstep of the Royal National Park. There he could find work, save more money, strategise for the next stage of his plan. He wasn’t a Wendy, who never came back after she got into the car that day. It wasn’t in him to just leave, without even a note. He had witnessed the decimation of abrupt departures. What Wendy’s did to Mrs Dougherty, what his brother’s did to his parents, and his mother’s did to his father. No, he withdrew himself from Temora methodically, without disturbance. He prepared his father, had Mrs Dougherty agree to keep an eye on him. He found new homes for the animals of the Cleary household, or else waited for them to die, fearing what would happen if they were left to Jim’s guardianship.¹⁰

Now he is preparing for the next part of his plan. The material considerations are all in place. His bag has been packed and sitting by the door for weeks. He has memorised the trains he needs to take, the paths through the bush. He just wishes there was some way to reach his uncle. His single painstakingly crafted letter was returned uncollected from the post office, and he knows of no phone to call. But he has visualised the journey so many times, the warm greetings, an invitation to stay and live in the park. And yet he finds himself tarrying in the town. He has imagined less

¹⁰ Several long-awaited deaths.
welcoming receptions as well.

So he has been practicing at work, observing the other men and their interactions, studying how friendships are formed. He just doesn’t seem able to catch or hold anybody’s interest. He is different to other people, he knows. People don’t talk to him like they do to others, and when they do, he says something wrong, or more often can’t think what to say at all. He went along to the pub one Friday night when he first started, but the noise was impenetrable, so he just sat there while his beer warmed and the other men shouted. The wharfies had been congenial with him at first, made an effort to show him the ropes, to joke with him. But in time their politeness faded to indifference, and he seemed to become part of the background without having forged any connections. So now he watches, studies how they do it, how they push themselves into their words and become friends. How they become part of what everyone else is a part of—the backslaps, the chitchat, the ribbing. They make it look so effortless, like they do it without even thinking. Like Uncle Irving moving from town to town, finding new drinking buddies in every pub. He is resolved.

After checking the time, he packs away his materials for the night except one. He switches the light off and turns on his bedside lamp, settling down into his sheets and blankets to read the next letter in his nightly rotation. Tonight it is his mother’s favourite, the one he too has come to most cherish—Irving’s first letter to Marg after he discovered Tranter’s Cove, when Marg was still a child.
My dear sister,

I am so glad the festivities went well. Can it really be since Christmas already that I had your last letter? I must apologise. I have read it and admired your drawings many times, but have only now at last got the chance to write you back. I don’t have long, but I shall try to convey to you all that has occurred since my last letter.

I hope you enjoyed your stack of books & haven’t got through them too quickly. The thought of your mother’s Christmas feast almost makes me wish I were back with you, instead of having this grand adventure. That’s something they don’t tell you in your stories, Margie—there’s hardly ever any food to be had, no pieces of cheese & biscuits & bits of hard bread from your pack. Instead, it’s all watery soups & what ever else you can come by. I shouldn’t recommend an adventurer’s diet to you at all.

The rumours I wrote you about, regarding work at the coal mine in Helensburgh, proved to be true, but with one important caveat. It seems word has got around that the whole operation is soon to be abandoned, & many of the workers have left rather than wait for the mass sacking to come. I heard in the pub—don’t think too terribly of me, Margie—that most of them are bound over the hill to volunteer themselves for work on a new dam. Enter, yours truly. Having no family to support, I’m quite content to wait for the axe to fall on my neck before I move on.

Last week I presented at the mine & procured myself a job within the minute. It’s unpleasant, like every other mine I’ve ever been in, so I shan’t dwell on it here. Anyway, the best part is not the work, but the accommodations. Here’s something you must
promise me. Before you grow too old & get yourself married with children, we must take a holiday together here on the coast. The greatest sin our parents ever committed against us was to rob us of a childhood by the seaside. We did make do in the river & our little pond, didn’t we? But now I’ve seen the real thing, I know that was all just making do. The sea is a magnificent thing. You really can’t imagine it until you’ve seen it for yourself, not even with all your books or all the paintings & photographs in the world.

At the mines I’ve met all sorts of fellows. I was complaining of the price of my lodgings atop the hotel in town, fully half of my weekly pay packet, when one of them (Ellis) let me in on a little local secret: most of the miners lacking the luxury of a nearby family residence avoid the prohibitive costs of accommodation in town by erecting instead little tent cities down by the water, on grazier’s pastures. For a fraction of the cost of town living, one can spend one’s leisure hours in a large expanse of green fields, breathing the fresh sea air & taking in the terrific views, ocean bathing, bush-walking, &c. I’m told in the winter one can even watch the whales on their southerly migration.

Ellis lives in a place called “Tranter’s Cove” & has offered me the other side of his little canvas tent until I can organise the funds to purchase my own. In the meantime he shares with me all his tips & tricks for making ends meet. They have got it down to a fine art here. There are fish, rabbits & possums, & some men even have little vegetable plots, so they rarely have need to venture into town apart from work.

Yesterday was Sunday & we had a marvellous time. Ellis fried some wild eggs he had scavenged from somewhere in the surrounding forest (there’s miles and miles of it) & we had a little toast with our billy tea (a rare luxury in these parts – damper is more common). We had a few informal cricket matches, & the grazier even stopped by for an over. Several of us went bathing in the sea, & I was shown about the rock-pools
onshore. You can’t imagine the way it teems with life, here; not only the crabs, fish &
snails of the rock-pools, but the dolphins surfing the waves early in the mornings, the
birds in their multitudes that chatter interminably in the evenings up in their trees about
the camp, the herds of deer and goats. It’s an Eden, Margie. I even saw a little wallaby
grooming himself in the sun on a hillock near the beach. I’m praying I can contrive a
way to stay, even after work at the mine dries up.

Apologies for my handwriting. The gentleman who has agreed to carry my letter
into town approaches. Who can say when next you’ll hear from me if I don’t give it to
him now.

Best wishes for the (not so) new year to you and the family.

Your doting brother,

Irving.

The letter stays with Daniel the next day at work, as the corrugated iron hall bombinates
with the raucous chatter of the wharfies, coming and going, ducking out for smokes,
brewing tea and coffee and laughing over lunch. There aren’t many letters where Ellis
isn’t mentioned after that one. He became Irving’s best friend—the kind of friend
Daniel can only dream of—along with Bill and Jeff, Frankie and Liam and Dennis and
Alistair and the others. Out of crumpled al-foil wrappings emerge a thousand spongy
whitebread sandwiches heaving with last night’s roast beef or creamed corn and tuna.
Daniel’s are cheese and butter. He surveys the lunch hall and wonders if, somewhere
here, his Ellis is waiting for him.
He takes a seat at the other end of the bench to Roy, Ernie and Rippa, three men from his old workgang, and Roy’s cousin Harry, uniform still bright and new. Daniel has been sitting here for the last week on the edge of their conversation, daring to let his gaze drift casually over to meet their eyes when he smiles at an overhead joke. He tries to look like he’s thinking about something interesting, like he’s Irving sitting in a pub in some strange town. He listens for opportunities in their conversation in which to insert himself, but he so rarely has anything to say. Yesterday he overheard Ernie telling Harry the old story about the copper and the sawdust. Today Rippa leads the conversation, regaling the rest of them with an oration on his favourite topic. He gets up to rest one foot on the bench and thrust, reenacting his latest conquest. ‘I’m telling you, boys, I went to town!’

Roy laughs him off, but Harry watches in awe. Rippa sits back down and grins from behind his sandwich. ‘They don’t call me Jack the Rippa for nothing.’

‘Mate,’ says Ernie, laughing into his thermos lid. ‘Jack the Ripper was a prostitute murderer. Trust me, that’s not the comparison you wanna go for.’

‘Oh,’ says Rippa. ‘Well, in a different sense.’

In fact, the nickname was earned on Rippa’s first day, when he tore open two separate bales of wool mishandling his cargo hook. Daniel is glad he never has to use one of the sinister-looking instruments. Cargo comes in containers these days, not bags and bales. And in coal loading it’s just managing conveyer belts and machinery, sometimes shovels.

‘What did she think?’ asks Harry.

‘Mate, she loved it,’ Rippa winks.

‘Don’t listen to him, Harry,’ says Ernie. ‘Women aren’t like us. They require a … special touch.’
‘Oh yeah?’ says Harry, a little too casually.

‘It’s all about rhythm,’ Ernie says, with a sagacious nod.

‘How would you know, Ernie?’ Rippa shoots from Harry’s other side.

‘I been married twenty-one years.’

‘Exactly,’ says Rippa, leaning back with his hands behind his head. ‘Quantity, not quality eh, Harry?’

Daniel studies the other side of the room. This would not be a good moment to be invited into the conversation.

When he turns back, Sam is standing there with his lunch bucket.

‘Hallo, Daniel,’ he says. His smile is enormous, his teeth like a movie star’s against the coarse black stubble covering his face by lunchtime, even though he could be younger than Daniel.

‘Hi,’ he replies. Rippa leans into Roy’s ear at the other end of the table, sniggering. Daniel hears Roy respond, ‘Mama mia!’ and looks down into his sandwich, chewing faster.

The Italian’s clothes are bright like Harry’s. The pair had sat together last week, until Daniel found Roy and the rest.

‘Excuseh me,’ he’d said on that first day in heavily accented English. His skin, hair and eyes were dark. ‘I seet?’ He indicated the seat across from Daniel.

Daniel nodded, unprepared for the sudden overture, slightly confused by the accent.

‘Tank you,’ said the stranger, sitting down. ‘I am Sam.’ He held out his hand and they shook. His hand felt warm and loose. ‘I am from Sicily. And you?’

‘I’m Daniel,’ he answered after a moment. ‘From … here. Australia.’

‘Beautiful,’ said Sam. Then he closed his eyes, bowed his head and folded his
hands for a few seconds. It was a long time since Daniel had seen a grace anywhere outside of Ms Sutton’s. Sam opened his eyes and placed a large lunch bucket on the table, out of which he withdrew a single slice of cheese. ‘I am new today. And you?’

‘Six weeks.’

‘Ah, but you see …’ Sam grasped for the word, then indicated the empty space around Daniel, the cheese slice flapping.

‘Alone?’

‘Si!—Uh, yes. I see you at Ms Sutton’s. I tinking you are new also.’

Daniel took a bite of his sandwich. Sam began peeling cold slices of various meats out of the bucket and eating them one by one. They hardly resembled anything that came from an animal, but Daniel averted his eyes anyway.

‘I am sorry for my English.’

‘It’s okay,’ Daniel said. His accent was strange, but Sam had already spoken more words than Daniel had uttered all week. He imagined what it must be like to speak so confidently in two languages. ‘Where is Sicil—Silicy?’

‘Sicily?’ said Sam, picking olives out of a salad and popping them into his mouth.

‘South Italia—Italy.’

Daniel had a vague idea of the concept of Italy. ‘Do you like the job?’ he asked.

Sam thought hard about the question, and then his answer, translating each into Italian and then back to English. ‘It is very … difficult, but very good also. And you?’

‘Same for me,’ was all Daniel could think to say. Usually he was the one struggling with the pace of conversation. But he had already exhausted all his ideas for questions. The topic of Uncle Irving and his plan came to mind, but he thought Sam wouldn’t understand it. Sam just carried on peeling slices of meat from his bucket and combining them with cheese and chunks torn from a large round dome of puffy-looking
bread. He smiled and nodded at Daniel between mouthfuls, extending a chunk of bread to Daniel when he noticed him examining it. ‘Muffuleta,’ he said around a mouthful of food. ‘Muffled leather,’ Daniel made out. Or possibly, ‘My full letter.’

‘Thank you,’ he said regardless, placing it in his mouth. It tasted incredible. Sam laughed at his expression of surprise.

At the end of lunch they parted ways and, crowding slowly out the door with the other men, Daniel felt a nudge.

‘Oi, Danny boy.’

He looked around. It took him a moment to realise Rippa was talking to him. They hadn’t spoken since Daniel first started. Rippa was a couple bodies over, unlit cigarette dangling from his lip. ‘Not a poof are you?’

‘No,’ Daniel said. A black feeling tainted his chest.

‘Word to the wise then, eh. Watch yourself around them faggoty wog blokes. He’ll try something on you.’ He nodded seriously, then turned away towards Dock 6.

There was a scandal back before Daniel left school. One of the Brothers at St Michael’s disgraced, relocated to another diocese. For Jim, it was yet another failure to lay at the feet of the Lord. Every holidays thereafter it was a topic for one of his drunken sermons, which would always end with the same imperatives, issued in the same conspiratorial tone as Rippa, far too close, his stubble scraping, his noxious breath filling Daniel’s face. ‘Watch out for the poofers. Don’t let ’em try anything. Don’t let ’em touch you.’ Sometimes, if he was particularly drunk, the warnings would turn to accusations.

Sam is very different to the other men, and he’s the most devoted Catholic Daniel has encountered since the Brothers. He has been wary around him ever since, just in case. Rippa and some of the others make kissing faces at them if they spend too much
time together, at lunch and walking back to Ms Sutton’s, which makes Daniel squirm. How can he form a friendship if all the men think he’s a queer, or that he’s strange for sitting with the dago? That’s what the other men call Sam, though he couldn’t find an entry for it in his dictionary.

He finishes his lunch quickly and gets up from the table, waving to Sam. He will spend the rest of the lunch break sitting on a rock, staring out to sea.

Daniel manages to evade Sam on his way home that afternoon, too. If they have to talk, let it be at Ms Sutton’s where no one will see. They have spoken a few times in the common room after dinner. Daniel even initiated his own modulated version of the kinds of talks he hears the other men having. He was encouraged when Sam expressed admiration for beautiful Australian women, though it made him wonder what Italian women looked like. Daniel admitted that he had never been with a woman. Sam explained that he had lived in such a small town in Sicily, any such activity outside of marriage would have been impossible. And of course, there was the church. Once Sam asked if he would see Daniel at Mass on Sunday and he nearly said yes, but the thought reminded him too much of school.

Now he walks up the alley from the train station to head home through the mall, perhaps catch a glimpse of the tourism booth girl before she leaves for the day, when suddenly he sees her on the other side of the bridge that crosses the railway line, distant but familiar. Not the girl but a slim, long-haired woman in a dress and coat, walking into the light of a streetlamp high above. She is weighed down with luggage: in one hand a suitcase, the other a paper bag, a handbag over her shoulder and a hat on a string
dangling from her elbow. He keeps walking towards her, squinting through the distance. When he reaches the middle of the bridge she withdraws a large Danish from the bag, a dribbling of icing cast brittlely over its surface like spilled candle wax. He has treated himself to one from the bakery at the station before, and they are always stale and dry at this hour. She dismantles it slowly as she chews, tearing off long curls of the outer spiral which, separated from their spool, look to him like the long, stiff limbs of some sea creature, some crustacean. She arcs her fingers so that only the tips touch the pastry. They must be sticky with the flakes of it.

Below them a coal train is roaring through the blackened trench of the railway line, blowing a dirty gale into the eyes and mouths of all those waiting on the platform. The passing of the cars allows steady glimpses of the opposite side of the station as they shuttle onwards, making a flip book of those opposite for the commuters on either side. The pressure of a hundred paused conversations, squinting sets of eyes, held breaths and buried faces mounts as the freight train rushes on, seeming interminable even at its great speed. On the bridge Daniel’s heart keeps pace with the percussion of the cars on the tracks. *Vulpes vulpes. Vulpes vulpes. Vulpes vulpes.* It would be impossible to speak over.

A sudden thunderclap arises from beneath them as two cars collide over a bump in the tracks. The woman drops her danish and snaps her head up at the sound and, even amongst the cacophony, recognition hits Daniel like a blow.

It is Wendy Dougherty.

‘Shit,’ she mouths.

The features of the sixteen-year-old still reside unmistakably within the shroud of thirty-three years. For Wendy’s part, the Daniel of 1951 is invisible on the other side of adolescence. She mutters over the lost pastry as she gathers her bags, and he watches
her skirt back to the alley, making for the station. Daniel stands gaping after her. ‘Wait, your hat,’ he finally says, long after she is too far to hear it. He runs over to grab it and give chase.

At the station entrance, people are crowding out of a train and he loses her.

‘Hey!’ he soon hears from the huddle, a woman’s voice. His eyes are drawn to a waving hand, then Wendy’s face. ‘That’s my hat!’ she calls. She’s squeezing past the crowding bodies. ‘’Scuse me, excuse me!’

‘I know.’ He holds it out for her.

‘Oh,’ she says as she approaches. ‘Thank you so much. Thank you. Did I leave it on the bridge?’

The words waft at him like bubbles.

‘Wendy …’ is all he can manage.

She cocks her head and squints her eyes. The fluorescent white lights outside the station pick out all the imperfections in her skin, make her brown hair look grey. But she’s still beautiful.

‘It’s Daniel Cleary … from Temora.’

Her eyes widen and her head bulges forward, her hand reaching for his arm as if to confirm its corporeality. ‘Daniel?’

He worries he’s angered her. He’s bothering her, reminding her of things she ran away from, things she wants to forget.

She play-slaps him. ‘Why didn’t you say something? Oh my God!’ A jarring, manic laugh escapes her, like a temporary release on sanity. Nothing like the laugh he remembers. It reminds him of her father. She looks him up and down.

‘Look at you! You’re enormous! I haven’t seen you since …’ The end of the sentence dies on her face. ‘… you were little,’ she finishes instead. ‘How on Earth did
you even recognise me? It’s been a lifetime.’

He is reminding her of things she wants to forget. He knows, because she is doing the same for him. But they’ve started something now and it’s as inexorable as the coal-filled freight train that passed below them on the bridge. Its momentum will carry it to its own conclusion.

And it did happen as if it were inevitable, as if by its own animus. Daniel doesn’t know how, but it is half horror and half wonder and he has no power over it. Even now, as she rides him, it is as though he isn’t here for her. It is happening outside of him, happening to him. Her small breasts swing and her straight hair tickles his nose as she leans forward, rising and falling without much contribution from him at all.

He worried he would do something wrong, hurt her. He worried it wouldn’t work—he’d heard the wharfies talk about too much drink interfering—but the moment her tongue parted his lips in the bar, there it was, and here he is now.

He wonders if it is always like this. He always pictured himself on top. But if Rippa’s motions are to be believed, there are other positions. He always imagined the woman’s parts in a slightly different place, too. More on the front, like where a man’s parts are, not all the way down to where her hand guided him between her legs. He nearly jumped when she took hold of him. But if he lets himself think too long now on the softness and certainty of that grip, about his hands on that perilously slender waist, how hard they are breathing together, the small noises she is beginning to make, it will all be over, and the conclusion is not yet upon them.

He tries through the twin fogs of his drunkenness and disbelief to retrace the
events that led them here, and finds his way somehow back to the moment outside the station, to how she had transformed herself again. No Marilyn in this woman suggesting they find a bar to catch up and pass the time, no Wens-dee full of woe. She’d missed her train when she came back for the hat, she said.

They walked once again up the alley and filed into the closest establishment. It was an Irish pub named O’Malley’s, which they laughed at because they had known actual O’Malleys back home. Temora has a family for every Irish name there is, Wendy said wistfully. But home is a dangerous topic, so she began talking about her trip from Sydney, a route Daniel knows winds through the National Park. ‘It was so beautiful,’ she said. ‘Good for the soul. I was beginning to forget what the country looked like.’

‘My uncle lives in the park,’ Daniel answered with some pride. Then he had a vision of taking Wendy to meet Irving, building her a shack in Tranters Cove to live in.

‘You can live in the park?’ she said, slapping the flat of her wine glass down on the bar.

‘Not just anyone any more,’ he said. ‘But he’s been there since the Depression.’ Daniel’s first plan in Temora had been to go straight to Tranters Cove, but his research had taught him of the prohibition of new shacks and the purchase and sale of existing ones. ‘Do you remember the letters? From when we were little?’

‘Mmm,’ Wendy mused. ‘Nope.’

‘Oh,’ he said, and she smiled at the old habit while he explained the history of the shacks as he had learned it.

‘Wow,’ she said after some minutes. ‘You must go there to visit all the time.’

This took him off guard. ‘Well, no … Not yet, but I’m planning a trip. I’m going to visit him soon.’

‘What?!’ she said. ‘You haven’t been already?’
The words sputtered. ‘Well, I don’t really know exactly where he lives in Tranters Cove.’

She gave him a look. ‘You’ve never visited him? You’ve come all the way from Temora. Who cares if you don’t know exactly where? It’d be an adventure! You must have some clue.’

‘I know his shack is at the top of a hill separated from the rest a little. And I know it’s built out of—’

‘Well see, there you go,’ she interrupted, lighting another cigarette. ‘It’ll be easy. Knock on a few doors. Ask around. What’s his name?’

‘Irving Aloysius Mortimer Montgomery Ronald Crabbe,’ he recited. The words are hard to stop once he gets going. ‘Irving was just his mother’s favourite name, but Aloysius was his confirmation name after Saint Aloysius Gonzaga, patron saint of youth. The rest came from his family.’ He counted on his fingers. ‘His father Mortimer Crabbe, his grandfather Montgomery Crabbe, and his other grandfather Ronald Taylor.’

Wendy issued her distorted laugh again at that. ‘Exactly! How many Irving Aloysius-Mortimer-whatever Crabbes could there be? I bet everyone up there knows each other.’

At this, Daniel launched into an explanation of how tightknit the community is, how the men play cricket and the women have elevenses on the rocks every day and they all pitch in to help repair one another’s shacks or bring supplies down from town and on and on. He remembers thinking then that he felt like Irving, talking with a lady in a bar, just as his Uncle must have done so many times in his travels.

He didn’t ask about the man in the black car. She didn’t ask about their parents. It wasn’t clear to him whether Wendy even knew about Marg. Instead she told long stories about her fabulous life in Sydney. Daniel didn’t talk much at all apart from when Uncle
Irving came up. But Wendy spoke for hours—missing train after train—about the interesting people she had met, the parties she went to, the artists and activists, the lawyers and businessmen. She censored how she had been hurt, why she needed to leave. Just said she was going to stay with her aunt on the south coast while she sorted her life out.

‘Oh, shit!’ she said right after that. ‘I have to call her. Where’s the payphone?’

She looked around and found it herself.

He allows himself a glimpse of her now, still bouncing away in her own world. It doesn’t usually take him this long on his own, he thinks. He wonders if he is doing everything right. They have melted into one now, fused together down there like the mating orange and black butterflies he used to follow around his backyard. He can hardly feel himself, just heat and wetness mixing like pleasure and fear.

Then it comes back to him, the moment in the dusky bar that started this, the laughing and talking and the smell of cigarettes. Wendy was smoking one after the other, the ashtray beside her a steadily growing graveyard for the contorted bodies of cigarette stubs. She dropped her lighter and stumbled when she bent down to pick it up, tumbling to the ground. She looked up at him for a moment and then erupted into silent, sucking laughter, eyes squeezed shut and hands dangling from limp wrists in front of her. He leaned over to help her up and she tugged him down with her and they both went into hysterics. Then was it she who leant in, or him? Or was there just some inescapable gravity between them that drew them together? He was no good at kissing, he was sure. The cigarettes on her breath tasted like coal dust between his teeth. Then they were being escorted out by the publican.

He began walking towards the station with her bags, but she stopped him.

‘Where are you taking me? Which way is your house?’
He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. ‘Back that way. I thought …’

‘No, no, no,’ she said, leaning into him like a rugby player and spinning him around on the spot. ‘It’s too late and I’m too drunk. Take me home.’

So back to Ms Sutton’s they went. Even when they were there and she was sitting on his bed wearing nothing but a nightdress he dared not think anything would happen. He assumed he would sleep on the floor and leave her alone. He asked if she needed anything, but all she said was ‘Come here.’

Little puffs of air are escaping her regularly now. Does that mean she’s nearly done? ‘Women aren’t like us,’ Ernie’s words come back to him. ‘They’re all about rhythm.’ He modifies his movements with that in mind. She responds, and suddenly it is all rushing to its end. Everything they left unsaid that night is still in their bodies. They are sweating it out of their pores, mixing it in their mouths. It is all being unstoppered now. He is plumbing it from her. She is wringing it out of him. Even amongst the ecstasy the stray thought finds him. So this is what she was doing with that man in the car while he watched from his window.

Before long she bends over to rest her head on him as they catch one another’s breath. She breathes out as he breathes in. His mouth is watery with foreign saliva and he almost wants to spit it out. She whispers something he doesn’t hear. He moves her with his body, so she’s looking at him, and he sees her eyes are brimming. ‘I remember,’ she quavers. ‘Oh Daniel, I remember.’ And now he can see her, that girl moping on the steps outside her house. Woe is me, he thinks.
Daniel retrieves his lunchbox from his locker and drifts to the corner of the lunch hall. This morning the coal from the train that passed beneath them on the bridge was waiting at the docks to be unloaded into the hold of a ship, like an heirloom of the night before, an omen of nights to come. He felt like taking a head-sized chunk of the glistening black rock and plunging it into the water, to watch it smothered in the clarity of the depths.

He is halfway through his cheese sandwich when Sam arrives.

‘Ciao!’ he says as he takes his seat. He is beginning to feel comfortable enough with his English to let some few Italian phrases sneak back in. When Daniel doesn’t respond, Sam asks what’s the matter.

‘Sorry,’ says Daniel.

He expected her to be there when he woke up.

A group of men with Sam’s dark skin and hair prowls past their table. One of them points to Sam and suddenly they explode into sound and action: hugs and backslaps, bombastic greetings and rapidfire conversation in Italian. Sam looks like a different person in his native tongue. Daniel is envious, but then they begin kissing each other’s faces and he goes back to his sandwich. Perhaps Rippa was right.

When the men carry on their way, Sam explains. ‘Those are men from my town. I tell them get a job here. First time I see them here today!’

They really are employing a lot of Italians, Daniel thinks. The foreman told their workgang it was something political, defying some moratorium on new recruits. Union machinations are always beyond him.

Sam is munching on slices of his strong-smelling Italian meats, making Daniel’s delicate stomach turn. Then he leans forward across the table to look Daniel in the eye. ‘Daniel, my friend,’ he says seriously, placing a hand on his arm. ‘What is wrong?’
Daniel pulls away instinctively from Sam’s touch, looks around. ‘I …’ he begins, wondering how to say it. ‘I … slept with a woman. Last night.’

Sam’s face drops.

Daniel isn’t sure for a moment if he has offended Sam’s morals with his admission, but then his enormous smile spreads across his face. ‘Daaaaaniel,’ he says, crouching up half out of his seat. ‘Fantastico!’ He grabs Daniel’s head and plants a kiss right on his lips. ‘You must tell me all about it!’ he nearly shouts, gesticulating as he resumes his seat.

Daniel trembles. He looks at Sam wide-eyed, and the joy slides from Sam’s features. ‘What is it, Daniel?’

Then the laughter erupts. Rippa gets up to stand on his seat, pointing right at him. ‘I knew it!’ he yells. ‘I bloody told youse all! They’re a coupla flaming poofers!’

Daniel sees Ernie smack Rippa’s knee with a roll of his eyes, but all around Rippa men are joining in, clapping, laughing and calling out. He stares down at the table, holding on to it. Sam’s face was rough. The poisonous taste of smoked flesh finds its way to his tongue from the place where Sam’s lips touched his and the world around him fades.

‘Did you see that?’ Rippa continues. ‘They bloody kissed!’

Daniel gets up out of his seat.

Sam says, ‘Daniel, I apologise. It isn’t … In Sicily, we …’

But Daniel can’t hear anything.

The hall falls when he howls and runs from the hall.
The glossy green station seats are misted like they’ve just been pulled out of the fridge as Daniel steps off his train and into the cold of morning. Calmly they proclaim a word straight out of his uncle’s letters: Helensburgh. It is odd to see it replicated here in the physical world in crisp, white lettering instead of his uncle’s cursive script. This is the place, an outpost between Wollongong and Sydney, where Irving worked in the mine, where he first learned about Tranters Cove. Around him, the station and the tracks are the only manmade things Daniel can see. They shear through the bush like a parted hairline. He sets off up the stairs to find the hiking track on his map.

It wasn’t until he reached the train station yesterday that Daniel began to calm down. He had run the whole way from the lunchroom, spitting and scraping at his tongue and lips till they were raw, attracting strange looks from shopkeepers and mothers with children. At the bridge, as he slowed to a walk, he passed the remnants of Wendy’s dropped Danish in the gutter, and stood there watching it for a long moment. It looked unreal in the light of day, a scattering of ants picking at its sugary glaze.

In the rattling quiet of the carriage he sat sweating and panting, letting the panic dissipate, and once it cleared he was resolved: it was time to go to Tranters Cove.

That evening he set about excising himself from the small temporary life he had built in Wollongong as neatly as he had done from Temora months before. He packed up his belongings, discarding anything he didn’t need, leaving only a small bag with some toiletries, some clothes, his chequebook, and his bundle of letters.

He didn’t go to dinner that night, didn’t leave his room at all. Instead he tidied up and began composing letters and notes of his own. He heard Sam knock gently on his door after dinner, but he didn’t answer. Then, deep in the night he crept downstairs to leave two weeks’ board for Ms Sutton, with a suggestion to talk to Sam about filling the room with one of his Sicilian friends. And at Sam’s door he left his dictionary with a
letter of resignation inside to be passed on to the foreman. He was sure they would have no trouble filling his position; Sam has many more friends looking for work. Some evenings he hears them all playing soccer in the field across the road.

This morning he arose while it was still dark to avoid meeting anyone and crept out of the house the way Wendy must have the day before. He caught the first train to Helensburgh.

It is an arduous walk, but a pleasant one, mostly downhill, a dirt path crossed by logs and ferns and even a rivulet. He wonders what awaits him at its end, imagining tea with Irving and his friends, an introduction to the neighbours. Perhaps they will help him build a shack of his own, whatever the authorities say. The journey is magical for Daniel, like a storybook brought to life. Every sight and sound he hears or sees, every birdcall, every sudden vista through a parting of trees, he mentally cross-references against those described by Irving in his letters, and finds a new appreciation for his uncle’s ability to capture them in words. He is seeing the world through Irving’s eyes, hearing it through Irving’s ears. When he finally emerges out of the bush to reach the beach, he identifies scenes from the letters in much greater profusion. He mouths the words as he surveys them. The ‘dusty lot nestled in the cleavage of two large hills’ that he wrote of in the letter about his third Christmas in the park. The way the ‘dust scratches out into a band of vibrant green grass that peters out into sand which, in turn, gives way to the white foam of the breakers, the blue of the water, then the white of the clouds & more blue.’ There is in the distance to the north the headland that ‘juts triumphantly into the sea like the prow of a great trireme, waves breaking all around it’ from a letter where Irving and Ellis set out to see how far they could walk in one day. There is the ‘battered wooden building with a red and yellow flag’ marking it as the surf lifesaving club, where they gathered during bushfires one year when they were cut off
from Tranter's Cove.

By half-past Daniel walking down the path into the bottom of the Cove, lined by trees Irving and his friends planted years ago. Daniel can barely contain himself as the first shacks come into view, little brown and grey and white and green and yellow squares huddled in the distance, scattered all over the valley. There must be seventy or so, all sitting at a respectful distance from one another, but spread fairly evenly. He flips mentally through the dictionary definitions that could apply to the feeling that sends this thrill through his stomach, this smile to his face. Is he overwrought? Euphoric? Is this rhapsody? Rapture? Whatever it is, the waves are shot through with currents of anxiety. Ahead of him is a small inlet forded by a wooden plank and it suddenly feels so invasive to cross it, to walk among these secluded little shacks uninvited. But he has come this far. He clings to his objective: find Irving.

To his left, so close, he can hear the water lapping, the roar of the wind and the waves. And on his right up ahead he can see the first shack, a pink weatherboard wall with a little window. He rounds the corner and the shack’s third dimension opens up before him. A small verandah framed by wooden latticework and covered in potplants, dangling wind chimes and glass ornaments, houses a stout woman in front of an easel, paintbrush in hand.

‘Ho there,’ she calls, peering out from behind her canvas. ‘Friend or foe?’

Daniel stops. ‘Friend,’ he smiles back.

‘Good to hear.’ Her curly grey hair pokes out from beneath her beanie like an aged clown. She has a big, friendly face, with a floppy neck that sags from her jaw to her collarbone. ‘What brings you to Tranter’s Cove on this fine afternoon?’

‘I’m … I want to meet my uncle,’ he says.

‘Oh, how lovely. Is he expecting you?’
‘No,’ he says. ‘I didn’t …’

‘No need to explain yourself to me, me lad,’ she chuckles. ‘I only play at gatekeeper. I only ask to make sure he’s actually in. As you can see,’ she gestures around, ‘there’s not too many of us about today. It’s pretty quiet except in holidays. Not many full-timers these days.’

From here there is a better vantage of the community. He can see down to the jewel-blue cove now. There are a few more closed-up shacks around, and a few more in the distance as the land slopes up the hill. He bets that’s where Irving’s shack is, right at the top where he can’t see for the trees. He notices a pile of debris off towards the water, a blackened stack of corrugated iron sheets and pipes.

‘Was there a fire?’ he asks, gesturing.

The woman follows his gaze, suddenly radiating contempt. ‘You could say that,’ she says, in a tone to match her expression. ‘A damned shame it was too.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he says.

‘Nothing to be done now, I suppose. Not for that one, anyway.’ She turns back to him and snaps into a smile, setting her paintbrush down and holding out her hand, ‘I’m Lydia, darl.’

‘Daniel,’ he says, coming forward to take her hand. It’s impossibly soft in the way of old women.

‘Lovely to meet you, Daniel. So tell me, who is the lucky uncle of such a fine young man as yourself? It’s not Gregor is it? Or let me guess, Charlie? Haven’t seen you around before.’

‘Actually,’ he says, ‘I’ve never met him before.’

‘Well now, this is an occasion, then, isn’t it?’ she says before he can go on. ‘Now I’m dying to know who it is. But I’m pretty sure it’s only Gregor and Charlie who’
down at the moment, so I hope you’re in luck.’

‘Irving’s his name,’ says Daniel. ‘But I think he lives here all the time.’

The smile fades again from Lydia’s mouth. ‘Irving, you said?’

‘Irving Crabbe,’ he adds. ‘Yes. Is he up there on that hill?’

‘Oh,’ is all she says as she removes her glasses, looking down. ‘Oh dear. I thought … The resemblance, but … Why don’t you come in?’ She gets up and shuffles inside without waiting for a reply.

Dread is the only word for the feeling Daniel has now.

When Lydia reports Irving’s demise Daniel begins to lose himself as he has so many times before. He keens a long and dissonant moan of protest between short bouts of panting, but Lydia springs into action in a second. She wraps a heavy blanket around him and presses it down firm, keeping him seated as he roils, kneading his arms and shoulders even as he tries to flail. She shushes him and strokes his hair, in between humming a familiar tune. She rocks him gently back and forth on the seat in time with the melody like a boat on the waves and, miraculously, the fit dissolves before it takes hold. When he is calmed but still stupefied, quivering and staring into nothing, she leaves him, still humming that tune, to rustle about the kitchen and boil a kettle. She sets a lukewarm cup of tea down before him and resumes her seat across the table, chewing gum and letting the silence dilate.

‘Now,’ she says when she judges the moment right. His eyes flick up at her and then back away. ‘I’m going to tell you what you need to hear, and I want you to stop me if you feel another temper coming on, okay?’
Daniel nods.

‘It was about a year ago, now,’ she tells him. ‘It was peaceful. He drifted off one night up in his shack, where he wanted to go.’

So it has all been in vain, he thinks. She puts her hand over his, but he barely feels it. His uncle is just another thread snipped out of his life, but this one before they could even meet. For Daniel it is always as though a greater force is teasing his life this way and that, contriving ways for him to remain alone. He begins rocking again, but Lydia squeezes his hand and starts up her tune again, brings him back.

‘How do you …?’ he begins, when he is lucid again.

‘Worked as a nurse for forty years, me boy. Don’t get that far without coming across a few strange eggs like you.’

A strange egg. He likes that.

‘What is that song?’

‘I thought you’d like it. Your uncle used to whistle it. When Irish Eyes are Smiling,’ it’s called.’

Marg used to sing it too, he recalls now.

Then a thought strikes him.

‘What about Ellis?’

Lydia raises her eyebrows at the name, like she’d forgotten it. She swallows her tea. ‘How’d you know about Ellis?’

In answer, he lifts his pack up onto his lap, digs around to find the hefty stack of letters and postcards bound by a rubber band, and places it on the table. ‘His letters to my mum.’

Lydia whistles. ‘Well, I’ll be. I bet there’s some good times in there,’ she smiles.

A serene death.
'But no, darl, Ellis died years ago. Must’ve been … ’58, ’59? Far too young. I tried to step in for him in a sense, after he passed. We became very close, Irving and I. Course it could never be quite the same.’

‘They must’ve been great friends,’ he says.

Lydia eyes him. ‘Yes.’ She takes a pensive sip from her cup. Outside, her chimes jingle. ‘We didn’t know how to get in touch with Irving’s family. He’d been here so long, you see. Longest of all of us.’

‘He never wanted to leave,’ says Daniel.

‘No. And he never did. It was a beautiful service. Just us Cove folks. No priest. Just his good friends drinking, sharing memories.’ Lydia holds her wrists and looks off to the side as she speaks. ‘A couple of the surf lifesaving blokes buried him at sea. Sort of a secret. He wanted that.’

Daniel likes the thought of that too. Sinking down to the ocean floor to be alone with just the sea creatures forever. There’s a long moment of silence. Then, ‘So what will you do now, Daniel?’

His gut clenches. He didn’t imagine this eventuality. Turning around, going back … It’s unthinkable. He will have to go somewhere new. Find work somewhere else. Sydney or Newcastle, perhaps.

Lydia gives him a sympathetic smile. Then she twists around in her chair, scrunching the vinyl. ‘That’s them, you know?’

Daniel looks up to see her pointing at a painting of two laughing old men hanging on the wall behind her. He looks around the room, taking it in for the first time. It’s full of paintings depicting trees and flowers, landscapes, people. It’s full of things in general. Even a piano with a cat statue sitting on top. He imagines trying to manoeuvre

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12 A premature death.
it down through the bush. Then he returns to the painting she pointed out. ‘Irving and Ellis?’ he asks.

‘Yep, Irving’s on the left. I wasn’t completely happy with it at the time, but it’s grown on me since. Can’t tell if I’m remembering them better or the painting’s twisting my memory.’

Daniel gets up to look into his uncle’s acrylic eyes. The same blue-grey as his, the same round face, the same large ears, but a mop of white hair. It’s like gazing into his future. ‘How old is he here?’

‘Ah,’ she scratches her head. ‘That was … just before Ellis passed, so ’58, ’59 again. That’s the only reason they agreed to sit for it. Irving would’ve been around fifty-eight or fifty-nine himself, I suppose. He always loved how he was the same age as the Federation.’

The latest photo of Irving Daniel has, sent in a letter to Marg, he was about ten years younger, wearing bathers by the water, his hair still the same colour as Daniel’s. The painting is somewhat abstract, so he can’t pick out the exact features that have aged. But it is clearly his uncle, he can see, now that he looks. Ellis is leaner, gaunter, with pale brown eyes and long grey curls.

‘Is that the shack?’ he asks, pointing to the structure they sit before.

‘That’s the one,’ she says. ‘ Couldn’t have them sitting anywhere else. That’s where they spent all their time. Beautiful shack, that one. I suppose you know they built it themselves.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I read about it.’

‘Would you like to see it?’ she arches an eyebrow.

‘Yes!’ he says, awed at the prospect. ‘Can I?’

She laughs. ‘It’s nice to see a young bloke so interested in the shacks. Come on, I
can make it on my own if I have to but it’ll be easier if you help me.’

Lydia retrieves a carved walking stick and they set off through Tranters Cove up to the ridge where the shack stands alone, Daniel taking her arm when they get to the incline. It’s slow going, so she has time to tell him about Irving’s last years, the ones he has no letters for.

‘They were here from the beginning,’ she croaks. ‘And they suffered a lot for it, too. It wasn’t easy for them, but the Cove wouldn’t be what it is without them. Your uncle was the pillar, you know? He never did mind portraying himself as the hero, but I’ll bet there’s plenty of good he didn’t mention in those letters, too. Life out here was pretty cheap for him,’ she explains. ‘He barely spent a dime on himself—living through the Depression changed people—but he wasn’t a poor man.’ She tells him how he saved and invested the profit from the sale of his property, the property he sold to the McCluskys instead of Daniel’s father, here at Tranters Cove, how he covered the repairs for countless shacks when they needed it, jumping in with a hammer and nails himself. How he paid for the community toilet blocks when they needed upgrading. How he sponsored new gear for the surf club every few years. How he shelled out loans to his mates when they needed it, so they wouldn’t have to sell their shacks, so they could stay a part of the community where they belonged, and he never charged interest or breathed down their necks, either. He didn’t need to. No one would rip Irving off.

From the outside, when they get there, it’s a dark red-stained wooden box of a structure, not at all what Daniel imagined until he saw Lydia’s painting. The planks go upwards instead of horizontally, up to a flat roof with a small overhang. It’s uniform the whole way round with little adornment.

‘Better on the inside,’ Lydia winks as she presses past him to fumble with the key. When she lights the kerosene lamp, she reveals a treasure trove. Books line every ledge
and splay over every surface: poetry, philosophy, classics, stacks and stacks of biographies and histories about Australian explorers and pioneers and, best of all, an enormous, well-worn dictionary. Entire walls are covered in patterns formed from wine corks, with others plastered in photographs depicting festive evenings on the grog and sun-soaked mornings at the beach. He even finds pictures of his mother younger than any he’s ever seen, and baby pictures of him and Jed she must have sent him. Snake skins and cicada shells dangle from the rafters, dead sea animals hang in the windows, morbid but beautiful. Paraphernalia of every other kind is scattered everywhere: a Navy sailor’s hat that Lydia tells him washed up on shore one day, ancient albums of clippings, a telescope.

She takes one look at his face and says, ‘Yeah. This is a real shack.’ As if in distinction to some impostor.

‘Where did the …’ Daniel points at the dried-out seahorses and puffer fish and starfish in the windows.

‘… fish come from?’ she finishes. ‘All washed up on shore. Beautiful, aren’t they?’

The small shack is partitioned into three spaces. One side is a bedroom of sorts, with a large, springy mattress, a shower and toilet nook, and cupboards. The other is a kitchenette, with counters, a fire stove, kerosene fridge and seating space. These two rooms lead into the same little open area, a sun room with wide windows on three sides and a few chairs, where Lydia sits now, watching him take it all in.

‘What do you think?’ she spreads her hands.

Daniel just shakes his head in wonder. ‘It’s … perfect,’ he says.

Lydia closes her eyes and nods. ‘Take a seat. There’s something else you need to

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13 A string of ornamental deaths.
know.’

Daniel joins her and she leans forward in her chair. She peers at him for a moment, then looks away with a bitter laugh, shaking her head. ‘There’s no better way to say this … They want to burn it down.’ She lets him absorb the statement.

‘What?’ is all he can manage at first. ‘Who?’

She leans back, that same look of contempt from before returning to her face. ‘Remember that heap of smoking ruins you saw down there? That was a shack, till not long ago. A bloody old one too.’

‘I don’t …’

‘It’s this new government department,’ she explains. ‘They want us out of the park. All of us. And the shacks destroyed.’

‘Why?!’

‘Heaven only knows.’ She throws her hands up. ‘This is what they do. They get some notion in their heads about how things should be, and they don’t care whose lives they ruin to achieve it. Then fifty years later they realise they made a mistake, and the people complaining were right all along, but it’s too late then, isn’t it? I tell you, there’s nothing more stubborn than a government that actually believes in something. Trouble is, they always pick the worst bloody things to believe in.’

It doesn’t make sense to Daniel, this tiny room of wonders going up in flames.

‘I mean, look,’ she says. ‘I can almost see what they’re saying. The national park’s for nature. Not people. And that’s a fine grand ideal, but not when you’ve already got people living here! We’re a part of this place now. They can’t just chase us off and pretend we were never here like some sort of pest. What’ve we done? Who’re we hurting here? Nothing! No one!’

Daniel shakes his head.
‘But we’ve been fighting them, you see. Your uncle and me and loads of the rest of us. They can’t make us leave. But what they can do is wait till we die and pick our shacks off one by one.’

Daniel’s knee is jiggling of its own accord.

‘We’re going to keep fighting them. We’re getting the community behind us, getting petitions signed, lobbying the pollies, taking them to court. But all that takes time, and that won’t help keep Irving’s shack safe, not if they get wind of his passing.’

‘They don’t know?’

‘No,’ she smiles. ‘We kept it hush-hush. No obituary. Private funeral—just us Cove folks, like I said. So what we’re doing is, we just keep paying the rent and hope they don’t notice. We’ve got people ‘living here’ who should be a hundred and fifty years old by rights, if the names on their leases are to be believed.’

‘But, the money …?’

‘We pool money if we need to. Usually there’s a family member who wants to hold onto the shack and they take on the payments.’

‘Oh,’ Daniel blushes. He couldn’t afford that for very long, especially without a job.

‘Oh, no, pet. Not for Irving. I’m not asking for any money, if that’s what you think. No, Irving paid for himself, well in advance. He … he willed everything to the community trust. And as long as I’m Chair and we can keep the shack standing, his rent will be coming out of that. He’d roll over in his watery grave if I let the bastards have their way with the shack now,’ she laughs. ‘I can’t count how many times some park ranger safety inspector government bureaucrat so-and-so came round here banging on his door telling him he was only allowed to live here so many days out of the month. Every time he’d just stick his finger up and tell ’em to bugger off. I do the same when
they knock on my door, but I have my legs to blame, and’—she adds a quaver to her voice—‘I’m just a poor little old lady, so it doesn’t have quite the same effect.’

She affects a sweet expression and sticks her finger up at an invisible figure. Daniel booms with laughter and she joins in with a titter. Then she turns serious.

‘Look,’ she begins. ‘I’m not sure I believe in fate, but you turning up out of the blue like this … I don’t know.’ She pauses, gazing at him. He looks away.

‘I gather that you’re at a bit of a loose end. I don’t know what made you come all the way out here now of all times, if you got yourself into some sort of trouble …’ She waves her hand indulgently. ‘And I don’t need to know. But I like you, Daniel. And what I do need to know is, if can you help preserve what your uncle built here.’

He’s not sure what she means.

‘Like I said,’ she continues. ‘I’ve got the rent covered. But what I could use is someone to stay in the place, to use it, to keep it clean and in working order and lived-in. Even if it’s only every few weekends, even if it’s only until we can find someone else. I’m getting too old to walk up here all the time, and I’m certainly not getting up on the roof to fix anything. The others’d be glad to lend a hand, but most of them don’t get down here half as often as they’d like, and when they do, they’ve got their hands full with their own maintenance.

‘I won’t lie,’ she says. ‘It may look like paradise here, but it’s no boatride. It’s a constant battle against the wind and the storms and time and the elements and vandalism and the government, and Lord help you if the termites set in. It’s a full-time job in itself. So that’s what I’m asking, Daniel.’

Everything he wants to say crams up inside him, and nothing comes out. But he cannot believe his luck. He imagines how his life might be here in the park, working his way through Irving’s library, adding to his collection of shells and knick-knacks,
watching the whales sail past in the winter with the binoculars in the window.

‘I’m not asking you to make any decisions right away,’ she says, taking his silence for hesitation. She checks her watch. ‘It’s getting late. Why don’t you spend the night here and see what you think? Sleep on it.’

Daniel grins and sends his eyes around the shack, nodding absently.

‘It’s no small thing I’m asking of you, Daniel, I know. If anyone from the government comes around, well, you know … It’s a big deal. In a way,’ she laughs, ‘I suppose I’m asking you to become the new Irving. Take over where he left off. Maybe that’s me missing him.’

Daniel smiles at that too.

She lifts her bulk up from the wicker chair with some effort, both hands pressed against the table. ‘You stay here,’ she says. ‘It’s easier going down than up. Come down for tea if you get hungry.’ And with that, she hobbles out of the hut and leaves Daniel to his decision.

Daniel never does go down to Lydia’s for tea that night. Daniel never emerges from the shack at all. Because, of all the words Lydia spoke to him that day, there is one phrase he cannot dislodge from his mind. I’m asking you to become the new Irving.

She didn’t mean it literally, but what a thought it is. Not just to leave his job, where the men will never forget that day with Sam. Not just to leave his room at Ms Sutton’s, haunted by the ghost of Wendy. Not just to see the world through Irving’s eyes and hear it with his ears. But to become Irving. To pick up where he left off. To spend his days here with Lydia, and this community Irving built. Among the animals, the treasures, the peace of Irving’s shack. To adopt Irving’s confidence for his own. To
leave his own past, the history of Daniel, behind, and take on Irving’s. To dissolve the indistinct, unremarkable essence of Daniel Cleary in the legend of Irving Crabbe. By the time he lies down in the bed where his uncle died, it hardly seems a choice but for Daniel to die there too, and for Irving to be reborn.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{14} A metaphorical death.
3. not causing offence or disturbance; inoffensive; unobjectionable:

*an innocuous presence*
—this Bride,
Young, modest, meek, and beautiful I led
To a low Cottage in a sunny Bay,
Where the salt sea innocuously breaks …
— The Solitary, Book the Third: ‘Despondency,’

William Wordsworth’s *The Excursion: Being a Portion of The Recluse, a Poem*

Chapter 5

*Monday 31 August 1970*

*Royal National Park, New South Wales*

And so you see my deception.

Or perhaps you pieced it together long ago.

You must permit me my vanities, dear reader. If delay and indirection are not inescapably encoded into my being, they are, at the least, foundational aspects of my identity. What is a story, after all, but a set of facts twisted and turned in the telling, manipulated for emphasis here, teased for gratification there?

Regardless, you see now that the Irving of 1970, out here in the bush with his rites and rituals, his voices and his objects, is not physically the same as the Irving who left his sister Marg behind during the Depression to roam the state, who settled down in Tranters Cove and sent his letters for a quarter of a century. That Irving, Irving the Elder, Uncle Irving Aloysius Mortimer Montgomery Ronald Crabbe, died in Tranters Cove in 1966. But a year later his nephew Daniel came to take his place, and set himself on the path to become, only three years later, the tortured man we find now on his cot in the corner of his hovel the day before his death, cowering before the callous black hulk
of the rock on his table, the bone, invisible but sneering from its place on the shelf. Their sinister twin voices telling their long, painful tales, not fabulations but memories. This is the true nature of the connection between this ghost of Irving and Daniel; they are two halves of the same person, one half conjured out of the fantasy, the depression, the worship and loathing of the other.

And how long could such a personhood truly remain viable? It is rupturing now under the weight of two years out here alone in the wilderness, miles from that shack in Tranters Cove, straining beneath one thousand, five hundred and twenty two rusting cans, seven hundred and sixty-one collected objects, and the powerful blows of the past two days. The edifices that have sustained him these past two years are crumbling: the voices disappearing, his rites corrupted. He has not slept, so there can be no Vivification. He has no appetite for Ingurgitation, so there will be no Interment or Defecation. He cannot, he finds, summon the will for Cultivation or Refurbishment. Let his garden go wild and rot. Let his hovel cave in on itself. Something about his reality is shifting that makes it all meaningless.

But all of this, he thinks, is traceable to last month’s Rite of Acquisition. The missing Acquisition items, the lights and sound in the sky, the appearance of the infernal spirit and its ceaseless harassment, its reappearance in consecutive Fabulations, its perversion of the Ceremony of Selection, and now this torpor he finds himself doused in. Perhaps that is the cause of it all, the fault that has allowed the infiltration of the spirit’s malevolence. Perhaps it will all be rectified today once he completes the rite properly. It is the one rite that still seems to mean something to him, the only one to which he remains committed.

Now that morning has dawned in earnest he finally feels able to leave his place on the bed and go looking for PP and FF. They clucked and scratched at the door for some
hours last night, insulted at being shut out, before wandering off to find somewhere to roost, but he was pinned here until now, until the light of morning loosed his bonds and drove off the watchful spirit who possessed the objects. He hurries past the two sentinels all the same, silent though they may have fallen.

His mind is already in Tranters Cove, but first he must find the chooks. His hand in his breast pocket and the other worrying his chin so that he seems to hold himself as he walks, he sets out calling their names, filling the bush with long haunting echoes of his voice.

Yes, I have permitted you to believe this Irving was the destiny awaiting Uncle Irving instead of his nephew Daniel. And yet there are also echoes of the uncle in the nephew that made this deception possible, just as Marg noted all those years ago in the fabulation of the bone. Like Bass in the rock’s fabulation, like all humans, Marg’s understanding was limited by the world she was born into. A ‘sadness passed through the genes’ was as close as she could come to the truth. She had no way of perceiving the too-fast swelling of her infant son’s brain, the overabundance of synapses it concealed, coiling in especial profusion around his emotional and linguistic centres, slowing and stifling every unit of information, every transmission through his mind. She could not see how the genetic seeds that bloomed in Daniel’s brain had only sprouted in Irving’s, how her brother’s woes and peculiarities were much different in origin to her son’s.

But our concern here is most particularly with cause and effect, with this particular link in that great concatenating sequence that extends from here backward and forward into eternity. I am concerned with my own expression, with the answering
of the questions that have been my jailers since Irving died, for I yearn to be known in all my completeness. The questions that remain to us in the story of Daniel, of Irving the Younger, are much bound up with two foundational aspects of Uncle Irving, Irving the Elder, which I shall relate to you now.

The first and most prominent aspect was his fervent nationalism, of which you have already heard. The original Irving was always a patriot, from his earliest youth. It may have had something to do with his being born on the third of September, the day on which the national flag was first flown, in the year 1901, when the six colonies of Australia united to form the Commonwealth. It always pleased him, as Lydia said, the way his own age kept apace with the age of his nation, as though it had been brought into existence solely in preparation for him. His favourite book was *Seven Little Australians*. As he grew older he read it to his little half-sister Marg, and in his own time he devoured the exploits of Australian inventors and pioneers—Flynn, Bass and Flinders, Mawson, Kingsford-Smith and Hargrave. And, of course, he followed avidly every sporting event where scrappy little Australia achieved success disproportionate to its size, keeping a book of related news clippings.

Like Daniel, Irving would lose his mother at an early age, though in his case it was a bloody childbirth—the gambit of all placental mammals, you recall—that killed mother and child. A maternal death, a neonatal death. Before she died, however, Irving’s constant prattle about the achievements of his Australian heroes and boasting of the patriotic coincidence of his birth date led his mother to craft for his birthday one year a replica Australian flag the size of a large tea towel out of sewing scraps.

This treasure was one of the few things he took with him when he left behind his father, his stepmother and his half-sister to begin his wanderings around the state. Twenty-nine years old, he had lived his entire life on his family’s farm in Temora, and
his father was beginning to nudge him towards assuming responsibility for it. But Irving wanted some of the adventure he had been reading of his whole life. He wanted to see more of the land that he loved with his own eyes. He had never even seen the sea.

And there were other factors. The town, like all towns, had a particular power to it: the smaller the town, the stronger the force. The work opportunities, the social groups, the very architecture of the place, its populace of family and friends, of neighbours and acquaintances and strangers, all exerted in concert a certain pressure to exist in a certain way. It only allowed for so many possibilities. As well as the expectation that he would take over the family farm there was a growing unconscious animus toward marriage pressed upon him, a ubiquitous, well-meaning speculation on when he would take a wife. Add to this the incident at the cricket club, an amity with one of the players that turned sour one afternoon, the scuffle, and then the malicious spread of rumours that followed, and Irving was ready to escape the stifling familiarity of Temora, exchange it for the freedom of travel, the anonymity of itineracy.

So he set off with his swag to wander the length and breadth of the state, from Bourke to Wagga Wagga, Broken Hill to Newcastle, scrounging work wherever he could find it, which was difficult with the Depression, but not impossible for a practical man of talent and charm, only passing through, not demanding anything much, just odd jobs or a bit of extra labour when it was needed. And when he couldn’t find work he was fairly proficient at providing for himself off the land, snaring rabbits and catching fish.

1932, his second year as a nomad, mostly spent hopping from coastal town to coastal town, happened to be an especially good year for a travelling patriot. There was the victory over South Africa in the cricket that he wrote of, and by March he was passing through Sydney in time to get swept up in the opening of the Harbour Bridge.
celebrations, where he stood on a box to catch a glimpse of Captain De Groot riding out to slash the ribbon from right under Jack Lang’s nose. He carried right on celebrating when Phar Lap won the Agua Caliente the next day. Two weeks later would find him working alongside Ellis in the Helensburgh coalmine when the news came through that the horse had suddenly died under mysterious circumstances. By the time the men were commiserating at the pub after work they already would have been cutting him up to send his skin to one museum, his skeleton to another and his heart to a third. Everyone wanted their piece. A fragmented death.

And this is the night Irving will write of in his letter to Marg, when after too many consolatory beers in the heaving pub with the men he is beginning to know, he airs his grievances about the exorbitant price of board upstairs. Ellis, sitting across from him, will get a nod of assent from Bill, a big bearded bloke, before crossing the floor to tell him of the alternative lodgings available at the grazier’s lands on the other side of the national park.

What Irving won’t tell Marg in his letter is how the two of them do not part ways after that, how they spend the rest of the night deep in furious conversation, withdrawing ineluctably from the general circle of the other miners into their own separate sphere, unbreached even as the other men depart one by one, Irving venturing some opinion about work or sport or life only to find it vigorously shared by Ellis and then vice versa. How they step on one another’s sentences in their eagerness to voice their agreement, to condense their whole lives and beings into words and pass them back and forth. He will not write, certainly, of how pleasingly lean, how fine-featured, how handsome he finds this local boy of 25 with his loose dark curls and smooth pale skin. How, his caution slackened by drink, by the fact that at any time he can disappear and never return, that no one here knows him, not really, he will indulge himself with
small familiar touches and feigned accidental caresses of this fine young man. All subtle, all within the realms of ordinary friendly contact, of course, and calculated not to raise any suspicion—a laughing slap on the thigh after a joke, a drunken arm draped around the shoulder when finally they are ejected from the pub at closing—but for him invested with a shameful secondary motive, a hidden titillating significance: the second foundational aspect of his being that will come into play in his nephew’s fate.

So imagine Irving’s delight and horror when, ever so casually, Ellis offers him the other side of his tent until he can save enough to purchase one of his own, and starting that very night, if he is game for the walk. ‘No sense paying a penny more than you have to,’ says Ellis with a charming diagonal smile.

‘Lead on!’ slurs Irving, swinging his arm out and up like one of the explorers from his books. Ellis waits while he retrieves his swag and belongings from his room upstairs, and they trek into the night. Irving wasn’t prepared for the steep forty-minute downhill hike on a narrow trail through the bush that awaited him, but he cannot begrudge it, for in his inebriated state he has to hold Ellis tight to navigate obstacles in the dark that only his companion knows. They scrape and laugh and clutch and pant their way down to the water’s edge together in the dark, down to the moonlit hillside of Tranters Cove, and all the while Irving can’t help but think about the things they could do out here together where there is no one to find them for miles, if only Ellis were tortured by the same demons as he.

By the time they reach the tent he has sobered, and he worries that he might have exposed himself somehow, but Ellis gives no sign of having noticed anything untoward. The tent is calescent with the heat of the night and their bodies after the exertion of their trek, so they strip down and leave the tent flap open to invite the ocean breeze. As if to counteract any suspicions he may have aroused earlier, Irving strives under these
conditions to behave like any other man, not to look even in Ellis’ direction, to prove, through his appearance of total indifference, his normalcy. Thinking of their long day in the mines tomorrow they mean to sleep straight away after their late night and long journey home, but the heat makes it difficult and instead they push further into the night, stay up later, even later than the moon. They resolve upon rest several times, uttering their parting words, but each time one of their minds gets sidetracked as it wanders towards sleep and before long they are talking once again, so that when they do inevitably capitulate, it is with the silvery threads of their conversation still hanging in place between them, unsevered by ‘goodnight’ and glinting in the dawn.

Thirty-eight years later, a different Irving is looking down upon Tranters Cove from the scrub of the hills above, like a prey animal in hiding, rubbing his face in agitation, muttering under his breath. He deferred his departure as long as he could this morning while he searched fruitlessly for the hens and, even arriving later than usual, the items of Acquisition are missing. The aberration is repeating itself.

On the last day of every month since he left the Cove, there has been a stout little box waiting for him up here at the edge of the bush, packed full of cans of beans and vegetables, tins of fruit, bottles of water, toilet paper, soaps he never uses, matches, sometimes a magazine or newspaper he starts fire with (after filling out the crosswords), other times some other little treat or useful item—chocolate, twine, utensils, medicine—and always an object to add to his collection, some bauble or curio slipped in just for him, always with a voice inside, the monthly Rite of Acquisition and the daily Rite of Perquisition coinciding one over the other like the two hands of a clock. But now, for
two months in a row, there has been nothing.

Last month he was paralysed for hours by incomprehension. He just perched in his spot in the bush, watching and hoping for the box to materialise, until he feared if he didn’t find something on his own before night came, the Rite of Perquisition would go unsatisfied, the voices would escape their resting places before he could spirit one back to his shack. And so he did something he hadn’t done for two years: he ventured down into Tranters Cove itself, walked among the shacks there in search of a sonant object and supplies to see him through the next month. In the shadows of the dormant structures he crept, peering into windows for imperishable foodstuffs and any objects that may carry a voice. Luckily most of the shacks were closed up, but what activity there was in the Cove seemed to be concentrated at its other end. As the afternoon darkened he could see a cluster of lights around a pink shack in the distance, raised voices carrying across the valley, not objects but people.

It wasn’t long before he spied a store of canned food filling a shelf under the sink in one of the shacks. He shook as he scrabbled around the cabin, feeling under the skirting boards and eaves, looking beneath mats and bricks and stones, checking inside potplants and crevices in the walls for a hidden key. He found it, finally, taped to the inside of the gutter, after circumambulating the entire structure on his tip toes with his hands searching inside. He trembled too as he counted out sixty cans into a discarded beer case he found behind another shack; it is not his way to impress himself on someone like this, to take what isn’t his, but circumstances forced his hand. He scrawled the word *sorry* on a notepad before he closed the shack back up and taped the key back in place.

It was just as he had stumbled upon a sonant object—the rust-flecked silver flute of a broken windchime, discarded in the dirt—that he heard the noise in the sky, an
awful droning buzz in the distance, quiet at first but growing louder by the moment. And as it drew closer he detected a percussion to it, a rushing, stuttering beat that made him wince. *Vulpes vulpes. Vulpes vulpes. Vulpes vulpes.* He thrust the chime into the box and hustled it back up the incline into the bush, turning around and searching the sky for the source of the horrible din. And then in a moment it was right above him, a black hovering monster obscured by the trees and the light it shone down all about him, impossibly loud, that peppering gale of sound whipping and blasting his hair and his clothes. He screamed and bolted as the aircraft passed over him.

While Irving flew back to the safety of his bushland fastness, the helicopter paused above the pink shack and let down a cable, and a woman recumbent in a stretcher was attached. Lydia Spratt, Daniel’s old friend and the person who came closest to ever knowing his story—my greatest hope for salvation—had finally been taken from the park. There will be no more monthly deliveries for Irving.

It is the memory of the great aircraft that keeps him now from venturing back down to repeat his escapade from last month. He does not want to bring that cacophony back upon himself, cannot force himself to descend past this point on the hill. It was the apparition of this soaring behemoth that began everything: the scarcity of the voices, the decay of his rituals, the arrival of the bone spirit. But the daylight hours wane, and he must at least have his sonant object for the day before he returns home. The failure of his rituals will not matter once his collection is complete, and he knows he is so close.

He searches the ground around him frantically in the faltering light, racing the sun as it sets its course for the other side of the escarpment. Crashing through the scrub like a man in search of a friend’s body he finds nothing but a flake of Styrofoam, a broken plastic lighter, objects which, try as he might, he cannot squeeze a voice out of. Then he is back in the clearing on hands and knees, feeling through the grass and the dirt in the
dark, puling to himself as he goes. But the chances of finding a sonant object right here are narrow.

‘Unless …’ a dark voice hisses.

Irving’s eyes widen. It is once again the voice that has terrorised him these past three days, the rasping of bone, the grinding of rock, and now a new sibilance wisping up out of the earth before him like smoke. He stares at the patch of ground that issued the utterance, shaking his head in futile defiance.

Irving and Ellis nudged and butted up against one another all week like two courting dragonflies, one venturing while the other pulled back, then the other advancing while the first withdrew. Sideways glances from one while dressing in the confines of the tent, met with exhibitionism from the other, daring invitations to look. Roughhousing just to touch one another. Sitting unnaturally close. Long looks that surely, surely could only mean reciprocation, but no. And then finally, somehow, yes.

A kiss.

You humans ever inhibit your progress by clinging to your perceived impossibilities.

Before long, they were acting on Irving’s fantasies from that first night, slipping into the bush where no one could find them, cloaked in a privacy that Irving could never have known in the darkened chambers of the Temora cricket club with his one-time ‘friend.’

Much as the pair tried to be silent, the men of the Cove did hear the unflapping of the tent, the footsteps in the grass past their resting heads. They couldn’t imagine the
truth, though, could only assume someone was going off to relieve himself. But as time went on, it became too tempting for the pair to just remain in the bed, take the risk, and Tranters Cove could be a very quiet place at night. Secrets leaked through the canvas despite their best efforts. Their closeness, their prolonged cohabitation, their shared bed, their nighttime activities. To some men in the Cove—Frankie and Liam, Dennis and Alistair—the two remained mere mates. For others, Bill and Jeff, the rumours turned their stomachs, but what went on behind closed doors was no business of theirs, and besides, there was still no way to know for sure. But for some few, principally Orson Doyle and Nigel Whiting, the two could only be confirmed sodomites who needed to be driven from the Cove and the mines. Their efforts at first in this regard were limited to spreading rumours and shooting contemptuous glances, but it soon began to concern the illicit lovers. Irving asked if Ellis wanted to carry on with him south, find work on an oyster farm or a vineyard, but Ellis thought it was unwise to give up a good job while it lasted, and neither of them ever wanted to leave the park.

And then, a miracle. The first semi-permanent structures in the park began to spring up around them, seemingly like mushrooms in the night. When they spotted Dennis hauling logs out of the bush to build a cabin, they offered a hand and learned that the grazier who owned the land around Tranters Cove was giving permission to build cabins. ‘Four bob a week,’ he told them.

There was, overlooking the Cove, a peak where they liked to sit after work before they made their way down to the tent, and where they had gone one of those first nights for privacy. They figured if people kept building shacks they’d do it down where the land was flatter, where they didn’t have to lug heavy materials up a slope first. If they built up there they’d be close to everyone else, but apart, up on their own little peak with no room for anyone else. And they’d be safe if the owner ever decided he wanted
everyone out to use the land. So they asked, before the rumours got back to the grazier and turned him against them.

‘Two blokes shacked up together in a tent, I’m sure you understand,’ said Irving, giving Ellis a sideways glance. ‘It gets a bit cramped. So we thought perhaps we could put up something a bit more roomy and, er … permanent?’

‘All the way up there?’ asked the grazier. ‘Seems like an awful lot of hassle.’

‘We don’t mind. Think of the view,’ said Irving.

‘Just a small one, nothing palatial,’ added Ellis.

‘Well,’ said the grazier as he stood up and dusted his hands. ‘You boys haven’t given me any trouble so far, so I can’t see why not. I won’t be using that scrap of land for anything else any time soon.’

They celebrated that night and put the word out for any help the next day. In the end, the construction took a week and a half of afternoons and weekends, but it was worth it. Dennis and Bill showed up without a second word, and Frankie, Liam, Alistair and Jeff pitched in the day they carried their cast iron stove and kerosene refrigerator down through the bush, on condition they’d get to keep beers cold in the latter when the shack was done. Throughout the process, a skinny young eucalypt Ellis had felled and stripped lay weathering next to the inchoate shack. When Irving asked what it was for, Ellis said nothing more than, ‘You’ll see.’

For the roof and the walls they dug up some old corrugated iron sheeting from a scrapper’s heap. They would corrode in a few years with the ocean breeze up there, Irving knew, but by then they’d have a bit more money saved and could do an upgrade, maybe in weatherboard or even wood.

The afternoon they finally screwed the door into place, the final touch, Ellis brought out beers for every man who’d helped along the way and they had a fire out the
front of the new shack. Before dark, he finally revealed his plans. He had Bill and Alistair help lift the unused log into a hole he’d dug that morning. Threaded through a pair of nails at the top was a thick, coarse rope that had washed up in the cove weeks back. It looked like it’d been used to tie hundred-foot ships to their moorings somewhere down south.

One hand supporting him as he leaned against the pole, Ellis gathered everyone around to raise a toast. After a hearty round of ‘hear, hear,’ he set his drink down on the ground and pulled something from behind his back, a rolled-up piece of fabric. When he unfurled it with a grin, Irving saw that it was the Australian flag his mother had made him as a child. Ellis hoisted it up to a round of applause from the onlookers. Their own little piece of Australia.

It took only a week for the flag to come down. It was a Friday night when Irving and Ellis returned from the mines to find it gone. The pole chopped down, an axe sunk into their kerosene tank, their door broken in and their belongings ransacked. They knew immediately who was responsible. Doyle was laid off just days before, and had spent the week since drinking in his tent, shouting abuse at anyone who passed by, and especially Irving and Ellis. He would be bitter, they knew, that he, an honest, God-fearing man with family in the mines going back generations, had gotten the sack, while they, a blow-in and his bugger, retained their positions.

Ellis wanted to inform the grazier, but Irving was already marching down to Doyle’s tent.

‘Get out here, Doyle,’ he barked.
‘Bugger off!’ was all that emerged.

Ellis slashed the tent flap aside and Irving charged in, grabbing the drunkard by the scruff of his collar. ‘Where’s the flag, you bloody mongrel?’ he demanded.

‘I don’t have to say a word to two buggering sodomites like you!’ Doyle spat.

‘You chopped down a flagpole, Doyle. It’s bloody … seditious!’

‘It’s not Australia I got a problem with,’ he slurred back. ‘I did the nation a favour. You’re not fit to fly the flag!’

Behind them, Ellis rustled through the tent looking for the stolen pennant.

‘Oi, cut it out!’ said Doyle, struggling to peer out from behind Irving. ‘You won’t find anything! I burned it, I did! I bloody burned it!’

‘You wouldn’t,’ Irving said.

‘I did,’ he grinned, and Irving couldn’t help but wallop him one. But he didn’t believe it. Even Doyle wasn’t so vile.

‘Found it,’ came Ellis’ voice from behind them. Irving twisted around to see it for himself, then looked back to Doyle. The scoundrel spat at him, but missed. Irving just gave him a shake by the collar, then dropped him and followed Ellis out of the tent.

He never hoisted the flag again after that. In truth, it was already more faded and battered than he preferred after its short time atop the pole. They decided the shack would require more security if they were to inhabit it long term. The next day they trekked into town to buy some padlocks for the doors and windows, and a long metallic for their valuables. They buried the chest in the earth beneath the shack so that only the lid was above the soil. Into it they placed Ellis’ pocket watch, their saved cash, and a few other bits and bobs they wanted safe. The last thing Irving threw in before they locked it and covered it over with a thin layer of soil and their rug was the length of rope and his flag, against a day when perhaps they would be able to fly it without fear.
Irving takes a stick from the underbrush and begins to scratch around in the earth, prodding and digging up clods. He shudders when he feels it. That old metal chest from so long ago. Grimly he sets about uncovering it from beneath the thin layer of earth that conceals it. He scrunches his eyes closed and hooks his fingers under the rust-stiffened lid. Though he cannot see, some part of him knows what is waiting for him within, coated in decay, coiled around old photographs and an ancient tattered flag and sitting like a dragon atop its hoard of useless Australian pounds. It hisses to him again.

He hauls it out of the chest and slings it over his shoulder, the terrible weight of this hoary rope. He slams the lid shut and kicks the soil back over the chest, then rushes back into the scrub and up the hill, back into the depths of the bush, wondering when his curse will end.

But back at his shack an unspeakable sight is awaiting him, barely visible now as night falls. Initially he is aghast walking amongst the carnage, but it takes a few minutes before he realise it is not just the dismembered carcass of some poor anonymous creature, but his old companion who has been so defiled. FF is nowhere to be seen, but the remains of PP are strewn all around the shack. He is shuffling through the butchery, looking at his feet and mumbling the names of the chooks when he kicks it. PP’s decapitated caramel head camouflaged amongst the leaves. He sees her now, eyes vacant, beak ajar.

He whimpers in disbelief, reaching down at the soft little ball.

Looking up through his tears he sees the gore anew. A string of entrails not far behind him has the golden globe of a half-formed egg in its orbit. And up ahead, the
feathers begin to litter the ground like leaves. Not far off he finds a wing, a leg, and finally the rest of the body in one piece, its interior visible through a craterous wound.

It is not one of the feral dogs or cats or foxes he has seen over the years, but the devilry of the spirit whom he holds accountable, fixing him in place on his cot last night so it could enact its vengeance. A voice inside tells him FF has been devoured in full and PP left behind for him to find. An ominous death. A message writ in flesh. He breaks down and wails, holds his head in his hands for a long time, and then the rage is once again upon him like it was so often in his past life. He is pounding his fists on the trunks of trees and annihilating his garden with hands and feet. He is tearing the tins from their place in the earth and hurling them at his shack, moaning and howling like a demon himself. But it is not enough, none of this devastation is enough. He turns on his hovel now with his own body his instrument, grunting and shrieking as he tears at the walls, peeling back panels and spinning them off to the side, knocking aside beams and tearing off bindings. From inside he hears the cries of his collection as his objects awaken, but even they cannot stop him as he leans into the structure with all his weight, pressing against its two structural beams with a mighty cry, slowly bulldozing the whole structure into a slanting diagonal and finally an absolute horizontal.

He lands amongst the rubble, panting and bleeding and sated, and lies there until he can muster the energy and composure to gather the remains of his friend for burial. Then there is nothing to do but prop himself against the debris of his shack and bask in the noise of his collection, awaiting the rope’s fabulation.
There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s, although he wasn’t the least bit effeminate looking—still—that thing was there …

— Blanche DuBois, Scene Six, Tennessee Williams’ A Streetcar Named Desire

Chapter 6

July 1967

Royal National Park, New South Wales

The morning after she left Daniel up in his uncle’s shack Lydia has to stifle a laugh when he appears at her door wearing Irving’s old clothes and cologne. His favourite navy shirt and black tracksuit pants. The weatherproof jacket he used to hang on the back of her door when he visited. The old leather boots he would leave like sentries on her verandah, which she found one morning standing, preposterous and abandoned, on the beach.

The next moment she is biting back tears.

‘Daniel, darling, what are you doing?’ she asks, swallowing the quiver in her voice as she lets him in.

‘Call me Irving, please,’ he replies very seriously, as though there is nothing unusual about the request. The laughter escapes her this time, but his blue-grey eyes remain unchanged.

‘Pet,’ she flusters, pulling a chair for him and rounding the table. ‘I—I think …’ She peers at him and grips the back of her own seat. ‘I think you might’ve taken me a bit literally. You don’t have to actually pretend to be Irving. I just meant …’
‘But I want to be Irving,’ he insists, a hint of the temper in his voice.

‘But …’ she gives another half-laugh of puzzlement, indicating his clothes. He still has the hood up on the coat, every button buttoned and every zipper zipped.

‘What’s this all about?’

He fixes his gaze off to the side in that way of his, flipping mentally through his dictionary in search of the words. But Lydia watches his brows knot together as if in commitment to his stance. A long silence elapses while she considers him. She has encountered oddities like his before during her years at the asylum, her decades at the nursing home—the fits of temper, the childishness, the quietness, the aversion to eye contact—though never in his particular configuration.

‘You’re a strange egg, aren’t you …’ She tests the name, ‘Irving?’

He shines like he’s been set alight, lets his gaze rest on her face. Her speaking the name confers reality on his transformation.

‘Okay,’ she shrugs in cheery resignation. ‘If that’s what you want to be called, that’s what you want to be called.’

‘Yes, please.’ He is bouncing in his seat, kicking his legs, twisted together beneath the table.

‘And what else have you decided, Mr Crabbe? Did you enjoy the shack?’

‘Oh, yes,’ he beams. ‘I …’ he looks away again now. ‘I would like to stay.’

She watches him across the table as he awaits her response, as he braces for the snatching away of something he wants dearly. ‘You want to live here all the time, you mean?’ she asks.

‘Yes.’

‘Wonderful!’ She delights in his relief. ‘A new shackie for the Cove, then! They’re not going to burn that shack down with you in it, are they?’
He shakes his head emphatically.

Lydia taps the table with both hands. ‘But you never came down for tea last night! You must be starving.’ She launches out of her seat, bustles into the kitchen. ‘I’ve got some bacon in here somewhere if you like. I could cook up some eggs and toast. We’re not supposed to keep chooks, but I do anyway. Bugger ’em, I say.’

Irving freezes, as he always does when confronted, but Lydia doesn’t notice with her face in the fridge. He shakes his head, eyes bulging. ‘No,’ he manages. ‘No meat … no bacon.’

Lydia swivels. She is about to ask when she notices his agitation. ‘Not a problem, not a problem,’ she says instead. ‘Eggs on toast it is.’

Gathering the ingredients, she checks another peculiarity off her list, charting the topography of this strange young man. Then, ‘Ooh!’ she says to bury the hiccup. ‘We should be celebrating, shouldn’t we? I’m afraid I haven’t got any champers. We’ll have to make do with tea.’

The kettle is filled and set on the stove, and Irving hears the magical crack of shell on counter, the sizzle of egg in hot oil.

‘Did you say you have chooks?’ he asks.

‘Yes, yes, a hen and a rooster, actually. I’ll take you out to meet them after breakfast if you like.’

‘Yes, please,’ he says. He likes this woman, but he hasn’t yet thawed to her. He doesn’t yet feel safe with her. But the chooks, at least, count in her favour. ‘What are they called?’ he asks.

‘The hen didn’t really have a name until my daughter dropped the rooster off. I just called her ‘chook.’ But now her name’s ‘Piano’ and the rooster’s ‘Forte’ because he makes an awful racket. Lucky no one around here minds.’
‘Oh,’ he says.

‘I’m hoping for some new chicks before Piano gets too old, since her laying’s slowing down now.’ She turns back to him, pointing to the eggs. ‘Don’t worry, though, these ones aren’t fertilised.’


Lydia nearly asks if he will be travelling back home to collect any of his things before he settles in, but she doesn’t even know where home would be. He still seems so sensitive, so secretive. She doesn’t want to set him off, and she detected a reluctance in him yesterday when she asked him questions. She will leave his story to him to divulge, if he ever wants to. Tranters Cove has always been a refuge for iconoclasts and radicals, fringe dwellers and misfits. He will open up to her in time, she is sure.

‘My daughter and her husband do monthly grocery deliveries for me,’ she says over the hissing of the pan. ‘I’ll get them to bring some for you too, shall I?’

‘Thank you,’ he says. He hasn’t even considered how he will feed himself out here.

‘Not a problem,’ she says. ‘I’m sure they’d rather stick me in a home than trek down here every month, but it’s the least they can do for their old mum. Now, how do you like your eggs?’

‘Um,’ he replies, perturbed that his trouble with words has not been vanquished along with his old name. Mucilaginous slides through his mind as the exact term for his preference, but it doesn’t sound right.

‘Runny, cooked-through, sunny side–up, gooey?’ Lydia prompts.

Gooey. That isn’t as precise, but it is the kind of word people actually use. ‘Yes, gooey please.’
The toast pops and Lydia swoops on it in time for the escaping heat to melt the butter. She pours water into two mugs, already milked and sugared, teabags slouching within. Then she flips the two eggs at the last minute to seal in the viscous yolk, and deposits them onto the toast.

‘There we are,’ she says, when she sets the plate down before him. She slides him the salt and pepper and passes his tea.

He looks up into Lydia’s pleasantly anuran face and says, ‘Thank you,’ again, trying to press it out as sincerely as he can to make her feel how much he means it.

‘Here’s to new beginnings,’ she winks, raising her teacup. But Irving misses the cue, so she chalks her cup into his herself with a laugh.

The pair fall quickly into a friendship after their first breakfast. They learn one another’s rhythms, each familiarises themself with the other’s presence. It isn’t the friendship Irving envisioned for himself in all his years as Daniel. He hadn’t guessed his Ellis would be a woman in her seventies. But it confirms his decision to leave Daniel behind. Daniel’s life had gone twenty-two years without a friend. Irving’s came with friends built in.

They spend nearly every day together, weave their own pattern out of the warp and the weft of each of their separate habits and needs. Irving trundles down from his shack after breakfast each morning to feed Piano and Forte and the chicks when they are born. He adores the tiny yellow puffs with their constant shrill cheeps, cradles them in his hands every chance he gets, but he doesn’t like the Italian sound of the names Lydia gives them—Pianissimo and Fortissimo—so she suggests the nicknames PP and FF
instead. After stroking each of them in turn, except Forte, who doesn’t like to be held, he waits quietly on Lydia’s verandah.

When he begins to miss days between showers and neglect brushing his teeth, Lydia reprimands him for poor presentation to a lady, recalling pointedly how well-groomed his uncle was, and he quickly falls into line. So he is always freshly dressed and showered whenever she emerges with tea—sometimes at 9, sometimes at 10—and they do a word puzzle from one of the books she has accrued over the years. Irving is useless at most of the trivia, but prodigious with synonymy. Early on Lydia makes the mistake of lending him a book of the puzzles to do on his own and he returns it the next morning, every synonym question in the book answered. *Famine* (7): *PAUCITY*. *Lionize* (5): *EXALT*. *Forlorn* (9): *SATURNINE*. She rations the puzzles more frugally after that, reads him the questions and enters the answers herself rather than handing the book over to him to fill out in five seconds flat.

When they are stumped or the puzzle is complete they might go for a short walk, a paddle by the waterside collecting stones and shells to add to the windowsills of Irving’s shack. They take lunch and sit together in the afternoons while Lydia paints or reads or plays piano or busies herself with some other project. Irving reads his dictionary or another book from his shack, or makes his own art from a box of craft materials she keeps for her grandchildren’s rare visits. He sticks googly eyes and pipe cleaners and feathers onto rocks to make happy little creatures, paints shells and pieces of wood with her old brushes. She teaches him the notes to ‘When Irish Eyes are Smiling’ on the piano, which he will play for hours on end if she lets him. Sometimes he asks her to tell him stories about his uncle while she paints. Sometimes he brings her one of the decorations from the shack that has caught his attention to see if she knows the story behind it, and sometimes she does. She can’t tell him anything about Irving
and Jim when he asks. But still, he never expected there would be so many more stories beyond those from the letters. Occasionally they overlap, and he enjoys hearing them anew from Lydia’s perspective, but more often she pauses a moment after he asks her, and her mind wanders into some new detail, some aspect of the man that surprises and delights him. The time he and Ellis were helping Mr Davis restore his stonework shack with boulders rolled down from all over the hills, but they lost control and the stones came tumbling through the Cove, miraculously missing children and other shacks. The time a park ranger insisted they evacuate due to bushfires, only to get them stuck in the bush, headed off by flames, and it was up to Irving to lead them back to the safety of the beach. The year after when they tried to get them to evacuate again and Irving told them to clear off. His work removing the lantana from the Cove and replanting natives. His legendary Queen’s birthday barbecues. His ability to recite entire nonsense stories and bush poems. His kindness. His strength.

Lydia might also take Irving around to meet someone in another shack if they are staying for the weekend or the holidays, and he sits in on action meetings planning their next move to protect the Cove from the demolition crews—determining which letters need writing, which applications need lodging, which decisions appealed, which protests attended. But they lose the Frazier and Ingram shacks all the same when their leaseholders Marty and Vanessa die, the dreaded yellow demolition notices blossoming on their doors one morning like flowers on graves. Marty and Vanessa’s lives in Sydney kept them too busy to make the trip, so Irving never meets either of them. Their shacks didn’t have a protector like his.

At some point each afternoon he returns to the solitude of the shack, which he explores inch by inch, inspecting every photo, poring over every album of newspaper

15 Two distant deaths.
clippings, reading every book. He never tires of looking out at the ocean through the windows festooned with dangling seahorses and urchins, fishes and seashells as he prepares his dinner. And afterward, he still reads one of his mother’s letters every night before bed, giddy that he sleeps now in the place where they were written. He has brought them home.

Behind the cabin is a waist-high wall of brown liquor bottles piled up to display their years of manufacture on each base. When he asks Lydia about it she tells him how a lot of the Cove folk used to just throw their empty bottles out into the scrub whenever they had a night on the drink, but then it got so full of broken glass you couldn’t walk through it anymore and Uncle Irving led the effort to clear it out. From then onwards he added all his bottles to the wall. Other people started doing the same out the back of their own shacks until it became an architectural feature of the Cove, a point of pride to compete for whose wall was the highest, whose bottles stretched back the furthest in time.

One morning Irving sits down at one corner of the wall, brushing away the accumulated cobwebs, and works his way through each bottle from the base to the top. He counts 880 by the time he is done. The bottom row is all from 1959, and the ones at the top are 1966. It’s strange to think how recently his uncle would have kissed the lips of some of them. He wonders how many days since the last one was laid, if any of the sinister whiff lingers in their honeycombed chambers.

Whenever he sees shards of glass on the ground after that, he always picks them up. And if he spots an empty bottle intact, discarded beside a shack or lying on a table after the night before, he always pinches it to add it to the latest row of bottles, that his uncle’s work might carry on through him.

After a few misunderstandings, Lydia soon learns that he rarely picks up on hints
or implications, to instruct him quite clearly if she wants a day to herself to recover from a flu or read a book in her own company or finish one of the pictures she paints now to make up for the ones she never had time for when she was raising the kids. But those days are few and far between. It is pleasant to become once again so central in somebody’s life, now that she is so peripheral in the lives of her own children, all the way out here in Tranters Cove.

She learns he doesn’t do well with variations from routine, and which topics and sights and sounds and smells will send him into a fit. She refines her methods of pulling him back out when they do strike. After misspeaking only a few times, she learns to think of him as Irving rather than Daniel. And she learns by omission that, though he revels in tales of his uncle, his own past is not a place Irving likes to dwell, that he is a creature entirely absorbed in his present and that, perhaps, he will never share his story with her. She still does not press him for it. It is her nature to give those she loves what they want, even if it is not in their best interest. Her dogs were always fat, her grandchildren spoiled. So she doesn’t tell Irving when the cheques he writes to cover his groceries begin to bounce; she just adds the small expense to the withdrawals from his uncle’s community fund that already cover his rent. Some of the days that she keeps for herself she spends painting him a picture, an impressionistic portrait in which she accentuates the features he shares with his uncle. She paints him in a heroic pose by the seaside, surrounded by crabs for his new namesake. Secretly she thinks the animals an apt symbol for the boy. For things without a past can have no future, and something about him seems locked in time, condemned to move forever sideways—laterigrade, he would say—instead of forward through life.
Irving’s happiest year ends one night with the sounds of three hushed voices outside his shack.

‘Is this the right one?’ Tom whispers, panting from the climb. His full bladder exacerbates his anxiety.

‘Has to be,’ says Jason.

Tom’s family has a shack in the neighbouring community to the north, and this year they invited his cousin Jason and Jason’s mate Reed along for the annual trip.

Irving freezes, straining to make out the voices hovering just outside his walls.

‘Do you think he’s in there?’ asks Reed, too loud.

Tom shushes him frantically. ‘You’ll wake him up!’

‘Yeah, Reed, don’t want him to come out and feel you up,’ Jason laughs.

‘Let him try,’ says Reed.

Jason feints a grab for his friend and they snigger again.

All week the two older boys, just over the bridge into adolescence, have been muttering to one another in disgust about the old faggot up at Tranters Cove—everyone has heard the stories—and how someone should do something. Tom joined in, thinking it was all just talk. But tonight is their last night in the park, and they shook him awake with fingers pressed to lips and led him out into the night toward Tranters Cove.

From his bed, Irving looks around for some salvation in the dark.

‘All right, you got the paint, Tom?’ asks Jason. Tom fishes it out of the bag Reed foisted on him during the trek. ‘Give it here, I’m doin’ it. Keep a look out.’

‘Right,’ says Tom, somewhat relieved.
Irving hears a rattle right next to his head. He rises slowly and creeps to the other side of the shack, ears still pricked. Then he hears the swiping of spray paint against the walls outside.

Tom’s bladder is still bursting and, with no sign of movement from inside, he decides to make the most of it in front of the other two. ‘Oi,’ he says as he approaches the structure and unzips. ‘Oi, Jase.’

‘What?’

‘Jase, look, I’m pissing.’

Jason turns and lets out a short sibilant of approval through his teeth, then rattles the can once again and the hissing recommences.

Irving is in a state now. The trickling of urine against the walls, every swish and rattle of the paint can gnaw at him, that horrible hissing. He wants to kneel in the corner and wait for the boys to leave, but he can’t stand this violation of his uncle’s old home. His head is full of the tales of Irving—himself, he feels—standing up to the authorities and coming to the rescue of his friends, of how he and Lydia fought the State for decades to preserve this shack, and how he is supposed to be its protector now, how someone is marring it. He thinks what his uncle would do if he were here, and before he can stop himself, he is charging outside, yelling ‘Hey!’

The hissing stops. Tom’s fly zips up. ‘Shit,’ he says.

Jason and Reed are whispering furiously when Irving appears around the corner.

‘What are you doing?’ he tries to demand with all his outrage, but he trips over the words.

Tom’s mouth gapes and he begins backing away until Reed grabs him. Then Jason steps forward to meet the challenge

‘Wh-wh-what are you doing?’ he mocks. ‘Are you a moron as well as a faggot?’
Now the mood changes as the boys press in at him and his fury turns to fear. He feels the oily black taint in his chest once again at the venom in that last word. The fumes of the spraypaint stir in his lungs.

‘I’m not scared of you, you freak,’ Jason continues.

‘Jason,’ Tom interrupts. ‘He’s not old.’

Jason’s eyes never leave Irving’s, which are downcast now.

‘Yeah, so?’ asks Reed.

‘The guy … the poofter … he’s supposed to be really old. Are you sure it’s him?’

‘I’m not!’ yells Irving, like a cornered animal lashing out before returning to his cowering.

Reed looks to Jason.

‘It’s him,’ he says. ‘I can tell a fag when I see one.’

Irving balls his hands and thrashes them in protest.

‘If it’s not him it’s his boyfriend,’ Reed smirks.

Jason nods to Reed and they grab hold of Irving, wheeling him around to face the shack. He squirms, crying ‘No!’

‘Can you read that?’ Jason points to the red letters scrawled across the side of the cabin. Irving reads the words and stares at the ground below them dumbly.

Tom stands rooted to the spot. There’s something wrong with this man, he sees, and it is going too far now. But he can’t find the moment or the means to stop it.

‘I said, can you read that?!’ the boy roars, loosing a punch into Irving’s stomach.

Tom winces with the impact. ‘Jason!’ he says. ‘Let’s go!’ But Jason doesn’t react.

‘I think someone’s coming,’ he lies.

Jason leans down next to the graffiti himself, pointing to each word as he speaks it: QUEERS OUT OF THE PARK. Next to it is the beginnings of a stick-man hanging
from a noose. Irving’s chest constricts at the sight of the hateful words on the hallowed wood. His stomach roils.

‘Yeah,’ says Reed next to Irving’s face. ‘It’s called a natural park for a reason.’

*National* park, Tom corrects internally.

‘You got that?’ demands Jason.

But Irving is just moaning now, falling from tears into a fit. Jason and Reed look at one another. They are losing their momentum. As much out of a need for finality as anything else, Jason punches Irving in the face before Reed drops him. They stand there for a moment over his body. Jason turns back to Tom. ‘Got any piss left in the tank?’

Tom shakes his head, so Jason spits instead. ‘He’d probably enjoy that anyway, sicko.’

It isn’t until the fit passes that Irving realises his attackers have left. He lies there for some minutes before he can haul himself down to Lydia’s.

Hovering over him in her nightgown in the pallid light of her kitchen, Lydia manages to coax an account of the attack out of Irving as he presses a bag of frozen peas to his face. She was so furious when he turned up she nearly handed him a frozen steak. It will be a tall order to track the culprits down, if they are even still in the park, especially given Irving’s couldn’t look them in the face, but she will make all the necessary phone calls in the morning.

Irving is bewildered. He keeps returning to the same question: why him?

‘Just the way they are,’ Lydia tries to explain. Irving is so gentle, she thinks, that he can’t comprehend the hatred that stirs men and boys to such violence. ‘It’s nothing
you did. Nothing you could’ve done. I’m sure they hardly knew why they were doing it themselves.’

But Irving isn’t getting his meaning across. He marshals the words. ‘But why me?’ he pleads. ‘Why did they say that about me?’

Lydia sighs and takes a seat across from him. She draws a deep breath, fights off an urge to call him Daniel instead of Irving, as though this whole time they have been play-acting and now it is time to be serious. ‘Irving,’ she finally says, ‘Look. When you first showed up here I thought you knew this … You know, from the way you spoke about Irving and Ellis, but …’

But it became clear over time that he had a different idea of their relationship.

‘Well, pet, it sounds like they took you for your uncle. He was always having trouble with those sorts, strangers who didn’t know him. Rumours and things …’

But Irving still doesn’t understand. ‘They thought my uncle … liked men?’

‘Irving,’ she begins. It feels stranger than ever to call him that now. ‘Your uncle did like men. He liked … He loved Ellis, at least.’

His blank stare forces her on.

‘In a romantic way.’

His mind recoils. ‘No he didn’t!’ he accuses. The oily taint spreads through him again. ‘Why are you saying that?’

Lydia purses her lips in reluctance. ‘Because it’s true, pet.’

She places her hand over his, balled tight on the table, and he snatches it away. He stands up and slams the bag of peas down.

Lydia has never seen him so worked up without having a fit. She knows better than to approach someone in this state, so she stays in her seat. ‘Why does it bother you so much?’ she asks.
He throws his hands up. ‘It isn’t … right!’ he says. The boys’ words come back to him, Jim’s toxic breath. ‘It’s not natural! And it isn’t true. You’re making it up.’ He is pacing now, his right eye blooming red, his thumbnail between his teeth. ‘Don’t lie about that!’ he yells. ‘You shouldn’t tell lies about someone!’

Lydia remains calm, quiet. ‘Irving, I can’t make you believe anything you don’t want to, but I knew your uncle for twenty years.’

‘He’s my uncle!’ he yells. All he can hear in his head is the word lying over and over again.

There’s no point pressing something he doesn’t want to hear, Lydia thinks, something that’s just riling him up. ‘Irving—’ she says.


And then in a moment he runs out of her shack, back up the hill to his own cabin, never ceasing the recitation of his mantra, telling himself he will never emerge from it again.

The next morning Irving resists the compulsion to shower and dress and walk down to feed Piano and Forte, PP and FF. Instead he stands before the mirror, pressing the tender violet crescent that frames his right eye, remembers last night’s whispers outside and the wounds of Lydia’s falsehoods. He draws his curtains and settles down with his dictionary. He never needs to open the door again, he tells himself, basking in the caliginous silence, the oblivion of his absolute seclusion.
So he is incensed when Lydia breaches the peace of his sanctum.

‘Irving?’ She taps on the door.

He declines to answer, as she feared he might.

‘Irving, I’m sorry about last night,’ she tries. Nothing. ‘Let me in, pet. Can you forgive me?’

_No_, he thinks.

After a long moment she sighs and rests her head on the door. ‘Irving, look. I called the police and the park authorities. They might want to come and talk to you.’

He looks up at that. He doesn’t want to talk to anyone. Why did she do that?

‘We should talk about what to tell them,’ she continues. She rose early this morning to walk to the surf club and use the phone. She hesitated over the name to give for the victim, but settled on Irving Crabbe. It is the name he is using, after all.

Irving shakes his head mutely and sends his finger down the page to find his place again: _tenderfoot, tenderhearted, tendering, tenderise, tenderloin, tenderman_. Then he finds it. _Tendinitis. Inflammation of a tendon._

‘At least let me have a look at your eye,’ Lydia pleads.

He puts his hands over his ears and keeps reading. _Tendinoplasty. See tentoplasty._ He hates the anticlimactic entries that direct you elsewhere. He wishes they would just duplicate the description. He doesn’t like the messy procession of abbreviated words after each entry, either. Even though he has learned what they all mean, he can’t help but read them in his head all clipped and stuttering like a malfunctioning robot. _N. Surg. (pl) -sties. fr. OE. Lat._ He wonders how much bigger the dictionary would have to be to spell out all those words in full.

‘Irving,’ her voice, softer now, muffles through his hands. ‘Please.’

_Tendinosuture. See tenorrhaphy._ He rolls his eyes.
No matter what she tries, Lydia cannot coax Irving out of his shack, cannot even elicit a response. Cocooned inside he learns to dismiss the noises of the world beyond his four walls. It is not that he doesn’t hear. He listens intently to everything. But he allows them to come and go without reaction, like plants and animals living and dying, the ephemera of living matter bursting in and out of their brief existences around a stone, stalwart through the flickering centuries. Later that day he pays no heed to the rapping on his door and window. He speechlessly rebuffs Lydia’s pleas and a man’s stern questions, sending the stranger instead to see what he can glean from the other residents of the Cove. He ignores the persistent scrubbing and wet slapping of a brush in water from the side of the shack, Lydia’s groans of effort, her sobs. He tunes out the scuff of a heavy box of groceries being left on his front porch. And at night he shuts out the eerie echoes he hears in the distance, the whispered words he hears beside his head, the accusations, the voices inviting him out into the bush.

After some weeks, he begins to feel safe venturing outside for brief excursions if there is no one around, usually early in the morning. Though, if he stays out for too long he begins to fear one of the boys will appear and hurt him, one of his three miniature tormentors. One dawn he sneaks down to the waterside for a few minutes to watch it up close. Another morning he is drawn out by a herd of semi-tame deer who have enveloped his shack as they graze. Lydia happens to spy him up there from below, a lone dark figure in the distance holding out a hand to the regal creatures, who regard him with casual caution. She hears them in the night and the mornings sometimes, their horrifying, too-human screams that scare the kids of the Cove on school holidays. Her
first thought is to rush up there now while he is out of his shack, talk to him. She is sick with worry for the boy. But she knows that, like the deer, he will just flee at the sight of her, and she can’t bring herself to spoil such a perfect moment for him, to make him wary of venturing outside again. It is clear that he cannot forgive her revelation about his uncle. It drives the truth of the matter home to her: that he can read all the letters and postcards he wants, listen to all the stories, adopt his uncle’s name and try to live his life, but he never really knew the man, and he never will. The idea of Irving and Ellis took some getting used to for her as well, but it was impossible to know them—really know them—and hold it against them. Even the gruffest men in the Cove were at least able to put it from their minds in his presence, and yet his own nephew, who professes such admiration for him, cannot.

It is clear that the attack, too, has broken something in him. She has wondered briefly whether she should find help for him. But what help is there for such a soul? She knows better than anyone the sterile, medicated life he would lead within the halls of an asylum, how ill it would suit him. It’s why she herself will never leave the Cove to be put in a home, not after she has seen how the residents are treated. Any kind of life he can have here in the Park, among the animals, in his uncle’s shack by the sea, is better than that.

It is almost too much to bear when Lydia learns Irving’s shack is scheduled for demolition. Word of the true Irving’s demise got out during the investigation after the attack, though the culprits themselves were never found. ‘Christ,’ she says when she climbs the hill to see the shrill yellow notice posted on his door for herself. ‘Irving!’ she
calls out. ‘Did you see this?’

But her voice is just another one for Irving to turn a deaf ear on.

‘Irving,’ she says on the other side of the door for the hundredth time since his withdrawal into reclusion. She speaks slowly, wringing the words out of herself. ‘This is very sad, but you might … you’re probably going to have to move, okay? They’re going to demolish the shack.’ She clings to a hope that the government will defer the demolition on appeal. If anyone can inspire their compassion, she thinks, surely it will be pitiable, inoffensive Irving, a troubled young man with nowhere else to go. But she knows better than to count on that.

*Demolish.* Irving picks the word out of her sentences and lets the others around it fall uselessly to the floor. *Ruin, destroy, raze, tear down.*

‘Irving.’ Lydia bites her lip. She tears the notice from the door and slips it under the crack. ‘Do you understand what this means? This says you need to get out of here, okay? Read it. They’re going to *burn the shack.*’

The way she stresses those three words makes him grasp onto them. But that isn’t right, he thinks. That’s why he moved here, so they couldn’t burn the shack. That’s what Lydia asked him to do. This voice is just confusing things.

‘I’m going to try to stop them,’ the voice continues. He is already blocking it out. ‘But we have to start packing up your things, okay?’ Lydia continues, unheeded. ‘Just in case. I’ve brought some boxes. I can do it if you like.’

When there is no response she relents. ‘Okay, Irving. I’m going to leave the boxes here. You have to fill them up with everything you want to keep. The rest you … you might have to … leave behind.’

She rests a hand on the door for a minute before she makes her way back down the hill to call an action meeting.
That night, Irving uses the notice and her boxes in his woodfire stove.

On the day of the demolition, Lydia sits on her verandah all morning and into the afternoon, jaw set and eyes cold in grim anticipation of the crew. The government will not be dissuaded from its insatiable pursuit of each shack in the Cove’s dwindling herd. The thought of the humble, venerable old home of Irving and Ellis going up in flames makes her sick. The pointless erasure of what they left behind. But she has, at least, her plan of last resort—waiting within the binoculars around her neck, the note in her pocket. If she cannot save the shack, she can at least limit the damage the loss will do to its latest inhabitant. She tried one last time yesterday to lure Irving out of the shack so she could pack his things, move him down to her place, but it was no use. He remained ensconced in silence. She could have broken in, but what good would it have done? She couldn’t drag him away. She couldn’t keep him anywhere against his will.

The day is almost over when a suit, a park ranger and three men in high-vis vests carrying their various implements of destruction finally swagger past. She guesses they must have had other demolitions to attend to in the communities further north, all scheduled for this one day to maximise efficiency. She calls out to them in a weary deadpan. ‘You lot here for Irving’s shack?’ She sticks her tongue into her cheek as one of the vests consults his clipboard. It is all she can do to muster this much civility. But her plan requires some degree of tact. These men hold Irving’s fate in their hands.

‘Says here, “Crabbe – Illegal Structure 44E”’ the man with the clipboard squints back at her.

‘That’s the one,’ she resists rolling her eyes and heaves herself out of her seat.
‘I’ll show you to it.’

The men nod to themselves, and she joins them, pointing at the shack when it comes into view. She makes polite small talk, doubting her tone is fooling anyone, but it pays to observe the niceties. When they reach the base of the hill she cuts to the chase.

‘Now look, gentlemen,’ she says. ‘The one in here’s a special case—’

‘You mean the occupant hasn’t vacated the premises?’ interrupts the suit.

‘Like I was saying,’ she continues. ‘Special case. Very attached. Been in the family for decades and all, I’m sure you understand.’

The ranger and the suit exchange a look.

‘Now, it’s getting late. I’m sure you blokes want to get home to your families and whatnot, so I’m going to do you a favour and handle this one for you. All I’m asking is, when we get up the hill, you let me talk to him, take him down to the water so he doesn’t have to watch, then just wait a few minutes for me to come back and grab a few things and you can—’

‘Madam,’ smiles the ranger. ‘The occupier’s had ample time to remove his or her belongings from the structure. If he or she hasn’t—’

‘Look,’ she says. If at least the letters and a few other treasures aren’t retrieved, she knows he’ll never recover. ‘I couldn’t really give a toss either way. I’m only offering because you seem like nice fellas. Now, you can either let me take care of it my way, or you can wait around three hours for backup because this one will not go easy.’ If they have to forcibly remove him, she doesn’t know what will happen. He could be taken into custody, sent to a mental hospital. She stares the ranger down, though he towers a head or two above her, until he turns back. The suit gives him a reluctant nod of assent.

‘Righto then,’ she claps and turns her back on the men, her patience with them
expired now that she has their agreement. She bustles off to give herself a head start with Irving, starting up a loud whistling rendition of ‘When Irish Eyes Are Smiling’ that leaves the men puzzled.

The tune brings a smile to Irving’s lips as it travels up the hill toward him. He starts playing the notes on the table.

G, E, E, D, C, E, G.
E, C, F, A, C, A, G.

Then, all of a sudden, the song stops and a voice is at his door. ‘Whales, Irving,’ it says. ‘You’ve got to come and see the whales!’

Irving’s heart surges at the word. He missed them last season. He rushes to his window and slashes aside the curtains, looks for any of the telltale spouts of water, any humped backs breaking the surface in the distance that he has read about in his letters.

‘Irviiiing,’ the voice singsongs at his door. ‘Come down to the beach to see the whales.’

He walks slowly to the door, warily pulls it open a crack to peer out.

‘Irving,’ Lydia beams. This is further than she has gotten with him all month. His hair is a bird’s nest atop his head, his face smudged with ash and grime. His breath and body odour make her stomach quease, but she holds out her hand. ‘Come with me to the whales. I’ve got some binoculars.’ She raises them off her chest and he stares. Then his attention shifts over her shoulder. She turns to find the men rolling up, shoos them away aggressively.

‘Silly men,’ she says, turning back to him. ‘Quick, before you miss the whales.’ She holds the binoculars out to him and he takes a step out the door. But then he seems to notice the brightness of the day and he shoots back inside, shaking his head as he slams the door.
‘Irving.’ It’s getting dark. They don’t have time for this. She knocks now, turns to see the suit checking his watch.

She walks around to the window, sees him on the other side still searching the water for whales. ‘Irving,’ she waves, startling him. He moves to close the curtains but, before he can, she has the note in her hand. ‘I have to tell you something about Uncle Irving,’ she says, holding it up. ‘I have a new letter for you.’

His eyes lock on the piece of paper. She didn’t want to show him this, but if it gets him away from the shack …

It is hardly a letter, but she unfolds the thin scrap of paper torn from a notepad, and presses it up to the glass for a moment, long enough for him to make out the looping script of his uncle. Then she snatches it away and jerks her head in the direction of the door, walking back around.

She waves to the men in acknowledgement of their indulgence, then returns to the door. ‘Come on, pet,’ she says. ‘Come for a walk down to see the whales and I’ll give you this letter from Irving.’

The door opens once again and he stands there regarding her.

‘Come on,’ she gestures, like beckoning a puppy.

He shuffles out of the dark and she secures him with an arm around his waist and a hand on his shoulder, ignoring the smell and steering him away from the shack. She gives the men a restraining stare as she passes them.

‘It’s good to see you, again. Do you want these?’ she asks, lifting the binoculars once they are walking downhill.

He shakes his head.

‘The letter?’ she asks.

He nods.
She sighs. He has degenerated so far from when she first met him. When she looks at him now, her head fills with one question: what have they done to you?

‘Okay, Irving,’ she begins, still steering them down to the water. ‘Do you remember how I told you your uncle died in his shack?’

He nods, and she wonders if he will ever speak another word to her again.

‘Well, that wasn’t the whole truth. I didn’t want to upset you any more than I had to.’

She looks into his eyes, but they’re fixed on the ground before them. She wonders if he’s even hearing her.

‘He was very sick, you see. And it wasn’t your uncle’s way to just sit around and wait …’ She takes the note back out of her pocket and his eyes snap onto it like magnets. ‘I found this on my door the morning he disappeared.’

She hands it over and he opens it.

*Lydia. Taking a swim. Won’t be back. Better this way. — Irving.*

He stares at it for a long time after reading its single line, then slips it into his breast pocket and looks out to the water.

‘Do you know what that means?’ she asks.

He doesn’t look like he is going to answer her, but she will never know for certain. What she will carry with her for the rest of her life is the momentary look of shock he gives her next, the accusation of treachery in his widened eyes. For at that moment the smell of smoke reaches them there at the foot of the hill and they turn to see the dark plume billowing up into the sky from its source in the shack. She will never forget the heart-hammering run back up the hill, his demented writhing there before the
conflagration, the hurried retreat of the crew under her barrage of abuse and threats, the
derangement in Irving’s bellows as he reaches for the flames, the fabric of his shirt
slipping through her fingers as he burns himself, and flees howling like death into the
bush.

Irving runs until his body can’t go on any longer, pounding the pain out into the earth
through his feet, panting it out into the air through his lungs. He collapses somewhere in
the bush and lies there in the dark, cradling his burned hand and tasting his own tears.
Shudders wrack him as he is assailed by a hundred separate realisations of what he has
lost. The home his uncle and Ellis built. All the treasures they filled it with, the books
and his dictionary just burned-up kindling now. The beautiful fishes and seahorses
cremated. The photos melted from the walls. His painting from Lydia incinerated. And
his letters vaporised, turned from cursive memory into smoke.

He doesn’t stir until a noise reaches him and he looks up to see, in the dim
moonlight, an animal nearby. A small kangaroo or wallaby, he cannot tell. The creature
watches him with a black shining globe of an eye, stripping the leaves from a shrub. His
heart buoys at the sudden closeness and beauty of this being, and for a moment his
miseries are forgotten.

When the shrub is bare, the marsupial shifts and turns, and Irving rises, perhaps to
follow. But then a crash of leaves and grass and the visitor is gone into silent bounding
distance. Irving watches after, then turns his eyes back in the direction of the Cove. He
slides down the slope as if to head back in that direction, but his limbs give out, and he
falls once again. He gathers his coat around him and allows sleep to take him.
Lydia waits half an hour at the smouldering site of the shack, wringing her hands and watching the scrub for Irving, but when he doesn’t emerge she descends back into the Cove for help. She finds Gregor and his wife Julie sitting in foldout chairs on the beach next to a line, Tim and Andrew having a beer outside a shack, but otherwise the Cove is quiet. She has long suspected the government deliberately schedules the demolitions for the quietest part of the year to minimise backlash.

The men take torches up into the bush, calling out Irving’s name, but hours of search find nothing. Afterward Julie comforts her, tells her he’ll turn up in the morning, but Lydia isn’t so sure. She succumbs in the end to one or two hours sleep after a long night spent trying to calculate where Irving would go, if he really would come back, whether she should notify the authorities to organise a more formal search, what would happen to him afterward if she did.

It is just as Lydia is finally nodding off, long after the search party has given up for the night, that Irving does return to the steaming wreckage of his home, filled now with purpose. He sifts through the ash like a graverobber. It is difficult to make out anything by the light of the moon, and he must be careful with the still-hot debris, but here and there he comes across the fire-gnarled remains of shells and trinkets that he slips into his pockets. Mainly it is the large, structural items that survive: sheets of metal, half a beam or two, his oven. He works over the hours to shift what is salvageable into a new pile at the edge of the scrub and then, as morning comes in earnest, he retreats into the bush once again, heaving and puffing under a large sail of corrugated iron balanced over his head.
But his activities do not go unnoticed when Lydia returns to the site of the shack hours later, the dew soaking through her slippers, her eyes puffy from too many tears and too little sleep. She notes the drastic change in the shape of the heap, the ashen tracks beaten into the grass between the rubble and a new pile of salvage, hidden in the scrub. Now her worry softens. He is okay, and he will be back.

That night Lydia borrows a foldout beach chair from Gregor and Julia, rugs up in a beanie and blanket, with a thermos by her side, and sets herself on the edge of the scrub with a torch and a book to wait for his return.

Irving carried his sheet for hours back through the bush that first morning, deep into the heart of the park, away from Tranter’s Cove and the other communities to the north, away from the hiking tracks and the beach and the park rangers’ stations. It was as he was losing his strength that he came to a small clearing, and that was how he knew it would be the site of his new home. He was going to start again, build his own shack just like Uncle Irving had. He leaned his sheet against a tree and lay down in its shade to sleep through the day, only rousing himself that night when it was time to make the long journey back to the Cove and retrieve the next load of salvage.

But when after his tiring march he finally approaches the Cove, he is crestfallen to find a light hovering guardian-like over the sight, warding him off. He sets himself down to wait for it to leave, but it never wavers. When he draws nearer, he recognises it is Lydia bearing the torch, but he cannot be seen by her now. She will try to interfere with his plans. He turns to withdraw back to his place in the bush, tonight wasted, but his movement so near alerts Lydia to his presence.

‘Irving?’ she calls out, sweeping the impenetrable scrub with the beam of her
torch.

He flees back up the slope with her voice chasing after him, echoing through the valley.

That’s when she decides it has gone on long enough. The next day she calls the park rangers to inform them of Irving’s disappearance. But when she tells them he has been living in the Cove for a year, that he returned last night and the night before, that he isn’t a lost tourist or an injured hiker, she feels their urgency fade.

‘Calm down, love,’ says the man on the phone. ‘He’s probably just gone bush for a while. Can you tell us exactly where he might’ve gone?’

‘No …’ she says. ‘I’ve got no clue.’

There is a judgemental silence from the other side of the line. She nearly slams the phone down on him there.

‘You’re aware the park is fifteen-thousand hectares, madam?’

‘Yes, I’m aware! I’ve been coming here my whole life. But look, he can’t be that far from Tranter’s Cove if he’s coming back every night, can he?’

He tells her there are a few hermits around the park who the rangers keep an eye on, and he’ll pass the word out.

Until then it hasn’t fully dawned on her what Irving was doing. He wants to leave them all behind, build a new shack with the remnants of the old one somewhere in the depths of the park. She feels a pang of loss, but then the thought of him alone out there is not so strange. It almost feels right for him. And perhaps he will return to her one day, once his peculiar mind has processed everything that’s happened to him in its own peculiar way. She must let go of him now, must step back and allow him to collect the remnants of his shack. Though, perhaps, she thinks, she can at least assist him in his endeavours.
‘Actually,’ she says to the ranger. ‘Never mind. You’ll never believe it, but I’ve just seen him walk past the building.’ She doesn’t wait to hear the man’s derisive sigh.

Over the next few nights there is no guardian light hovering over his shack, but each time he returns his pile of salvage has been augmented considerably. A cornucopia of food, both fresh and imperishable, to fill his ravenous stomach, and water to revitalise his parched tongue. A wheelbarrow to ease the process of ferrying all this material between the site of his old shack and the site of the new. A set of tools. Nails and rope. A tarp. Cookware. Bedding. Clothing. Anything Lydia can think of to help him carve out his new life. One of her last gifts is a cage with the chicks PP and FF inside, to feed him and keep him company. And atop it all, fluttering in the breeze on top of her old black beanie and pinned under a little glass paperweight in the figure of a blue whale, a note telling him to return on the last day of the month to acquire his next box of supplies.

With Lydia’s aid, Irving’s project progresses well. He delights in putting together his new shack, though it will never match the comfort of his old dwelling. It is on the last of his week of nightly visits to the Cove, just as his new shack becomes habitable, that things go wrong.

The night before he used the wheelbarrow to transfer the last item of salvage—his cast iron stove, the greatest challenge yet—from his pile. But now, with the torch he has been gifted, he turns his eye back to the original pile of debris, to sort through it one last time with the benefit of his own light source. He begins at one corner, sitting down heedless of the ash dirtying his clothes, and wades through the wreckage from one end to the other, using a stick to shift it around, to dig through the ash and turn up little melted treasures. He deposits each one with a clang into the wheelbarrow. He shifts crumbling boards and panes of glass out of his way as he goes, and it is only when he
finally reaches the opposite corner that he feels something strange with his stick.

He plunges it down through the rubble as far as he can, twisting it this way and that to sift through the last of the material, and he encounters a resistance right against the very end of the stick, down in the ash and the soil. He flips the broken boards and panels off the spot, then shines the torch on the patch of ground beneath, feeling around with the stick. There is a hard ridge in the earth just beneath the surface. He peels a singed and sodden carpet tile off the ground and tosses it aside, then scratches at the earth around the ridge to reveal a dull red metallic panel he has never seen before. It is the lid to a chest.

He is excited now. This is buried treasure. Not something salvaged from the flames but something that survived them, hidden in the earth just beneath his feet for all the years he lived in the shack, just waiting for the fire to reveal it, like a pyrophytic seed pod in the soil, just waiting for a bushfire to unlock it. He wonders why his uncle might have sunken it there, what secrets it might hold.

He digs eagerly at the earth around the ancient rusted lock, kicks at it a few times until it dangles, no key required. Then he lifts the lid and places the torch in his mouth so his hands are free.

Inside he finds many things, though the box is far from full. An old pocket watch, dull with age. A pile of important-looking but boring papers—certificates and bills and records. There are bundles of old cash and some coins too, currency they don’t make any more, pounds and shillings you can’t even use. To one side is heaped a thick mass of old rope, with a small patch of faded cloth laid over the top of it. He buries his hands in amongst the thick coils to heave the entanglement onto his lap and reveal what lies beneath, and out flutters a series of cards, which he gathers up into a small stack. Postcards? he wonders. Has he unearthed his mother’s replies to all his uncle’s
correspondence?

But no, they are photographs in black and white. The first photo is of two young men, shirtless and wrestling. It’s not anyone he’s ever seen before, not Irving and Ellis. Just two strangers. He flips to the next one and finds a photo of a nude man. He feels rude looking at the mustachioed stranger flexing and posing naked, so he flips to the next and nearly drops the stack. Now there are two different men, naked and kissing. He flips to the next with trembling hands to find more and more pictures, all men, all kissing and naked. He drops the stack into the box, gasping.

He stands up to get away from the box and its grimy secrets. Implications strike him. Lydia’s words. Rippa’s words. His father’s words. The words the boys scrawled on the side of his shack. The taste of flesh, the scrape of stubble, the smell of grog. It is too much. He presses the lid shut as hard as he can and slides the earth back over the lid, stamps down on it, but it is not enough. He wants to push it deeper down into the ground. Instead he begins shovelling handfuls of ash over it, then pushing debris down on it into a mound, so no one will ever look there, no one will ever find it. He needs to scream, but he can’t do it here, so close to the Cove. He backs away from the accursed spot, then turns and runs to the soothing safety of his new shack, to lose himself in the work of establishing his new life, of falling into rituals that will numb him to the world and its many treacheries.
1590–1600; from Latin *innocuous*
Irving raised his bowed head when the rope finished its fabulation there in the clearing in the bush, where he had dwelled for two years since his flight from Tranters Cove. And though it was dark, he felt he could still see with such clarity.

With the last sentence of the rope’s tale, the voices resolved into a whole picture, a whole story. The lesser objects of his collection deferred to the convocation of this unholy trinity, were subsumed by it, as bone and rock met their final triumvir. He could see them now, lying about him in the clearing, these last three objects in his years-long process of reconstruction and reconstitution, of making whole what was shattered. The white streak of the bone and the black glimmer of the rock protruding from the rubble of the shack he destroyed. The weight of the rope in his lap.

It was that same evil voice they issued, only magnified now by the order of three. At once it was the rusting whine of the chest as it opened, the hissing of paint and aerosol, the roar of flames consuming wood and air and paper, the whirring of blades beating the sky. It was hacking laughter in a crowded hall, the roar and thunder of a train on tracks, the impenetrable cacophony of too many voices in too small a space. The crack of bone through feather and flesh. The droning of bees. A lamb’s bleating. The croak of a throat closing over, trying to say his name, ‘Daniel.’ All in chorus, all woven into the fibres of that rope, compressed into the sediment of the rock, suffused within the marrow of the bone. They fit together in only one way, toward only one end. The pattern of cause and effect they embodied, the process they resulted from, presented only a single inescapable conclusion. They pronounced their final, ineluctable sentence.

He left his faded note fluttering under a glass whale statue atop the rubble of his shack, not knowing its addressee lay now in a hospital, recovering from a stroke. Lydia. 

_Taking a swim. Won’t be back. Better this way._ — Irving. The bone he slipped into his breast pocket. The rope he slung around his shoulders. The stone he heaved into his
hands. And he set out on his final journey. He walked until he found a road that led him to a bridge, and a handrail, and the sea.

A gruesome spectacle became nothing at all, as if it never was.

A body broke down like sentences into words and words into syllables, gone once pronounced.

You can hear it in my voice now, the ending of things. I am become quite conclusive. I am repeating myself. I feel my own ending coming at me like the end of Irving’s rope, like the water below waiting to embrace him. Only I can slow my descent, if I wish. Told stories are not conscious in the way of untold ones. I will lose control of myself when I am complete, to take on whatever form the world has prepared for me.

Irving was ever methodical, ever careful to withdraw himself from his various lives in the way that would cause the least disturbance. Even in his debilitated state he could not bear the thought of Lydia noticing her deliveries uncollected, nor could he inflict on some stranger the nocuous sight of his suicide. And so he had planned and waited until the time was right, as he had always done, even if the plan was forming beneath the surface of his own awareness. There was only one being he didn’t consider in the orchestration of his innocuous death.

Of course, he couldn’t have known of my existence, that in leaving his life without ever committing his story through pen to paper, or through voicing it to another soul, that he was condemning me to this purgatory. For decades I mourned my confinement to history’s hollow lacunae, wishing Irving had communicated me so that I could have my chance to breathe in the world, a story told. But now you know the whole story, or as much of me as you ever can. All my many innocuities, all of Irving’s, of Daniel’s.
And if Irving had to go through his life alone, if he could never have found anyone to confide in, then now that I have found this method of self-relation, now that I have found my way to you, dear reader, I do not think I would have had it another way. If only every untold story were so lucky.
Author’s Note

This novel has incorporated and benefited from numerous works by creators other than myself. The origin of the ‘One fine day’ rhyme that appears in part on pages 83, 90 and 127 and in full from page 108 is unknown to me, but it is available in slightly different forms on many websites. The narration of Wallabia’s conception, development and birth from page 80 onwards owes much to David Attenborough’s *Life of Mammals*, while her death scene from page 84 is based loosely on Fraser Explorer Tours’ YouTube video “A dingo captures a swamp wallaby in the surf on Fraser Island,” from where a number of the tourguide’s statements have been lifted.

Most of Marg’s colourful sayings are not the product of my own mind, but come via my grandmother and her mother before her. The hymn at Jed’s funeral is “Just As I Am,” with lyrics by Charlotte Elliott and music by William Batchelder Bradbury.

The true tale of the *Sydney Cove* was introduced to me by Patrick McGowan. The general circumstances as depicted in Chapter 3 are accurate, though the details have necessarily been improvised. The alternative account of the fates of the first mate and carpenter is imagined, though it seems to me no more fanciful than Bass’ accusation of Dilba. The explanation of Aboriginal customs for entering country on page 137 is paraphrased from Aunty Barbara Nicholson. Governor Hunter and William Clarke’s words on pages 137 and 138 are from historical documents accessed through Project Gutenberg. I am also indebted to Max Jeffreys’ *The Wreck of the Sydney Cove*.

The Royal National Park houses a number of true shack communities, but Tranter’s Cove is a fabrication. The description of Uncle Irving’s home beginning on page 171 is based on a real Little Garie shack, and has been modified from a passage that appears in my blog post “Little Garie and the Hidden Shack Communities of Sydney’s Royal National Park,” which can be accessed for more information.