Race, Place and Grace:
Cosmopolitanism in Small Town Australia

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Abstract

This multidisciplinary PhD comprises a novel and exegesis, which, together, explore the idea that some small Australian towns may promote the likelihood of residents having intercultural experiences associated with cosmopolitanism. The exegesis examines social, political and economic conditions which may support cosmopolitan experience. The novel dramatizes how the lived social environment can influence one's emotional experience of cultural difference. Together, the novel and exegesis conclude that small towns present social conditions, which can promote empathy and cultural curiosity.

The combination of novel and exegesis enables this project to ask broad questions about how Australian multiculturalism could harness the potential of cosmopolitan interactions. For example, it asks as: can modern residents of diverse small towns better adapt to social and cultural change than city dwellers? Through creative, practice-led research in the form of a novel, this project offers a verisimilar perspective of a cultural outsider in a diverse small town. Through first person narrative, the novel explores what a cosmopolitan experience may feel like. This perspective also allows the thesis to reflect on how some of the socio-cultural impediments to acceptance may be overcome. The exegesis supports this line of inquiry through more traditional scholarship, drawing on case studies, as well as social, cultural and economic theory to interrogate the central assertion of this thesis: that small towns can be as cosmopolitan, if not more so, than their big city counterparts. Combined, the creative work and exegesis respond to perennial questions, such as what it means to belong to Australia, how difference is perceived and how it could be valued in this country.

Through the novel and exegesis, the utility of cosmopolitan perspectives and social policy emerge as a practical responses to negotiating differences in the social context of Australia's multicultural community: a diverse, national community facing an increasingly global world.

Declaration

I, Yannick Thoraval, declare that the PhD thesis entitled ‘Race, Place and Grace: Cosmopolitanism in Small Town Australia’ is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

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White Foam

a novel

For all who have lost, or found, or are still searching for their home.

Prologue

I don't know what my first mistake was. Maybe it was angering that Chinese woman and getting suspended from work, or maybe it was going to Australia, or going to the beach that day, or getting drunk at the bar with those guys, or any other number of things that happened before or after in the great causal chain of events. I made mistakes. That's clear.

Lawyers, they pinpoint the moment when things go wrong. That's what they do. They think they see timelines so clearly. But doctors, psychiatrists, they pick different moments, different reasons to allocate blame. And a guru, a priest, I bet he would choose a different spot on the timeline again – original sin, maybe. I've been thinking about that a lot lately, my timeline.

I sometimes wonder if the trajectory of my life was inevitable. Who knows, maybe my path was set out long before any of this really started – at my birth perhaps, through some fatalistic gene that set me on this course. Or even before then. Maybe this was all some strange karmic twist of fate, plotted generations ago by people whose wrongs the universe now called on me to correct. I doubt I'm that important.

I've already had a lot of time to think about what happened, what I did and didn't do. I know I'll get more time. Maybe things will eventually make more sense.

My doctor told me to reflect on the events, write them down, she said, try to work through them (her words, not mine). I thought about her advice without doing anything for longer than I probably should have. I'm more ready now.

I know other people will probably read this. I didn't write it for you. I wrote it for the people involved, because I feel I owe them. But I mostly wrote it for me. For the person I was, the person I am and the person I want to be. To anyone else reading this, I know you'll judge me, I know you'll have your own ideas about where I made mistakes, how you would have done things better or different. I'm sure if I looked at your life, I could find ways to judge you too. And I would. It's what people do.

To everyone, whatever it's worth, I'm sorry. I know that doesn't change anything for you. But it does for me.

I

A forced vacation – The road to Niminbinji

I've been told I have anger management issues. More precisely, people have a problem with my anger management. My latest outburst, or 'episode' as the HR manager put it, had got me this trip to Australia.

So here I was. Sharp sun flashed through the stringy trees as my car wound its way up the empty highway. The flickering light on the bitumen intensified – a kind of urgent Morse code, a last message from the skinned kangaroos and burst wombats that lay splayed in the ditch. I sped up, past their bloated corpses, past dilapidated farmhouses and 'for sale' signs put up by land-banking baby boomers whose oncologist bills were overdue. Roadkill.

The crux of the story is that I told one of those oppressive, helicopter moms to let her eighteen-year-old son finally grow his own balls. It didn't go over well. There was consultation, followed by mediation, and now this forced time off. 'Stress leave*'* they called it, so we could all save face.

It was an absurd situation, a non-event, really, but pride and opportunity on both sides had whipped up a simple dispute into an international incident. The university had wanted me fired. Apparently, the mother had felt threatened and racially discriminated against. I don't think I'd even noticed she was Chinese.

I got the union involved. They negotiated eight weeks paid leave on my behalf: time with which I was to *take stock*, *regroup* and *evaluate my commitment to the organization, its values and objectives.* It was all moronic, a way of getting the situation under control without addressing the central issue that had caused it: namely that this mother's child, like so many of our international students, was either too stupid, too lazy or both to get into the university on his own merit. But we let them in anyway. I had refused to admit him because his grades weren't good enough. I had stood my ground and refused to reverse my decision. My notes had been requisitioned, my scoring of the application questioned.

International student applications are messy, always subject to interpretation, but the way I saw things, even the most generous evaluation of this application would determine the student was ill-equipped to handle tertiary studies in English. Letting him in was setting him up to fail. But what the university saw in my decision was lost revenue. Its 'solution' was to

make me disappear while they quietly reversed my decision. My *reflections* over these past few weeks have enabled me to see that the university would have done nearly anything to keep the story out of the newspapers. The Chinese education market was at stake. I should have asked for twelve weeks leave.

Meanwhile the kid, or more likely his mother, was probably now enrolling him into the first classes of a Bachelor of Arts. His lack of commitment and rusty English would now be someone else's problem. No wonder educational standards are slipping.

The road wound through yet another 'state park'. That's what it said on my GPS: *State Park*. According to the map, I was driving through a green blob. The view out the window was more textured. The land fell and rose steeply beside the highway and the terrain was densely covered with trees, shrubs and boulders. I imagined it would be slow going to make your way through that landscape on foot. I was glad to be cruising through this country in my rental car.

Between capital cities, Australia seemed little more than pubs, bakeries and state parks. Even though my GPS showed the continuous blue blob of the Pacific Ocean alongside the red dot of my car, I had not seen or heard the ocean in more than a hundred kilometers, but it was nice knowing it was there.

I popped my second Lexapro; the chalky, jagged little pill worked its way down my throat. After a decade of occasional psychiatric evaluations, I knew that everyone feels better when they can identify a person with a label and that anti-depressants have come a long way since the 1990s. The jet lag had messed with my schedule, my digestive system and my circadian rhythm. The days felt unnaturally long here. It was getting dark by five o'clock when I left Canada, the sun low on the horizon all day, barely clearing rooftops. Here the sun traversed a long arc, high in the sky, a blazing cyclops. I winced as I swallowed and tossed the remaining tray of pills onto the passenger seat, the burst sections of the blister pack counting down the holidays.

Why was I angry? *Why do you think you are angry?* It was the central question, the one that dominated every psychiatric evaluation I'd had. It was the question that shaped my life and had signalled the beginning of the end of the two medium-term relationships I'd had. I could say I was angry because the world was a mess, because of the militarization of global politics, because of corruption and division, because of inequality, or the destruction of the environment. In fact, I *had* claimed all these things when the occasion benefitted me, usually to impress a girl with the depth of my feeling and commitment to a cause (selflessness was sexy, at least temporarily).

But the truth of my anger was rather more banal. While the state of the world *did* upset me, in a general sense, it would be self-aggrandizing to say that global politics or the environment affected me personally all that much. Those grievances were on par with my daily annoyances – a late bus, slow Wi-Fi – and were more of a side-dish, a topping to the delicious malcontent of my life. Bad news from abroad was no more than the stuffing, the turkey leg frill to the true centerpiece of my rage, which came from nothing more complex than facing the crushing mediocrity of my daily life. I liked being angry. It gave me power.

I was supposed to *be* somebody. So I'd always been told. So I believed. I had the skills and opportunities to succeed. The future was mine. The world was at my fingertips (whatever that meant); all the marketing slogans that I helped the university feed prospective Indian, Chinese and Korean international students had once been directed at me, and I'd believed every word. I too had once been *Future Ready*.

Now thirty-two years old, I was an international student admissions officer at a second-rate college in Vancouver, Canada. It might have been an acceptable achievement if I were a new immigrant or mildly retarded, but I'd been an A student, won scholarships and prizes, and had an honors degree with a double major in philosophy and international marketing. Now I shared a windowless office with two Indian girls – sorry, women – who worked part time on a rotating work-share arrangement so they could stay home with their babies two days a week. My seniority over them was more implied than formal, a function of my full-time status. But they both seemed happy enough to assess the applications I found too tedious to deal with, so long as they got to leave work by 3pm on the days they were in the office. I'd been there five years.

My degree didn't mean much anymore; this I knew from evaluating university entrance applications all day. I had published nothing, had no board or committee memberships, no volunteer work or impressive extra-curricular activities to boast about. Grad school was out of the question. Besides, I was still paying off student loans from my undergraduate degree. I was stuck, just another over-educated, under-paid, over-qualified minion, waiting in the purgatory of the labor force until the baby boomers retired or a robot took over my job, whichever came first.

So I waited, and even though I had denounced the shallowness of consumer culture in my early twenties, I now found myself preoccupied by wanting stuff that my salary, my social status, could not afford. I browsed e-Bay, and Mr Porter and Carsales.com when I should have been working – the cars, watches and fashion advice more promising than the stupid faces of another Arjun or Cheng or Muhammad, whose passport photos stared back

hopefully from the inherent optimism of their college applications. I was pathetic. I knew it, and that made things even worse.

I'd rented a car in Melbourne three days ago, a Nissan Micra, and had been slowly making my way up the east coast of Australia. So far I'd been to Stratford (its River Avon had thinned to a rocky trickle that passed calmly under the town's main bridge as I sped through the town), Paynesville (because I couldn't resist the photo opportunity of standing next to the town's welcome sign), Orbost (because it sounded like something out of Tolkien's Middle Earth), and Mallacoota (because it sounded ridiculous and I'd hoped, without success, to find something to eat there other than meat and mushroom pies from the town bakery). Today's destination was Niminbinji, New South Wales, chosen for no other reason than it had a sandy beach and that I liked the sound of it.

I hadn't slept well last night. A swag had seemed like a romantic idea, but two nights of sleeping on the ground had left me with a kink in my neck and a growing regret that I had not upgraded to a camper van.

I checked the World Clock on my phone. It was 2:43pm in Vancouver; a cold rain was probably falling on the city. People would be heading out and coming home. I imagined the sound of a million Gore-Tex jacket zippers locking together to keep out the damp.

I turned up the music. The chipper melancholy of The Shins strained the tinny speakers of my rental car. I felt the heat of the Australian sun on my arm through the closed window and a breeze of air conditioning against my bare legs, a yin and yang of hot and cold that sent a pleasant shiver down my spine. I turned the music up a little louder and pushed my foot down on the accelerator. The road descended into a clearing and I finally saw the coastline. It stretched out, towards the horizon, headland after headland, and I could see where puffs of sea foam broke noiselessly against the distant cliffs. I smiled, maybe for the first time on this trip. Probably the last time too.

II

Arriving in Niminbinji – Playing tourist – A text from my sister – Drowning and almost drowning

My Nissan Micra was dwarfed by the motorhomes parked in the campground as I made my way through the internal streets of the Niminbinji caravan park. I felt small and ridiculous. All around me, big trucks and vans were parked on plots of mowed grass. Many of the vehicles had decals with the names of businesses on them – *Clark and Co Building Supplies, Zoran's Air Conditioning and Service*. The working class had assembled on vacation.

The place was crowded, occupied by what looked like generations of families determined to stay for the summer. Long trestle tables spanned multiple campsites, covered by tarps and awnings held together with complicated rope work.

A gang of little kids zoomed past the front of the car. I didn't have time to honk before they sped down the hill behind me on bikes that were two sizes too big. No shoes, no helmets, no parents.

There was a shanty-town vibe in this place that only I seemed to notice. I passed a man seated on a camping chair, newspaper unfolded on his lap, shaving the stubble off his bald scalp with an electric razor. He didn't look up. The Nissan cruised through the campground, passing rows of parked trailers, motorhomes and caravans. Near the top of the hill, a fat man broke up bags of ice by slapping them against the road. He was red from sunburn and the day's exertions. The pink sun of his belly rose and set behind an enormous metallic icebox into which he emptied the bags of ice, cubes tumbling like a frozen waterfall. Despite the smell of bacon fat that seemed to hang everywhere, clothes were put out to dry on the communal clothes line, board shorts, mostly, and towels but also the odd brassier, underwear and cloth diaper. Two girls rinsed themselves in the outside shower near the toilet block, in full view of park inhabitants. They wore their swimsuits, sure, but they lathered themselves with soap and shampoo, unconcerned by the wandering gaze of passers-by.

This casual exhibitionism was on display throughout the campground. The place was like an entire suburb turned inside out. I could see directly into people's homes. People didn't seem to mind. They kept on washing their dishes or brushing their teeth, or reclining,

shirtless, in deckchairs with a beer balanced on their lap. It all felt suddenly intimate. It would take me a while to adjust to the bonhomie of the caravan park. I'd paid for two nights.

I parked in a field reserved for tents and rolled out my swag behind the car, feeling both proud and ashamed of the simplicity of my own set-up. I breathed in deeply and could almost taste the salt in the air. I rummaged through the duffle bag in the trunk, through socks and underwear and the layer of clothes I probably wouldn't wear at all. I found my board shorts. I was only a short walk from town and the beach. A wave thumped somewhere against a rock and I felt the impact resonate in the ground beneath me. Time for a walk.

Niminbinji's main street was a crooked row of little shacks and houses, lined up as if they had just tumbled down from the hills behind them. Like many small towns in this country, it had once been a mining village, but there was no sign of that affluent past, no stately public building, no gilded town hall, just wooden shacks and a narrow sidewalk along the waterfront.

I added apostrophes to the signs I saw as I window-shopped my way down the boardwalk: *Dons Bait n Tackle, Ramblers Lane, Grumpys Shack*. I watched a shirtless middle-aged man inspect a rack of used surfboards outside the surf shop, running his hand along the edge of a board, fingers delicately probing for something known only to the connoisseur. A queue stretched outside the plastic drapes of *Ednas Pies and Coffee*. I couldn't stomach another meat pie. I took a seat on a park bench, but the metal slats were too hot from the sun; it felt like they would leave griddle marks on my legs, so I walked on.

Two kids played cricket with a tennis ball on an adjacent field, the grass was brown and patchy, bleached by heat and chewed up by wear. One boy hit the ball. It sailed past my ear and rolled into the tall grass behind me. The boys looked on, unmoved. They were expecting me to get it for them. The nerve. Their sense of entitlement offended me. I resisted the urge to pick up the ball and throw it onto the roof of a nearby building. I hated being trapped in the no-man's-land between two people playing some back-and-forth-type game, a frisbee toss, a football pass, anything that made me the non-consenting pig in the middle, just waiting for a fumble or a long pass to hit me on the head. I looked back at the tennis ball in the long grass. If tossing that ball up on a roof could stop these two kids from growing up to be the kind of men who would throw a football to each other over fifty yards of crowded public beach, it would be worth it. I looked at the boys and their families united in their merrymaking in a public barbecue area, and specifically at the two chunky guys (the dads?) in polo shirts with collars flipped up, mirrored sunglasses hanging around their thick necks, and thought the lesson could wait. I threw the ball back, suddenly nervous about my

technique. One of the kids caught the ball. He looked at me. I don't know how old he was. His body was ill- proportioned, somewhere between boy and adolescent. You could make out the shape of the man in the child, like a face that briefly materialises in a passing cloud. One moment it was there. Then it was gone. The kid turned around and walked back to his friend. They didn't even say thanks.

The air conditioning was on full blast in the Tourist Information Centre. I could feel my skin grow goosebumps. It was soothing, like ice on a burn, so I lingered, walking slowly on the bright blue carpet. The place was full of trinkets, key chains and fridge magnets with pictures of a beach and the words *Niminbinji NSW* – pretty unimaginative, really. There were T-shirts with the same beach picture (I think it was the beach just down the road), only the T-shirts had the phrase *I fished Niminbinji, NSW* printed on them in this smoky, chunky font as if it had been put on with a branding iron. I didn't understand the relationship between branding and fish.

I got a pleasant, wintry feeling out of that air conditioning so I stayed a little longer, browsing the tourist information section. There were brochures and leaflets produced with varying degrees of sophistication. Some of the material was glossy and professional-looking, officially put out by the government tourist bureau: *NSW Recreational Saltwater Fishing Guide, Fitting Your Life Jacket.* Other publications were just photocopied leaflets with grainy black and white images on them. *Fill your holes with Edna's Pies*! At least someone had added the apostrophe on this one. A hand-drawn flyer caught my attention: *Fish Fry Fundraiser, January 18. All you can eat!* No mention of why the funds were being raised.

There were brochures offering activities for everyone: fishing, skydiving (weather permitting), whale watching (seasonal), mini golf, Aboriginal Heritage Tours (by appointment). You could visit craft fairs and food markets (every third Sunday of the month), and New Year's Day promised something called *the Summer Salt Mist Jamboree*. You could dive in caves or visit a working cheese factory. You could swim with seals in an all-inclusive package called the *Underwater Safari*, where you would be taken five kilometers offshore on a zodiac and dropped into the water near a reef to swim with a local seal colony. This brochure showed a photograph of a half-submerged, wet-suited snorkeler, a girl no older than ten by the look of her, waving her arms at the camera while four indifferent seals swam in the sea in the rocky background. Swimming with seals seemed like a fundamentally bad idea, since the animals are a known delicacy of Great White Sharks who also prowl these waters. Why anyone would choose to swim *among them* was almost as much a mystery as why this brochure advertised swimming with shark food as a family

activity rather than what it was: an extreme sport akin to bungee jumping and jet- boat rides advertised on the reverse page.

On the wall next to me hung a black and white photograph. It had been blown up too big and the photo was grainy close-up. The paper tag underneath the frame read: miners work the creek, ca. 1899. I took a few steps back from the photo, until I crashed into a bucket of stuffed toy wombats and kangaroos. Now I could see the whole image. It showed a guy, wearing a suit, out in the forest. The trees were all smashed around him, whole stumps ripped from the ground and tossed aside, their roots dangling like entrails. The guy in the suit stood next to a water cannon aimed at a pile of rocks and boulders on the side of the hill. Two other men stood nearby, also in suits. All three of them stared back at the camera. There was a creek running between them. The water must have been running downhill pretty fast because in the picture it was blurry, a kind of silky mist that appeared to float between the rocks. The men were all in focus, though, as sharp as the rocks. Who knows how long they'd stood motionless to get this picture.

Old photos creep me out. It's like there's something captured in the picture that we weren't meant to witness, a frozen coordinate of space-time, revealing clues to a mystery we don't see or understand. It's too easy to accept these strangers in old photos as having, somehow, a two-dimensional existence. I have to tell myself that they were probably just like me; just as cunning, confused, intolerant, gullible, self-interested, stubborn, sophisticated, courteous, contradictory, fearful, principled, pious, pathetic, law abiding (most of the time), amused, bemused and amusing. Seeing their static, grainy faces, though, I have to remind myself that they once moved. It's spooky.

I suddenly felt a long way from home. It was snowing in Vancouver – I'd checked the weather – and the Canadian Christmas season almost seemed beautiful in the sharp light of the sun, piercing the crooked blinds of the Niminbinji Tourist Information Centre. My phone vibrated in my pocket. One short buzz. A text from my sister. Never good news.

Dad not doing well. Could be his last Christmas. The words sat inside their cheerful little green speech bubble. Jenna had said the same thing last Christmas. I put the phone back in my pocket. Dad's been sick for a long time. I'm not sure he was ever well.

Back out on the sidewalk, I had a pocket full of brochures and no plans. I couldn't even settle on which side of the street I wanted to walk down. Up or down? Left or right? All options seemed equally promising and pointless. I could feel my indecision turning into mild panic, so I tried to let go of my anxiety, *they're just thoughts, Marc, you can acknowledge them, crumple them up and throw them away*, *just like a piece of paper.*

You know, it worked. It often does. For all its genius, the human brain is easy to fool. I embraced my role of visitor. I got an ice-cream and yet another meat pie (in that order). I looked at real-estate photographs hanging outside the gas station window and wondered if I'd ever be able to buy a house of my own. I even bought a snorkel and mask at the surf shop. The shop itself was also for sale.

On advice from the surf shop attendant, I walked over the sand dune to Hammerhead Beach. It *was* the beach photographed on those key chains, fridge magnets and T-shirts, and it was so named "cuz the cove's shaped kinda like a hammer," the woman at the surf shop had said – "not cuz of sharks."

It was true. With a little imagination, the sandy crescent of beach between the cliffs and dunes did resemble a hammerhead. I wandered down the steps to the beach where bodies, crumbed with sand, lay about like slabs of chicken schnitzel. It was still warm, but clouding over, and the place looked less friendly the more the light dimmed. I stood up and took off my shirt, suddenly aware of the ocean breeze against my white paunch. One day I'd get back into shape. I resisted the impulse to suck in my gut and concentrated instead on the wind in my hair and the tingle of sun on my shoulders.

I tiptoed my way past a line of broken sea shells and dried seaweed and stepped onto the wet sand. It was already colder than I expected. I don't know why, but I had expected Australia to be more… tropical.

A round, stocky looking grandma walked past me and waded into the water. The cold water didn't seem to bother her. She walked out, tucking her hair inside her bathing cap. When the water had risen to her chest, she dived under and swam out to where the waves were breaking. I watched her dive under the waves and pop out behind them where the water was smooth. She now swam breaststroke, parallel to the shore, until all I saw of her was the pink dot of her bathing cap. I had caught a whiff of her lavender perfume earlier.

With someone already out in the water, I felt safer going for a swim myself. I walked into the surf. A surge of water covered my feet, ankles and knees. The wave retreated, sucking the sand out from beneath my toes. The sea in Vancouver was more lake than ocean, calm and soft and green. This water had hard edges, it was ice-blue and had vitality, places to go and things to do. I ran forward as the wave retreated, chasing it into deeper water. I turned my back on an incoming wave and jumped. Its power knocked me off balance and pulled my loose shorts down below my hips. The water sizzled around me and I was baptized in its effervescence. This expanse of sea and land and sky inspired me, reassured me, as if their mass, their power was transferable, as if I could will their combined weight and momentum

behind my own ambitions. This was the Australia I had imagined. I felt lucky to be away from home.

I spent the afternoon poking around rock pools, watching little crabs and fish retreat at my shadow. If I sat motionless for a while, the creatures that had scurried into holes and crevices returned. The ocean is not seamless. It has borders too. They are more felt than observed by the creatures who dwell there, who move to the shallows and depths and temperatures that feel right for them. I watched small fish in the rock pools dart out from under the seaweed where they'd been hiding. Crabs, dark as tarantulas, crept up the rock face, resuming the course they'd set before I interrupted them. Now that I was just watching them, motionless, the crabs and fish continued as if I wasn't there. I stayed still and watched them all emerge from hiding, preen themselves and savor the sun, forgetting I was there. Forgetting I was ever there.

Was this *their* rock? Or had they just washed up on the last tide? Were they explorers, like me? I wondered about all the things we miss because we're not there to see them. What other little rituals and splendors of nature do we scare off before they begin? The crabs and fish dare to be themselves when we're not around. But so do the rats and roaches. I stuck my hand up to see if the crabs would react to my shadow. They did. The crabs retreated straight away, scuttling in to shallow crevices in the rock. They didn't even need my shadow to scare them. My movement from five paces away was enough to send them into hiding. They had reason to be afraid. I'd seen smashed crab shells littered all over the rocks, pecked apart by the sea birds that circled above us. I wasn't a seagull, but how could a crab tell us apart? Could they ever get used to me, these crabs? Did they have that capacity? Could they ever learn to trust that I meant them no harm? How long would I have to sit here, waving at just one of those crabs before it would believe in my banality and move on to wherever it would rather be? It didn't matter. Who had that kind of time?

I returned to my towel and lay on my stomach drawing swirls in the sand with my big toe. The beach sand was as soft as sifted flour. The musty odor of slow decay wafted up from the sand where buried sticks and shells and tufts of grass baked in the sun. I used my knees to make grooves into the sand through my towel, and ground my hips into the grooves, the sand forming a contour of my body, my own private dent on the beach. Strange creatures perched in the gnarled tangle of grey wood that encircled the dunes of golden sand. Little colored birds flitted from branch to branch. It was nature that reminded me I was far from home. I saw Jurassic-sized ants, a moth as big as my hand and armored beetles, as if the southern hemisphere offered the insect world a fighting chance against its predators.

It must have been about four o'clock when I walked to the edge of Hammerhead Beach where the cliffs and dunes enclosed it from the rest of the coastline. I scrambled up the sharp rocks, the rubber strap of my flip-flops strained with the effort. I'm not sure if it was sweat or salt spray, but I could feel drops of moisture beading on my forehead. The path rose along the cliff and narrowed. I searched the edge of the rock with my hands. I needed a ledge, a dent, an impression, something I could trust with my weight to climb up and around the rock face. I needed both hands to climb now, so I strapped the diving mask to my forehead, the snorkel dangling annoyingly under my jaw. I was exploring a new planet, an astronaut in flip-flops and board shorts. Thick, heavy swell rolled in from past the horizon and broke against the rocks below my feet in plumes of salt spray. Hammerhead Beach disappeared behind the bend.

Here the cliffs eased into a series of smoother, rocky platforms – a tiered arrangement of ledges and boulders that sloped down towards the sea. The yellow cliffs were veined with other minerals. Jagged seams of rock curved and criss-crossed the landscape like wrinkles on a palm. The charred remains of a campfire on the rocks told me I'd found a local hangout, the kind of place you don't find on a tourist map, the kind of place where local kids went to make out and blow off steam. They had carved their initials on the cliff face: JW, KF, DA, DD, Ari + Lisa 1993. Whoever they were, they weren't here now. They were either dead or had moved on, no longer witness to the infinite breath of the sea.

There was a small cove about twenty meters below me, a crescent jumble of half submerged rocks with a narrow opening to the sea. It looked like a Roman amphitheatre of cliffs and boulders sloping downwards with the water as the stage. The cove was almost certainly a well-kept local secret. I sat atop a level platform and watched the rhythm of ocean swells break against the rocks below. The whole ocean was slashed with narrow strips of white foam. The sea was calmer inside the cove.

I pushed hesitations from my mind, took off my flip-flops and crawled my way down to the tideline. *Embrace your sense of adventure.* I surveyed the cove from my perch. The water rose and fell just below my feet. The sea was marbled, blue and turquoise, green and black, marking out submerged shoals and cliffs and tufts of seaweed in the depths below. I could jump in here; the water behind this ledge was deep enough. The ocean swell inside the cove was big but not high enough to trap me there or pitch me onto the rocks. If I timed it right, the swell would lift me back onto this ledge when I was ready to get out.

I spat in my mask, rubbed the spit around the glass and strapped the goggles to my face. I was slightly panicked at not being able to breathe through my nose anymore. I bit down on the snorkel, felt the hard plastic wedged against my gums, the grit of sand on my teeth. I dived in. My skin tightened. My shallow breath echoed through the snorkel as I adjusted to the cold. I pumped my legs and swam deeper.

The world opened beneath me as the seabed fell away. In some spots, I could barely see the bottom. I swam through the liquid dusk, expecting the jet plane silhouette of a shark to materialize on the horizon. I pushed the thought from my mind and tried to focus on the beauty of this underworld. Here all was quiet. Beyond my rhythmic breathing through the snorkel, sound was reduced to a few pops and splashes. The sun pierced the surface of the water, projecting ripples onto the rocks that shimmered like disco balls. The cove was calmer, yet more alive and intimate than the grey and empty world above it. Here everything moved. Bunches of seaweed danced in the current; fish the size of bread loaves picked at the rocks, and my own body rose and fell by the grace of the sea. Up there I was trapped in a flat, linear plane of existence, forward and back. Here I could fly. I was a migratory bird, a drone on a mission, cruising high above a mountain range in hostile territory, freed from the tyranny of gravity. I dived down where the water was even colder and felt the pressure build in my ears, my lungs, until the need for breath compelled me back to the surface. I turned and corkscrewed and chased the gloomy fish that had seen it all before. I flipped onto my back to look up from below the water to where the rippled surface promised to release the tightness in my lungs. I floated, no longer aware of my body – its weight, its disappointments – and dissolved into the sea, a liquid consciousness. I was the salt, the current, the ripple of sunlight that danced on the sandy bottom and was gone. I was nowhere and everywhere, had always been here and would never leave. I belonged in the water.

Thoughts came to me in rapid succession: *I'm cold, I'm hungry*, *what time is it*? They reassembled me, these needs, re-attached my eyes to my body, the hair to my head, my tongue to my mouth. I again felt the hard plastic of the snorkel wedged between my gums, the grit of sand scraping against my teeth. I was no longer liquid; I was reconstituted. Solid and frozen.

I made for a submerged rock ledge where tufts of seaweed swayed over the honeycomb of barnacles that clung to the rock. Condensation crept in and fogged up the sides of my mask as I examined old fish hooks and rusty lures that had snagged on the submerged rock. The cliffs above plunged down into the water, encircling my swimming hole. Looking up, I felt I was in a cathedral where incoming shafts of light had turned to stone. Down here,

the bottom was a patchwork of rocks and sand and blobs of seaweed. At its deepest, a few sandy patches lay about ten or fifteen meters below me. At its most shallow, rock ledges, sharp with barnacles, snails and mussels, lay just a few feet below the tideline. I was glad I hadn't jumped in from the top of the cliffs. I was sure this place had stories.

The water had been cold when I first got in. It had been exhilarating. But now it felt like the cold had penetrated a deeper layer of my body. It was taking over, spreading inside me. My limbs tingled. My arms were less responsive. My body had begun its betrayal. My numb fingers had already surrendered. I tried to make fists with my hands, to pump life back into my fingers, but they were weak and slow to respond. I was being drained. My thoughts, gradual and clouded, now crystallized on finding the ledge I'd used to enter the cove. There was a sharp pain at my temples. I'd earlier discounted it as the rubber strap of my diving mask pinching my skin. The pain was urgent now. The cold of the ocean was piercing my scalp, preparing for its final assault on my body. Patches of fog in my mask gathered like storm clouds to blot out the view. The scene below the water was now as grey and featureless as the sky above it. I lifted my head out of the water and peeled off the mask. The cold water hit my forehead, my cheeks, my eyes, extinguishing the last warm spots on my body. Now separated from my underwater world, I was small and vulnerable. Dark patches of rock and seaweed appeared to rearrange themselves beneath me. The eyes of nameless, shapeless things watched me from crags and ledges in the water below my shoulders. I was no longer welcome in their world.

I was in the middle of the cove, at least a hundred meters from the nearest cliff face. The water was choppy and I felt my body lift and drop between the swells. The roll of the waves interrupted my view of where the water met the cliff. Where was the ledge I'd jumped in from? That ledge was the only way out. I scanned the cliff face, searching for the path I'd taken when I climbed in from Hammerhead Beach. It all looked so different from down here. Somewhere up on those cliffs was that charred patch of rock, the remains of the campfire where those people had carved their initials in the stone.

Then I remembered the tide. Of course the rim of the swimming hole looked different. The tide had been steadily *falling*? *rising*? since I dived in. That ledge would now be submerged or too far above the tideline for me to climb out. How long had I been in here? All around me, the cliff walls shot out of the water towards the sky. I had to find a way out of the cove or swim out towards the open ocean where the waves thumped hard against the rocks.

"Oh my god," I whimpered as the stupidity, the awful simplicity of my situation took hold. The sea rose and fell. I treaded water. My neck muscles cramped, pulling my chin

towards the water. My jaw clenched and my teeth chattered. “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.” I repeated it out loud. A seagull flew overhead. I envied its freedom, hated that bird for its indifference. I drew strength from my anger, felt it charge my limbs with renewed vitality. A wave lashed me in the face. I gagged on the ocean water and got hit with another wave before I could take a breath. This was no way to die. I retched and drew a breath that rattled with mucus. Another wave and the snorkel slapped against my neck. I tore at the mask and threw the gear behind me. It was weighing me down. I didn’t dare turn around, though, to see my snorkel and mask sinking behind me; it was enough to know I’d done away with them, as if jettisoning the excess baggage made all of this more real, a necessary step in my resolve to make it back to shore.

I aimed at the cliff, at the spot where I thought I’d come in, and waited for the ocean swell to propel me forward. A wave lifted me. I thrashed my arms and pumped my legs until I was dropped down into the trough of the passing wave. I readied myself for the next one, my limbs heavy and poorly attached to the rest of my body. My shoulders trembled, my breath reduced to shallow, urgent gulps of air above the tideline. Another wave lifted and dropped me. Another. Another. I mistimed, swallowed seawater and vomited. The puke floated on the water around me, circling my chin. I didn’t even try to flick it away. I only had a swimming-pool’s length of water to go now before I reached the sides of the cliff. Its rocky features were coming into sharper focus with every wave. I searched for a smooth boulder, a more level platform to aim for. I had to target a landing site now or the next few waves would dump me against the sharp rocks of their choosing. There was no swimming back against these waves. I sighted a smooth rock that came out of the water with a gentle slope. Waves broke on either side of it, suggesting deeper water underneath. If I could get there and avoid the thrust of the waves, I might be able to clamber onto it. I could then work my way further up and out of the cove from there. It was steep, but I could worry about that later. One thing at a time. I could do it, had to do it, would do it. I was going to sit atop that orange rock and look back down to where I was now. It was the only thing that mattered.

The cliffs were now perpendicular to the water and seemed to close the sky above me, a jagged, circular fade to the grey sky. The wet crack of the waves against the cliffs was sharp in my ears.

My wave came before I was ready. It pulled me up and inside of it, half dragged me sideways, half pushed me forward and I surrendered to its will. I shut my eyes and braced for the impact, tightened, loosened whichever part of my body might hit the rock first. *Please don’t let it be my skull.* I had no idea where I was or how fast I was going. I was moving in

water, that I knew for sure. *Don't breathe.* I protected my face with my hands, my arms, but the surge of water pulled them away again. I spun and tumbled, no longer sure which way was up or down.

Then I felt the weight of the water release me, pass beside me, under me, felt the whole surge disintegrate like a breath of wind that had run out of puff. Waves crashed on either side of me while I drifted in the calm water under my ledge. I grabbed at the rock and hoisted myself out of the water, tripping and stumbling to get ahead of the next wave, my numb fingers scratching at the rock. I picked my way up the cliff face and out of the cove, leaving streaks of blood wherever I'd been.

When I was far enough above the water, I collapsed and lay shivering in a dimple of rock, willing the sun to break through the clouds and draw the cold from my body. Even on solid ground I felt the movement of the waves, the sensation of being poured into something. My legs were streaked with blood where rock and barnacles had punctured them. They ached and shook with spasm.

Down there in the cove, dark blue patches of water churned turquoise in the whirlpool. Waves collided against each other whipping up an effervescent fizz below the tideline that sizzled on the surface. The gurgling sea receded from the holes and cracks in the cliff. Then a pause. A moment when the whole sea, all of it, stopped at the end of its breath, when the waves and the tumbling and the spray were only leftovers, evidence of the force that had created them. But it was only a lull. The sea was gathering its strength, drawing its breath. It exhaled in a swollen burst of water that crashed against the rocks with a thud that trembled through the rock beneath me. The water crashed over the sharp rocks, it eddied and spluttered, gasped and sucked through hidden cracks and channels, and cascaded down the barnacled face of the rock. It was like watching geological time.

I spotted two people walking on the low rocks on the ocean side of the cove. They must have been ten meters below me and maybe two hundred meters away. The guy was dark, black like a silhouette; I could barely make out any of his features, but his outline looked sharp, thin and muscular. The girl was white, her long but loose-fitting dress billowed in the wind, showing me more of her body than she probably would've wanted me to see. The couple hadn't seen me. To them, I was just part of the rock, no more of a witness than those initials carved in the stone above me. The couple stopped walking. The guy pointed something out to the girl. He held out his arm and pointed out to sea, his finger traced the arc of the horizon. The wind caught the girl's hat and it almost blew off. It was one of those big floppy hats that nearly covered her shoulders. After that, she kept one hand on her hat. She

also had long hair and she kept pushing it back over her ears or behind her shoulders to keep the wind from sweeping it into her face. She was kept busy with one hand on the hat and the other one wiping the hair away from her face.

I wished they had seen me. Not being seen was as if I were hiding. I didn't want them to start doing anything they wouldn't have done if they'd known I was there. But I didn't move. I didn't say anything.

The couple walked along the jumble of low rocks on the ocean side of the cove. He walked in front, but kept looking back as if he were concerned for her. The sun caught the side of his body as he turned and I could see that he was shirtless, thin but strong, all muscle and sinew. She looked down, kept watching her feet on those sharp rocks. There was a bit of a dip or a hole or something and the guy extended his hand to help the girl across. She took his hand, but used the hand that she'd been holding her hat with. The wind ripped the hat off her head. It happened as quick as if the hat had been tied to a string and pulled. They both scrambled to catch the hat, but it flew over their heads and disappeared. They both stood there on the rocks, looking down over the edge of the cove. I guessed the girl's hat was down there because they both pointed. She held her long red hair back and it jumped around in the wind like flames. They were talking and pointing. He started to inch down the rocks, towards where the hat probably was but she held him back. He patted her hand, said something, and she let him go. He stepped down onto a lower ledge, down towards the sea. He used one arm to brace himself against the rock behind him. He paused there. Maybe he was mapping out his descent or maybe he'd lost sight of the hat. But he stood there a while. I could only see his torso now; his legs were obscured by the rocks as he made his way down to the water.

I noticed I'd stopped shivering. The wind that I'd been huddled against had stopped, suddenly, as if a door had been shut on it. It was quiet, peaceful but uneasy, like a lull in traffic on a usually busy road. The sea inhaled, long and deep. I could feel it gathering strength from the rocks and the sky, flattening the expanse of water as it drew breath. Out past the rocks I saw a hump in the ocean. It looked different to the waves that had come before it. This wave was smooth, a glassy bulge with a sharp edge of water at the top that cut the sea into two levels: the bulge and everything else below it. This surge of water stretched for hundreds of meters, sucking up everything in its path as it gathered speed. It grew taller as it approached. The top of the wave was still a crisp line as it moved towards us, a sharp pleat that sparkled in the sun. The mass of dark ocean underneath was dimpled with shadow and swirling debris. The girl saw it too. She pulled at the man's shoulder and pointed at the wave. He reached back and took her hand, turned his body sideways and tried to scrabble back up

the rock. I stood up and held onto the cliff, even though I was probably too high and too far away for the wave to hit me. I wasn't sure. I watched them cling to each other, watched her bury her face in his neck and disappear in a spray of white foam as the wave exploded against the rock. Salt spray blew high into the air and spread like mist. White water charged up and over the dark rocks, into the cove where I'd been swimming. The water crashed against the side of the cliff where I was standing. The air cooled as all that water broke up and floated in the sky. I looked through the mist, at the place where the couple had been standing. They were gone.

I hobbled down the cliff to the side of the cove, still about two meters above the water when another wave smashed against rocks. It was a smaller wave, but it hit the rocks with a hollow thud.

I saw him surface. He was on the ocean side, encircled by the frothy water. He stroked madly, his head and arms out of the water. His forearm was slashed, the flesh hung in ribbons that flared in the water like the gills of a fish. He was dragged sideways, fast, as if he were being pulled down a drain. His arm went up again, its skin turned inside out, pink and glistening with seawater. Then I lost sight of him. I don't know if he ever saw me.

I limped down to the rocks, cut and bleeding, and stood at the rim of a boiling cauldron, looking for signs of life. There was no place to dive in. It was a half-submerged labyrinth of sharp rocks and barnacles. The sea hissed and gnawed at the gashes on the soles of my feet. The water gurgled and slurped, filling unseen caves below the surface. I searched the edge of the rock for a way in. I swear I did. I didn't see anyone. Not anymore. Just a scummy froth that wobbled on the surface of the water and tumbled over and over like clothes in a washing machine.

I looked back at the orange cliffs with their spindly trees, angled like waves frozen in stone. I saw a fisherman, his rods wobbling above him as he made his way down the cliff.

III

Squeezed by the cops – A friendly conversation – The first news footage – A response to my sister's text and her reply – Lists of names

The policeman set a plastic cup of water down on the desk in front of me. "Marc?" he read my name from the clipboard of paperwork I'd filled in earlier. He said it like a question, the way doctors do when they call a new patient out of their waiting room. I nodded. He shook my hand. He was a big guy, so the lightness of his handshake surprised me. "I'm Senior Constable Miles," he said. I wondered if it was protocol to introduce himself like that, with his title and everything, omitting his first name. I was Marc, not even Mr Gilbert; he was Senior Constable Miles.

Senior Constable Miles then half sat down, half fell onto the office chair beneath him, his knees seeming to give way halfway towards the chair, which bounced on its pneumatic piston as it took his weight. He leafed through the paperwork with his chubby fingers. Pale hands. No wedding ring.

I hadn't asked for the water, but I could feel my mouth was dry. "That's for you," said Miles, pointing at the water. "It's important to keep your fluids up. You've had a bit of a shock."

The space between my thought about the water and Miles mentioning it freaked me out a little. I suddenly entertained the idea he was using the water as some kind of police interrogation method, reading my body language, that kind of thing. The soft handshake, making me wait here by myself for twenty minutes, and this silent leafing through the paperwork while I watched him, now seemed like they might all be part of some psychological grilling technique.

"Thanks," I said, but I kept my hands in my lap, under the desk. The truth was my hands were trembling and I wasn't sure I could hold the cup without spilling the water.

"Okay," he said and expelled a long breath of air through his thin lips. He held the clipboard with both hands like it was a dinner menu. '*I, Marc Gilbert*,' he read. The French pronunciation was jeel-bear, but I didn't correct him. I'd stopped correcting people a long time ago. '*…do swear or solemnly affirm that this witness statement is true and correct. At the cove off Hammerhead Beach, at approximately 6pm, I saw two people, a man and a*

woman, get swept off the rocks by a large wave. I called out to them, but they didn't hear me. I was at least 200 meters away from where they were and too high up on the rocks to get hit by the wave myself. After the wave hit, I climbed down to the water near where I think the couple went in. The water was very choppy. I entered the water up to my knees, sustaining several cuts on my feet from the sharp rocks and barnacles. I thought I might be able to assist the couple. But I didn't see them, so I retreated from the water, fearing for my own safety. Big waves were still crashing against the rocks of the cove. I looked around and saw a fisherman coming down a path on the cliff behind me. I told him what happened and he called for help on his cell phone.'

I shifted in my chair. It was hard and plastic, and was making my legs sweat. Senior Constable Miles took a breath. "Satisfied with that statement?" He didn't look up from the clipboard.

"Yes."

"Okay, just sign here." He handed over the clipboard. I signed it, quickly, and spun the clipboard around on the table to face Senior Constable Miles.

I don't know why I lied on the statement about calling out and going into the water. I'd written it quickly. It didn't feel like a lie when I wrote it down. It seemed plausible, like maybe I had mixed up my recollection of the events. But it sure felt like a lie when Miles read my statement out loud. I almost stopped him to correct the statement. I swear I did. But I thought it would look suspicious. I got scared and I felt stupid, so I didn't say anything.

Miles looked at me over laced fingers. "That must have been scary," he said. I nodded.

"You want to talk to somebody about it?"

I shook my head. "No." I sat on my hands. "I'm okay," I said.

"You sure? There's no shame in it, you know."

"No, I'm okay."

The office chair creaked as Miles leaned forward. "It sounds like you did what you could, Marc. Sometimes that's all there is." He picked up the clipboard again. Even his fingers were fat. He leafed through the paperwork, the white paper reflected in the lens of his glasses. "How long you been in town, Marc?"

Hadn't there already been a question about that in the paperwork? "I got in this morning."

"Long drive?"

"Not really. I've been driving up the coast for a few days. Taking my time, you know."

"And how long you plan on staying in Niminbinji?" Miles raised his eyebrows, a third chin formed in the gathering flesh of his neck.

"Hey, am I in some kind of trouble here? Because I thought I was just coming in to give the witness statement and, I don't know, I'm feeling a little weird about the vibe here now, you know, just a little… uncomfortable." I almost reached for the cup of water now, but just ended up rubbing my hands against my legs under the desk. I could feel my face getting red and blotchy with anger and embarrassment.

Miles seemed to mellow all at once. His eyes softened, his shoulders dropped, even the firmness of his corpulent physique seemed to loosen, the hard fat of his stomach suddenly dissolving into something soft and squishy. He leaned across the table. "I'm sorry you feel that way, Marc." He sniffed, as if to wipe the slate clean. "Look," he said, putting the clipboard face down on the table. "I've got a list of questions I need to get through to finish the paperwork. That's all." He tapped the desk with his forefinger a few times and looked out into the hallway before turning back to me. "The reason I asked you how long you planned on staying is you're probably going to have to stay in town longer than you thought. In situations like this, where there are no physical remains, we have to wait for a coroner's report before we can put the whole thing to rest. You're the only witness, you see. So you're going to have to wait for that report too."

"How long?"

"Not sure."

"Well, roughly? I mean are we talking days? Weeks?"

"Couple of days, a week, maybe. Could be less if the remains turn up."

I thought of that couple on the rocks and that stupid floppy hat. Now they were all just *remains.*

"You might think of visiting the parents," he said. I must have looked at him blankly because he went on. "You were the last person to see Sarah and Cedric alive. I'm sure their parents would be grateful to hear what you saw."

Sarah and Cedric. It was the first time I'd heard their names.

"That's a bit… I mean, wouldn't that be upsetting?"

Miles leaned back. The office chair creaked. "It's already upsetting. Imagination is often worse than the facts. He sneezed suddenly and loudly. "Sorry," he said and produced a hanky from inside his sleeve. "Allergies." He blew and wiped his nose. "You say the two of

them were together, holding each other, when it happened," he put the hanky back up his sleeve. "Well you see that's a nice detail. Not the kind of thing you imagine. Parents like to hear about those things. They need details. It keeps them busy, you know, keeps their minds occupied. In situations like this, loved ones always want as much information as they can get. Even bad news is better than no news. We haven't got much information to give them. So they might feel a bit better talking to you. It's up to you, though, Marc. Can't force you. But I'll give you the addresses before you leave."

My hands still trembled. I was sure they'd never feel warm again.

The sun cast long shadows on the damp sand as I made my way back over the dunes towards the caravan park. Surf broke beside me in sharp, wet slaps against the beach. The sea darkened as the light faded, a dimpled abyss under a lavender sky, cooling sand like a draft against my ankles as I walked along the shore. All signs of the earlier tragedy faded with the dying light. The tide had washed away the tyre tracks of the emergency vehicles that had parked on the beach. The news vans that had captured the story had also packed up and gone home. The beach was innocent again. A couple walked arm in arm, leaning in to each other, a teenage surfer sat wrapped in his towel, staring out to sea. People acknowledged me with a nod of the head as I passed them. It seemed possible, even probable; they were all thinking about what happened here earlier that day. The day's events still clung to us, delicate as smoke in an airless room. We had shared a glimpse of oblivion and it turned each perfunctory salutation into a deep respect for the sanctity of life. *How you going? Namaste*.

I hadn't called out to them. It probably wouldn't have changed anything if I had. What bothered me was that it never occurred to me to warn them.

It was almost dark when I passed beside the boom gate of the caravan park, my rented territory. I noticed there were no campfires. In Canada, I remember sitting around a campfire as a kid, that's what camping was all about: fire and marshmallows. This campground seemed cold and dark without them. Here people sat on the grass, or lounged on plastic patio furniture, fingering iPads or watching TVs strapped to the side of their mobile homes under the deepening bruise in the big sky. People flung open doors to let in the cool breeze, exposing living rooms and kitchens. Legs stuck out from bedrooms where people read books or settled children to sleep. Families played cards under fluorescent camp lights and looked up as I walked by, our greetings wordless, soundless against the shrill cry of cicadas in the trees.

I walked up the hill towards my campsite when I noticed a huddle of men standing around with the kind of circular interest that usually indicates one of them is either digging a hole or building a fire. Sure enough, this crown of beer bottles had formed around an electric hot plate in the camp's covered picnic area where a fat older man in a golf shirt was busy turning sausages. He reminded me of the bulldog in that portrait of the dogs playing poker, his face a rosy pudding of sunburn and alcoholic bloat.

"G'day," he said, as I walked past. Until that moment, I had wondered whether *G'day* was a real thing or just a marketing slogan. "Want a sausage?" he said. *I call.*

"Thanks," I said and walked towards the group of guys, who nodded as I approached. I nodded back. *I fold.* Standard protocol. I couldn't remember when I'd last eaten.

"Here," the bulldog picked up a sausage with his barbecue tongs and held it up. "Get yourself a slice of bread." He motioned to an open bag of sliced white bread on the picnic table. "Want sauce?

"No thanks," I said, even though I wanted ketchup.

"Ah, well, it's all there, mate," he said gesturing at the picnic table behind him. "Just help yourself." I walked over to the picnic table and got a slice of bread. The bulldog put a sausage on it. Would it be weird to now put ketchup on it anyway, even though I'd said I didn't want any?

"You up from Melbourne or Sydney?" The question interrupted my thought.

"Melbourne," I said and took a bite of my dry sausage.

"Camping?"

"Yeah. Well, just in a swag actually," I said, pointing off in the general direction of my campsite.

"Oh, you're the guy with that little Nissan Micra?" He sounded genuinely pleased at having matched the car to its owner. I nodded.

"Yeah, they're great little things," he said, turning his sausages, tongs clacking.

"Yeah it's pretty zippy," I said, wondering if the term *zippy* made any sense here. "Pretty quick," I clarified with a touch of surprise as if the vehicle had exceeded my expectations. That's really all I had to say about the car.

"Are you guys all from the village?" I said, hoping to change the subject.

"From the what – the village?" he laughed. "The town. Nah mate, most of us come down from Canberra or Sydney. We get up here a couple of times a year. Do some fishing. I'm Darren by the way, I'd shake your hand but it's a bit greasy."

"I'm Marc."

“Nice to meet you, Marc.” The sound of my own name struck me. At how genuine Darren’s voice sounded, like he’d really absorbed, you know, like already he’d never forget it.

“Here you go, Gaz,” said a voice from the huddle. “They’re talking about it now.”

“Turn it up,” said another voice.

Someone turned up the sound on a portable TV sitting on the counter of the camp kitchen. It was a news story. A female reporter stood on a bluff that I recognized from just down the hill near Hammerhead Beach.

“Louder, Gaz,” said someone. “Can’t hear what she’s saying.”

“Emergency services mounted a desperate search after two teenagers were swept into the ocean by a rogue wave late this afternoon.”

“You hear about this?’ said Darren, turning to me. I nodded. The journalist continued.

“The tragedy occurred just after 6pm at the usually idyllic coastal town of Niminbinji on the south coast of New South Wales. South Coast Lifesaving director Jim Fenwick describes the sea conditions responsible for the tragedy. ‘A big surge from a wave hit the couple while they were on the rocks and dragged them in. Unfortunately, it’s going to be a body recovery operation.’ The bodies of the two teenagers could not be found after a two-hour search involving local police and marine rescue units, lifeguards and the Westpac rescue helicopter. The search will resume tomorrow at 7am. Police said the incident is a grim reminder to tourists and anglers about the danger and unpredictability of the sea. With a community in mourning, for Seven News, this is Philippa Strahan, in Niminbinji, New South Wales.”

“Fuck’n waste,” said Darren shaking his head. “What were they? Sixteen or something? Shocking. Imagine the parents. Poor cunts.” He took a long drink from his beer, and solemnly returned to his sausages, turning them unnecessarily. “Say, you Canadian or American?”

“Canadian,” I said finishing my last mouthful of sausage and bread. He waggled his tongs at me. “I knew that,” he said. “Knew you was a Canadian and not a Yank, you know why?” I shook my head. “Volume. If you’d been a Yank – well, first off you would’ve told us already – but it’s the volume, mate, the loudness of the voice. I reckon Canadians are just a bit more quiet.”

“Sounds about right,” I said without fully agreeing, suddenly aware of the volume of my voice.

“What part of Canada you from?”

"From the west coast." I wiped my hands on my shorts. "Vancouver."

"You're joking," said Darren. "I used to work for Dee – the Department of Agriculture, so I spent a bit of time up in Alberta. Never got down as far as Vancouver. Place looks amazing, though, a dead set paradise." Someone handed Darren a new beer. "So why come out here?"

"It's winter over there," I said.

"Fair enough," he said with a chuckle. "Fair enough. Not a skier then." He twisted the cap off his beer in one fluid motion, as easy as pulling the head off a flower. "Well how's the trip going so far?" The group laughed. Maybe I was tired, but it seemed kind of cruel.

"Seriously though," he added. "You haven't picked the best time of year to visit this place," he said, searching the sky. "The weather can be a bit shocking around Christmas time. Not cold, just windy."

"Yeah that wave that took out those kids is pretty standard for this time of year," said Geoff. "You don't go crawling over the rocks unless you know what you're doing."

"You reckon they'll find the bodies, Geoff?" asked Darren. I wanted to know too, though I couldn't have asked the question myself.

"Them bodies'll surface, yeah. But it's deep water. They could turn up miles offshore or get taken by sharks."

Geoff's grim assessment settled heavily on the group. Most of the guys just stood around looking into their beers.

The words, *I was there* formed in a thought cloud that hung above my head. I was so close to saying it. It was as good as said. All I had to do was pluck the words from the air and give them breath.

"Be wet in the swag tonight," said Darren, nodding gravely. "We'll cop it soon," he said squinting at the night sky. "It's gonna bucket down. Give it an hour or two, I reckon."

The intimacy evaporated. I couldn't believe I'd only just felt comfortable enough to share that I had seen the couple die on those rocks. *Cedric and Sarah.*

"I better get back to the swag before it starts then," I said, sensing an opportunity to leave.

"You'll be right for a bit," said someone from the group. "Probably another hour or so." The weather prediction got a general murmur of agreement from the others. I looked up at the sky. The glass dome that covered the light bulb over the picnic area was filled with dead insects. Their corpses blotted out half the light bulb, a storm cloud of hairy legs.

"You got a torch?" said Darren.

"Not sure." I didn't. "I can just use my phone."

"Yeah, and how good does that work when it's wet?"

I shrugged.

"Rick," said Darren, addressing the group over his shoulder. "Get Marc a torch would ya. That little red one."

Rick disappeared into the darkness outside the dim glow of the camp kitchen. Darren turned back to face me.

"You'll need a torch to find your way to the toilet in the dark. It'll be bloody dark when that moon clouds over."

I thanked Darren for the sausage and the torch and wandered back to my campsite, both grateful and suspicious of his generosity. People need reasons to be nice.

Back at my camp spot, I brushed my teeth. My glass deodorant bottle had shattered in my toiletry bag and the deodorant had seeped onto the bristles of my toothbrush; even after I'd rinsed the bristles, the chemical fizz in my mouth felt like it was doing more harm than good.

With my mouth tasting like my armpits, I moved the swag a little closer to the car. If the rain got too heavy I could always sleep in the Nissan.

I lay there, no idea what time it was, waiting for the rain. I pulled my phone out and re-read my sister's text.

Dad not doing well. Could be his last Christmas.

I tapped out my response.

Ok. Thanks for letting me know. I also wrote 'Sorry. Good luck,' but erased it, and wondered if there was an app out there that could show you what people were writing in real time before they sent it. I put the phone down. I picked it up again and checked my newsfeed:

Drone strike…collateral damage... EU divided on fiscal policy… North Korea… United Nations push for sanctions…Confessions from Gwyneth Paltrow's former personal chef.

I looked up and saw the moon, its glow dimmed by the mosquito netting of my swag. This might have been the same view seen by some other human from this very spot a hundred years ago, a thousand, forty thousand. But wait, that passing cloud up in the sky looked like a boat, a car, a UFO, all cultural references specific to my time, my experience. Besides, wasn't that the faint odor of cow shit I could smell wafting down from a distant paddock? Weren't cows basically a human invention? These were all reminders of the present, my present, and the cumulative impact of generations of people who'd sought to leave their mark on the

landscape, on the world. It was impossible, I decided, to pretend to be in a time other than my own, as much as another century occasionally seemed to promise greater opportunity than my own circumstances provided.

I wanted to stand for something, but I could never convince myself anything was worth fighting for. I didn't want a job. I wanted a calling, something with a uniform, maybe, that people could believe in. But people don't trust uniforms anymore – police, army, the priesthood, they no longer inspire trust, if they ever did; the uniforms have been corrupted. People might still trust the people wearing those uniforms, but they don't trust the motives of the organizations behind them.

My anger, my problem, is not so much physical or psychological, as it is cultural. I live at a time, in a place, in a city where to be a man means little more than being tall or short, or vegetarian. My sex, my gender alone would, at any other time in history, have afforded me a direction in the world, a kind of certainty, a purpose. Nowadays life was invariably described as a *journey*, a *process* of finding *your* way *your* self. It was all so circular and self-indulgent. I liked, at least in theory, the structure, the order imposed on society by a solid monarchy, a patriarchy, a benevolent dictatorship. I was even prepared to accept a matriarchy if it meant I could find a meaningful place for myself in a subculture of oppressed males. But there was no such club, and there wouldn't and shouldn't be. I was a well-educated, able-bodied, Caucasian, heterosexual, English-speaking male. I was oppressed by no one; I was everybody's asshole. If *I* didn't succeed it was my fault, not society's. I had no right to be angry, and it was this that made me angriest of all. I had every advantage and *still* I had achieved nothing. I was no fan of Trump but I empathized instinctively with the impulse, the collective rage that had elected him. I wanted freedom too, not in the abstract sense. I wanted to feel it.

I zipped up the weather fly on my swag and waited for the rain. I listened to the general stirring of the caravan park: a cough, the shriek of some kid who wouldn't go to sleep and men talking with their campfire voices, even if they had no flames to stare into.

I thought of Sarah and Cedric, of their bodies, still out there somewhere in the darkening sea, the flesh on Cedric's arm fanning out in the moonlit water like kelp, rippling in the current.

A helicopter woke me. I unzipped the rain cover on my swag and assumed it was early. The depth in last night's sky was gone, the moon and stars replaced by flat, grey light that hung

above me in a low and featureless haze. No sign of life yet in the caravan park. Camp chairs and patio furniture had toppled over and lay in the sodden grass, pooled with water from last night's storm. I hadn't heard a thing.

My hands and feet searched the insides of the swag for damp spots. It was dry. Not bad for a rental. I unzipped myself from my cocoon and stood up to better assess the day. It was windy, but not cold. The caravan park was quiet, save for the rumble of distant waves and a few of those weird Australian crows with their defeated whine. Why didn't birds sound like birds in Australia? The Kookaburra sounded like the cackle of witches and the magpie like a dial-up internet connection. Biology refused to play by the rules in this place. I grabbed a muesli bar, and began walking down the path towards the beach.

The beach was deserted and strewn with seaweed, the sand pockmarked from heavy rain and streaked with lines of runoff where tiny rivers had charged towards the sea. Now desolate, the place was gloomy and altogether less friendly than it had been the day before, when it was packed with people and beach umbrellas. A single surfer straddled his board in the grey water behind the swell, watching boats with emergency lights circle near the rocks.

I wandered into town, happy to have a destination. I checked my phone. No text from my sister. It was 1:57pm in Vancouver. December 11. It would be quiet at work. The campus almost empty of students. The staff already starting to take holidays, especially people with kids. Those left behind would now be watching the calendar, the clock, whittling down the days before *their* Christmas began.

Niminbinji's holiday decorations were minimal. One chewed-up strand of red tinsel twisted in the sea breeze. It had been strung up between three of the five palm trees that lined the park side of the main street. There were crimson bows, fading with age and sunstroke, tied to lamp posts and telephone poles. A hand-painted sign read *Seasons Greetings*. It hung askew on the playground fence, secured with plastic zip ties, the kind cops use as handcuffs. The last four letters of the word *Greetings* were squeezed together after the sign maker realized they were running out of room on the plywood board. These adornments seemed more ad hoc than part of the town's official decorations. It was quaint and reminded me how Christmas had become more of an industry in Canada, a glittering, glimmering pageant of over-indulgence. It was refreshing to see decorations so unashamedly ragged and modest. You could imagine the person behind them, the imperfect human glimpsed in the crooked bow, the limp tinsel.

Shops were open. That surprised me for some reason. Ednas Pies was already doing a brisk trade. I got a coffee and a carrot muffin and sat on the patio, not even minding the wobbly table.

A Channel Seven news van cruised down the main street, its rooftop satellite dish on a crane almost level with the tinsel in the trees. People turned to watch the van as it drove towards the beach, curdling good humor in its wake. We all watched the van lurch and wobble as it mounted the curb, crossed the sidewalk and parked on the grassy bluff above Hammerhead Beach. And there it sat, a physical incarnation of the town's collective question: *what now*? It was the cardio encephalogram next to the bed, the empty chair at the dinner table, the bouquet of flowers on the roadside, the evidence that things were not as they were, nor as they should be.

My phone vibrated.

So are you coming home? Or are you just going to keep hiding?

Jenna always did this. She escalated things. Creating chaos was her way of staying in control. I wasn't in the mood, even. less so than usual. I shoved a wad of napkins under the table leg, asked Mabel or Barrel or whatever her name was, to put my coffee in a to-go cup and walked down the street in the opposite direction to the news van. This was supposed to be my holiday, goddammit.

A breeze of mellow reggae music drew me inside the Hope Emporium. Here a decidedly younger crowd of tourists browsed racks of hemp clothing in the dim of candlelit amethyst crystals. I caressed the soft fabric of a shirt made from organic bamboo fibre as I walked through the front door, conscious of my transition from pedestrian to consumer.

"Beautifully soft, isn't it?" said the woman behind the counter who'd clearly made the same conversion. I nodded. "A lot softer than cotton," she added. I smiled, turned the price tag over and moved to another section of the store that displayed a wall of imported and organic soaps. There were bright boxes of Aphrodisia and Egyptian musk soap, and Chandrika Ayurvedik soap from India 'for glowing skin.' There was soap made of goat's milk and red apple, jojoba and buttermilk, charcoal and walnut. I sniffed a cake of lavender and peppermint, of sandalwood, of coconut and lime. The jasmine and ylang ylang made me sneeze, which drew a knowing smile from the saleswoman behind the counter.

I bumped my head against a dream catcher that hung from the rafters as I made my way deeper into the store. The place smelled of woody, mossy incense, a moist aroma that struck me as a counterpoint to church incense, which always made me think of dry and dead things. I gravitated to a bookshelf in the corner, a small library alcove where I could get my

bearings. Here, a consumer's acceptable browsing pace slowed, a space where privacy and contemplation were part of converting passive interest into active sales. I tilted my head to read the book spines: *Change Your Truth*, *Diamond Heart*, *The Wisdom of the Ennegram*, all books written by people with white-sounding names like Beth and Gordon, Kevin and Nancy and Krystal. I glanced at a girl in cut-off denim shorts reading *Go Girl: Sexual Awakening for a Kundalini Princess*. I walked on.

I felt bulky in this shop; things rattled and quivered on the shelves as my big feet trod on the uneven wooden floor. I padded over to a display cabinet of *magikal* charms and amulets. The Gaelic and Egyptian inspired jewelry promised they would guard their wearers against oddly specific metaphysical ailments: fragility of spirit, self-doubt, lack of courage. "The Key of Solomon," I said to no one in particular, reading the little placard under a smooth, black pendant that promised to help its wearer *develop intellectual abilities*. *"*Whatever*,"* I said, shaking my head. "What. Ever."

Only the permissive aesthetic of a New Ager could display a Buddha statue next to one of a ceramic frog doing yoga poses on a lotus flower. These cheap trinkets, the rubber bracelets, the plastic Vishnu and Buddha and Chinese dragon statuettes – all of it – was part of the same vague and undisciplined 'spirituality' that placed no real demand on the faithful. It called for none of the self-sacrifice fundamental to true belief. Here, self-discovery was equal to enlightenment. The whole system of New Age, if there was one, was a kind of materialist Buddhism, the apotheosis of the Self. If Jesus had blessed the meek, then New Age anointed them. Everything false and self-deluded about the twenty-first century was for sale in this shop.

The saleswoman came out from behind the front counter and walked across the parquetry floor, the merchandise on the shelves barely shaking under her slight build as she moved, and took up a new place behind the lock and key side of the display cabinet.

"Did you want to look at something in particular?"

"No thanks," I said cheerfully, head bowed, my gaze still lingering inside the display cabinet. "Just having a look." The Key of Soloman cost $90. Had they ever sold one? "Some nice stuff in here, though," I said, signalling my polite lack of interest. The woman smiled, her cold blue eyes framed by her warm red hair.

I retreated, pretended to browse the racks and shelves as I made my way to the exit. A green fedora with a bright red feather in it caught my attention. But I no longer felt playful. I no longer felt like being a consumer. I needed to be outside.

I stood outside the shop, leaning against a post that held up the Hope Emporium's low and crooked awning. Tourists passed me by along the sidewalk. I heard some Germans, a few Brits. A Korean family shuffled noiselessly past the Emporium's display of hammocks and Indian-patterned throw cushions. Someone had knocked a soft drink over and I watched the dark, effervescent puddle of cola slowly trickle across the sidewalk towards the gutter. People stepped over it. Life went on.

A monument in the distance caught my attention, an obelisk on its own little patch of grass on top of the hill. A war memorial, no doubt. These small towns were so filled with war monuments you'd think Australia had single-handedly won the First World War.

The granite slab sparkled as I approached. The gilded letters of the honour roll glowed in the afternoon sun. I could read the names as I got closer:

WWI
E. Barrett
R. Beck
W. J. Collins
M. Gilbert

WWII
A. Cook
S. Dunbar
G. Stephanos
A. Tayt
J. Woodhouse
S. Wong

I sometimes watch old news footage on YouTube, from 1914 or the 1930s and see people lining the streets to wave their soldiers off to war. People don't do that anymore. Even if they trust the soldiers, they don't trust the motives of the war they're sent to fight. Things seemed simpler then. Good and bad were clearer maybe. Or maybe we're just more complex now. Or maybe that's just what we tell ourselves so we don't feel we have to get involved.

The lettering on the monument was freshly gilded. I almost had to squint, the way it reflected the sun. Strange to see my own name carved up there on that slab of rock. M. Gilbert. *Michael? Martin? Marc?* I traced the carved stone letters with my fingers, the sharp

angles of the engraving hard against the soft flesh of my fingertips. Did anyone still living know of that guy? Or any of the people behind these names? Know them, not in the abstract, he-was-my-great-grandfather sense, but in a real flesh-and-bone way? How did E. Barrett like his coffee? What did J. Woodhouse do for fun? They must have known each other, all these people. This place was too small not to. Imagine it back then. Were they all in the same regiment? Did they fight together? Die together? I guessed it wasn't one of them lying in the small tomb of the unknown soldier.

This heavy, sober monument was erected on this airy patch of grass that overlooked the beach, where surfers lined up behind the breakers, resting in between sets. I could see beach umbrellas from here. Maybe it was the warmth of the sun coming through the clouds onto my shoulders, or the sound of laughter carried up from the beach below the ridge, or because I felt sleepy, or because I was, effectively, on vacation, but I couldn't reconcile the events memorialized by this monument with the battlefields of Verdun, Ypres and Ardennes, those sacred places. Maybe it was because none of the men whose names were etched into this stone had actually died here, or anywhere nearby. No. They'd died *there*. These men had spared the *grateful citizens* who had erected this monument the immediate horror of the wars. Their death was a distant, remote sacrifice, preserving the innocence of this little hamlet, a luxury no European village could afford. Australia is far from everything. *Lest we forget.* This monument was just a bullet-point list of names on a gravestone. Was it built out of gratitude or outrage? Would these soldiers have sacrificed themselves today, knowing what they died for? What was to come? Do people still sacrifice themselves like that? I'd like to think they do. Whoever they were, these men, they were long gone now, more faded than their sharp initials carved into the stone above the cove; their spirits were long gone, of that I was sure.

I pulled out the piece of paper that Senior Constable Miles had given me with the names and addresses of Cedric and Sarah's parents. He'd written it like a shopping list, his handwriting swirly and bubbly, like a girl's.

Cedric's family:

- Albert Kalonji (dad)
- Dina Kalonji (mom)
- Aline Kalonji (sister)

Sarah's family:

- Jamie Collins (dad)

The names hung there on the page, radiating grief and longing. I crumbled the paper and put it back in my pocket. I wasn't going to talk to the families. What could I possibly say? *Your kids died because of a floppy hat and I did nothing to save them. I didn't even call out.*

The sun oozed through swollen, milky clouds. It was still morning and already it was turning into a murky, sticky, coffee-mouthed write-off of a day. I needed a place to sit, a place of my own. It was annoying just having the swag. There was no privacy in it. I needed somewhere cool and quiet where I could just breathe for a little while, a place where people couldn't just watch me whenever they felt like it, a place where I didn't have to look at the Channel Seven news van with the satellite dish on top.

I headed back towards the caravan park. I was going to sit in the car with the air conditioning on, maybe play some music.

When I got there, a well-dressed black man was peering into the passenger-side window of my Nissan Micra.

IV

Mr Kalonji – Interviewed by the media – The house of mourning – A graceless exit.

I nearly kept walking. Really. I almost turned around, imagined myself walking down the path, past my car, out of the caravan park and up the road. I could've hitchhiked or something. But I couldn't. And I didn't. I just stood there, watching the man peer into my car window. I mentally took stock of the vehicle's contents – what a mess it was inside, my shorts and underwear spilled out on the back seat, a towel drying on the steering wheel. The man had his back to me, the fabric of his blue suit jacket stretched tight across his pointy shoulder blades. His long fingers, his hands cupped against his forehead left smudges on the window glass as he moved around my car.

He sensed something, or heard something. Maybe my foot crunched on a patch of gravel, maybe a twig snapped under my foot, but he suddenly turned around.

He smiled, beamed really, his mouth broad and toothy under a salt-and-pepper moustache. It was a natural smile, soft mouthed and twinkle-eyed, the kind your body reserves for an old friend you haven't seen in a long time. He walked towards me, his arm already outstretched to shake my hand.

"Mr Gilbert?" he said. He pronounced it *Jeel-Bear.* We shook hands. His fingers wrapped all the way around my hand.

"My name is Albert Kalonji." He spoke with a thick French accent, each word a sentence.

Of course it was Albert Kalonji. He'd come to confront me, berate me, to denounce me as a coward for failing to save his son. I wasn't ready. I should have prepared some kind words. A better person would have been able to think of something suitably momentous, somber but life affirming. I had nothing.

"Hi, I'm Marc," I said. What a lame introduction. What a feeble thing to say. *Loser*.

"Mr *Jeel-Bear*. Marc. I understand you are from Ca-na-da." The French accent was nearly impenetrable, almost comedic, a black inspector Clouseau.

"Yes," I said. "From Vancouver."

"Ah," he said, pleased, and raised a finger in the air, as if marking the arrival of a train. "I have a cousin in Vancouver. I understand it is very beautiful. I nodded. "*Cela veut dire que nous pouvons parler en Français?"* he said. Albert Kalonji's English was a stuttering, stammering effort, each word searched for and retrieved from some deep mnemonic recess, a grab bag of nouns and verbs that had to be sifted through and tried on for size, uncertain like borrowed clothes. His French, though, was beautiful, an effortless translation from thought to speech. He was no Clouseau.

"*Oui*, *on peut parler Francais*" I said. My own French clunky, effortful, like something assembled. I had already stumbled into using the informal *tu* rather than the formal *vous*. Dad would have been ashamed.

Kalonji smiled even wider at my acceptance of speaking French, his joy manifest in his cheekbones, which rose to his eyes like a double lunar eclipse. "*Ah, parfait, monsieur Gilbert. Vous ne pouvez pas savoir le plaisir que vous me faites. De pouvoir parler ma langue comme ca avec vous...*" He was so happy to be speaking French. It almost didn't matter what I said.

Strange how some improbable braid of history, some colonial battle, maybe, won somewhere years ago, meant that we now spoke the same language and how, by some personal twist of fate, we now spoke it here, so far from where we and it had all started.

I asked Kalonji if I could use *tu*, rather than *vous*, hoping he would say yes. My Canadian social French wasn't up to the mental acrobatics of making in-situ formal conjugations.

"*Bien sur*," he said, slapping me on the shoulder, accepting the shift to linguistic informality as a step towards personal intimacy.

He said that Constable Miles had told him where to find me, that he was sorry for imposing himself on me but that his heart is where his head used to be, ever since the accident. That's how he put it, *l'accident*. I offered him my condolences, just like that. It was easier in French. Maybe the language itself made it easier, maybe French words just didn't penetrate me like English words did, the French words more like a set of dance steps in a choreographed routine, the English words more like a freestyle whole-body response to the music of my life, like comparing a polka to a rave.

"*Merci*," he said. "*Merci*," and then silence hung between us, a heavy, transitory quiet, as purposeful as the gathering fury of that wave.

I don't know if speaking French disarmed me, made me less equipped to assert myself, but I accepted his invitation to come to their place later that night. It would be

himself, his wife, Dina, their daughter Aline, and, of course, Monsieur Jamie Collins, *un pauvre homme*, as Kalonji put it, shaking his head. A poor man. Kalonji pursed his lips when he mentioned Jamie Collins, as if Sarah's father had lost something greater than Kalonji himself. *Un pauvre homme*, he repeated.

Kalonji wrapped my hand up again with his own to say goodbye. He held my hand for a while, his coarse, dry skin against my own. He let go, turned and starting walking towards the boom gates of the caravan park, his blue suit still tight at the shoulder blades, dress shoes worn at the heels. He looked a little shabbier up close than he did from a distance, with a slight limp in his step that he disguised with a swagger, flinging his left arm out behind him as he walked, more for balance than style. How could he not be sweating in that suit jacket? I watched him for a long time, watched him disappear below the grassy slope. It felt like something out of a movie, the scene where a stranger leaves town. Who was the stranger, though, him or me? When Kalonji disappeared behind the hill, things didn't feel so cinematic anymore. It was as if the lights had come back on in the theatre and I suddenly noticed all the other people who'd been sitting there with me in the dark. I felt jarred and conspicuous, saddled by the weight of mundane decisions I had to make, the effort required to move my own narrative forward. If this were the movie of my life, now would be the time to do something interesting.

I surveyed the litter of my campsite. The bottle of sunscreen on the picnic table, the camp chair toppled over in a sodden patch of grass, my swag and its bedding rolled out like a homeless person's sidewalk bivouac. What kind of story did this tell? *A sad one.*

I couldn't deal with any of this now. I needed a moment to myself. I pushed a button on my car keys. The lights flashed on my Nissan Micra, unlocking the doors. I got in. The towel on the steering wheel was still damp so I arranged it on the passenger seat. There was a faint odour of rot in the car, the sweet, floral beginnings of decay. I vaguely remembered an apple. It had probably rolled under the car seat. I couldn't bother looking.

I plugged my phone into the car's console and re-read my sister's text.
So are you coming home? Or are you just going to keep hiding? Whatever. Jenna was the good girl who stayed by dad's side, always called him, visited him, especially after she moved him into the Home. 'You have to check up on the staff,' she'd said. 'They'll try and get away with as much as they can.' She ordered the care-workers around, told them to wash dad's clothes more often when he stank, to clean the cobwebs out from under his bathroom sink, to flip his room-calendar over when a new month started. Jenna relished in telling me all of these details because they let me know all the things she did and all the things I didn't.

Thing is, even if I went there, she'd scold me for not going more, or not doing things right because I didn't notice that dad stank, or that he had cobwebs under his sink, or that the calendar in his room was two months out of date. I couldn't win. With Jenna you could only win by losing to her.

I scrolled through my music library.

Arcade Fire

Bach

Beastie Boys

Beck

Boards of Canada

Bob Dylan

Brian Eno

Brother Ali

Elton John

Eminem

Fleetwood Mac

Four Tet

Honey Claws

Leftfield

Metallica

Nas

Philip Glass

Pink Floyd

Queen

Radiohead

Rammstein

Serge Gainsbourg

Shins

Sigur Rós

Snoop Dogg

Spiritualized

Supertramp

Tragically Hip

Tupac

What a dreary selection. I didn't feel like listening to any of this music now. I should've got a phone with more data so I could've loaded more music onto this thing. I put on some Brian Eno but I could tell from the first few seconds this wasn't going to work. Too slow. I shifted to Dylan, but it was one of his harmonica songs and it just annoyed me. I thought of YouTubing something but the reception was patchy.

It was getting stuffy in the car so I rolled down the window. I put on Fleetwood Mac; *Rumours* was the right album for any mood, any occasion. Boomers had done a few things right. This album was in their pantheon. I tilted the seat back, closed my eyes, resisted the urge to skip to the next song and let the music wash over me, transport me, lead me through a succession of romantic vignettes from my life for which this music was the soundtrack.

A tap against the car window startled me. I opened my eyes to see a TV camera lens pointed at me and a woman, leaning down into the window, holding a furry microphone. I tilted the seat back up and turned the music down.

"Marc? Hi. I'm Philippa Strahan, from Channel Seven news. I just wanted to ask you about what you saw yesterday down at Hammerhead Beach."

The camera guy must have flicked a light on in his camera because I was suddenly squinting in the glow of it. The rest of the world was now a silhouette.

"What?" I said.

"We're doing a story on the young couple that drowned over by the rocks yesterday and I understand you were there when it happened. Just hoping you could tell us what you saw." Philippa Strahan tilted the microphone towards me.

"What? Ah, we – I, ah, uhmm."

"It's okay, Marc. We're not live or anything so you can take your time. We'll edit this together later. Just think back and tell me what you remember."

I saw the camera guy crouch down, that big lens just staring, the fuzzy microphone, like a splayed hamster on a stick.

"I don't. I mean, I don't really have anything to say."

Philippa Strahan flicked her hair over her shoulder. *Some kind of signal to the camera guy?* "It's okay, Marc," she said. Her voice was suddenly conciliatory. "You don't have to talk to us. It's just that a lot of people in the community cared about those kids. I'm sure it would help them to hear what you saw."

"I'm sorry. I'm just a bit out of it, you know. I was just talking to, um – I'm, just… I need a moment to process all… this. So could we just, like, maybe turn that thing off?"

"It's okay. Just tell us what you saw, Marc. Maybe start by describing the wave?" She sounded so impatient, only after the sound bite for her stupid story. The microphone just hung there, half inside my car, dangling like roadkill in my face.

"Hey what's wrong with you?" I said, opening the car door. "Seriously." I stepped out. "I asked you to turn that fucking thing off and you can't even be civil about it. You just keep filming. Waiting for I-don't-know-what-the-fuck." I walked towards Philippa and the camera guy. They backed up. "Yeah, I was fuckin' there. You want to know what happened? Here's what happened. A big fuckin' wave came and scraped that couple off the fuckin' rocks. Now they're dead. Happy? Get any fuckin' useable footage out of that?"

"Marc, I know you're upset but–"

"Upset? I'm not upset, okay. I'm fuckin', ah, disgusted. Totally disgusted with you, and this whole… whatever the fuck this is. You just want to take it, you know, you just take it and then that's it. Fuckin' thieves is what you are."

"Take what, Marc? What do we want to take?"

"The story! You fucking…" I put my hands on my head and grabbed fistfuls of hair. "This is just a story to you. You just come over here and point that thing in my face and then you just want to, like, squeeze. All so you can get the story – *my* fuckin' story, *their* story– and then move on to the next one. And for what? Just so you can build up your shitty career? I didn't ask to be there, okay. I didn't want to see that. But I did. So there. It sucks. It sucks more for them and their families than it does for me, but it still sucks. I know that's, like, a selfish perspective or whatever, but that's what it feels like. I wish they hadn't have been there. Poking around on those rocks."

Strahan gave the kill signal to the cameraman who turned the light off and lowered his camera.

And that was it. It already felt like my fate was sealed up in that camera. But I couldn't have known the town's was as well.

Philippa Strahan and the camera guy turned to leave. "I'm sorry you're so upset," she said. The microphone now hung down by her side, pointing at the ground.

"Yeah, well," I said. She didn't deserve what I'd said. Not all of it anyway. It didn't matter. I couldn't take it back now.

I hung around in the shade of my campsite for a while after the news crew left. I cleaned up a bit, folded up some of the clothes that were lying around in the back of the car,

even tried to read some of the book I'd brought, *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, recommended by Param, one of the Indian ladies I worked with. It was okay. But these Indian writers all kind of sounded the same to me, like they'd been brought up in an English boarding school and were then sent to India to work out what it all meant. The guy could write, for sure, in that English way that's so light-footed and self-assured, like a cat creeping along the top of a wall, its little bell in the collar jingling just loud enough so you know it's coming. It just wasn't my thing.

I fell asleep and woke up in the heat of the car. The sun had now cleared the shade of the trees and was shining straight through my windshield. The sun was chasing me too.

I walked beside the boom gates of the caravan park and into town. The Channel Seven news van was no longer parked on the bluff overlooking Hammerhead Beach. I walked past the dry and chewed up field where those kids had played cricket, before the incident. Some teenagers were hanging out near the barbecue area now. I turned away from them, feigning interest in a boarded-up shopfront on the other side of the street. I didn't want anyone looking at me. I was no longer sure about who knew me and who didn't. I missed the assurance of anonymity.

The interview played over and over in my head in a continuous loop. Just knowing it was out there made me uncomfortable, like it was something hard and sharp that I'd thrown into a crowd and hadn't landed yet. Maybe it wouldn't hit or break anything? Maybe it wouldn't even make it on TV? There wasn't much of what I said that could've been put together as part of a story anyway.

Mr Kalonji had told me to follow the hill up towards the cell phone tower and that his house was beside the water reservoir. I could see the tower now, its spikey jumble of tubes and saucers rising from the scaffolding built on top of the town's water reservoir. Their house was small and brightly painted in yellow with purple shutters; the house's outrageous colors separated it from the dark shadow cast by the round, concrete silo of the water reservoir that stood next to them. The reservoir was almost twice as high as the house. It was a wooden house, like a cottage, and I imagined it had been built before the water reservoir. Boy, the original owners must have been pissed off when that tower got built next to them. The front door of the house was open. A fat dog in the front yard barked once to signal my arrival and returned to its long-tongued panting in the shade of a bush. If I'd wanted to turn back, it was now too late. A woman I had to assume was Mrs Kalonji soon filled the open doorway.

"Marc?"

"Yes."

"Okay," she said, neither happy nor sad, resigned to the fact of my being there. Like her house, she too was colorful, dressed in a purple, billowing dress adorned with bright, multicolored sashes.

I walked towards her and held out my hand, conscious I was probably already doing something wrong, something culturally inappropriate.

"*Bonjour*," she said and shook my hand. "*Je suis Dina."*

I offered my condolences. Dina nodded. Her hair was short, like, buzz cut shaved, accentuating the weight and size of her head as she bowed it. It was the size of a small watermelon. Dina turned and I followed her into the cool darkness of the house.

The long hallway opened into a living room where Mr Kalonji sat in an overstuffed lounge chair, still in his suit. Beside him, a weedy, fragile man sat on the edge of an adjacent couch. On a separate chair was the red-haired woman I recognized from that hippie shop in town. Kalonji shot up from his chair when he saw me. "Marc," he said and grasped my hand with both of his. "Thank you for coming," he said. "This," he said gesturing to the sunburnt little man on the couch, "is Mr Jamie Collins, the father of Sarah."

Jamie Collins nodded up towards me from his position on the couch.

"My condolences," I said. Collins nodded again and silently mouthed something before dropping his gaze to the floor. "And this is Carol," said Kalonji, bowing slightly in the redhead's direction. "She was our host when we first arrived here and now she is our friend."

"Hi Marc," said Carol, and waved, her bracelets falling from her wrist to her forearm. I looked at her neck, half expecting to see her wearing one of those medicinal Gaelic amulets she sold in the store. She didn't.

"Sit, please," said Mr Kalonji, easing himself back into the stuffing of his chair. "You want something to drink? Coffee? Beer or something?"

"I'm okay," I said, lowering myself onto the far edge of the couch, as far away from Carol and Jamie Collins as I could get.

"Dina!" Kalonji called over his shoulder.

"Yes," said Mrs Kalonji from another room.

"Can you bring some beers?" He looked back at me, leaned forward intently. "You hungry? Want something to eat?"

"No. Thanks, really. I'm okay." I choked on the words a bit because I had a lump in my throat. I was nervous, the way I get if I need to do any public speaking, even if it's just

talking in a meeting. I get anxious weeks before I actually have to do it. It gets so bad I can't swallow. That's how I felt now.

"Okay," said Kalonji. He turned to Jamie Collins. "Jamie, you want something?"

Collins slowly shook his head, his wispy facial hair framed the chapped rictus of his mouth.

"Okay," said Kalonji, satisfied, and sank back into the pillowy folds of his chair. The four of us sat there listening to Dina Kalonji opening and closing cupboards in the kitchen, the rattling of glass bottles as she opened the fridge door. I sat on the edge of the couch, a pile of bright throw cushions between me and Jamie Collins, who sat rubbing his hands together while staring at the floor. Kalonji sat motionless, gripping the arms of his chair as if ready to spring into action. We were suspended, awaiting the arrival of whatever Dina Kalonji was preparing to re-animate us. I could not think of a single thing to say.

Carol called out to the kitchen. "You sure you don't need any help in there, Dina?"

"No," came the soft reply through the wall. "It's okay."

A door opened. A shaft of light cut through the darkened hallway. We all looked up. Even Jamie Collins lifted his weary head. A girl emerged from a room off the hallway. I figured it was the girl's room because I glimpsed purple walls and clothes all over the floor before she turned out the light and shut the door. It was hard to tell how old she was. Fifteen? Sixteen maybe? She was really tall, the yoga pants accentuating her long legs. I vowed not to look at them again.

"Aline," said Kalonji, and reprimanded her for not wearing something more discrete. The conversation was half in French and half in something else I couldn't understand. It ended with Aline retreating into her room and Jamie Collins again bowing his head to look at the floor.

Dina returned to the living room carrying a long tray heaped with stuff that rattled and clinked as she made her way to the coffee table. "*Merci*," said Dina, as I moved some of the magazines and papers piled on the coffee table to make room for the tray. Jamie Collins sat back on the couch and rubbed both palms up and down the knees of his jeans. Mr Kalonji didn't move at all. Dina unloaded the contents of her tray. She'd brought bottles of beer with tall glasses, a bowl of mixed nuts, some little rectangular cookies and a plate of what looked like round doughnuts.

"*Voila*," said Dina.

"Thank you," said Jamie Collins as he picked up his beer. He lifted the bottle to his mouth, looked around, and lowered it back down to his lap and waited for the others. Dina sat

down in a wicker armchair with a heavy sigh. Mr Kalonji heaped sugar into a small cup of coffee. I didn't want my beer, but I poured it into my glass anyway, noticing, while I did it, that my hand was shaking a little. I could tell the beer I poured was tepid, too warm and foamy to drink. It didn't even fog up the sides of the glass. They probably didn't even drink beer. They probably bought it especially for me. Mr Kalonji stirred his coffee with a tiny spoon, the act made both delicate and ridiculous by the size of his long fingers, the baby spoon at the end of his fingertips like a tiny wand.

"So, Marc," he said, tapping the little spoon against the lip of the cup. "It's not easy for us. But we are all wanting to know what you saw." He sat back into the soft folds of his chair and sipped his coffee. Jamie Collins turned sideways, as if shielding himself from me and took a drink from his bottle. He didn't seem to mind the beer was warm. Carol leaned forward. Dina Kalonji sat motionless on her wicker chair, squinting, her hands under her chin.

This was why I was here. I knew that. They wanted to know things – needed to know them. But what was there really to say? I had no answers for them. I could offer them no closure. I shouldn't have come. "I was swimming in the cove," I started. It seemed as good a place to start as any. Already I could tell I was talking and thinking too fast. "After I got out, I was really cold, so I sat on a rock to try and warm up. I saw them, Cedric and Sarah. They were walking down on the rocks near the water."

"What were they doing?" Dina said urgently. Mr Kalonji shot her an irritated look.

"I don't know, they were just sort of walking along, you know, like, out for a stroll."

"I know it's difficult, Marc," said Kalonji. "For us, also. But if you can remember details; I think it helps us." Kalonji nodded at Dina, at Jamie Collins, who nodded back in agreement. Carol didn't move at all.

"Okay," I said and searched my memory for a useful detail. "Well, it was windy. I could hear it whistling in my ears, so I couldn't hear what they were saying or anything. Plus, I was too far away. But I could see them down on the rocks below me. They were holding hands." Dina Kalonji let out a whimper at this detail. Carol reached out and rubbed Mrs Kalonji's forearm. Dina Kalonji crumpled into herself, covered her mouth with her hand. This exercise started to feel a bit like I was torturing them. What was the point of this? We all knew how the story ended. But I went on anyway. "He – Cedric – he pointed out towards the horizon, like he was showing Sarah something in the distance." They all listened; we could only imagine what Cedric had pointed to. "They were just standing there, looking out at the sea."

I could feel my heart beating faster as I told the story. My breathing became shallow. "Sarah had this hat on. It was a blue, floppy hat." The description of the hat stabbed Jamie Collins, who coiled up. He shielded his eyes and trembled on the far end of the sofa. I wanted to stop. How could this be helping anyone?

"*C'est bien*, Marc. Continue," said Mr Kalonji, soft and encouraging. My mouth was dry. I couldn't swallow.

"Well the hat kept flapping off in the wind, so she had to hold it down, you know, but the sides kept flipping up. They kept walking for a while, just along the top of the rocks. Then this big gust of wind blew the hat off and it landed in the water. Cedric was on his way down to get the hat out of the water when the wave came up out of the water." I couldn't speak.

"What happened then, Marc? Please," said Mr Kalonji. Carol had her arm around Dina Kalonji.

I looked down at the coffee table, with all the food and stuff there. It all looked gross, sitting there, stewing in oil and grease, in little bowls and plates on the table in the dark living room, like food in those old Dutch oil paintings, half rotten and crawling with bugs. I couldn't look them in the face. I tried to take a deep breath but I couldn't. It was like I was running out of air. My heart was beating so fast, as if I'd been for a run. I put myself back on the cliff, looked down, suspended in the moment between waiting and knowing what happened next.

"I called out," I said. "I saw the wave and I shouted, but they didn't hear me. They were crouched down, kind of huddled together. She was holding onto his arm and had her head down near his shoulder, kind of tucked in. He covered her head with his other arm. They were bracing themselves."

Dina Kalonji nodded gravely. Jamie Collins wiped his eyes with the back of his hands. Mr Kalonji stared at the ceiling, holding his little cup and saucer. Carol stared straight at me, expressionless.

I was going to throw up. Right there in the Kalonji's living room. I could feel my throat opening, readying itself to let the puke out. I stood up abruptly, knocked my beer over on the coffee table.

"Sorry," I said, standing up. "This is…" I could feel my guts tighten, my throat open. "I'm going to puke."

I didn't look at them all again, didn't wait for them to say something. I just turned around, back into the dark hallway. I kept looking at the floor as I sped down the corridor and

out of the house. The sunlight was so bright when I got outside I couldn't even open my eyes. I ran, stumbled down the front steps, blinking to shield my eyes from the sunlight. I got as far as the gate before I keeled over and threw up in the garden. I stood there for a while, retching, sure of only two things in the world: that my hand clenched onto the picket fence was the only thing keeping me up, and that every time I threw up I felt a little better. I don't know how long I stood there, spitting onto the broad leaves of those red flowers in the Kalonji garden. I felt a hand on my back and turned around.

Dina Kalonji patted my shoulder and handed me a glass of water. I took a sip and rinsed out my mouth, daring to spit onto the leafy plants of her garden while she watched.

"It's okay," she said, taking my glass of water. "It's normal."

"I'm sorry," I said. Tears filled my eyes. She put her hand on my shoulder. "It's not your fault," she said, half smiling and half frowning. "It's difficult. And you are still a boy. I see it in your eyes. They are soft, *comme un enfant*. Like a child." She cocked her head and studied my face. "Innocent," she said. "It can't last forever." She patted my shoulder and turned to walk back towards the house.

Her words were like smelling salts that brought me out of my stupor. She walked up the front steps slowly. "You go now," she said without turning around. "Don't worry about Albert. I will explain." She held my glass out over the railing and poured what was left of the water onto the bushes at the side of the house. Then she turned to look at me. "You must come back. To the beach. We have to raise them. It's not right to disappear into the sea. We will call them home together." Dina Kalonji shook the last drops of water out of the glass. She walked up the remaining steps and disappeared into the dim light of the corridor, leaving the front door wide open.

I didn't know what to think. I already knew I didn't want to come back here, certainly didn't want to 'raise' Cedric and Sarah, call them home, whatever that meant. I half expected someone else to walk out of the open front door. No one came out. Even the fat dog had left his shady patch of grass. I left too.

It was quieter now that I was alone. I was calmer and became aware of all the other sounds around me: some rustling leaves, a dog that barked somewhere in the distance. Maybe it was the one that had been here earlier. Gravel crunched under my feet as I walked back towards the town, *child, child, child, child, child.* A child? Who did she think she was? And what kind of bizarre witchcraft were she and that hippie woman cooking up?

V

My interview is broadcast – Drinking with fury – Nostalgic about old friends – Praying at the church – Meeting Aline

I wandered back into town, not really caring where I ended up. The sun had gone down, but the sky was still light by the time I reached the main street. The atmosphere was changing too. There was a softness to the air now the sun had set. There was almost an odor to it, a texture, like a sweet, moist cloth. The shops were closed. I didn't even want to look at the Hope Emporium and its New Age trinkets. The town pub looked like the place to be. There were a few dozen people in there, walking around in the warm light. A breeze of music escaped the place whenever someone opened the patio door. I smelled cigarette smoke and looked down at my shoes as I walked past.

"Oy, Canuck." The words pulled me out of my daze. I looked up and saw a familiar face on the balcony of the pub. It was my caravan park neighbor, Darren, and his entourage, all sort of leaning against the wire patio railing, like birds assembled on a power line.

"Hey," I said and held up my hand to Darren and his crew: his parliament of owls, his murder of crows.

"Where you heading off to in such a hurry? Last time I checked, a swag still only fits one person." The guys laughed behind him. He half turned towards them and smiled. "What's the rush in getting home?"

"I don't know. Just walking around, I guess."

"Well come up and have a quiet one with us instead."

It was getting darker. I looked up the road, in the distance where the dirt path led up over the hill and towards the caravan park. The dim, yellow light of the street- lamp flickered to life. It promised a lonely journey. Darren was right. Why was I rushing home to tuck myself into bed? *A child.* I looked back up at the guys assembled on the balcony. Darren took a long pull of his cigarette, its warm glow lit the bottom half of his face.

"Sure, okay," I said.

"Atta boy."

I searched the balcony for a way in.

"Front door's around the side, mate. Just walk through the pub and head for the sliding doors."

I wandered up a laneway at the side of the building and found the 'front' door. I pulled the handle, expecting a bit of weight, a bit of resistance, but the door swung open on loose hinges and half toppled out of the doorframe. Heads turned as I walked in. I was clearly not a regular.

It was a dingy sort of place. A few dozen people sat or stood around high, round tables. The low ceiling panels had absorbed rusty water stains and jaundiced patches of nicotine back from when smoking indoors wasn't a crime. The swirly-patterned carpet did a better job of hiding the human detritus. There was no discernible theme or aesthetic to the place. The radio was tuned to a classic rock station. The Eagles. Several TVs hung on the walls, all showing the same panel of commentators. I assumed it was a sports show of some kind because the guys all wore suits, but they didn't look classy. They had these broad, smiling faces and bright ties, their hair looked professionally tousled. They looked more like real-estate agents. The pub was the kind of place that, in Canada, might be called a sports bar, which is what you call any place that doesn't really have a focused décor, the kind of bar that uses all the free merchandise that alcohol brands give you when you buy in bulk: coasters, pendants, bar fridges, inflatable furniture, that kind of thing. The giveaway décor started with a Tooheys Draught Beer welcome mat at the front door.

I moved through the room, through little clusters of middle-aged men in shorts and T-shirts. I was half nervous and half reassured by having my own group of guys on the balcony that I notionally belonged to.

"There he is," said Darren, shaking my hand. "Guys, you remember Marc."

Darren re-made the introductions. There was Geoff, the older guy with the wizard beard; there was Tommy and Steve and Ron, and a couple more guys but I can't remember their names. I've always been terrible at remembering names. I shook all their hands.

"Your shout is it?" said Darren, looking at me. This drew hearty laughter from the group, who pretty much occupied the pub's little smokers' balcony. "Just kidding, mate, we'll get this round," he said, red-faced and grinning, still absorbing the good humor of his own joke. Geoff and someone else scuttled off towards the bar.

He was a drinker, Darren. I recognized the signs, not just the puffy face and the burst blood vessels on his nose; those are only physical symptoms. I also glimpsed in Darren the deeper threads that bound him to the bottle, the ones I'd seen in dad, years ago when his drinking was still acceptable – the affection for alcohol, the disproportionate generosity he

showed in sharing his vice with others, the too good bottles of wine offered to people he knew would not appreciate them, the rounds of drinks he bought for a bar full of strangers, all votive acts of a man committed to a one-sided love affair. He couldn't see the pain, his or ours; all he knew was a desire to share in the giddiness of his abandon.

"So," said Darren stubbing out his cigarette. "What do you think of Niminbinji so far?" The other guys murmured in the background, rekindling private conversations.

"It's nice," I said. "I've just been sort of walking around, really. Through the main part of town down here, mostly." I gestured out past the balcony railing where the main street was. It was quiet now, the shops dark, and the ocean darker still, a patch of interstellar space between the streetlights.

"Yeah, it's not a bad little strip. You can get most things you need down here. The Woolies is new. Used to have to drive up to Kempey for a decent supermarket. It's all booming now, of course. It's high season. Winter's pretty quiet. Fishing's still good, though."

"Well as long as you can still get a Chinese-made plastic Vishnu statuette." He wrinkled up his face.

"What's that?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just some of the junk I saw in that Hope Emporium place over there." I pointed in the general direction.

"Oh yeah, that place. Bit of a funny bird who runs that shop. Sort of a hippie chick – into crystals and horoscopes and that kind of stuff – artsy, if you know what I mean."

I nodded. Darren rubbed the edge of the table with his fingers. "Hey, I said. "I've got to give you back your flashlight from the other night."

Darren squinted. "Oh right, the torch."

"Yeah, sorry, it got a bit wet in the rain."

Darren chuckled. "Mate, don't worry about it. Keep it. It's yours."

Geoff and the other guy returned from the bar with glasses of beer and set them down on the wooden table. When everyone had one, Darren hoisted his glass. "To life, boys, the cruel bastard." They drank.

I sipped my beer. I felt lighter in here than I had leaving the Kalonji house, despite the macabre sentiment of Darren's toast. I felt like the night could go a number of different ways now. I got it, the allure of the pub. A night out drinking was about embracing potential, a place to simultaneously commemorate, commiserate and exonerate your worries. *No worries*. It's little wonder this country has more pubs than schools and churches combined.

The guys talked. About fishing, mostly. About patches of ocean they'd been to that *jumped* or *heaved* or *boiled* with fish. These stories all seemed mostly the same, tinted with a subtext of regret, as if these fishing spots were something lost and remembered, places that used to be good but were now over-fished, or over-developed or that the fish had simply moved on to different feeding grounds. *Oh well*, went the refrain. *It is what it is*.

"What about you, Marc?" said Darren. "You do much fishing up in Canada?"

I hadn't. I'd paddled around some lakes in a canoe for a few summers, sometimes with a lure off the side of the boat, always a lure, no worms or anything. I couldn't bear the feeling of a worm writhing and stiffening as I pierced its body with a hook.

"Trout, mostly," I said with some authority, which drew nods of acceptance.

"Be rainbow trout up there, wouldn't it?" said Geoff.

"That's right," I said without certainty or hesitation. "Rainbow trout." I'd only ever caught one.

Geoff nodded and considered his beer. Yeah, we get mostly brown trout down here," he said. "Still… nice fish." The group briefly murmured in agreement and then receded to whatever private memories the mention of brown trout evoked.

"It'd be pretty similar in a lot of ways, though, wouldn't it?" said Geoff. "Canada and Australia?"

"Except for the cold," said Darren. "I was only there in the summertime but people'd tell you stories about blizzards, about, fuckin' forty below, cars frozen in blocks of ice and fuckin' body parts falling off from frost bite. Christ. Sounds shocking."

"Yeah, but it wouldn't all be like that?" said Geoff.

"Well I live in Vancouver, so it's not that bad in the winter. Well, it just rains a lot. But my dad's from Montreal. It gets pretty bad over there." I sipped my beer. I wasn't keeping up with the others.

"And what's your old man do?" said Darren.

"Oh, he's in a home now," I said.

Darren shifted in his seat. "Sorry to hear that, mate. That's hard." We each sipped our beers. "Montreal," he said. "That near Quebec?"

"It's in that province, yeah, which is like a state over here. It'd be like Victoria, or whatever."

"As long as it's not like Queensland," said someone, which drew a hearty chuckle from everyone.

"It *is* the French part, though isn't it?" said Geoff.

"Yeah, it's French."

"So you're a Frenchy canuky," said Darren and took a long drink of his fresh beer.

I told them I worked at a university. They seemed impressed by that, especially that I was the person who made the decision about who got in. "Gatekeeper," they called me after that or, "Gate" for short – or Frenchy or Doctor French.

Geoff was in construction, it turned out that half the crew were literally his crew. They were his subcontractors, his plumbers, his *chippies* and *sparkies*. Darren had been a canola farmer who now worked as a sometime adviser to the department of agriculture, a crew of its own that Darren called the *daisy boys* for some reason. I didn't ask why.

I went inside for a piss and noticed I was already light-headed from the beer. I hadn't eaten much.

When I came out of the toilets I had another quick look around. I must say the décor in there was pretty much what I had expected of an Australian pub, even if I couldn't have imagined the exact details. Signed rugby posters and sports jerseys hung on the wall. There were also photographs of people holding fish. These weren't professional portraits. They were just home-made photographs taken by regular people. The little portraits were all over the place, taped to the wall on crooked angles, pictures of self-satisfied men with sunburnt faces holding dead fish.

On the largest wall also hung the skeletal remains of a giant shark's mouth. Darren, on his own way to the bathroom, saw me eyeing the shark's gaping mouth, its rows of neat triangular teeth.

"They caught *him* out here," said Darren, pointing a stubby finger at the sliding glass doors of the balcony and Hammerhead Beach beyond.

"Really?" I said.

"Yeah." He leaned in a little too close. I could smell his hot beer breath. "They should never have taken him out of the water."

"Oh."

"No. See, a shark's a territorial animal." Darren swallowed a hiccup and turned his head. "Pardon me." He pointed towards Hammerhead Beach. "See, that out there was his beach. He patrolled it, you know. I reckon he would've been out there a couple of decades at least. Know how many shark attacks they had here in that time?"

He didn't wait for an answer just held up his hand, his fingers forming a nice round zero. "Not a one," he said. "He'd have been too big to bother with humans. Even a fat bloke like me makes a pretty slim meal for a fish that size." We both looked at the bleached bones

of the shark's jaw. Darren shook his head. "They took him out in 1987. We've had two attacks since then. By little sharks, you know. They wouldn't have come within miles of the beach while *he* was swimming there." He pointed at the open mouth on the wall. "But we took him out. That creates a power vacuum, mate, you just make room for another bastard to come in and fill the gap. We were idiots. Still, live and learn."

I suddenly realized I was on the third beer I hadn't paid for and felt obliged to equal the score. "I'll get this round," I said.

"Good man," said Darren. "A gentleman and a scholar," he said, sinking his beer and putting the glass down on an empty table. "Tooheys," he added, pointing to the empty glass.

"Sure," I said.

Darren patted his belly. "Now, I gotta see a man about a dog," he said and headed off towards the toilets. He was a bit frowsy and dated, with his musty aftershave and his homespun philosophy, but I liked him. He was solid. If Darren was in your corner, I got the sense he'd stay there.

I walked towards the bar. It was a bit busier in there now. Standing room only. I spotted Senior Constable Miles, now out of his uniform, wearing jeans, a crisp-collared polo shirt and a fleece vest. He looked harmless out of his uniform. He squinted at me in recognition and turned back towards his own little huddle of men, nodding in agreement to whatever was being said there.

I walked up to the bar and waited my turn. The odor of stale booze wafted off the rags they used to wipe the bar and tables.

The two women behind the counter were busy, active but unhurried. I watched them saunter from one customer to the next, opening fridges limp wristed and perusing their contents as if waiting to be inspired by what they found inside. They were older, these women, in their fifties, I guessed, and it sort of surprised me to see them tending the bar in this kind of place. They looked kind of rough, the pair of them, with hard eyes that looked out from under dyed bangs. In Canada, most bar tenders are young and attractive. I guess that's what happens when you work for tips.

"Tooheys," I said when it was my turn. "Do you do pitchers or anything?"

The woman shook her head. "Schooners," she said. "For the boys outside is it?"

"Yeah, out on the balcony there."

The woman nodded, already placing a glass under one of the taps, another empty one in her other hand, ready to go. "You really with those guys?"

"What do you mean?"

She half-rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Nothing. You going to be right carrying all this out?”

“Ah,” I said considering the trek back.

“You want a tray?”

“Sure, that’d be good.” The woman nodded, filled the rest of the glasses and arranged them on a tray. I looked up and noticed Philippa Strahan’s pinched little face on the TV. She was standing on that familiar bluff overlooking Hammerhead Beach.

“Turn it up,” someone called out. The other woman behind the bar pointed a remote control at the TV. I knew what was coming, the only question in my mind was how bad was it going to be? How much of a dick would I look like? I thought of the Kalonjis, at home, watching this too.

“… for a community still coming to grips with the tragedy.”

I cringed when I saw my own face on the screen, looking stunned and dishevelled, standing near my car in the caravan park. *Marc Gilbert – Witness*. “I didn’t want to see that. But I did. So there. It sucks. I wish they hadn’t have been there. Poking around on those rocks.”

My skin prickled. My face was hot. I felt everyone in the bar looking at me, looking at the screen, the back of my head burned with their staring eyes. I didn’t dare look away from the TV.

Strahan continued, “With the recovery operation now into its second day, authorities have expanded the search zone to account for northward currents. Search and rescue officials say they are still hopeful they will find the bodies of Cedric Kalonji and Sarah Collins.”

Two separate pictures of Cedric and Sarah appeared on the screen. The one of Sarah was a selfie of her at what looked like a party, wearing a green dress. It was the first time I’d seen her face. There was a second person in the original photo who’d been cropped out. Cedric was sitting on plastic patio furniture, flashing the peace sign with long, skinny fingers like his father’s. The camera zoomed in on him, wearing one of those loud-patterned African shirts.

“The Kalonji family are refugees from the Congo, who were re-settled in Niminbinji last year as part of the Federal Government’s Regional Settlement Initiative. For the Kalonjis, the tragedy adds to a lifetime of injustice.”

The report cut to *Mr Kalonji – Victim’s Father* – dressed in his blue suit, looking all the more grave and haggard for squinting into the sun. “It is very sad,” he said in his solemn,

broken English. “A tragedy, of course.” He nodded. Then his creased face softened. “But what can we do?” He smiled.

I felt the collective mood, the tension in the room behind me. I couldn’t see them, but I felt them see me – the nudge-nudge, wink-wink of the other patrons pointing fingers at my back from behind the rims of their beer glasses. I picked up my tray of beers and walked back across the room with my eyes focused on the beer froth wobbling on top of the glasses. It felt good to have something to focus on, to have a group of people to walk towards. The TV was still going but the news anchor was talking about something else now. I knew people were watching me as I passed, looking at me sideways. Maybe they wanted to ask me what I saw too. It really wasn’t any of their business. It wasn’t even my business. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was sick of talking about it, sick of thinking about it, about those two people out there somewhere in the water with skin peeling off their bones. I got lucky. It could’ve been me. I narrowed my interest down to my tray. The whole world shrunk to those seven beers, my whole purpose reduced to keeping the white froth from spilling onto the black tray.

I put the tray down on the table. The guys claimed their beers. There was a kind of deliberate silence about their movement and it felt like the chemistry had somehow changed between us. I sat at the table, next to Darren, next to Geoff. The rest of them stood, scattered more loosely around the side of the table and the broader patio. It’s as if I had somehow moved closer to the center of this group. I took a long swig of my own beer, each gulp a measure of salvation.

“I know how it is, mate,” said Geoff, turning his beer glass in its little puddle of condensation. “I used to be a police officer. I’ve seen stuff I’d like to unsee, you know, the kind of stuff that stays with you.”

Darren groaned. “Leave it alone, Geoff.”

We all sat there, sipping our beers and looking out past the balcony, to the black and noiseless ocean beyond the railing.

“I saw the parents,” I said.

Darren raised his eyebrows. “Oh yeah.”

“Poor cunts,” said Geoff.

Darren shot him an annoyed look. “And what did they say?” said Darren.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know. What’s to say?” I sipped my beer. “They want to have some kind of ceremony.”

“Oh.”

"Yeah, they want me to come back." I looked down into my glass, at the white swirls of foam marbled through my beer. "It's supposed to be some kind of raising the dead ceremony," I said. "Sounds like some kind of voodoo thing." I drank. "I don't want to go but … don't feel like it's something I can refuse, you know."

"What? Why not?" said Darren. "Just tell 'em no. Or, better yet, just skip town if you don't want to go."

"I can't. Constable whatever in there says I can't leave until there's a coroner's report about the accident."

"Aw that's bullshit," said Geoff. "Just a stupid way–"

"It's not like *you* killed those kids," said Darren. "So, how long they expect you to hang around for?"

"I don't know. Until the report's done, I guess. Whenever that is."

"That's entrapment," said Ron behind me.

"It's not entrapment, Ronnie, you dumb cunt, but it *is* a bit more bullshit, I reckon. More like, fucking, false imprisonment."

"Country's going to shit mate," said Geoff. "Every year we get less and less freedom and more and more rules. Can't do this, can't say that, it's like a – what's the word – nanny state. That's what it is, mate, a nanny state."

"Are things this fucked up in Canada?" said Darren.

"What do you mean?"

"Tension, mate. Useless government. Hostilities. Culture clashes."

"I don't know. I suppose so," I said.

There was some light joking about Canadians not being all that different to Australians, even the French ones.

"Bit of difference is okay," said Darren, brushing something invisible off the front of his shirt. "The world's a big place, people come from all over, take jobs we wouldn't touch with a barge pole, it's good for the economy, rah rah rah – I get it. I'm not an idiot. But you've got to have some limits. People've been coming here for generations. Started off with the Scots and the Irish and whatever. We're all migrants, yeah, yeah except for the Aboriginals. I know. I've heard it all before." He turned towards me. "But it's different now, you see. Before, when we had the Greeks and the Italians, and later the Indians and whatever… those people are all a bit different, okay. But they all played by the rules, you see. It's about values, mate." He leaned up against the back of his chair, as if working out a kink in his spine. "The people coming in now…" He shrugged his shoulders. "They don't see

things like you and me. Right? It's all about… 'what can I get? What can I take? What are you going to give me?'" He slapped the table. "Take that blackfella you just saw on TV." He motioned to one of the wall-mounted TVs inside the pub. It was now showing a cricket match. "That guy's son just died, right?" Darren looked around the table at the other guys. Their faces were downcast and contemplative. "Well, didn't look like it phased him, you know. I mean, there was no emotion there. The guy was almost smiling."

"I don't know Darren," said Geoff. "I've seen a lot of people in bad situations and…"

"There's just something not right about it, Geoff. I'm just saying you'd think the guy would be a little more…affected, you know. A little more cut up about it."

"Grief's weird, though…"

"It's not the grief, mate. It's not the grief. It's the background." Darren looked past Geoff and addressed the others now. "You see, a lot of the people coming here now, they're coming from places that are violent and over-crowded; places where they can be ratbags, where they can despise women, treat 'em like shit, or where they believe in a God that tells them it's okay to kill little kids, as long as they're infidels, or whatever. Well, no. I think we need to take a stand and say, that's not on here. If you want to come here, you have to assimilate. Full stop. And if you don't want to, well then why the shaggy shit did you want to come here for in the first place? If the country's good enough to come to, then why change it? I know that's not pee cee or whatever, but fuck it. That's how it is and someone ought to say so. Take this fuck'n voodoo ceremony or whatever it is. Well, what's that all about?"

"Come on Darren. Ease up. They just lost a kid," said Geoff.

"No, I'm sick of it. Look, a kid's died and that's a tragedy. I'm not taking that away from anybody. Have a memorial. Fine. I'll drive you to the church myself. But a voodoo ceremony… Christ." He shook his head and muffled a burp that came from somewhere deep inside him. He winced as if it caused him pain. "And where do they plan to do that, mate? Cut up a live chicken out front of the servo?" He stared at me as if expecting an answer.

"Down at the beach, I guess," I said. "Maybe on the cliff there by the war memorial." I don't know why I said that. It was the place that came to mind, the only place I could think of that felt… ceremonial. So I said it. I was drunk. I know that's not an excuse, but it's an explanation.

"Fuck'n hell," said Darren recoiling. "At the shrine?" He bristled. "That's properly fucked." He picked up his beer glass, brought it to his lips, then put it down again without drinking. "That's a war memorial. Full stop. You can't just use it for whatever you like." The crease between his eyebrows and the wrinkles on his forehead gathered in valleys of worry

and disbelief. “It’s not right,” he shook his head. “It’s disrespectful. Don’t you reckon, Frenchy?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I guess it is. I don’t know for sure if it’s there or not.” But it was too late. The causal chain was already moving, unwinding itself.

“See, Ron? Frenchy knows when to keep his mouth shut. You could learn a few things.”

Darren picked up his glass again and downed the rest of his beer, his jowls bulged. He put his glass back on the table. Hard. Darren put his arm around my shoulder. It was heavy, strangely sharp and firm for such a thick man. There was strength in his weight. I felt protected by it.

“Don’t worry, Frenchy. We’ll put a stop to this nonsense.”

I watched the last streaks of beer foam slide down the sides of Darren’s glass and pool at the bottom.

I woke up hungover. The sharp sun pried my eyes open and shut them again. I turned my head to get away from the glare, buried my face back into the dark and swollen warmth of my swag. My mouth was dry, my tongue a pasty slab of flesh. I worked up a ball of spit to swallow away the lingering yeasty taste of stale beer. My body was coated in a layer of clammy, toxic sweat.

I checked my phone, my cotton and polyester cocoon aglow with the blue light of my screen, a little connected oasis on this barren coastline. Nothing new from my sister. Jenna’s text still hung there in its speech bubble. *Hiding out?* What a bitch. How about living my life? How about letting go? If I was ‘hiding out,’ then she was hanging on. I’d already said goodbye to dad a long time ago, even before he got sick and forgot who we were. What was the point of going back now to try and remind him?

I checked my newsfeed: Syrian rebels… Unseasonal floods in Jiangxi Province… North Korea ... intercontinental ballistic missile….Trump…war crimes… nuclear proliferation in the middle east… Estonian malware rebooted…. solar energy rebate…Icelandic tax reform…Vancouver mayor apologizes…

I checked my Facebook and scrolled through Gwen’s latest pictures. I didn’t even feel weird about it anymore. Here was Gwen with two girlfriends at a party, whose names and faces I paid no attention to. There was Gwen walking her dog in the snow. Here she was holding the dog up real close to the camera. It was one of those sausage dogs and it was

wearing a little coat. And finally – I knew it was coming – here was Gwen in a selfie with her new husband and his douchey beard. She was pregnant. That still felt weird.

Gwen and I had lived together with dad for a month, when we first found out he was sick, at least, sick enough to need someone around. He liked having a family for a while. We drank beer, even though he was told not to drink at all. I wasn't going to stop him, or tell Jenna. I made spaghetti. He liked the garlic bread that Gwen made. He was impressed she could make garlic bread. I don't know why. It's really easy to make. I think she and I liked playing house for a little while too. For Gwen and me it was a test run at domesticity, not out of choice, but out of obligation to my father. He still spoke English then but preferred French. Gwen didn't speak French. She said she wanted to learn. I think to please my father. I said I'd teach her and we tried. We set aside an afternoon a week for conversation; I'd even put together a jar of coins to practice counting money. We did it for a little while. The weeks with dad, the French lessons, these things gave our relationship the impression of a long-term commitment. In retrospect, a future was something we more hoped for than expected. She probably saw, earlier than I did, that I was never going to be a family kind of guy. Not a nice family anyway. I still blame her for leaving. But I've begun to understand her choice. People don't like me, not enough to stick around.

I couldn't believe she was pregnant now, though, especially with *that* guy's baby. We'd only broken up two years ago. It seemed fast, at least to me. It's not like I thought we'd ever get back together again, but seeing pictures of her new life made me sad. After we broke up it was easy to imagine our lives running parallel, somehow, separate but still bound in some fundamental way. But lately, tuning in to her updates about her ultrasound, her baby bump, of weekend get-togethers and birthday parties, spent in the company of cheerful faces I didn't know; it felt like she'd really moved on while I'd stayed in the same place, because I was already the person I would always be and that wasn't good enough for her. Did she still think of me sometimes? Maybe only when she heard certain songs. Did she skip them, as I sometimes did?

I left Gwen's Facebook page and saw that Darren wanted to be friends. His profile picture was a fish. I replayed last night's conversations, searching for hints of my having invited this level of closeness. My recollection was patchy near the end. I couldn't be sure about the things I'd said. I get weak and needy when I drink too much. A wave of nausea passed through me. I put the phone down. I needed to eat something before the hangover took hold.

Breakfast at the café. I had tea. My stomach couldn't handle a coffee. I ordered the eggs benedict with extra hollandaise sauce. I drew shallow breaths as I waited for the food. I needed food to counter the cold sweat and static fuzz of my hangover. The waitress smiled as she put down the plate. "Nice to get an early start to the day," she said.

"Thanks," I said and pierced one of the poached eggs with my knife. The yolk squirted out like a popped zit. A fresh wave of nausea passed through me as I contemplated the runny eggs. I ate quickly and felt the thick and buttery hollandaise sauce insulating me from the worst of my hangover. The hot tea and eggs softened the sharp edges and calmed the jitters. My sense of urgency lifted.

I looked around to take in the weather. It was shaping up to be a nice day. Clouds formed islands in the sky, continents that drifted on the breeze against the blue of the upper atmosphere. Wind hissed through the rigging of the boats in the marina. Odd to hear that whistling, blizzard sound on such a clear, bright day.

The news van was nowhere in sight. That was a good start. There was a group of dog walkers huddled together on the grass at the top of the ridge near the beach. One of them, a tall man with a small dog, pointed out to sea. He traced the horizon with his finger. The other dog walkers listened and nodded. Then he pointed at himself, then at the town. Maybe he was recounting his version of events.

I felt the anxiety grow inside me. It fed on the booze and the caffeine like dry grass to a fire. I took half a Valium to calm my nerves. Only five left in the pack. I needed at least three full pills for the flight home.

That stuff worked so fast. It was like being a little drunk again, tipsy but clear headed, you know, like a prescription version of alcohol. Cleaner. It helped me settle into the weight of my body.

I pulled out my phone. Facebook reminded me about Darren's friend request. I accepted it.

I wrote Jenna back. *Won't be home for a few weeks. I'm sure dad'll be okay.* I knew the message would taunt her. She'd probably come back with predictable reproaches – 'what would you know; you don't see him; you don't understand his condition,' that kind of thing. Jenna would say her piece, no matter what I wrote back, whatever promises I made.

We used to be close as kids, but after Jenna had children she didn't have much time for me anymore. Now she was always full of advice about how I should get my life together, which I assumed held her own situation up as an example of what a 'together' life should look like.

Jenna had stayed in Montreal. I'd moved to Vancouver. Even though I used to go back once a year, she'd tell me I didn't visit enough, or that my French was getting rusty. What I heard was, you're losing your roots.

Jenna used to want to be somebody and it was sad to see her turning into just another doughy, suburban frump. She was going to be a photographer, was good at it too. She was into landscapes and her pictures somehow made places look better than they were in real life – brighter, happier. Maybe it was something about the lenses she used or the lighting. I have no idea. I don't know anything about photography. Maybe she just happened to be there when a place looked its best. I don't know how much of the art was there before she arrived and how much she had to draw it out. She took this one picture. It was of a red farmhouse surrounded by green grass. There were no people in it, just the house. There was something inviting about it, something about the light outside that felt warm, like the light from a candle or a fire. Whatever it was, it looked like the kind of place you might like to stay a while, somewhere you might want to live.

When she studied photography at art school something changed. She didn't take pictures of places anymore. That was 'real-estate photography' now. "Pretty is boring," she said. "The world already has an Ansel Adams." I don't think she believed that. It's what her teachers thought. Education can make you cynical. Her stuff got all dark and weird then. Except that it wasn't. Because *she* wasn't. It was just her trying to be dark and weird – photos of garbage in alleyways, taxidermy animals 'waiting' at bus stops, a stack of buttermilk pancakes in a phone booth – stupid stuff that didn't mean anything. Her teachers loved those pictures, though, and she got good grades for them. I liked the farmhouse.

I hit send on my text and it whooshed over the sea. I stood up from the breakfast table and stuffed the phone back in my pocket. I half expected Jenna to reply right away. She didn't.

The main strip of Niminbinji already felt like familiar territory. Most of the shops were still closed or just opening, but I didn't feel like talking to anyone, so I just peeked into the windows and listened to the rhythm of my flip-flops slapping the pavement as I strolled along, trying to embrace the idea, the virtue, of having nowhere to be.

The church was open. I hadn't been inside a church since mom's funeral, which I had been only just old enough to remember. I'm not even sure the memories are all mine, or if they're a collection of things I was told after the fact. I do remember Jenna describing the church as God's house then. That terrified me. When we went inside it had smelled of incense. I thought that was how God smelled – of smoke and citrus wood polish, the same

way my uncle Pete's house smelled of moist earth and salami. This real, physical smell made it easier to imagine God as an old man, watching us from the rafters or through closed circuit TV.

After mom died, we moved from Vancouver back to dad's native Montreal. He said he had more support there. I don't know what he was talking about, unless he meant his drinking buddies. It was hard suddenly going to school in French. I'd never formally trained in the language, just learned it from speaking to dad, which wasn't saying much. I never really caught up at school and stopped trying after a while. How much did I really need to know about integers and the history of the Canadian fur trade? I couldn't wait to leave Montreal. After high school I took the first Greyhound bus out of there. I don't think dad ever forgave me for leaving.

It was weird being back in a church. This one was so different from the dark and serious churches I'd been in before. It was built of cheerful yellow brick, the stained glass not of dull saints and a sullen Christ, but a scene of boats on the ocean. There were no people in it at all. There was no incense smell in here either; God was not home.

The dry wood of the pew cracked as I sat down, the snap echoed in the empty church. I closed my eyes and prayed. I didn't really know how to pray, no one had taught me. My mom had been the religious one, so I was told. I closed my eyes and thought really hard. I tried to contemplate God. That conjured the image of a swirling mist, of space, and of an old man in a robe floating around in it, doing a kind of backstroke through the open vacuum of space. I brought myself back to earth and thought of trees and grass and the ocean. That brought up all the news footage I'd been watching: of troops marching, drones flying, of floods raging and decided thinking was probably not the way to go. I cleared my mind; maybe prayer was more like meditation. So I prayed in half thoughts, half feelings for strength and for guidance. I prayed for Gwen's baby and asked for it to be okay. I prayed that she would be happy. I prayed that the Kalonjis and Jamie Collins would get through their grief. I prayed that Cedric and Sarah were alive, somehow, and that, if they weren't, that they hadn't suffered, and that there was some plan, some reason why they had to die. I asked God to help me, to forgive me for being so weak, and to show me what to do, to let me know things would be okay and to show me they would be in a way that I would know it was Him and not just my subconscious playing ventriloquist. I listened and thought and felt and tuned my every sense for some sound, some feeling, some flutter, some twitch in the spider web of my consciousness. Nothing happened. All I saw was darkness. All I felt was empty. All I heard was the continuous hum of the air conditioner and the buzz of fluorescent lights.

Leaving the church was like opening a catacomb, the sunlight hard and bright, a demarcation between the living and the dead. I walked in the opposite direction from the main street of Niminbinji. I just needed to wander for a little while, without the clutter of shops and their willful distractions. I walked up a hill and soon found myself away from the tourist beat. Here, the crooked houses sat on oddly-shaped blocks of land, backyards full of drying laundry, visible over the fence. The front yards were littered with miscellaneous junk: used tires and disassembled car engines, empty beer cans and faded plastic kid toys disappearing in the tall grass. One yard had a pile of red aluminum poles that had once been a swing set. It now lay in a loose pile like an abandoned game of pickup sticks. I saw a torn trampoline in another yard, a toy doll and a rocking horse, their sun-bleached eyes turned skywards, waiting to be consumed by the advancing tangle of weeds. I guessed I'd found the 'bad' part of town.

There was a park up ahead, a square patch of brown grass, recently mowed to the dirt, on which stood some cheap, wooden play equipment, a cubby house with a slide coming out of it and some swings. The play set too was faded, had once been painted blue and red, but the sun had bleached the colors pale and thin. The sorry remains of the playground reminded me of drone footage I'd seen of an amusement park inside Chernobyl. I'd always loved abandoned places. This one was not so much abandoned as neglected, but the effect was the same – whatever communitarian impulse had first created this place, it no longer dwelled here.

I heard giggling from inside the cubby house as I approached and resisted the urge to walk away. Whoever it was had probably already seen me. I smelled cigarette smoke too, thick and toxic in the hot air.

"Fuck are you doing here?" said a disembodied voice. I heard shuffling from inside the cubby house.

"Oh shit, I know that guy." More shuffling. "Hey," said a girl's voice and Aline Kalonji emerged from the cubby house. When I saw her I felt the same static charge of recognition as when the gates open at the international arrivals airport terminal. Aline stretched her long legs onto the slide. "Oh, fuck. It's hot," she said, tucking her checkered school uniform dress under her thighs. "It's that guy," she said, turning back towards the cubby.

"What, the vomit guy?"

"Yeah," she said, chuckling. "The vomit guy."

“I told him about how you came to our house the other day,” said Aline to me. Another face emerged from the back of the cubby house. “This is Sammy.” Sammy gave me a stiff little wave, almost a salute, and leaned forward on the low plywood roof of the cubby house. He was a skinny guy and it made it hard to guess how old he was, with his matchstick legs and peach fuzz moustache.

“Hey,” I said, shielding my eyes from the sun.

“I hear you’re a wanted man,” said Sammy.

“What?”

“Yeah, the cops reckon you killed them two people and blamed it on the wave.”

“What?”

“Sam! What the fuck?”

“Nah,” said Sam, jumping down from the cubby house. “Just fucking with ya.” He turned to Aline. “What? Not funny?”

“Not funny,” said Aline. “Seriously *un*funny.”

“Yeah well…” Sammy eased himself backwards onto the black rubber of a tyre swing and stretched out his skinny legs.

Aline shook her head. She gathered her school dress under herself, curled herself into a ball, came down the slide and landed on the patch of dirt at the bottom. “Shit,” she said, looking down at herself. “That hurt.” She got up and dusted herself off, slapped her butt and thighs, pounding the dust out of the checkered dress. “You’re not going to tell my parents I’m wagging school are you?”

She was taller than me when she stood up. “Wagging?”

“Not going. They’re doing this whole assembly thing with counsellors and shit and I’m just not going to do all that.”

I looked over at Sammy who was furiously pumping his legs back and forth on the swing. “No,” I said. “I won’t tell them.”

“What else you not telling, eh Mistah?” said Sammy, swinging as high as the wooden beam the swing was attached to.

“Shut up, Sam! Seriously. It’s not funny you twisted fuck.” She turned back towards me. “Sorry. He’s a nice guy, but he’s a bit of a dick.”

I nodded. Sammy kept swinging.

“So what are you doing around here?” said Aline and sat down on one of the railway sleepers that boxed the playground in from the remaining chewed up grass that surrounded it.

I looked away as Aline sat down, so I wouldn't see the flash of her underwear or shorts or whatever it was she was wearing under her school dress. Those uniforms really are flimsy; probably designed by old perverts. I feigned interest in the tops of the spindly trees. "I don't know," I said. "I don't even know where here is."

She laughed, more than politely. "That's funny," she said with genuine surprise. I turned back towards her. She kept her legs together. It must be tiring to have to do that all the time, keep your legs together, and basically protect yourself. She had big, bright teeth. I felt stupid for noticing that, for thinking it, as if focusing on the contrast between the color of her teeth and her skin demonstrated just how hung up I was on the physical differences between me and a black person. Then, almost as if to negate the previous impulse, I thought about how I liked sitting here with Aline, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, as if it were an outward reflection of my values, letting any passers-by know that I'm not some racist, but a worldly, multicultural guy. Am I really that shallow? I guess I am. Anyway, no one passed by. I wondered again how old Aline was, but I didn't want to ask. It could only sound creepy and I didn't mean it that way.

"So, is this what you're doing, then?" I said. "You skip school and just hang around here for the day?"

"What? You reckon we should be out surfing or something?"

"I don't know. Do you surf?"

"Nah."

"Ever tried it?"

"Nah. Why? You surf?

"No."

"Why we talking about surfing, then?"

"I don't know. You brought it up."

Aline pointed in the direction of the houses I'd walked past. "Sammy lives just over there. He looks after his little sister while his mum's at work."

I nodded. "Where's the little sister?"

"Asleep."

"Oh so, like, really little?" Aline must have picked up on my judgment.

"Sammy," she called over her shoulder.

"What?"

"We should get back."

Sammy swung a few more times then jumped off the swing and landed hard. As he walked over I noticed his laces were undone and that he wasn't wearing socks. Or a school uniform. "What's that?" he said.

"Lisa. She might be up."

He scrunched up his face. "What time is it?"

"About eleven," she said. "Why don't you go get her?"

"What?"

"Why don't you get Lisa and bring her out, we'll go somewhere."

Sammy scratched at his elbow. "Nah."

"Why not?"

"Cuz. Easier to keep her home."

"Sammy, you can't just put a kid in front of the TV all the time, mate. It's not good."

"Why not? Dr Disney," he smiled and put his hands deep into his pockets.

"It's not good, Sammy." Aline shielded her eyes from the sun as she looked up at him. "Just go get her."

Sammy twisted his body from side to side, hands still in his pockets. "Yeah, and what then?"

"I don't know." Aline kept her eyes fixed on Sammy, a tractor beam of suggestion, as if the possibility of his bringing Lisa out of the house depended on Aline not breaking her sightline. "Just walk around or something, show the tourist around town." She stared at Sammy without blinking. He kept twisting from side to side. "Go on, Sammy," she said in a softer tone. "You get her. Just put her in the pram. We'll wait."

Sammy rolled his eyes and turned slowly towards his house. "You're a pain in the arse you know." He trotted off towards his house, little puffs of dust rising from under his feet as he ran across the patchy field of dry grass.

Aline called after him. "You don't even have an arse you skinny prick." Sammy patted his ass as he ran.

Aline gathered her hair and swooped it back behind her shoulder. It was in tight little braids with beads strung on the end. It looked annoying the way the braids kept swinging around. "Don't worry about him, she said, fishing out a handful of braids that had made their way down the collar of her school dress. "He's okay."

I wandered over to the base of the slide and sat down. It was hot, but I kind of liked it, the way the heat spread through my shorts.

“Is Sammy, like, your boyfriend?” She put her hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter.

“Oh gross,” she said and waved her hand dismissively. “Thanks for putting *that* image in my head.”

“What?”

“No, he’s just a friend. “Plus my dad would kill me. He's not real sweet on the idea of me seeing boys and that.”

The mention of her father brought me back to who I was talking to, of what had happened, of what I could’ve done and couldn’t have done. “Yeah,” I said. “He’s probably right, though. We’re all dicks.”

“That's a bit much.”

She had an Australian accent. It sounded kind of weird to me, coming out of someone who looked so… African. “Yeah, I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe. I just get angry at stuff.”

“Like what?”

“I don't know, anything really.”

“Like what?”

“Stupid stuff. Like… when I see someone out for a run or something and they've got a set of keys on them, like, a big janitor’s set of keys all rattling around. I don’t know, I just think: why would you go out for a run with that many keys annoying you and making such a racket.”

Aline scrunched up her face. “What? That's dumb. That doesn’t even have anything to do with you.”

“I know. It's stupid. But I just think, how come that person didn't think ahead, you know, until they got in that situation or whatever, where their keys are all swinging and jangling around and annoying them and everyone else they run past. I know it’s stupid, I know it doesn’t matter but it still pisses me off, I don't know why.” My ass was sweating now from sitting on the hot slide. “I guess it's, like, if they're stupid about their own stuff, then what else are they going to be stupid about, you know? It’s like you can’t trust a person like that. They’re probably also fucking up important stuff, bigger stuff, that matters to everybody. It's the same when I see people holding hands on a crowded sidewalk like there’s no one else around, and they don’t notice everyone else having to go around them; or people who don’t have their wallets out when they’re about to pay for stuff and there’s a bunch of people waiting in line behind them. Or people who put their feet up on an empty bus seat. It's

annoying. It's the little stuff that makes the bigger stuff possible, you know, just makes the world a worse place to be."

Aline shook her head. "You need to chill out mate. Seriously. You're going to have a heart attack or something before you're forty. Oh shit. Sorry. You forty already?"

"Fuck off," I said playfully. "Do I look forty to you?"

"Yeah, kind of."

I laughed. "I don't know. Maybe I should just go live in a cabin in the woods someplace."

She laughed.

"What?" I said.

"What, and live off the land and shit?"

"I don't know, maybe."

She laughed harder, head tilted back and everything. I could see her back teeth. "You'd be dead in a month."

"You don't know."

She kept laughing. It made me a little angry. But it also made me a little happy, seeing her laugh. The moment emboldened me to say what I felt I had to say, what it was my duty to say. "Hey, I'm sorry about your brother." She went quiet then. I was sorry I brought it up even though I knew it'd been there all along between us.

Aline cleared her throat and crossed her legs. "Were they really holding hands?"

I nodded. "They really were."

She didn't say anything, just picked a pebble out from the bottom of her shoe. "Don't worry," she said. "I'm not going to cry or anything." She tossed the pebble aside and looked off into the direction of Sammy's house. "You should have seen your face. You were so worried I was going to cry or something."

"You can cry. I don't mind."

"Yeah, well. I'm still not going to." She picked up a stick that was lying on the ground, a thin wisp of a branch and she twirled it in a grassless patch of dirt beside her feet, making delicate loops in the sandy ground.

"Your parents pissed off that I took off yesterday?"

She scratched out her loops with the stick.

"You know my dad was an accountant back in Congo?" She watched me for a reaction. "Surprised?"

I suppose I was. "I guess so," I said. "I hadn't really thought about it."

“Yeah, he had to leave there because he was counting money for the wrong people.”

It felt like a line, a rehearsed exchange, a conversational trap that Aline had set before, her way of controlling that part of her life, her back story. It felt like some kind of test.

“Do you like it here?” I said, trying to re-direct wherever she expected this rehearsed conversation to go, to confound wherever it had taken her before.

“It’s all right.” She shrugged her shoulders and tapped her stick on the ground. My initial question still hung in the air. If she didn't want to answer it, though, I wasn't going to force it. She yawned, overly loud. I think it was a fake yawn. Aline reminded me of Jenna in the way she tried to control a situation, like she was keeping score, but only she knew how to win and lose points.

“You know, I was pissed off at you last night. But then I thought about it again this morning and...” she held her hair back with both hands and then dropped it, beads and braids swinging all over the place. “…thing is, the other night was unfair. On you, I mean. It was just weird asking you to, like, explain yourself or whatever. I was surprised you came. Not sure I would've – Lisa!” Aline shot to her feet and ran towards Sammy, who was steering a baby stroller towards us from across the field. The baby’s head bounced around as the stroller made its way over the lumpy grass.

I sat there, prematurely yanked from the conversation, my ass still sweating on the hot slide. I began automatically scrolling through a list of plausible excuses to leave. I didn’t like the idea of joining a duo – three people if you counted the baby – where the others knew each other better than I knew any of them. I wandered over to meet them, wondering if the sweat had soaked through the seat of my pants. I suddenly understood why people wear white in the summer.

Aline crouched down to pick up a little stuffed turtle that had fallen out of the stroller. “This is Leeesah,” she said to me as I approached. Lisa grabbed at Aline’s braids. “Say hello, Lisa. Hello Lisa. Hello Lisa,” said Aline, shaking her braids around in the kid’s face. I like kids, but not babies so much; you really can’t tell what they want.

“Think I might let you guys go on without me,” I said.

“Why?” said Aline, rising to her full height. “Fuck else you doing today? Other than hanging around kids’ playgrounds.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Exactly, so just walk back down the hill with us,” she said. Sammy nodded at me with his eyes closed. I took it as his assent.

We left the park, Sammy steadfastly pushed the stroller, the veins in his forearms pulsing as he gripped the pram's padded handlebars. Aline ran backwards in front of the pram for a while, playing peek-a-boo with Lisa who occasionally let out an exclamation of surprise.

"Your sister?" I asked Sammy, to show some interest.

"Half-sister," he said and coughed into his shoulder. I stopped asking questions.

Aline soon grew tired of the peek-a-boo game and running backwards in front of the pram. The kid kept dropping her little stuffed turtle. Aline kept picking it up and handing it back to her. I had to marvel at Aline's patience. After a while, though, even she seemed to tire of picking the stuffed animal up so Aline hung onto it. Lisa shouted something incoherent. I saw her little hand reaching out for the toy from under the sun-shade of the stroller where I was walking, her miniature fingers opening and closing with unfilled need.

"Quiet, Lisa," barked Sammy. This all seemed like a lot of responsibility to put on a kid his age. He couldn't have been more than seventeen.

"Hey let's get a slushy," said Aline as a 7-Eleven came into view.

"Got any money?" said Sam.

"Nah."

"Bad luck, then. No slushy."

Strange, I thought, how the three of them resembled a real family. It would've been one of those dysfunctional teenage families, for sure, but still, they were just walking around, enjoying the afternoon like some other, normal family. I momentarily felt like some estranged uncle or a distant cousin or something, in town for the weekend, and it was on the strength of that feeling that I offered to buy slurpees for everyone. Lisa got a straw, which she nibbled on.

We walked on and turned down a path beside the beach. The pram's wheels crackled and popped on the crushed gravel.

I asked Sammy if he'd always lived in Niminbinji. He said he was from the Djirigani people and that the town got its name from them, on account of someone mishearing and misspelling it back when the *white fellas* went around re-naming everything, or so he put it. I didn't realize until that moment that he was Aboriginal. He didn't look it, at least not to me. He wasn't black or anything. But now that he said so, I could see there was something rounded about his face, its structure that I hadn't seen before. Or was that just my imagination? He kept using the collective 'we,' *we* been here a long time, *we* come down from the north during the wet times, *we* used to collect shellfish off them rocks.

I never really understood that, when people talked about themselves as part of something bigger, *my country, my people*. It always seemed put on to me. Dad had clear ideas of where he was from. He was not Canadian. He was a Quebecer, sympathetic to the separatist cause. The FLQ violence happened before I was born. I don't think he would've been involved. He wasn't the revolutionary type. Too much work. I asked him what he thought of the FLQ terrorists. "They weren't terrorists," he said. "They just got carried away."

I think the nationalist cause was just a convenient basket into which dad threw his collected grievances about not living up to his own expectations. Would he really have fared better if Quebec had separated from Canada? Was he really a victim of ethnic oppression? Still, he was so depressed after the 1995 referendum failed to achieve secession. For him that dream ended with an epic binge. Did he really imagine the French language would disappear? It all seems so quaint now that we have jihadists in rented vans. When I moved to Vancouver it proved to him that I was an anglophile at heart, not a traitor, exactly, but just another Canadian oaf, another *tête carrée.* He always corrected my French after that, always pointed it out when I misspoke or forgot a word.

"What do your people think of my people?" said Aline.

I thought about my own heritage. There was a little French, a lot of Canadian, a bit of Scottish and English, even a little Dutch in there from way back. European, I guess, but nothing to make me feel connected to a shared history, certainly nothing and no one I could describe as *my people* without overstating and oversimplifying things.

Sammy frowned. "Dunno," he said and coughed into his shoulder again, still firmly holding the pram handles. He bent down and sucked the straw of his slurpee that was wedged into the pram's cup holder. "I guess we don't mind so much now," he said. "It's just… it's hard to explain. We just want people to know we were here first. Not just in writing, you know. People should feel it."

Neither of us really knew what to say after that so we walked on in silence, sucking on our drinks. The slurping and gurgling sounded more ridiculous considering what Sammy had said.

We approached a rancid body of water that stank like a combination of cow shit and rotten eggs. The water was bright green. "This used to be a good swimming and fishing place," said Sammy, scanning the surface of the water. "It's all fucked up now."

I peered into the lime-green water. Patches of scummy, brown froth made it difficult to imagine anyone ever swimming in here. "What happened?" I said. "Pollution?"

"Nah, said Sammy, turning away from the wind to light a cigarette. He turned back when it was lit. The cigarette looked preposterously long, sticking out of his small, skinny face. "King tide," he said, tilting his head towards the sky, blowing the smoke up and away from Lisa. She was looking up at him from the stroller. "Big storm," he said. "It banked the sand up on the beach here a couple of years back." He took another puff of his smoke and blew it out with concentration. "Cut the flow off in the estuary. It used to run out to the sea here." He traced a line with his finger across the beach. "The water would empty out there and fill up again at high tide." Sammy's forehead creased. "Water's all stagnant now the sand's cut it off from the sea. Water's got to move around or it dies. That's why it's all green and stinky."

I looked up and down the beach, at the sandbank piled high between the stagnant water and the surf. "Couldn't you just get a backhoe, a truck or something and dig the channel out again?" I said.

"Nah." Sammy shrugged. "Better just wait."

"For what?" said Aline.

Sammy smiled. "Another king tide and a storm." He took another drag of his cigarette. He didn't look comfortable with his smoke, something about the way he was holding it, like he was afraid of dropping it.

I walked to the edge of the green water. My phone buzzed.

It's kidney failure Marc. He's drowsy. Doctor says he'll be gone soon.

I put the phone back in my pocket.

The last time I'd seen him he was bad enough to make it uncomfortable. Jenna took me. She had put him in an old folks' home. The building used to be a convent. The outside looked like a church with its big windows and crosses. The inside was more like a hospital. It really was a halfway house between life and afterlife. My shoes squeaked on the floor. The institutional disinfectant was like the sterile waft of a new bandaid. It was a no-nonsense smell; it took charge and said: *there's nothing to see here*. But it wasn't strong enough to hide the lingering beefy, soupy aroma of whatever had been served for lunch – the odor of humans, being.

My heart beat faster as we made our way through a labyrinth of linoleum floors. I worried he wouldn't remember me. I feared it. I assumed the disease erased his memory in order of priority – surely the most important things were the last to go. What if I wasn't there? I hadn't seen him in three years. He looked up when he saw me though. He knew who

I was. I saw the flicker of recognition in his eyes. And then it was gone. He'd already stopped talking. He forgot *all* the words. He was only sixty-three.

My hangover was creeping back. I was nervous and jittery again. I needed to eat, or run, or jump into freezing water, or smash something.

"I've gotta go," I said.

"What?" said Aline.

"Yeah, sorry, I just got, like, seriously hungry and I need to eat something quick or I'm going to freak out."

"Okay," said Sammy.

"You diabetic or something?" said Aline.

"Yeah, well not diabetic, I just get fucked up when my blood sugar's low."

Aline went over to the stroller and pulled out the stowed canvas bag that was full of Lisa's stuff. Aline rummaged through it and pulled out a pack of baby biscuits.

"Here," she said handing me the box. I read the packaging. *Baby Mum-Mum's Teething Rusks.* "What?" said Aline. "It's food. Just have some."

Lisa watched me as I pulled out one of her teething biscuits. I don't think she liked me going through her stuff. She frowned and opened and closed her hand.

"Oh, look," said Aline. "She wants one too. So cute." I handed Lisa one of the biscuits. She took it, held it close to her chest and buried her face in the pillowed seat of her stroller. The teething rusks didn't taste bad, kind of milky and gentle on my stomach. I ate five of them. They steadied my nerves.

We walked back towards town on the shoulder of the highway. The occasional car whipped past, disturbing the silence of the forest on either side of the road. We came across a little kangaroo lying face down in the ditch. It looked like a stuffed animal, the kind of oversized toy you might win at a fair or something, except this one had a big neon-pink X spray-painted on its fur and a deep gash along its side. The flesh inside didn't look pink and neatly cut, like supermarket steak. It was more like mashed up blueberries, all purple and black with tufts of brown fur mixed in. Flies buzzed in and out of the wound. I'd never seen roadkill up close before. It looked more violent and senseless than it did speeding past at a hundred kilometers per hour. The animal's guts had been pushed out of its mouth by the force of the blow.

As we crested the hill back into town, we saw the Channel Seven news van, and Channel Nine and Ten too. They were filming a parade of black motorcycles driving down the main street.

VI

Protestors – A familiar face – A mild panic attack – Body leads mind – An emergency meeting – Trapped in the corner – A poor man – Raising the dead

The roar of motorbikes echoed off the buildings and shook the storefront windows on the main street of Niminbinji. People on the sidewalks and on the café patio covered their ears. The bikes kept coming, wave after wave of black leather jackets, some with patches on the back, some without, some were single riders, others had women passengers on the back seat, their hair spilling out from under their helmets. Some riders were chunky guys with guts that seemed to anchor them to their bikes, others were skinny guys, whose studded leather jackets exaggerated their outline like porcupines or puffer fish. There were all kinds of motorcycles from road bikes and dirt bikes to Harleys, Hondas and Indians; there were men slouched on weird seats, legs splayed on either side of the engine, arms stretched up on high handlebars like a supine crucifixion.

I noticed Lisa was crying. We couldn't hear her over the roar of the bikes but her mouth opened and closed silently like a fish. Her face was wet with tears and trickles of clear snot glistened under her nose. Sammy leaned in to Aline and shouted in her ear, "Fuck this. Taking her home," he said, pointing down at the pram. Aline leaned into his ear and said something back that I couldn't hear. Sammy shook his head. He turned the stroller around abruptly and headed back towards the highway out of town. Aline watched him go, his spinal column visible under his shirt as he walked, stooped over the pram, pushing it back up the hill, back to his house by that chewed-up patch of grass with the laundry, toys and carparts in the yard. She turned back abruptly without looking at me and breezed past, walking in the same direction the motorbikes were headed. Then she turned back towards me and motioned with her hands. "Come on," she mouthed and flashed me the whites of her eyes.

The swarm of bikes collected at the far end of town, on the bluff near Hammerhead Beach. Bikes were parked all over the place: on the grass, on the sidewalk, under the shade of trees; they took over the parking lot, boxed in the cars that were already parked there and spilled out on to the street, clogging up the road. The confusion of chrome glittered in the afternoon sun and I squinted at the occasional flash of sun reflecting off a sideview mirror. Some guys were sitting on their bikes with the engines off, drinking coffee out of takeaway

cups. Others gathered in loose clumps, facing the same direction as the television cameras, their attention aimed at a tight circle of men and a few women who had surrounded the Niminbinji shrine of remembrance, its honor roll and its tomb of the unknown soldier. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, hands folded neatly in front of them, their heads bowed down, faces soft and expressionless behind dark sunglasses. The top of the obelisk rose up behind them.

An older man with grey hair and glasses was speaking on a megaphone. I couldn't hear what he was saying. The tinny voice from the megaphone echoed off the buildings and was drowned out by the roar of the advancing motorbikes. A more tightly formed group had assembled in front of him. They reacted to whatever he said by cheering and raising their handwritten cardboard signs:

Australia: Love it or leave it

Resist!

Assimilate or Leave

Respect Australian Values

No to Islam

No to Sharia

Australia first!

Our Land

Our Country

Our Way

Rapefugees not welcome

I looked over at Aline. I couldn't read her expression. She didn't look angry, or sad, or scared. She looked…tired. Disappointed. "I gotta go," she said and walked off, her checkered school dress moving against the current of the gathering crowd. I didn't try to stop her.

I turned back towards the people and their cardboard signs, back towards the shrine and the old guy with the megaphone and his solemn collection of goons with their hands folded neatly in front of them, as if in mourning. The news cameras moved like bees through a flower patch, stopping just long enough to absorb the nectar shot.

I felt my eyes widen. Behind the old man with the megaphone stood Darren, arms folded, face down, pious in his submission to the moment he created – we created – I created. *Voodoo ceremony.*

I felt a hot flash in my gut. It spread out from there into little pangs of constriction in my chest that made it hard to breathe. I felt like I was back in the cove, thrashing around in the water, legs numb and trembling, barfing saltwater and fighting to keep my head out of the water like it was a block of cement, like it wanted to go under. How quiet it was under the water. How loud the world above it.

A roar from the crowd pulled me out of the water and back on to the grassy knoll above Hammerhead Beach. I pushed my way back through the crowd, willing someone to try and stop me. Lucky for them, nobody did.

I breathed easier once I popped out of the dense part of the crowd, out where the onlookers were, where the wave of bodies had broken and the people fanned out. I walked up the street, past the café and the cop shop and up towards the hill, towards the water tower. I wasn't even aware I'd made a decision – not one – but my body was already leading me to the Kalonji house.

The street and driveway of the Kalonji house was crowded with cars. The front door was wide open.

I walked up the front steps and stood in the doorframe. I heard voices murmuring down the end of the dark hallway. There was no doorbell, so I knocked on the doorframe, the solid wood hard against my knuckles. There was no change in the volume of the murmured conversation inside, so I guessed no one had heard me. I walked into the cool darkness of the hallway; the voices grew louder and clearer as I neared the closed door that led to the living room. There were a bunch of different languages being spoken in there, mostly English, though. 'Hello,' I called out, softer than if I actually wanted to be heard. I can still picture the door clearly, its dark wood, the grain all scuffed and dented with age, the loose-fitting door knob, edges smoothed by well-wishers and homecomings. What was I? Neither, I suppose. A passer-by. I opened the door.

There must have been thirty or forty people in the Kalonji living room and it looked like the United Nations in there. The first people I noticed were three huge African guys. They must have been six foot five, maybe more. Two of them wore grey suits, the other one was dressed in something more like a toga, all yellow and gold, kind of like graduation robes. They barely registered my entering the room, except the robe-wearing guy, who bowed

slightly when I walked in the door, his pointy little sailor hat with sequins on it sparkling like something on a game show.

A group of three Muslim women were clustered near the couch. They wore headscarves and shapeless floor-length dresses in black or dull blue.

On the couch itself were two younger African guys. One was wearing black jeans, white sneakers and a white shirt, the other one wore camouflage pants and a neon-orange top. They both looked ripped, the lean muscle on their arms, the outline of their pecs visible through their shirts.

I also saw four guys dressed like Afghani shepherds, wearing those loose white pants and long tops with the little brown vests. I'd often seen outfits like that on news reports from Afghanistan where they were talking about the Americans, or the Taliban or whatever. These guys looked just like that, huddled together drinking tea in the Kalonji living room. The oldest one smiled at me as I took up a position inside the room. His teeth were all yellow and crooked. You didn't usually see teeth that messed up. I smiled back.

It wasn't all United Nations in there. There were lots of – what should I call them – regular people? White people? Second and third generation migrants? Whatever you'd call doughy, middle-aged white people wearing jeans and fleece vests. Australians? Citizens of Niminbinji, I suppose. New people kept coming in the door, waving to each other and shaking hands.

Aline came out of the kitchen, carrying a jug of water and a stack of glasses. I couldn't tell if it was a smile or a smirk she gave me; whatever it was, she wiped it from her face as she set the jug and glasses down on the coffee table and said something to the two guys sitting on the couch. They both smiled and looked over at me from the corners of their eyes. I looked down at the floor, at the tips of their white sneakers and army boots visible under the coffee table.

There was a dull thud behind me and I turned to see Senior Constable Miles shuffle into the room, his police hat tucked under his arm. I felt exposed, standing there in the middle of the living room, so I made my way to an unlit corner at the back of the room. I leaned against the only patch of wall that wasn't plastered with family photographs. I watched as Constable Miles waved at a number of people from across the room, silently mouthing the word 'hi.' People waved back. I then spotted the little Gollum figure of Jamie Collins who stepped forward to shake the Constable's hand. Miles put an arm around Jamie Collins' shoulder, the cop's large, meaty frame emphasized the other man's stooped frailty.

"Everyone." A woman's voice rose up from the gathering, calling for the group's attention. I turned to see Carol, the red-haired hippie from the Hope Emporium, waving her hand in the air, walking around, trying to still the chatter in the room. "Everyone, please," she repeated, waving her hand more vigorously. The Afghani guys peered over their teacups. Carol, hand still in the air, came out from behind a group of middle-aged white women and took up a position at the front of the room. "Could I have your attention for a moment please?" The murmuring died down, but not completely. The robed African man kept talking, though more quietly. "Now," said Carol, folding her arms in front of her. "Oh, where is Albert?" She scanned the room. A forest of hands pointed behind Carol. She turned to where Mr Kalonji was standing in the shadow of his dining room. "Oh good. Well come on out, Albert, where we can see you."

I thought it was a bit rude the way Carol spoke to Mr Kalonji, as if he were a little kid, but he didn't seem to mind. He even smiled at her as he came out of the shadow and stood next to his fireplace, his mantle crowded with framed photographs of his family.

"Now," sighed Carol. "I want to start by thanking the Kalonjis for letting us all come together here today." Heads nodded and the group murmured in agreement, shifting their attention between Mr Kalonji, who stood by his fireplace and Dina, who stood at the door to the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. "It's already a tough time for your family, and it's made harder by today's…. well, whatever you call it – so we thank you for opening your hearts and your home to us." More murmuring, nodding and wiping of hands on apron. "Now," said Carol more sternly. I know that some of you are feeling worried and unsafe by what's happening in our town today, so Senior Constable Miles from the New South Wales Police is here to talk to us about your concerns." A handful of people clapped as Constable Miles stepped forward but they quickly stopped when they noticed they were in the minority.

Miles stepped forward into the cleared space near the front of the room. "Thanks, Carol," he said and settled his weight on the heels of his feet. "Now folks," he scanned the room. "I'll be honest with you." He slicked his hair back with the palm of his hand. "The group of people that came into town early this morning caught us by surprise." I shrunk into my corner and put my hands deep in my pockets. "It's what's called a flash-mob," he continued. "These kinds of gatherings are usually organized through social media and it all happens very quickly. Now they start fast, but that usually means they end fast too, so we do not expect these people will hang around. They will probably leave town as quickly as they came." Miles paused and tucked his hat deeper under his armpit. He was sweating pretty good. "Our main concern here is public safety, okay, so we've got police coming in from all

over the coast, officers from as far away as Kempsey and Barrawonga are coming in to make sure that this… this… *group* moves on without incident." He tilted his head to the side. "I do think it's best if you stay away from there today, though – not because we think it's dangerous but because we're trying to get people *off* the street and, by going down there, you make the crowd bigger, not smaller. That makes our job of keeping people safe more difficult." I could see patches of sweat seeping through Miles' shirt, not just under the armpits, but around his chest and belly as well. "So it's best if everybody just stays at home." He sniffed and wiped a bead of perspiration off his nose with his free hand. "Now you probably have some questions and I'm happy to answer them as best I can."

"I've got one," said Carol immediately. "What if they don't leave, Adrian?"

Constable Miles squinted. I think he was irritated that Carol used his first name when he was trying to be formal. Miles then tilted his head from side to side as if he were weighing the question. "They'll leave, Carol. Most of these people are from out of town and there's just no place for them to stay here, so they'll most likely move on in a matter of hours."

Carol shook her head. "I don't know." She said it like she *did* know.

"Okay," said Constable Miles. "I think it's important not to scare people here, and to describe the situation as it is. These people are here now, and we're dealing with it. Hopefully they'll say their piece and get on with it. Yes sir, you have a question." Miles seized his opportunity to shut Carol down and pointed to the oldest of the Afghani men who had his arm high in the air. The man lowered his arm, scratched the side of his beard and spoke in his own language. I don't know what it's called. I obviously didn't understand what he was saying but it sounded a bit like wind through a willow tree, lots of shhh sounds. It was kind of nice to listen to, but then I suppose most languages are when you don't understand what's being said. When he was done talking, one of the younger men spoke.

"He says he is confused why people are allowed to be practicing a… discrimination when he was understanding this was not allowed in Australia?"

Miles rocked back and forth on his feet. "Okay…. Look, I know many of you will be quite upset by what these people are saying, and by some of the things written on those signs. That's another reason not to go down there. But in this country, people have what's called free speech, which means they are allowed to say what they want."

The younger man was interpreting for the older man as Miles spoke. The old man was nodding and frowning. He said something quickly and gestured with his index finger. The younger man interpreted.

“He says he understands about free speech, but knows there are also laws about speaking discrimination, so why can’t the police just take away the signs that have the discrimination?”

Miles half-smiled, half-cringed. “Ah, it’s complicated,” he said, nodding.

The younger man interpreted. The older man frowned, but then his face softened. “Yes,” he said and chuckled, bearing his yellow, crooked teeth.

Miles pointed a finger at the African guy in the graduation robes. “Yes sir, you have a question.”

The man cleared his throat. “Yes, thank you Mr Miles. Many of us are interested to know how did this situation happen? I mean, what does this have to do with us? Why are they here?”

The statement drew lots of nodding and murmuring. Constable Miles looked at me. I swear he did. He then looked back at the robed African guy. Miles held his hands out at his side, palms up. “We’re looking in to that.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Look, as I’ve said, these protestors aren’t from around here. So we expect them to move on before dark.”

“What if we want to counter protest?” Carol interrupted. Constable Miles’ body went limp. He looked at Carol pleadingly.

“Don’t do it Carol. Honestly, it’s just going to pour fuel on the fire. What’ll it accomplish?”

“Well, it’ll show them we’re not scared,” said Carol. “I reckon we should make our own signs and head down there.” She looked around the room, trying to gather support. Most people shook their heads quietly or looked down at the floor. Mr Kalonji pushed himself off the wall against which he was leaning, raised his hand and spoke.

“Thank you, Carol. We see your passion. And we thank you for it. But I think it’s better if we listen to Senior Constable Miles. It is better to respond to this situation with dignity.”

I looked around. People were nodding. I don’t know if it was because they agreed or because they were scared. Jamie Collins just stared out the window.

“That’s right,” said Miles, sensing the prospect of consensus. “Like I said, these people will come and go. The best way to counter protest is to go on living as usual. Then we can all get on with our lives.” He looked over at Carol who had a sour look on her face. “Anyone else?” said Miles as he quickly searched the room for further questions. But people had already resumed talking, no doubt fielding their own theories about what was going on and what to do next. “Okay, thanks everybody,” said Miles above the growing noise. A few

people clapped again. Most nodded, and mumbled thank you and reformed groups with their neighbors.

I stayed tucked in my corner, unsure if I should leave. I imagined myself walking down the hill, back towards the center of town. Then what? It didn't feel like I really had anywhere else to go. I searched the room for Aline but didn't see her. Then I felt someone coming up behind me. I turned to find Constable Miles standing over me.

"Hi Marc," he said.

"Hi." I moved my hand out of my pocket to shake his hand, but he didn't offer me his, so I pushed my fingers deeper into my pocket.

"Good to see you here supporting the community."

"Yeah. Sure."

"All good?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

Miles looked over his shoulder, half turned to me, leaned in and spoke out the side of his mouth. "Look, this is a good community, Marc. We've worked hard to build it up."

I crinkled my brow. "Okaaay."

He turned and looked at me now, over the rim of his glasses. "We'd like to keep it that way, you know what I mean."

I backed a half step away from him. "Sorry, but, I don't know what you are saying?"

"Really?" Miles squinted and took a half step towards me. He wasn't just big. He was also tall.

"No, seriously," I said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Miles took a deep breath. The air whistled in his nose hairs. "Marc." The Constable looked over his shoulder again. He smiled and waved at someone who was leaving. Then he returned his attention to me, his smile melting as he turned. "When you hang out with a guy like Darren Lyons, we tend to notice."

"Hang out?"

"Yeah, hang out. You guys were at the pub last night. I saw you there myself."

"Yeah, but…"

"He's a friend of yours on Facebook."

'Friend,' now sounded more familiar than I was comfortable with. "Hold on," I said. "Are you accusing me of something?"

"No." Miles said it real calm. He even shrugged his shoulders. "All I'm saying is that Darren Lyons has a history with police. He's not the kind of person you want to be associated with when you're part of a coroner's report. Just stay away from him."

"I'm telling you I don't really know the guy. I just had a few beers with him last night. That's it."

"Just stay away from him."

"Well, how am I supposed to do that? We're in the same campground."

Miles patted me on the shoulder. "You'll figure something out." He turned to face Mr Kalonji who was headed towards us. Miles shook Kalonji's hand, cupping it with both of his own hands. Kalonji smiled and thanked the Constable for coming.

"Gentlemen," said Miles and headed to the exit, stopping to shake a few hands on his way out.

Mr Kalonji stood next to me. I realized I hadn't spoken to him since I ran out the other night. I felt less embarrassed about it now, more annoyed. I went over my conversation with Constable Miles. How did I go from beach holiday to being some kind of suspect? It all happened too fast.

"It's good," said Kalonji, talking in his house full of people. We spoke in French, even though I didn't feel like it. "Good that everyone feels comfortable coming here. It's important that people feel there's a center to turn to in a crisis."

I didn't say anything. I needed some quiet time, some mental space to process what Constable Miles had said. I felt sorry for Albert Kalonji. I did. But I didn't feel like talking to him right now. I felt crowded by his presence. I sensed he was a little annoyed with me too. He didn't seem as friendly, as complimentary as he had when we first met. He hovered, emphasizing his height over me.

"I saw you on the news yesterday," he said, as if to get my attention.

It worked. I replayed my news clip and sound bite, and was embarrassed all over again. I took Kalonji's mentioning the news as a kind of sleight.

"Yes," I said. "I saw you too."

"Well…it seems we are now both famous," he chuckled. I smiled, unconvincingly.

Jamie Collins suddenly appeared behind Kalonji, who half turned to face the little man, as if shielding him from me, or me from him. I couldn't overhear what they were saying, but Kalonji was making a lot of reassuring gestures, patting Collins' shoulders. The man's face was red and peeling. It might have been sunburn or some kind of skin condition. His forehead was covered in patches where the skin had peeled away. Here and there, the

papery skin curled up in dry flakes, ready to chip off, like blistered old paint. Jamie nodded a lot, shook Kalonji's hand again, and drifted back into the group. Kalonji watched after him, sighed and turned back to face me.

"*Un pauvre homme*," he said. A poor man. Kalonji shook his head. "He was a soldier, you know, in the war of Vietnam. It was difficult to add Jamie Collins to the picture I had of the Vietnam War. I tried to visualize him wearing a uniform, to imagine his blotchy, bewildered face looking out from under a battle helmet. Or maybe what I saw is what the war did to him? Who knows. And besides, my picture of the Vietnam War came mainly from watching American movies. Still, it takes all kinds of people to fight a war, I thought, as I watched Jamie Collins and his jockey-like physique make for the front door.

Albert Kalonji put a hand on my shoulder. It broke my trance. "Marc," he said soberly, as if it were the beginning of a speech. I looked up at him; the whites of his eyes were yellow at the edges, his pupils beginning to fog. Years are the wrong measure of age. "I need to ask you a favor," he said.

"What is it?" I asked, feeling obliged by his frailty.

"It concerns my daughter, Aline."

"Okay."

Kalonji scanned the room and returned to face me. He didn't look at me, but at the space between us. "I understand she has become involved with a young man. An Aboriginal. I want you to understand that I have no issue with Aboriginals." He waved that long index finger in the air in front of him, like a little dagger. "I'm sure theirs is a noble culture. But I understand this boy comes from troubled family circumstances. I'm not a racist, you understand. It's not a question of race. It's a matter of class and education. Of prospects." Kalonji rubbed his jaw. "This is not coming out as I intended." He sighed. "Look, Aline is intelligent. She is charming and open-minded. She can accomplish much in this country, given the right opportunities. Dina and I have sacrificed much to ensure she can have a good life. But I fear Aline may squander her opportunities by shouldering that young man's problems as if they were her own. She is idealistic and loyal. It is a dangerous combination." He paused and looked at me. His face was soft and hopeful.

"Why are you telling me all of this?"

"I don't know," he said and put his hand on my shoulder. "I trust you. I don't know why, but I do. It's an intuition." He smiled. I looked away.

"Well, what are you asking me?"

"Nothing specific. Just that you keep an eye on Aline while this… affair in the village resolves itself. And perhaps that you reinforce the value of education, given the opportunity. Nothing onerous."

I looked up at Kalonji. He was nodding, hopefully. "Okay," I said, still not entirely clear what I was agreeing to. But I wanted to make amends, to do something right. I wanted to please him.

"*Bien*," said Kalonji. He dropped the hand that was still resting on my shoulder. "Come," he said. "I want to formally introduce you to my daughter." I followed him through the living room past a swinging door into the kitchen.

There were seven or eight women preparing food: cutting up fruit, washing dishes, stirring things in bowls. Dina Kalonji was arranging meatballs on a grilling tray, the white flour dust stuck to her fingers in powdery, meaty blobs. She said something to her husband in that language I now know is Lingala. She shook her head a lot and seemed to be shooing us out of her kitchen.

She placed a last meatball on her tray and walked straight up to me. She stood there, her face close to mine. "*Allors*," she said. "*Te revoilà*," she said, wiping her fingers with a dishcloth. "You're back. *C'est bien*." She looked me up and down. "*Peut être tu deviendras un homme."* Maybe you will yet become a man. With that, she turned her attention back to the clamor of her kitchen. She put her tray of meatballs in the oven, said something else in Lingala with her back turned. Mr Kalonji responded with a single word.

I was still reeling from the 'become a man' thing when Aline came in, carrying a stack of dirty casserole dishes. Mr Kalonji called Aline over. She put the casserole dishes down on the kitchen table. Another woman wordlessly carried them off towards the sink.

"Aline," said Kalonji as she approached us. "I present Monsieur Marc Gilbert."

I waved at Aline. Was it clear we'd already met? Could Kalonji see the deception in our eyes?

"See that he has enough to eat," said Kalonji. And with that, he left the kitchen.

I looked at Aline and waited until the door closed behind Mr Kalonji. "That was weird," I said. "'*See that he has enough to eat?*"'

"I know," said Aline. "It's like it's always the olden days at my house."

Dina Kalonji said something in Lingala, raising her voice above the fray of the kitchen.

"I'm doing it," said Aline and picked up a large bowl of rice that one of the other women had placed on the kitchen table. "Come on," said Aline turning. "Gotta do another

round. God forbid someone doesn't stuff themselves, you know," she said pushing the swinging door open with her back. I followed her out.

"So let me guess," she said as we walked into the living room. "My dad asked you to spy on me."

"Yeah," I chuckled. "Kind of."

"Figures." She put the bowl of rice down on the coffee table. "You and everybody else – far out. Look at all this shit," she was looking at a lopsided stack of paper plates and plastic cutlery piled on the floor and on the coffee table. "They're pigs, I swear."

"Who's a pig?" said the young guy with the camouflage pants and fluorescent orange top.

"You are," said Aline. "And so is dickless over here." The other guy blushed and laughed, bringing his hands to his face.

"Seriously, Danni, can you pick *something* up?" said Aline. "Those plates, maybe. It's not hard."

Danni looked down over the edge of the couch as if peering into a crevasse. There was a litter of plates at his feet. He reached down and cautiously picked up the stack and handed it limply to Aline, who stood there with her hands on her hips. "Can you just take them into the kitchen?" Danni turned his head behind the couch, to where the swinging door of the kitchen was. "There's a big rubbish bin on the left of the door," said Aline. "Just tip it in there. It's really not that big a deal."

Danni lifted himself off the couch, balancing the stack of plates in front of him and loped off towards the kitchen door. Aline took up Danni's seat on the couch once his back was turned. "Thanks mate," she called after him and placed a couch cushion on her lap. "What?" she said, turning to the other guy left on the couch.

"Nothing." He smiled and shook his head. "I'm keeping my mouth shut."

"Good," said Aline. "You're learning." She looked at me. "Oh, Marc, this is Chance, Chance Marc, Marc Chance." We waved at each other. "And the housekeeper there is Danni. They're my brother's friends."

A lump formed in my throat. Aline said *are* friends, not *were* friends. Did she still hope Cedric was alive? Or had her grammar just not caught up to her grief?

Danni returned from the kitchen, looking pleased with himself and eating a cake-looking thing with icing.

"Aaww," said Aline. "You got a little reward."

Danni took a big bite. Icing stuck to his beaming face. Crumbs fell to the floor.

"Where's my piece?" said Chance. Danni chewed and pointed at the kitchen behind him. He gave me a fist bump. It felt awkward – like the gesture was cooler than I was.

Mrs Kalonji appeared at the swinging door and yelled something at Aline who rolled her eyes. "Fine," said Aline tearing the pillow off her lap and getting up off the couch. Mrs Kalonji kept jabbering at her. "Okay, I know," said Aline. "Sorry," she added, sounding more conciliatory. Mrs Kalonji seemed satisfied with the exchange and retreated to the kitchen. Aline turned back towards us. "I gotta go," she said, her hand resting on the swinging door. "She wants you to stick around, though."

"She wants *me* to stick around? I said.

"Yeah."

I looked over at Danni and Chance. They weren't smiling anymore. Their eyes were downcast.

"Why?"

Aline sighed. "It's better if I let her explain. Can you just hang around for a bit until we finish up here? Like, twenty minutes. It's important to her." Aline's face looked tense, her eyes wide and pleading.

"Okay," I said. "Sure."

Aline smiled and mouthed the words *thank you*. She pushed open the sliding door and disappeared into the kitchen.

I turned back towards Danni and Chance. Danni was pulling his phone out of his pocket and Chance was already leaning in to peer at whatever the phone was brought out for. The wall was going up. Whatever. I didn't want to latch onto them after Aline got called into the kitchen anyway. They were *her* friends, not mine. They wanted to talk about their own stuff and my hanging around kept them from it. I got it. But I did feel adrift in the empty space between the kitchen and the couch. I told them I was going to get a snack. Danni didn't look up from his phone. Chance gave me the thumbs up. The pair of them sank back into the couch, their bodies visibly relaxed by the abdication of the responsibility for baby-sitting me.

I wandered over to the main table. It was crowded with food. Among the bowls of nuts and potato chips were dishes of Greek and pasta salad; a fruit platter, a cheese platter, ramekins filled with dips and dates and olives; a plate of meat pies, falafels, sausage rolls and spring rolls and rice paper rolls. I hadn't eaten anything since the slurpee and those baby cookies.

"Good tucker," said a guy at the other end of the table, adding a third spring roll to his paper plate, already piled high with meatballs and potato cakes.

"Yeah, it's a nice spread," I said, hoping that would be the end of the conversation. The urgent flame of nausea from my hangover was returning. I needed something greasy to smother it. I put a bunch of sausage rolls and some naan on my plate.

I wandered around the room a bit, looking for an inconspicuous place to eat my food. There were clumps of people talking all over the place. It was loud in there. People were satisfied to smile at me as I passed without pulling me in to their conversations. I was relieved.

The tall African guys had moved on, so there was now an empty spot by the mantle. I stood there with my back to the room and ate my sausage rolls. I've never liked people watching me eat. I wasn't entirely alone, though. The Kalonjis stared out at me from inside the frames of their family photographs. There was Mr and Mrs Kalonji on their wedding day. Mrs Kalonji looked young and thin, and smiling in her green gown and golden headdress. Mr Kalonji was kissing her on the cheek. He already had his moustache then, though none of his hair was grey. There was also a small black and white photo of a dozen people standing outside a straw hut. Five of them were adults. The rest were kids. The photo looked old and grainy. There were other pictures too, mostly of babies. I leaned in to look at a photo of Aline as a little girl. She was wearing rollerskates and posing for the camera, one hand on her hip, the other held high above her head, fingers fanned out in triumph. What a gangly thing she was. I didn't remember Jenna having a transition like that, from little girl to young woman. She had always just been my older sister.

I couldn't think of a single photograph I had of my own parents. Jenna had them all. I'd never thought to ask for one.

One picture frame lay face up on the Kalonji mantle. The photograph inside was missing.

"Hello." I turned. The Afghani shepherds had come over. "Hello," repeated the younger man who had been the interpreter for the older one.

"Hi," I said and put my plate down on the mantle. He introduced himself and the old man standing beside him, but I wasn't sure I heard their names right – Baghish and Amooz, maybe, something like that. My ear just wasn't tuned to those sounds. The old man spoke and the young man interpreted.

"He wants to know where are you from."

The old man leaned in close, tilting his head to point his ear at me. He must have been hard of hearing. His head was well inside the understood Canadian frontier of my personal space. I resisted the urge to back away.

"Canada," I said, speaking into the old man's ear while looking into the face of the younger one.

The old man nodded and looked up. "Canada," he said, beaming, as if the place was a revelation. Then he said something else and made gestures with his hands, as if to indicate something growing, expanding – his hands raised towards the ceiling.

"He says there are many high and beautiful mountains in Canada."

"Yes," said the old man, stretching out his arms. "Big."

"We miss the mountains," said the younger man.

"Are you happy living here?" I said. "I mean, wouldn't you rather be in a big city with…" I stopped myself.

He laughed. "With more people like us?" he said.

"Sorry, I didn't mean–"

"It's okay," he said, waving his hand as if to swat away the suggestion of offence. "You know, in Afghanistan I was a farmer. I lived in a small village. Smaller than this. I only see a city twice in my life before. When I come to Australia, I live in a city. But, what can I farm in Sydney? There I live in an apartment. Here there is land. I'm not a farmer, but I can grow potatoes. The land is rocky here and dry. Like at home. Touching the dirt – it heals my soul."

The old man nodded. I couldn't be sure how much of the conversation he had heard or understood.

"Do you miss it? Home, I mean."

"Of course," he said. "We do not forget where we came from. We remember." The old man nodded again. The two of them exchanged words in their own language. It was the first time I imagined the possibility that people from places like Afghanistan and Iraq didn't automatically prefer life in places like Canada and Australia.

I started feeling nauseous again. The Afghani guys had interrupted me before I'd finished my sausage rolls. I needed to eat more and be somewhere private, to soften the buzz in my head from being around so many people.

I excused myself, grabbed a wedge of lemon cake from the buffet table and looked around for a quiet place to eat it. I wandered around a bit – floated, really, looking to avoid being pulled into any new conversations.

I drifted into a part of the house off the living room that I hadn't seen before, drawn by the quiet emptiness of a narrow hallway. It was at the back of the house and looked like the kind of place you might put the washing machine. There was a deep washing trough

there, but no washer or dryer. I walked slowly, quietly, aware this probably wasn't a space the Kalonjis had opened to the public.

This part was less tidy than the rest of their house. There were cardboard boxes stacked in pillars that went halfway up the wall, old fruit boxes, mostly. There was also a wire shoe rack, piled high with scuffed up pairs of sneakers, all loose and misshapen from over-wear, the heels flattened from stepping in and out of them without untying the laces. Next to the shoe rack was a single, banged-up metal dumbbell – I'd probably struggle to lift it with both hands.

A triangular shaft of light on the floor drew my attention to an open door at the side of the hallway. It was only open a crack. I stopped, aware that I'd now strayed into a private part of the Kalonji house where I was not welcome. The wet slurp of snot inside the room was followed by a muffled sob. Though my view was obscured by the door, I saw Mr Kalonji holding Mrs Kalonji, whose head was buried in his chest. Here were the parents, crying inside the bedroom of their dead son.

I walked backward out of the hallway, waiting for a squeak of the floorboards that never came. I don't know if they ever knew I was there.

Back in the living room, I stood in front of the buffet, confronted by the absurdity of this pile of food. I stood there, if only to blend in with the crowd, which was already noticeably thinner than before Constable Miles spoke. Then Carol crossed the room towards me.

"You ready?" she said.

My forehead creased. "For what?"

"We're heading down to the water. Thought you were coming with us."

"No. I don't know what you're talking about."

"I thought Aline told you."

"No, told me what?"

Carol closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "You were the last person to see Cedric and Sarah alive. We need your energy to raise them out of the water so they can have a proper burial."

"My energy? Seriously?"

"Look, you don't have to do anything except be there."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not – like I get this is your thing – but energies and chakras and stuff, it's just not …"

"Not what?"

I shrugged. “Not *me*, I guess.”

Carol put her hands on her hips. “You’ve got to learn to meet people some of the way, Marc.” She tilted her head. “You Christian?”

“No.”

“But you know the basic storyline, right? God. Angels. Jesus?”

“Yeah.”

“Ever been to church, even just for Christmas?”

“Sure.”

“Well then what’s the problem?”

“Sorry, but I don’t get what that’s got to do with anything.”

Carol put her hand on her hip and flashed a look behind her at the front door. “Look, what’s a Christian anyway is what I’m saying.” She turned back to face me.

“I told you, I’m not a Christian, so…”

“I know. I know you said that. But what *is* one? That’s what I’m saying.”

I stuffed my hands in my pockets. “Look, no offence but…”

“I’m asking how much do you have to believe before you cross your own line? Is it saints and miracles? Do you have to believe in rising from the grave? In symbolically eating flesh and drinking blood? It's all magic, Marc. You don’t have to believe in *all* of it – or any of it – sometimes just the idea is enough, you know, like maybe going to church at Christmas and a funeral, only cuz it makes people feel just a little better, even if they don’t know why. If Dina needs this to feel better then so what? What’s the big deal? Is it so much to ask that you stand somewhere for a few minutes? I promise you can believe whatever you like the whole time.”

I looked around and thought of the Kalonjis in that dimly lit room. “What, so you mean, like, right now?”

“Yeah, right now.”

Aline appeared at the doorway, along with Mrs Kalonji. They both looked exhausted. Mrs Kalonji was holding a cloth bag.

“Marc’s ready to go,” said Carol over my shoulder. Aline smiled at me as she approached. I smiled back and the four of us walked towards the front of the house.

“Isn’t Mr Kalonji coming?” I said as we walked out the front door.

“No,” said Dina. We stood at the top of the front steps that led into the garden. “This is not a ritual for fathers.” She reached down and pushed back the folds of her dress so she

could better see her feet on the steps. “Not usually,” she said, beginning her descent of the stairs into the garden.

A loose collection of people was scattered outside. The tall African guy wearing the graduation robes stood smoking near the flowerbed where I’d puked. He was talking to another man who looked like an older version of a math teacher I once had, right down to the denim shirt and reading glasses that dangled on his chest by a string. For a second I thought it *was* him.

“Condolences, Dina,” said my math teacher as we passed him on our way to the gate. “I’m really sorry,” he said. The tall African man, drawing on a cigarette, didn’t turn his head to blow his smoke away from us. He bowed and said something in a language I didn’t understand.

Mrs Kalonji bowed her head. “Thank you,” she said and cradled the cloth bag.

“Thanks, Baz,” said Carol, as we passed my math teacher. “Going for a little walk,” said Carol. “Just need to clear the air a bit, you know.”

“Right-o.”

Aline opened the front gate and we stepped out into the street. There were cars parked up and down both sides of the road including a police car a few houses down.

“Oh, here we go,” said Carol as we approached the police cruiser. The window wound down. Carol put her hand on her hip. “Still keeping the streets safe, then?” she said.

Constable Miles stuck his head out. “It’s really not a good idea to go into town, Carol.”

“We’re not going into town, Adrian.”

“Well what *are* you doing then?”

“We’re going down to the water. To pray. Is that okay with you, Constable?”

Miles frowned. “Can you drive?”

“We’re just going down the road,” said Carol.

Miles looked up and down the road. Then he looked at me. Then at Carol. “Get in,” he said.

“What?”

“I’ll give youse a lift.”

We piled in the police car. Dina sat in the front. The rest of us sat in the back. I sat near one window, Carol near the other. Aline sat in the middle of the back seat. Her head nearly scraped the car ceiling.

I'd never been in a police car before. It smelled like a combination of citrus air freshener and hot plastic. The front console was a mess of wires, screens and buttons. The clutter of technology was bolted together on a metal frame and the assemblage looked like a prop from a B-grade movie. I'd expected the setup to be more slick. I wondered who the last person was to sit in this back seat. What had they done?

Aline sat beside me. She leaned forward and held on to the back of the front seats to keep herself from sliding from side to side. Carol looked out the window. Dina focused on the distance as we headed in the opposite direction from the center of town.

We drove in silence, listening to the clicks, beeps and chatter coming from the police radio.

"Cee kay cee, six-one-two-four, over." The message ended with a burst of radio static.

"Copy that, cee kay cee. What's your exact location?"

"Outside the containment area now, corner of Werner and… Hotham Streets. Vehicle is Tango, Sierra, Oscar Seven Three One. Over."

Constable Miles pushed one of the buttons on the console several times, lowering the volume of the radio chatter.

"Copy that cee kay cee, standby. Ten-twenty-one-three-o-three do you copy?"

Miles brought the microphone of his police radio to his mouth. "Ten-twenty-one-three-o-three received," he said. The curly chord pulled tight between the hand-held microphone and the console.

Roger that, came the reply.

Miles put the microphone back on the console. The chord now hung limp. He cleared his throat. "I'll drop you at Culloch Point," he said, trying to catch Carol's eye in the rear-view mirror. Carol kept looking out the window. Miles turned to Dina Kalongi. "That okay?" he said. Dina closed her eyes and nodded.

"Thanks Adrian," said Carol from the back seat.

"No worries," he said looking for Carol's gaze in the rear-view mirror. She didn't respond and kept looking out the window.

We drove in anticipation of seeing the ocean. When it came into view we each responded in our own way. Constable Miles slowed the car down ever so slightly; Aline dug her fingers deeper into the fabric of the front seats; Carol leaned across to see out the windshield; Dina Kalonji stopped looking at the horizon and gathered up the cloth bag she held in her lap. Somewhere out there, Cedric and Sarah lay under that endless expanse of blue.

Cedric was Aline's brother, like I was Jenna's. We had memories too that only *we* shared. Aline didn't have that anymore. There was one less person in the world for her. Some of those memories would soon begin to fade. In time, they would feel more like dreams, personal, untranslatable because the only other person who could remember them was gone. Losing someone hurts because the dead take pieces of you with them when they go.

The squad car turned down an unmarked road and descended towards the water. The ocean disappeared behind sand dunes, temporarily lightening the mood in the car.

"You're going the back way." said Carol. Miles leaned in to peer at something on one of his computer screens.

"It's still low tide," he said leaning back into his chair. "You should have plenty of beach down this end." The tires crackled on the unpaved track. He slowed the car and then stopped suddenly. Aline was jolted off balance. She braced herself, putting one hand on Carol's shoulder and the other one on mine. Miles turned back to look at us over his shoulder. "Sorry," he said. "Brake's a bit touchy."

Carol worked the door handle but it snapped back with a hollow clunk. "Oh," said Miles, undoing his seatbelt. "I'll get that." He opened his own door. "It doesn't open from the inside. Yours does, though," he said turning to Mrs Kalonji who had her own hand poised on the door handle. Miles heaved himself onto his feet and opened the back-passenger door. We all shuffled out of the back seat while Constable Miles held the door for us like he was a chauffeur at a wedding party. The police radio chimed, followed by a few burst of static.

"Thanks for the ride, Adrian," said Carol.

"Yes, thank you," said Mrs Kalonji.

"How long you guys going to be?"

"We can walk back Adrian. It's not far. I'm sure there are places you gotta be."

Ten-nine. Just heading to the west side of it now.

Copy that.

Constable Miles looked like he was going to say something.

"Don't worry," said Carol. "We won't go into town."

Miles nodded. "Okay." He pushed his glasses up his nose. "Well," he said, pointing at the hill, "just walk up between those dunes there and you'll come out onto the beach."

"I know," said Carol, softly.

"Yeah," said Miles. He made little circles on the roof of his car with his fingers. "I know you know."

Carol patted Miles on the arm. “Go on,” she said. “Go do some policing.” He looked out at the sand dunes then back at his car. He slapped the roof as if to stop wherever his thoughts had gone, to stop them from going any further. He closed the passenger door.

We walked up the dunes and left Adrian Miles standing by the front of his car until we disappeared behind the sand. I don’t know how long he waited there like that.

The wind hit us as soon as we cleared the dunes, a steady gust that whipped around our ears like someone running with a microphone. Mrs Kalonji tightened the knot on her headscarf. Carol re-tied her ponytail. Aline’s braids swung behind her like a beaded curtain.

“This still okay?” said Carol, leaning in to Mrs Kalonji. She nodded.

Culloch Point was a narrow beach, ringed by low, grey shrubs. There were no-footsteps in the sand. The beach was shaped smooth by the wind and the sea as if no-one had ever walked here before us. A long, wide sandbar stretched out from the beach and into a shallow bay surrounded by grassy hills. Waves crashed against high banks of sand piled along the shore. The tide and current would soon wash over this place, but for now, low sandy islands poked out from the shallow water inside the bay. The wind rippled the surface of the water.

Carol headed out first, setting a brisk pace towards the water’s edge. Mrs Kalonji followed, more slowly, making careful footsteps in the sand. Aline walked beside her mother. I trudged along behind. No one turned to check on me.

Walking on the beach was hard work. The sand was loose and deep. I took off my flip-flops but my feet now only sank deeper into the sand. It was harder than walking in snow. I looked to the others to see if there was some trick to walking in it. They seemed to be walking just like me. When I reached the sandbar, its density was a welcome change underfoot. The compact surface felt as smooth and even as a sidewalk. My whole gait changed – I no longer loped around like I had on the beach, trying to keep my balance on the uneven sand. I could now walk normally, as if I’d suddenly evolved from some more bent over version of early man into a modern, upright human.

The waves were now louder than the wind. They fell apart and collapsed on the shore in a confusion of land and sea. Even if I *had* called out to Cedric and Sarah, if I *had* tried to warn them about how wild the ocean was that day, they would never have heard me over the noise. The water pushed against the sandbank and retreated, and each wave sucked out and spat back the sand in turn. It was like someone raking wet gravel back and forth.

“Here okay?” said Carol, looking at Mrs Kalonji. She looked down at the yellow sand. It was streaked with bits of seaweed and grey sand from deeper down, churned up by

the tides and currents that washed over this place and daily re-shaped the landscape, forming, destroying and reforming the thin wedges of land where the shoreline met the sea. Mrs Kalonji scanned the horizon. “It’s okay,” she said. Aline said something to her mother and Mrs Kalonji peered into her cloth bag. She reached in, dug around and pulled out a stout, purple candle. Mrs Kalonji crouched down and twisted the fat candle into the damp sand until it stood upright. The candle had already been used, the blackened wick was sunk into a deep caldera of wax. “*Tien*,” said Mrs Kalonji, handing Aline a lighter. Aline got down on her knees and flicked the lighter, but it only sparked. There was no flame.

“Here,” said Carol. “Maybe if I get down beside you to keep the wind off.”

The tiny spark of fire from the lighter seemed sure to fail against the wind. Aline sniffed and rubbed her nose. “Can you try?” she said, handing the lighter to me. “Maybe if we all get down in front of it, to block the wind.”

I took the lighter. It seemed like a big responsibility. The metal tip was warm, even if no flame had burned there. I knelt down in front of the candle, the wet sand felt cold on my bare knees. I flicked the lighter and watched the flint spark, conscious of Carol, Dina and Aline willing me to light the candle. Sparks alone would not do it. *I couldn’t even do this right.* I shook the lighter, tried again and managed to produce a tiny flame that gave me a disproportionate sense of achievement. I quickly angled the lighter inside the candle and put the miniature blue flame to the wick. My thumb burned but I persisted. Some wax melted inside the candle but the flame would not transfer to the wick. The lighter went out.

“Not sure it’s going to work, Dina,” said Carol.

“It’s okay,” said Mrs Kalonji weakly. She reached out and turned the candle a few times in its sandy perch. Now it felt like my failure. Why did Aline have to pass the lighter to me?

Mrs Kalonji put her hand in the cloth bag and pulled out a photograph. It was of Cedric and Sarah, sitting next to each other on the green bench I now recognized from the Kalonji front garden. She held the photo out to us. Aline reached across and took a corner of the photograph, holding it between her thumb and forefinger. Carol did the same. I hesitated. Carol nodded her head as if to give me permission. I put my fingers on the photograph too, my thumb on Cedric’s shoulder. Everyone else closed their eyes. I did too.

Holding the photograph together like the planchette of a Ouija board amplified the small movements we all made. These quivers, felt in the dark behind my closed eyes, formed an improbable bond between us – the same telegraphed flutter of life that briefly unites a man and fish at either end of a deep line. Then begins the struggle.

I visualized the photograph we held, reconstructed the image of Sarah and Cedric, imagined them perched on the green bench in the garden, the look of embarrassment they shared by the attention they received. I recalled the peculiar way they were half turned to each other, as if instructed to do so, but still mindful of whoever was behind the camera calling the shots. Who *had* taken the picture? Was it Mrs Kalonji? Why had she taken it? Was she proud of her son? Delighted by his girlfriend? Was this fair-skinned red-haired girl a sign of her son's adjustment to life in a new country? Did the couple feel the weight of Mrs Kalonji's expectations? Was it her hope that accounted for the discomfort on their faces? Or were they just young and self-conscious?

Mrs Kalonji gently pulled the photograph towards her. We all understood it was time to let it go. I opened my eyes.

Mrs Kalonji stood up and walked towards the water. I expected her to stop at the edge but she walked in, past her ankles, past her knees, up to her waist. Her dress fanned out and floated on the surface of the water like a lily pad.

Carol's voice suddenly rang out from behind me. "Lord of water, spirits of the deep." She walked forward, past me. In her hands, she cupped a turquoise-colored stone, as large and smooth as a pocketwatch. "We make you this offering and ask only that you return Cedric and Sarah to us, so that we can free their souls from their bodies and let them leave this world." Carol held her cupped hands up and then she too walked into the water, her jeans darkening as the water splashed onto them and was absorbed. When she was up to her knees, Carol lowered her hands into the water and let go of the stone. "Receive our gifts and hear our prayer."

With this, Mrs Kalonji leaned forward, placed the photograph in the water, and sprinkled it with sea water; drops fell from her finger tips as if she were baptizing a child. There she stood, in the cold water, her hands together in prayer. Carol too was motionless, the sea water swirling around the legs of her pants.

Behind me, Aline cried softly. I didn't know where to look, so I searched for the stone in the water. I couldn't see it, so I looked at the photograph. I thought it would just float on the surface, or get pushed back to shore by the wind and the tide. I imagined us all watching the photo blow back onto the beach and how that would bring a special kind of shame on the proceedings. But the photograph didn't do that. It caught some unseen current below the surface and was carried off towards the middle of the bay. Out there, in the ocean, a sailboat cruised by, rising and falling as it ploughed through the swell.

Whatever else was out there, it wasn't Cedric and Sarah – not anymore. They were gone, dissolving, already taking the shape of water, mute as the sediment that held up the world. Were we really raising the dead? Or was this just another way to say goodbye?

Mrs Kalonji cupped her hands and rinsed her face with sea water. She drew handfuls of it and threw it up to the sky. It rained down around her. Then she stood still, her hands limp at her sides. Then she submerged herself completely below the tideline. She stood up and wiped the water from her face. Whatever she had done, it was finished now. She walked out of the water onto the beach and didn't look at Carol as she passed. Mrs Kalonji's floating dress deflating around her as she emerged from the sea, like an umbrella closing on its handle, until she turned back and stood at the edge of the water, dripping wet.

Aline walked over with open arms to give her mother a hug. Mrs Kalonji held up her hand. "*Non*," she said. "*C'est fini*." Aline dropped her arms. "*C'est pas le moment*." Aline took a step back from her mother and turned to face the sea. "*C'est fini*," repeated Mrs Kalonji, shaking the water from her hands. Aline stood there, her back turned to the rest of us. "Finished," said Mrs Kalonji and walked towards me. She walked right past me, bent down to pick up the unlit candle and stuffed it back into her satchel without wiping the sand off the bottom.

"I'm really sorry about everything that's happened, Dina," said Carol walking out of the water.

Mrs Kalonji slung the straps of the satchel over her shoulder. "Okay," she said. "I'm going home." She looked through us, turned, and began to walk back towards the dunes.

Aline still stood with her back to us. Carol came over and tapped me on the shoulder. "You did good," she whispered. "Probably best you head off now, though. Emotions are running a bit high." She pointed at the shore beyond the dunes. "Just head that way," she said. "Towards that rock over there in the distance. See it? That way goes straight into town. Just follow the water. You can't miss it." It didn't feel like a suggestion.

I didn't leave. Not right away. Carol went over and stood beside Aline. They both had their backs to me and were looking at the sea. Carol rubbed Aline's back, between her shoulders and said something to her. I couldn't hear them over the wind. Aline wiped her eyes with the back of her hands.

Off in the distance, Dina Kalonji made her way across the sand, every step a defeat. Her wet dress clung to her, unmoved by the wind.

What good was I? I couldn't even light a candle. It was time to go. I began walking down the sandbar, back towards the beach. "Wait up," said Aline. I turned around. Her eyes

were wet and red. I should have said something eloquent, something consoling. But I said, "hey," as if I'd just bumped into her at the food court in the mall. *What an asshole.*

Aline sniffed. "Sorry," she said and wiped her nose with her sleeve. "Hey, meet up with us later. A bunch of us are getting together. I'm not sitting at home all night." She didn't wait for me to respond and walked off.

"Wait," I said. "What are you guys doing?"

Aline turned back over her shoulder. "Don't worry about it," she said. "Just come. Be at the Woolies around nine." She walked on a few more paces then turned around. "I know this was weird, by the way." She kept on walking.

I watched her go, then I turned around and started back along the beach towards town. I didn't look back again, even though I wanted to.

I walked and flicked through my newsfeed – Diplomatic Crisis Worsens – Airline Gets Rid of Reclining Seats in Economy – Doomsday Clock Moves Closer to Midnight – To Stuff or Not To Stuff? Turkey Recipes to Rule the Roast. Then I came across this:

Niminbinji, NSW — White nationalist protestors descended on the southcoast town for a 'White Lives Matter' rally, striking fear and confusion into the usually sleepy community.

"We're a small town," said Lauren Saunders, one of the town's 2,000 inhabitants and resident of some thirty years. "I've never seen anything like this before. I don't know who any of these people are or what they're doing here."

The mob of some two hundred protestors descended in the early hours of Sunday morning and surrounded the town's Shrine of Remembrance after a Facebook post on the page of white nationalist group The White Knights issued a call for help, claiming the Shrine was 'under attack' and set to be used in an occult ritual. The post read, 'Need help. Send reinforcements.'

While the message underscores the group's militant tactics, organisers insist their aims are peaceful. "This is a non-violent protest," said Gavin Richards, a White Knights spokesperson. "We're here to honorably defend our heritage and our way of life against

people who, having no sense of our history or our culture, would seek to destroy it."

The furore is thought to relate to a commemoration of two locals, Cedric Kalonji and Sarah Collins, who drowned earlier in the week, though the details are unclear.

The Niminbinji local council and RSL responsible for the Shrine said there are no plans to use the Shrine of Remembrance outside of official events.

Counter protestors have also begun to arrive in Niminbinji, prompting local police to call in reinforcements from nearby towns. “Public safety is our top priority,” said Senior Constable Adrian Miles. “We’ve got no issue with people saying their piece, but if they get out of line, that’s it.”

Barricades are currently being erected to separate rival protestors.

While Facebook has banned several far-right pages and personal accounts for breaching its community standards policies, radical groups on the left and right use the social media platform to organise their events.

– Philippa Strahan

I looked up from my phone. It was strange to read about something that was happening only a few kilometers away. I almost didn’t believe it was true.

VII

Battle lines – Choices and loyalties – No escape – Supermarket at night

Niminbinji was unrecognizable from the sleepy hollow it had been this morning. The main street was now divided by a wall of aluminum barricades erected along the white centerline of the road. The barricades stretched from the first store right into the center of town about a kilometre away, and separated a steady flow of protestors, which the cops, wearing fluorescent yellow vests, funnelled through the barricades that snaked their way to the Shrine of Remembrance. The battle lines had been drawn.

How did the police decide on separating the protestors? Was it just from the signs they carried?

#No Room for Racists

House Homeless Not Refugees

Australia Not Yours to Reclaim

Aussie Pride Nation Wide

Stop Racism Now!

No Borders, No War

Some people held their signs high above their heads, well before they reached the barricades, out where the crowd was sparse and potentially indifferent. These were the true believers. Others carried their strip of cardboard tucked under their arms, presumably to hoist when they'd reached the focal point of their rage and were within view of the cameras.

Dad must have held signs like this once. *Vive le Quebec libre*. As if Canadians needed liberating. As if the French language needed saving. Whatever burden he felt the state imposed was surely doubled by the trouble he made for himself.

People in the streets of Niminbinji waved their signs with the same smug self-assurance. What about the people without signs? How did the police know how to separate them? Some people's clothes were fairly obvious. The black hoodies and balaclavas, the anarchist-print T-shirts and Guy Fawkes Masks clearly belonged to one side of the protest; these were the uniforms of civil disobedience. On the other side were the military haircuts and guys wearing tight T-shirts with gothic script on them, the people draped in Australian flags.

But what about people without signs or uniforms? How did *they* know which barricade to walk through? Did they self-select?

I walked along the sidewalk, which was elevated from the main street so that you looked down onto the street as if from a train station platform onto the tracks below. It was packed with people down there. Some bystanders had even set up camp chairs, as if it were a parade route. I suppose it was.

A line of police wearing helmets and fluorescent vests stopped me from going any further. They wanted me to go down onto the road and through the barricades. I explained that I wasn't a protestor, just a tourist who was staying at the caravan park and that I was trying to get back to my campsite. A lady cop looked me up and down. She was looking for my uniform, I suppose. Something about me must have satisfied her because she waved me through.

I kept walking along the elevated sidewalk beside the road. It felt like some kind of VIP corridor along the protest route. Participants looked up at me from inside the barricades. Some people just glanced at me, unmoved by my presence. Maybe my private lane alongside the protest march suggested neutrality. Other people waved their protest signs at me. Maybe they thought I was someone important. A few people gave me the finger. Maybe they thought I was important too.

Up ahead I saw the shrine where everyone was headed. The barricades parted way at the foot of the obelisk and wrapped around either side of it, creating two amphitheatres of protestors separated by a line of police wearing fluorescent vests. The circle of people around a central obelisk reminded me of Muslims circling the central monument at Mecca. But here there was a lot of finger pointing and sign rattling on either side of the police lines. I wasn't clear on what either camp was for or against exactly. They were certainly against each other. I suppose it's difficult to fit nuance onto a strip of cardboard.

People were busy filming each other too, pointing their phones at one another from across the police lines. At least in dad's day there was no formal record of your disobedience.

No facial recognition software to one day find your face on some protest footage and use it as a basis to deny you a bank loan or to raise your insurance premium. Dad had the opposite problem. He had no photos at all. I'd never seen a picture of him when he was my age.

I must have been standing there watching for too long because a policeman came over and told me to keep moving, that no one was allowed on the sidewalk, that it was to be kept clear. I was in no man's land, apparently, so I kept walking.

There were even cops stationed outside the boom gates of the caravan park. They checked my name off a list they had of registered guests who were staying there. Marc Gilbert. Always Gil-bert. Never Jeel-bear.

Life in the caravan park seemed to carry on much as it had this morning. There were a lot of tents missing, though. I could tell because they left rectangular patches of discoloured grass. I guess I'd probably leave too if I had a family. The chanting and marching beyond the boom gates clashed with the inflatable jumping pillow in the kids' playground. There were no kids around to play.

Some people didn't seem to mind the protest at all and carried on sitting around on camp chairs, drinking beer the way they had yesterday. You could hear the protestors, though, not what they were saying, just a kind of shapeless noise beyond the trees, but it was enough to drown out the ocean. Maybe that noise was why people inside the campground seemed extra friendly. We were a little community now, a list of names on a clipboard. People waved hello as I passed and said, 'how you going?' in a way that suggested it could be going better.

I was weary of what Constable Miles had said when I made my way up the grassy slope towards my own campsite next to Darren's. I could see a bunch of motorbikes parked near his plot. How was I supposed to avoid him if he was my neighbor? I got lucky, though. It didn't look like there was anyone at his camp so I kept on walking, as far over on the other side of the path as I could, until I veered off behind the patch of bushes and spindly trees that separated Darren's campsite from mine.

My campsite was pathetic – the open swag, the rumpled sleeping bag, all of it pushed under a canopy of low branches. It looked like the kind of homeless squat you might discover behind shrubs in a city park. Only the Nissan Micra reminded me that I still had a life, things I could do and places to go.

What would happen if I just left right now? If I threw my stuff in the car and took off. Would anything happen? Were they really going to stop me from leaving town? Was my name on another list somewhere, like it was at the boom gate of the caravan park? Would

they stop me at the airport? For what? For witnessing a drowning? That was absurd. And yet… maybe that's exactly what would happen. Maybe terrorists had made it easy for the police to make lists of names and stop people from getting on airplanes. Was I brave enough to leave?

Fuck it. I pulled the swag out from under the bush and zipped it up. The fabric got caught in the teeth several times. I rolled the bedding up, quickly and half assed, not bothering with the buckles and straps. Still, it was heavy work and my forehead sprinkled the green canvas with drops of sweat. The swag was more of a loose pile than a tight tube and it unravelled as I walked over to the car. The thing draped on either side of me like a dead snake by the time I got to the car, so I shoved the whole mess in the trunk. The lid wouldn't close, so I squished and stuffed the swag deeper into the trunk cavity. It just kept unravelling, though, as the memory foam mattress inside expanded. The trunk still wouldn't close. It just kept bouncing off the bulk of the swag. I punched the thing, yelling "motherfucker," as I fed it punches. Its tough canvas shell burned the skin of my knuckles. I yanked the expanding swag out of the trunk cavity and kicked it while it was on the ground. "Piece of shit." I kicked it until I was out of breath. I opened the passenger door of the Nissan Micra, moved the front seat forward, grabbed the swag and began shoving it into the back seat of the car. It was still all loose and draping and expanding as I half shoved, half kicked the thing into submission. I had to fight the passenger seat back down against the swag's expanding mess in the back seat. By the time I was done, I was panting and my knuckles were bleeding.

"Hitting the frog and toad?" The voice startled me. I looked up. It was Darren. He stood there, hands in his pockets, gut hanging over the waist of his jeans.

"Hey," I said, quietly. "Just putting the swag in the car."

"I see that." He nodded and half closed his eyes.

"It wouldn't fit in the car," I said, still holding the car door open.

"No," he said, taking a step closer. "You'd have to roll him up more."

"Yeah, it wasn't working."

"You want a hand?"

"No," I said too quickly. "I'm good." I shut the car door. "Thanks, though," I added, and moved to the back of the car.

"Okay," he said and put his hands deeper into his pockets.

I shut the empty trunk of the car and glanced over at my fold-up chair and mini-camp table. They wouldn't fit in the trunk. I'd have to roll the swag up after all.

"You know," said Darren, drawing breath. "This all's got nothing to do with you right?"

"What?" I said. Darren used his thumb to point back over his shoulder. You could still faintly hear the protestors. There was a rhythm to the noise now, like a chanting, though I couldn't make out the words. "Oh, yeah. Well," I said, suddenly aware that I was keeping the car between us.

"We're just showing people where the line is mate. That's all." He said it, looking at me from the side of his face, like a bird, one eye cocked. "It's a reminder. Simple as that."

"Yeah," I said. "Sure."

Darren put his hand back in his pocket. I picked a leaf off the roof of my car. He moved a stone around with the front of his foot. I wiped the leaf grime off my finger with the bottom of my shirt.

"Okay, son" he said. "Well anyway," he scratched the back of his neck. "Gotta get back, so. Maybe I'll see you later."

"Sure. See ya," I said too cheerfully and returned my attention to scratching at a crusty patch of something on my sunroof with my fingernail.

"You know," said Darren. "Sooner or later you have to pick a side." He put his hands back in his pockets, turned and disappeared through the path between the bushes.

I kept scratching at the patch of grime on the car. I think it must have been bird shit because it was glued on and wasn't coming off. Little shards of it clogged under my fingernail and ached like little splinters. Fucking nature.

I opened the car door and reefed on the swag. It was caught on something so I grabbed it harder, clenched the canvas with both hands and pulled. I twisted my body, leaned back with all my weight, straining until the swag tore loose from whatever it was caught on and gave way, sending me to the ground.

I stood up, got in the car and headed out. I drove around the outskirts of town. I drove for ages, thirty kilometers down the highway, then seventy kilometers the way back. I don't know what I thought I was doing. Letting off steam, I suppose. But I must have made a decision somewhere along the way because I stopped when I got to the parking lot outside Woolworths.

The supermarket was as far away from the protest as you could get and still be inside the town. The store was new and easily accessible from the highway. Woolworths sat on a wide dirt patch recently cleared of surrounding forest, anticipating the development of new

suburbs. Under the dimming sky, its blazing fluorescence nestled in the dark of the surrounding woods like a UFO.

Inside the supermarket, I could have been anywhere. It didn't really matter if it was Woolworths or Coles or Safeway or Save on Foods. Wherever I was in the world, here was the same layout of numbered aisles, the same easy listening music raining down from ceiling speakers, the familiar packaged foods. An old man glided past me riding an electric scooter. The white linoleum gleamed beneath his slow turning wheels, like a Zamboni cleaning the ice in a public skating rink. I missed Canada then. I don't know why. Maybe it was because this place looked so familiar, but was slightly off, as if someone had recreated my bedroom, down to the tiniest details, except that I'd never been there before, never lived there, and something about its newness, its insistent familiarity, made it just different enough to know it wasn't home.

Some cops had been stationed inside the store. They stood around between aisles, hands high on their hips, above their Batman-style utility belts. They didn't look as cool as Batman though. Some of their uniforms didn't fit so well – they gathered and puckered in different places, especially on the fatter cops. If I had to wear a uniform I'd feel obliged to make it look good. It would be part of my duty to keep it looking nice. One guy's pants were almost a different color to the others because he'd washed them so many times. He looked shabby, which made me doubt his authority even more.

Did they have a side, the cops? Privately I imagine they would have been more sympathetic to one side of the protest or the other. What did their official position represent, though? Neutrality? Complacency? Poised bystander? Was their position a third perspective, a middle way? Or were they soldiers? And did soldiers deserve to be called men when they could see past their own helmets?

The cops didn't like me looking at them. They pretended not to notice me, but I could tell they were looking at me sideways.

They had other people to monitor in the store. Protestors need food too. And here they were, having swapped their cardboard signs for supermarket baskets filled with bags of chips and crackers, and chocolate bars and bread rolls. These protestors didn't seem to bother each other so much now they were away from the street. They mostly ignored one another. I guess a supermarket is a lame place to protest. Besides, there were no television cameras around. There weren't any barricades either. Maybe *they* were the problem. Maybe corraling people behind barricades only helped pit them against each other. Maybe without the barriers, people

would just sort out their differences. Or maybe they'd kill each other. Who knows. I noticed the liquor store was closed, though – probably a good move.

"Marc!" I heard my name from behind. I was surprised. I hadn't heard anyone call out my name in public for a long time, not familiar like that anyway. I turned and saw Aline, Danni and Chance walking towards me; Danni and Chance were still wearing the army boots and fluorescent tops, the camouflage pants. Aline now wore blue coveralls, like a farmer's, except the top half was peeled down and hung around her waist, the empty sleeves draped on either side of her like deflated arms.

She looked like a half-peeled banana. The whole outfit was cinched up with a rhinestone-studded belt. She wore a tight-fitting white T-shirt underneath. The three of them walked towards me in what I swear felt like slow motion. It was like a scene from a hip-hop video right there in the spaghetti sauce aisle of Woolworths in Niminbinji, New South Wales.

"Hey," said Aline and gave me a friendly little push. Chance nodded from under the brim of his ball cap. Danni gave me a fist bump again. I felt up to it this time. The cops looked at us sideways.

Aline looked me up and down. "I should've told you to wear better shoes."

I looked down at my flip-flops, my board shorts and Hawaiian print shirt. Had I really been wearing that all day? They were all dressed in long pants and laced up, close-toed shoes.

"Sorry," I said. "I didn't realize we were going to a party." Aline laughed. Danni's smile cracked under his ball cap.

"It's not a party," she said, those little braids falling in front of her face. "Not really." She half glanced behind her, at all the cops looking at us from the sides of their faces. One of the cops came out and blocked our aisle. He walked towards us, hands high on his hips, fingers resting on his batman utility belt. This guy looked the part. He was tall and lean, his uniform all the same colour, neat and pleated. I couldn't help being impressed by him. "Hey guys," he said, looking straight at us. "What are you guys off to tonight?" I read his badge: Nguyen.

"Just picking up some bags of ice for my mum," said Aline. She looked Nguyen straight in the face. "She's got stomach cancer and she has to take these pills that make her sweat. The ice helps her get to sleep. The bottle shop's closed though. They usually keep the ice in there."

Nguyen lowered his hands from his utility belt. "Sorry to hear that," he said and scanned the supermarket. "Someone can probably help you at the checkouts," he said and moved aside to let us through.

“Thank you,” said Aline as we passed officer Nguyen and made our way down the aisle. “No worries,” he said as we passed him. “Hope your mum bets better.”

We broke into a fit of laughter after we’d turned out of Nguyen’s view. “What a tosser,” said Aline.

“Stomach cancer,” said Chance, laughing.

“Whatever,” said Aline. “Fuck’n cops. They’re always stopping you to ask stupid questions.” We walked on a bit, among the rattle of shopping carts, the beeping of the registers. “Stomach cancer,” said Aline. “That was a good one though, eh?” We all had a giggle. “Come on,” she said, and pulled me by the arm.

“Where are we going?”

“Relax. We’re meeting Sammy up the road. He’s the only one who knows where we’re going.”

The four of us cruised through the supermarket. It wasn’t just the cops looking at us from the sides of their faces now. Everyone was looking, even if they pretended to examine the fruit or read the labels on packages on the shelves. They were really looking at us. Already we were outlaws and we hadn’t even done anything yet.

VIII

A secret cave – A toxic plan – A string of texts – For the rest of my natural life

The country road was a narrow strip of potholed bitumen. Darkness fell away on either side of my headlights like the event horizon of a black hole, so dark was the surrounding bush. The Nissan Micra's headlights occasionally lit up the undersides of a passing tree as we wound through the forest. Lit from underneath like that, the tops of the trees looked like balls of wool. I had no idea where I was; even the GPS was a blank canvas. Still, little side paths and driveways veered off now and then, to private places that didn't show up on a map.

"Turn left here," said Aline. I turned the steering wheel a little too hard and we fishtailed onto a gravel path with no name. The little car straightened out and I felt confident enough to push down on the accelerator again. Rocks popped underneath us, hitting the car's undercarriage with an occasional metallic ping. No one spoke. A spray of tiny pebbles tinkled on the windshield as we went through a dip. Behind me, the blue glow of Aline's phone lit up the back seats. The Nike swoosh on Danni's cap sparkled in the rear-view mirror. Chance sat next to me, tightly gripping the ceiling handle, the pale dots of his fingernails seemed to glow in the dark of my peripheral vision.

"Okay, slow down," said Aline, still looking at her phone. Chance half turned and said something over his shoulder to the back seat in Lingala. "He will be," said Aline. "It's just a bit further. Slow down more." The car rattled along the unpaved road. We were going slow now, I could barely hear the engine. "There," she said, pointing to the side of the road. We all looked out the window. It took a second to make out Sammy's lanky silhouette in the tall grass at the road shoulder. I pulled over.

Sammy leaned down towards the passenger side. Chance rolled down the window and stuck his head out. He and Sammy clasped hands, as if they were going to arm wrestle. "All good?" said Chance.

"All good." Sammy leaned in closer through the window. He nodded in my direction before turning his attention to the back seat. He just stood there staring for a while.

"You getting in Sammy?" said Aline.

Sammy was unhurried. "Wow," he said, moving is head around inside the window. "This is a really small car."

It sounded like a personal insult. I'd grown attached to this two-door hatchback. It was part of me now.

"Chance," said Aline. "You've got to move to let Sammy in."

Chance dropped his hands to the side of his seat and searched around for the latch. He found it and the passenger seat fell forward, pressing him up against the dash. He grumbled. I don't know why he didn't just get out. Sammy climbed in behind him and pushed down on the back of the passenger seat a few extra times as he got in to annoy Chance, who was pinned against the dash. It was all supposed to be funny. Danni laughed. Even Chance did, but I've never understood why guys are mean to each other for sport. Danni gave Sammy a fist bump as he sat down. Sammy's backpack clanked with bottles as he put it down at his feet.

"So, do I just keep going down here?" I said. I was getting a bit annoyed.

"Yeah," said Sammy. "Just go on here for a bit until you get to the gate."

I drove, frequently glancing at the rear-view mirror to look in the back seat. Aline was showing Sammy something on her phone. Their heads were close together and they were leaning in to look at the screen. Whatever they were looking at made them giggle. The angle of the mirror cut off the bottom half of their faces and I resisted the urge to tilt it down. I suddenly felt like a chauffeur. The initial amusement of this outing drained away. Things now felt a little aimless.

"Where are we going?" I said trying to catch Sammy's eye. My headlights bounced off a handmade sign strung to a cattle gate. *Private property. No trespassing.*

"It's okay," said Sammy. "Just take the chain off and open the gate." Chance hesitated and looked back at Sammy. "It's okay," said Sammy.

"Seriously?" said Aline.

"Seriously, it's fine. No one lives there."

Chance got out, unwound the chain from the fence post and swung the gate open. He waited there, holding the gate until I drove the car through. I watched Chance in the side-view mirror as he closed the fence behind us. He took care in wrapping the chain around the gate and post again. He jogged back to the car and climbed in, the car wobbled under his weight. I think he'd farted while he was out there; I could still smell it, lingering on his clothes.

We drove up what was now less road than twisty forest path, barely wider than the Nissan Micra. The trees were on top of us. Their leaves brushed the car and the occasional branch knocked at the window. Forest litter raked the undercarriage; fallen branches reached

up from the ground and scraped the car with a rasping and clunking we could feel up through the floor. There was a satisfying crunch of gravel, the snap of twigs under the tires as they bit through the soft dirt and loose stones of the forest track. It was an adventure again.

"I seriously hope you know where we are, Sammy." Aline looked out the window. "I don't want some crazy farmer coming after us."

Sammy sat coolly in the back, grinning, with that smudge of a moustache sitting on his top lip. "There's no farm," he said, his head swaying from side to side as the car bounced around on the bumpy track. "No farmer."

I leaned back so both my eyes filled the rear-view mirror. "You're going to tell me if I'm about to go over a cliff or something though, right?" I said, trying to catch Sammy's attention. Sammy just looked out the window.

"Geez, everyone relax," he said. "So intense."

Aline leaned in real close to Sammy and sniffed the air around him. "Are you high, right now?" Sammy laughed. "You are!" She slapped him playfully on the shoulder. "You're a fucker," she said, crossed her arms and stared out the opposite window.

Sammy made a show of getting his bearings, leaning forward deliberately looking through the windshield and peering out the passenger window as if trying to pick someone out in a crowd. If his exaggerated scanning of the darkness outside was meant to distract Aline from pestering him, it worked. She made no more reproaches, didn't say anything. In fact, she joined him in looking out the window. We all did. We were absorbed by what we might discover out there, preoccupied by the idea of where we might be going. I searched for possibilities: an abandoned farmhouse? Some shack that Sammy had built out of driftwood? A meth lab? I squirmed at the ideas of what I might have gotten myself into now, with this band of – what were they, seventeen year olds? Danni and Chance might have been in their early twenties? How did *I* end up being the adult in the room? *Was I just their ride?*

"Okay, slow down," said Sammy, having spied some landmark unfamiliar to the rest of us. "Just over here on the side." I steered the car to where he was pointing, into the tall grass. "Here's good," he said. "We'll walk the rest of the way."

Car doors opened and we stepped into the night. There was nothing around as far as I could see, just a bunch of rocky hills and scraggly trees. A low rumble of breaking surf told us the ocean was somewhere nearby, probably out past that thicket of trees silhouetted against the sky. Sammy threaded the straps of his backpack around his shoulders. "Let's go," he said, using his phone as a flashlight to lead the way. He walked with bouncy steps that made his bag clink.

No one spoke. We followed, single file, with only Sammy's phone to part the darkness just enough for us to make our way over the uneven ground of an abandoned paddock, now overgrown with shrubs and weeds. We were all so docile, willingly herded. Maybe Sammy's field trip appealed to our sense of adventure. Whatever our reasons, we followed.

Walking single file like that reminded me of the time dad took me walking after a big snowstorm in Montreal. The snow had blown around and buried everything, even parked cars were just mounds of car-shaped snow. I was small, young enough to be afraid that I might disappear under the snow. He walked in front of me. The snow muted everything except the swishing of our jackets and the crunching of the powder under our feet. I had to stretch my legs to fit into his deep footprints. They were so far apart. It was like following a giant.

We passed the ruins of a farmhouse. Its walls had collapsed and its rusty tin roof was torn and peeled back like the lid of a can. Planks and beams of wood littered the ground. Some had sunk into the ground and were grown over with weeds. The place looked like it had been abandoned for a generation. The ocean got louder as we made our way through the trees and came to the edge of a cliff. "Careful," said Sammy turning to face us. "We have to climb down to the cave from here."

So that was his secret? A cave? That was his big reveal? I was relieved and disappointed at the same time. Things suddenly felt real and manageable again. Gone was that sense of mystery, the air of a magic quest that had so bewitched me from the first moments after we left the car. The spell must have broken for the others as well. Aline seemed particularly agitated, flicking the zipper of her coveralls. She'd now slipped her arms into the sleeves. "Sammy, it's seriously dark." Aline looked down at the black cliff face. "Going down to a cave seems really fuck'n stupid." Danni and Chance nodded, the brim of that ball cap exaggerating the movement.

"It's okay," said Sammy. "People have been going down there for thousands of years."

"I don't know, Sammy. I just don't like it."

Sammy squared up in front of Aline. He gently rested his hands on both her shoulders. "It's safe. It's hidden. The hard part's finding it, but if you know where to look it's easy. I promise."

I'm sure Aline was thinking of her brother. I know I was. And of how stupid it was to go scrabbling down an oceanside cliff at night, especially after everything that had happened.

She must have been thinking about her parents too and asking herself if they hadn't already been through enough, should anything go wrong.

"Okay," she said and turned to follow Sammy down the cliff. I don't know if it was love or pride or defiance or something else that overwrote Aline's instincts, but her guilt and fear vanished. I remember thinking in that moment that I would never again trust my understanding of what motivates people. I don't even know why I followed them myself. I tell myself it was for her, but if I'm honest, I'm not sure it was anything so valiant. It might just have been curiosity – I'd come this far. But I fear my motivation was even more pathetic, that it was bound up with my feeling like I'd become part of this group and that I had succumbed to its internal momentum, unable to go against its collective will. It was easier to just keep going.

We shuffled down the cliff. Sammy held his phone out behind him, the white light fell sharply against the smooth orange rocks. The going was easy and I think we now all felt a little ridiculous about our hesitation to come down here a moment ago. Maybe the night got to us. It's easier to imagine bad things in the dark.

There was a moon, low on the horizon and its light showed the ripple of waves on the water. I saw dolphin fins between the swells. Nowhere had I seen civilization abut wilderness like this. Even in Canada, the line between the realm of people and animals is softer. The wild always seems a bit further away, over there, somewhere deeper beyond the trees. Here the wild is a sudden discovery, the separation between safe and deadly as sharp as the rock between land and sea.

"It's there," said Sammy, shining his light at the cave opening, a slice in the rock with the high tide lapping at the entrance. We inched our way down the side of the rocks and slipped into the cave. It was dark in there and I almost expected Sammy's light to reveal hundreds of faces looking back at us: our war council. But the cave was empty. It was just us.

"Not many people know about this place," said Sammy.

I could see why. The cave was all but invisible from the cliff face. Even in daylight it would've been easy to miss the entrance. You had to know where to look.

The outside world fell away as we got inside. Sound muted, wind ceased and a kind of internal stillness settled over us all. No one spoke. The cave smelled musty, wet earth mixed with a faint odour of stale urine. People had been here recently. We all turned on our phones for light.

Sammy busied himself piling up bits of driftwood in a circle of stones that was already there. We shone the blue light of our phones on the walls, littered with graffiti.

Brad Little 12-81

NERVY *Go Vegan!*

Jodi is a slut.

Scared yet?

The usual stuff, the kind of graffiti I might not have looked at twice if it were painted above ground on a brick wall on a city street. It would've been prattle, noise up there. But in here, in the darkness, lit by my phone, my private light, it all felt more intimate, the messages more urgent and personal, targeting us, the wanderers, the people who had also made the journey to find this cave. Even TK + LY seemed to share a more universal message down here than they would have if those same letters had been scratched into the back seat of a bus.

Danni and Chance sniggered at something they'd discovered on a far wall, visible only to them. I kept on spraying the wall with the light of my phone, feeling like Indiana Jones. There were tags in there too, written in jagged and bubbly letters: JONIN, CASPER, IZIG. There were painted swirls and figure eights, a two-meter drawing of a boom box with a tape inside it. Had it been spray-painted in the 1980s, or was it retro-graffiti? Did these guys even know what a boom box was? Or cassette tapes?

I supposed the impulse behind all this graffiti was the same. The same existential force had motivated someone else to paint their hand on a cave wall 60,000 years ago. It's still a selfie. We all need to be noticed. There is no me without them.

Sammy got the fire going and it soon filled the cave with an orange glow that flickered on the cave wall. Our bodies cast shadows on the walls. Sammy coughed, a deep, chesty cough – a man's cough. "Good," he said and sat back, admiring his flames.

Thanks to the fire I could now see the whole cave. It had seemed bigger, more mysterious when I was revealing it in patches, image fragments that I had to mentally stitch together. In ambient light, the place seemed more common and familiar, a cave like any other, even if I'd never actually been in one before. There was garbage in there, dented cardboard boxes and chip packets, crushed beer cans, some of them rusted or with faded labels. A flannel sleeping bag lay crumbled and dusty behind a rock. I wondered if it was Sammy's. Maybe he lived here sometimes when he didn't have to look after his little sister. I couldn't blame him for wanting solitude. Pop music broke my train of thought. Aline put her phone down on a rock.

"What is *that* shit?" said Sammy.

"Fuck you," said Aline playfully. "I like this shit." Sammy shrugged his shoulders. "It's fun," she added, leaning in close to Sammy's face. She swayed to the music a bit, moving her hips from side to side. Aline twirled her arms and then suddenly plunged her hands into Sammy's backpack. He grabbed her by the wrists. She was smiling. "Got secrets, Sammy?"

"Leave it," he said holding her wrists. Aline tried to twist her hands loose but Sammy held on too tight. "Oooh, you're so strong," she mocked. She wriggled her arms, her body around, trying to break out of his grip. The smiles disappeared from their faces. "Fuck'n let go of me now," she said, trying to shove him off with the weight of her body. He still held onto her wrists. I felt like I should do something, say something, but I didn't know what. I didn't do anything. Danni and Chance just stood there too.

Sammy let go and Aline stumbled a few steps backwards before finding her footing.

"That fuck'n hurt you dick," she said, rubbing her wrists. Sammy just looked up at her, his arms resting on his knees. The fire flickered on the side of his face.

"Well don't go diving into my shit."

"Okay, whatever." She examined her wrists. "I don't even care what's in there. I was just fucking around." She rubbed her forearms.

"It's not a big deal anyway," said Sammy, unzipping the bag a bit. He stuck his hand in and pulled out a big green bottle with square edges, like something you put olive oil in. Danni and Chance approached.

"What's that?" said Aline.

Sammy chuckled. "It's just grog." he unscrewed the cap and held the bottle out to Aline. "Home brew," he said.

Aline took the bottle, sniffed the mouth of it and wrinkled up her nose. "Oh, smells like cat piss," she said. Sammy laughed. She tilted her head back. "You promise it's just grog," she said.

"Promise."

Aline lifted the bottle to her lips and took a pull off it and lowered it again. "Ah," she said and smacked her lips together with a pained expression on her face. "That stuff is vile."

Sammy laughed.

"Aw yuck," she said. "What is that shit?"

"Can't tell you," said Sammy. "Secret family recipe."

Aline wiped her mouth with her sleeve. "Oh that is disgusting."

"Does the job, though," said Sammy and motioned toward me. Aline offered me the bottle.

"I'm good," I said. Sammy shrugged. Chance took the bottle and lifted it to his mouth. He grimaced too but kept quiet about it. I don't know what that stuff was, but it smelled like pine needles. I could smell it from five paces away.

We sat around the campfire for a while, passing the bottle around. Sammy occasionally spat a small amount of the liquid into the fire, and we watched it ark from the fire to his mouth with a blue flame. Whatever that stuff was, it worked and I could tell they were getting louder and more confident. They talked bullshit for a while, dropped names of people I didn't know. What *he* said and *she* said, how so and so was up themselves and didn't even know that nobody liked them – that kind of thing. I waited for a break in the conversation.

Dad took me camping a few times. Not in a campsite or anything. We'd always bushwhack it, even though it was illegal to camp wherever you wanted. "Nature should be free," he'd say. We'd always walk through the forest for ages looking for the right spot. When we eventually found someplace that was pleasant and secluded enough, we'd set up our tents. At night, we'd sit around the campfire and roast marshmallows. I didn't like the way they tasted when they came out of the fire, all charred and gooey. I just liked holding them over the embers, waiting for them to catch fire. If mine got too singed I gave them to dad. He liked them almost black. I burned a lot of marshmallows.

The firelight flickered on the cave walls. "It's sort of like being here a thousand years ago," I said. "Except for the graffiti and our clothes, I guess." They all seemed to consider what I said. Sammy looked up at the roof of the cave. "This is where my people used to come when they were at war," he said.

The mention of war brought us all back to more present things, the cops, the protestors, the barricades.

"Hey, why do you guys think all those people showed up today?" said Aline. Danni and Chance shrugged, "Just dicks," said Danni.

"Nah," said Sammy. "They're here to start something, I reckon."

"Around the war memorial, though. It's fucked up," said Aline.

"Why?" said Sammy. "It's just a statue."

It was more than just a statue. Wasn't it?

"Hey," he said, "you reckon there's a real body in that tomb?" He was asking me.

“Dunno,” I said. “Probably. I think there has to be if it’s a tomb of the unknown soldier.”

“Seriously?” said Aline. “I thought it was just symbolic.”

“No, I’m pretty sure that’s what they do,” I said. “They put a real guy in there.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Where do they get him from?”

“I don’t know. Just some random soldier they dig up from a battlefield someplace, someone they can’t identify.”

“What, and then they just put him in a box in the center of town?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s how it works.”

She shook her head. “That’s fucked up.”

“Poor bastard,” said Sammy. “That’s like dying twice.” He poked his stick in the fire and sharpened its edge on a stone until it was a fine, glowing point. We all stared into the fire.

“Hey we should do something,” said Sammy.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, fuck them up somehow.”

“I know how to make a Molotov cocktail,” said Danni.

“What’s that?”

“It’s like a petrol bomb.”

“What?” said Aline. “That’s stupid.”

“Well, what then?” said Danni.

No one said anything for a bit. I don’t know if they were thinking or just waiting for someone else to speak.

“If you want to hurt people without really hurting them,” I said. It seemed to get their attention. “Take away something they care about.”

Danni took a swig from the bottle. “Like what?”

“Like one of their bikes,” I said.

They jumped on the idea, began planning its execution. They talked about stealing someone’s motorbike, guiding it over a cliff. It all sounded so easy. This all sounded like drunken babble. They’d wake up tomorrow without resolve, but it clearly made them feel better to plot, helped them to even the score, even if it was just in their minds. I felt old. Not old, exactly, it’s just, they sounded like kids then. I was just their ride.

My phone buzzed. I wasn't really part of the conversation anyway, so I took it out.

Dad died this morning.

I read the words over, arranged inside their cheerful green dialogue box. Then the phone buzzed again and a new dialogue box appeared.

Thought you'd want to know.

Buzz

Or maybe you don't.

Buzz

Maybe you don't care.

Buzz

Or can't.

Buzz

Or won't

Buzz

I've tried to reach out. But I see now there is…

Buzz

NO POINT

Buzz

It's sad Marc.

Buzz

I'm sad.

Buzz

All I wanted...

Buzz

was to be a family.

"Wow, are you trending or something, bro," said Sammy. I felt tears brewing behind my eyes. If I blinked they'd fall. I swallowed.

"You okay, Marc?" said Aline.

I swallowed. "I'm okay," I said and slipped the phone back in my pocket.

"You sure?"

"Yeah," I said rubbing my pant legs. "Hey let me try some of that shit will ya," I said reaching for the bottle of whatever it was. Danni handed it over. I drank. The liquid hit the pit of my stomach where it glowed like the embers of the fire. I waited for the phone to buzz again. I wanted it to. It didn't.

It was not yet dawn when we left the cave and scrabbled back over the rocks. The moon punched a small hole in the sky, the night seemed bigger, fuller somehow, as if it had pushed daylight aside and claimed darkness as the natural state of things.

The tufts of tall, reedy grass in the farmer's abandoned fields were now slick with dew and licked us as we passed. Danni and Chance staggered around with the backslapping silliness of drunken sailors. Aline walked on her own, off to the side of our group, her coveralls zipped to the neck, palms hovering over the tops of the dewy reeds. Sammy led us, backpack cinched tight on his shoulders. Even drunk, he picked his way through the fields with that light, bouncy walk of his.

The Nissan's tail lights flashed as I unlocked the car doors from ten paces away. Aline walked over to the passenger side, tipped the seat forward and held it there for the others. Chance creased his forehead.

"No way," said Aline. "*You* sit in the back. I'm not having you puke on me. Fuck that. I'm sitting up here. You two can spew on each other." Danni, Chance and Sammy folded themselves into the back seat.

The windows were all fogged up. Aline helped me wipe the windshield with the sleeve of her blue coveralls. She smelled like laundry detergent.

"Where do you want me to drop you guys off?" I said and started the car. We crunched up the gravel path. I tried to catch someone's eye in the back seat. Danni had his eyes closed. Chance looked over at Sammy, who leaned forward.

"Just take us back to the Woolies," he said.

Aline turned around in her seat. "Why don't you guys just go home?" Sammy sunk back into his seat. "Seriously," said Aline. Sammy turned to look out the window. "Whatever," said Aline and turned back around. "You guys are idiots."

The forest track climbed up and down hilly terrain. The headlights swept the landscape like prison searchlights, lighting up the knotted trunks of trees and their tangled, grey branches. They'd been here for who knows how long, these trees. We were only passing through. My lights fell on the gate, on the back of the no trespassing sign. Chance stirred in the back. "I'll fucking do it," said Aline, unlocking her seatbelt. She flung the strap off her

shoulder and the buckle hit the window, loud enough I feared it might've cracked the glass. Sammy and I watched Aline through the windshield, her legs and torso lit up by the headlights as she unwound the chain from the fence post.

"She's ropeable," said Sammy. I didn't say anything. "Always upset about something." If he was looking for an ally, he wouldn't find one in me.

Aline pushed the gate open. It must have been heavy because she leaned into it, using both hands to push it open. She stood up against it, holding it open, and the car slid through. She pushed the gate closed, wound the chain around the gate post again and walked back towards the car, rubbing her palms up and down her pant legs.

"Thanks," I said as she got back in the car. She sniffed and wiped her nose with her sleeve.

"You okay to drive?" she said.

"Yeah," I said. "I didn't drink much." I hadn't. More than I should have, though.

The car shook on the pitted and uneven road. I occasionally glanced back in the rear-view mirror. I figured if someone was going to puke back there, then all the jostling of the car would make it happen. I wanted to be able to stop and let someone out if they had to yack. I didn't want to have to clean up vomit. Danni and Chance just sat there with their eyes closed. Sammy looked out the window and gripped the backpack on his lap.

The car levelled out as I veered onto the paved road of the highway exit. With the smooth bitumen under the tyres, it felt like we were flying. I thought of dad and of Jenna's text messages. I couldn't do anything about that now.

I pushed my foot down on the accelerator and took pleasure in how the car smoothed out the bends of the road.

I didn't know we'd had our last conversation. I couldn't even remember what it was.

"Hey," said Sammy. His voice broke my trance. "You missed the turnoff." I took my foot off the gas and watched the speedometer needle drop. "It was back there," he said, pointing over his shoulder.

I looked behind me, the exit was already well behind us, the back of the sign already small in the rear-view mirror. "Just pull a U-ey," said Sammy. I ignored him and kept driving, the broken lines on the highway passed beside the car, steady as a metronome. My high beams flashed off the next sign. Niminbinji Town Centre. The yellow pulse of my blinker lit up the inside of the car."

"What the fuck," said Sammy from the back seat. "Don't go that way, the cops will be everywhere."

I hesitated and jerked the wheel. The car fishtailed as I took the highway off ramp too fast.

"What the fuck," said Aline. "Slow down. You've been drinking. You seriously don't want to get busted."

"Turn out here," said Sammy, pointing at a small side path beside the exit road into town. It wasn't a street, just tyre tracks through the scrub. The car jerked hard as we hit the uneven terrain. The bouncing car woke Danni and Chance.

"What the," said Danni, looking around bewildered and glassy eyed.

"Wrong turn," I said.

The path cut through the state forest reserve that encircled the town of Niminbinji. This was not an official road, probably just a track carved out by locals in their four-wheel drives. It took us behind the main buildings, parallel to the center of town.

Sammy stuck his arm between the front seats to point the way. "Go between those two trees." I did what he said and steered the Nissan off the track and into the grass towards the trees. The car scythed a path through the grassland, the tyres rumbled over unseen debris. My headlights bounced off a wire fence up ahead, beyond the trees. It looked about chest height.

"I'm not knocking this thing down, just so you know."

"No, said Sammy. "There's a gap in it up that way," his finger hooked to the left. "It's for horses, but it's wide enough for this thing to get through."

I drove along the fence until we found the opening, neat as gap in a line of Tetris blocks. I backed the car up and squared it up in front of the break in the fence. We all made the same calculations. "I don't know," said Aline. "I don't think we're going to fit."

"It'll fit," said Sammy.

I inched the car forward, steadying the wheel against the pull of the uneven ground. I sized up the opening in the fence as we neared. It seemed too narrow the closer we got. The front of the car cleared the fence posts and the rest of the Nissan slid through like a canal boat passing through a loch. Even the mirrors cleared the fence posts without a scrape. It was such a little thing, a non-event, but I felt a disproportionate sense of achievement.

Now we were back on a paved road a few blocks out behind the main street of Niminbinji, behind the buildings. It was unusually bright above the rooftops and I was grateful to Sammy for getting me off the highway that would have led us straight to whatever was going on over there on the main street.

"Can you kill the lights in this thing?" said Sammy.

I fiddled with the knobs on the lever off the steering wheel. The headlights went dark. Night closed in around the car.

"Go straight up here," said Sammy. "Then take the first left."

I must have been going ten kilometers an hour but it took all my concentration to guide the car in the dark. There were no streetlights. We were in a grid of paved streets; no houses yet, just empty plots where they would soon be built, a suburb that didn't exist yet. We all looked out the windows, expecting the blue flash of cop lights at any moment.

The would-be suburb funnelled us towards the backblocks of Niminbinji, a few streets behind the town center, home to businesses that didn't need to worry about curb appeal. We passed a lumber yard, a vacuum cleaner repair shop.

"Wait," said Aline. She turned around in her seat to look out the passenger window. "Stop the car." She unbuckled her seatbelt. I braked hard and the car stopped with a jerk. "That's Jamie," she said, pointing.

We all squinted out the side windows, searching within the gloomy light in the alley at the back of the buildings. The weedy figure of Jamie Collins was unmistakable, even only half-lit by the naked light bulbs above the dumpsters at the back of the buildings. There were other people there too, four or five of them, arms, hands and legs fused together as the silhouette of a single organism. Jamie Collins was waving something at it. I thought he was holding a canoe paddle at first, but it was a cricket bat. Aline opened her door and got out.

"Wait," said Sammy, but Aline was already walking away from us. Danni and Chance looked at each other and then piled out of the car. I watched them all go. They weren't staggering anymore.

"Should we get out?" I said.

"Fuck no," said Sammy, with his face now pressed up against the window. Aline half walked-half jogged towards the murky light. "This is bad," said Sammy.

The group of people shuffled forward and retreated as Jamie Collins swung the bat at the air in front of him. He hadn't noticed Aline coming up behind him yet, in the dark, followed by Danni and Chance. There was yelling. Jamie's voice was gruff.

"Yeah, well fucking piss off then."

"And who the fuck are you?" barked the silhouette.

"Go on, piss off."

"Who the fuck are you?"

On it went until Aline caught up to Jamie. She put a hand out towards him. He half turned to face her and waved her away. He was angry and yelling. He said something to Aline and tried to shoo her away.

Sensing Jamie's distraction one guy jumped out of the silhouette. He lunged forward and grabbed the tip of Jamie's bat. They wrestled the thing back and forth but it was soon ripped from Jamie's hands. With the bat gone, Jamie seemed diminished. He ducked and brought his hands to his face. He walked backwards, against Aline, Danni and Chance, shielding them from the advancing mob with his arms out to protect them. The advancing group was still a muddled shadow, a jumble of heads and legs, but the pack marched forward, all arms and legs turning over, like a giant spider. The guy out front swung the bat in the air. Jamie backed away, shielding the others with his hands.

The guy swung again. Jamie dropped, crumbled to the pavement without a sound. I only heard the pop of the bat after he fell, the delayed wet crack echoed off the buildings. He was already dead, gone before he even hit the ground.

I turned to look behind me but the back seat was empty. Sammy was gone. My heart burst with hate. Anger stormed through me. My limbs tingled with an energy that bound me to something greater than myself. My brain hummed with this force. Something wild and evil was about to happen and I would be at its center.

I dropped the car into drive and hit the gas. The Nissan burst forward, headlights off. My mind was a black canvas. The group scattered. Legs pumped in the dark, arms waved, heads bobbed as they ran. I turned the wheel, chased them down. It felt good to watch them scatter like roaches. They weren't so tough now. One guy jumped into a dumpster. I turned the wheel and drove in circles, the tyres screeching. A brick hit the windshield. I turned the car towards where the brick came from. A thud and my side mirror tore off. The back of the car jumped like I'd gone over a speed bump. My head hit the roof. I pushed the accelerator down to the floor. The car skidded before the tires bit pavement and I shot through the alley where the walls now blazed with red and blue lights.

I scraped through the alley and out onto the main street of Niminbinji, and ploughed into a row of empty metal barricades. Upturned barricades lay all over the place. There were people scattered everywhere, running through the streets. Cops advanced in lines, discharging cans of pepper spray, their toxic plumes lit up by the streetlights. Other cops dragged people along the road by their arms, their shirts pulled up, bellies exposed, heels kicking at the ground. The barricades had upheld the schism between both sides. When the barriers

collapsed, so too did the self-assurance of the protestors' competing idealisms, unleashing a kind of hell in the rush to self-preservation.

I was in the middle of it. Cop cars came at me from all sides. They closed in. It was only a matter of time before they got me. I kept turning the wheel and somehow kept going, the streetlights strobed like tracer fire. A cop car raced forward and hit me, spun me around until I lost control of the Nissan and crashed into a parked car. Cop cars rolled up from all over the place to pen me in.

I was still alone in the car. I put my hands up. No one asked me to. It was instinctive. Red and blue lights danced around the inside of my car, they flashed on the windshield and pulsed on the dash. It felt rhythmic and calm, like sunlit water ripples shimmering. It was quiet. I was quiet, present and strangely comforted in knowing that my life, as I knew it, was no longer entirely my own. A rampage. That's what they called it. That's what they said in the papers. Those were the words they used in court. But I didn't feel rampant. I felt calm, as if my whole life had only been lived in preparation for this.

My car door tore open and someone ripped me out of the vehicle. He dragged me away from the car and spread me out face down on the pavement. There was a lot of yelling and helmeted silhouettes. I couldn't move my arms and legs, they were held down. I didn't resist, whatever they said later. I was calm and docile, submissive. Someone put their knee on my back.

More policemen searched my car. Their flashlights bounced around inside the cabin. They opened the trunk. They moved the front and back seats. One of them pulled something out of the Nissan and brought it around to the front. A group of them huddled together around the hood of my car. One of the cops looked at me, over his shoulder. I wanted it to be Constable Miles, or even Nguyen but it wasn't either of them. I'd never seen this man before but he had hate in his eyes. That cop came over. He was carrying Sammy's bag. He put the bag down on the pavement a few feet away from me.

"Just pulled this bag from out of *your* car and had a look inside." He was crouched down talking to me while I was spread out on the sidewalk. I couldn't see his face now, only his knees. "What do you reckon I found inside?"

I was still pinned down. It was hard to breathe. "I don't know," I said.

"You don't know," he said it like he didn't believe me. "No?" He sunk a gloved hand into the bag. "You want to tell me what this is for?" he said pulling out a knife. It was a big hunting knife with a serrated edge. "What do you need with something like that?" he said, holding it out in front of me. I didn't say anything. What was the point?

I looked behind him and saw the obelisk of the war memorial rising above the bustle of legs and flashing lights. An anarchy symbol had been spray painted over the list of names chiseled in the rock: *Tayt, Dunbar, M Gilbert.*

For God and country. Was it though? Had *they* picked a side? Or were they just pulled in by the flow of events? They must have known each other, all those people. The town was too small not to. Maybe they just died for each other. I thought of those soldiers' names. Cook, Stephanos and the rest. I imagined them all still buried in some field in Europe somewhere. To what memory, in what place, had their minds flashed when the bullet struck them? To what did they belong, these men, these bullet points on a mass gravestone? For what ideal had they imagined themselves fighting? Was it really for 'Empire'? For the fatherland? Or did they sacrifice themselves for something smaller, something personal, known only to them? Maybe they died for this town. Maybe even for this very spot. Had their idealism withstood the piercing bullet? As their eyes closed, had their thoughts returned to this place? To the memory of kids playing in the surf, grinning under a halo of sunlight; did they remember girls draped in towels, wringing salt from their hair; or miles of coastline with squeaky yellow sand. Maybe, as the light died in their eyes, their thoughts drifted towards a culture, more than 60,000 years old, whose wisdom now seemed translatable. Perhaps they did think of their country, and its acres of red dirt, which they might never see, but it felt good just to know it was out there. Perhaps I'd seen their dying memory right here on this very patch of grass. Maybe I'd heard it in the liquid birdsong, the metallic whirr of the cicadas, or seen it in the silvery glint of a fish caught off the pier, felt it in the milky haze of salt spray carried deep into the trees, perhaps I'd smelled it in the collision of moist air against dry, hot wood, or known it from the purple silhouette of the distant mountain whose peak had kept them all from growing too tall or too bold; maybe I'd lived it among these pale rocks, gilded with sunlight and wrapped in white foam.

Who was their sacrifice for? Was it for this? Australia? Or was it for each other? Would they someday etch the name Jamie Collins on that stone? Did he deserve it less?

I didn't do what I did for 'us' or for 'them.' It just happened. If it was a sacrifice, then I'm not sure what it was for. Was it for her? Or was it for me? Does it matter?

Epilogue

My doctor told me to reflect on the events. Write them down, she said, try to work through them (her words, not mine). I thought about her advice without doing anything for longer than I probably should have. I'm more ready now.

She told me to write to my father, so I started and this whole story came out. Here's where it ended and where it began.

I delayed writing this letter. I think I was trying to spare myself. Or spare you. It kind of feels like the same thing. Anyway, what does it matter now? I can tell you things I haven't told anyone else.

I did bad things, dad. Things I can't take back.

My lawyer tried to explain the circumstances – about the stress leave, about the wave and the trauma of the accident. He talked about your prolonged illness, your death, but the judge was unsympathetic. That stuff only seemed to make things worse.

"I accept that your personal circumstances upset you at the time of this incident," said the judge. "They may well have contributed to your sense of abandon. I do not, however, accept that your emotional state impaired your moral judgment. You knew right from wrong. And so I can reasonably conclude that your recklessness was a deliberate act, a progressive escalation in a pattern of increasingly hostile and anti-social behaviour. You chose not to care and in doing so pre-emptively accepted the results of your destructive actions." Those words swirl around in my head every day. Each day they seem a little more true.

Maybe that's why I never told them the bag was Sammy's. I don't know what he planned on doing with that knife. Whatever it was, he didn't do it. The guilt was mine to bear. But, for the judge, that knife made things worse. "The discovery of a hunting knife in your vehicle implies malicious intent," he said. "It compounds the pre-meditative nature of your crime and gives me reason to suspect that your wanton violence that night may not yet have reached its terrible conclusion."

He picked his words carefully, the judge, and when he lined them all up, what he said sounded so cold. I killed that guy, dad. Jason Malik. That was his name. He was twenty-two years old. I didn't mean to hurt him. Not him, exactly. But I didn't try not to hurt him either. It all happened so fast. I didn't know he was there. For a while I told myself it was his fault

for being there, hidden in the dark. I don't think that anymore. It's hard to explain. In that moment, I felt like I was at war and they were the enemy. They all were.

Except Aline.

She won't see me now, didn't come to the trial. Neither did Darren, or Mr Kalonji.

Vehicular homicide. That's what the judge ruled. Even my lawyer was surprised by the severity of the sentence. He had expected manslaughter or criminal negligence causing death. We're appealing, requesting a transfer to Canada, but it's too late – the damage is done.

I talk a lot now. More than I used to. I think a lot too.

It's complicated. My memories sometimes feel like they belong to someone else. I know they're not. They're mine. But the events of my life appear distant, fleeting, like the outer swirls of a galaxy that is light years from where I stand. I know the fires I see are explosions that happened a long time ago and their light is only reaching me now. I am part of it though, separate and bound to everything that happened before. I'm beginning to see that now.

But there's a hole in me, dad, that I don't' know how to fill. I tried to fill it with food, with starvation, with cutting and self-discipline, with study, with alcohol and weed, with porn, with running, with violence. None of it helped. It only made the hole deeper and harder to see.

Did you have that? The same void inside you? Did you forget that too? Or was it all you had left? I wish I'd asked you more questions when I had the chance. I guess I thought I'd have more time.

There was a wall between us. We could see each other through it, hear each other, but we both knew it was there. We built it together, made it from our disappointments, the times we failed to be open and honest and gave in to our need to save face, to have control. We built it every time we talked about the weather, with every movie we told each other to see instead of really talking. We thickened the wall with our banalities, reinforced it. Year by year, inch by inch, the wall grew. It was strong and wide. It now spans an ocean and is twice as high as the ocean is deep.

It didn't have to be there. But then you got sick and I knew we'd never knock it down together. I'd have to do it myself. But I don't know how.

We could have been better. We could have done more. I don't know, what we were we afraid of? We'd already done the worst things to ourselves. I'm sorry that I was not braver.

I've learned that remembering is a choice. So, I remember what is good.

One memory sticks out. I must have been about ten. We were camping. You and I were on an inflatable raft together, just lying there in the sun, floating around on a lake. Neither spoke. All was peaceful and tranquil. I remember willing myself to savor the moment, commit it to memory.

It's my favourite memory of you. I remember feeling truly safe and warm and quiet with you, just us out there on that plastic, inflatable raft. That was the best of you. And the best of you is what's best in me. If I hold on to that, even I deserve hope. Je me souviens.

PART II – EXEGESIS

Introduction

Background

This PhD germinated over the five years (2009–2014) I spent working as a senior communications and policy adviser in the Victorian State Government Department of Premier and Cabinet, specifically within what was then called the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship. In 2013, one of my jobs in that office was to deliver civics lectures to new refugee communities throughout the State of Victoria. These talks were designed to help new migrants recognise that, as their new government saw it, they had rights, as social, if not legal, citizens of this country. However, as new migrants, the government wished to stress new residents also had responsibilities – to the broader community and to the state – through social and political engagement, as well as responsibilities to follow local laws and so forth. I delivered these lectures to refugee communities all over Victoria, from culturally diverse urban areas of Melbourne, such as Footscray and Dandenong, to regional areas such as Mildura, Shepparton and Swan Hill.

Something struck me when I compared the attendees, the experience of the crowd, at these sessions in metropolitan Melbourne versus the regions. One thing I noticed was that, in the city, attendees would arrive, often in self-segregated racial groups, people would then sit, they would listen and they would leave. In country Victoria, the social dynamic was noticeably different. There would be more mingling, before and after the formal sessions, between me and the people the sessions were ostensibly for, as well as between people in the audience, some of whom were existing members of the community who were curious to find out more about, or to support the refugees who now lived in their town. There would also be more banter, more engagement, between the new migrants and other government and settlement support service workers who attended these government-sponsored information sessions to give *their* talks about how to participate in the community, through organisations such as Victoria Police, health services, local council, sporting groups, or charitable organisations. It seemed like genuine friendliness and social commitment was on display in country Victoria, a conviviality that was less obvious in the urban sessions I facilitated.

That surprised me. I had expected to find the refugee communities in regional areas more visibly isolated and less gregarious than their city counterparts – their experience of Australians in the country as more hostile than in the city. Anecdotally, that is not what I heard or saw in the regional towns I visited. I began to wonder, privately, what could be happening, socially and culturally in these small, but increasingly diverse, communities between the established population and the new migrants settling in these small towns. That question led me to this PhD.

The central question I am pursuing is: Can cross cultural exchanges between new migrants (especially refugees) and established communities occur more effectively and meaningfully in small towns rather than in large urban centres in Australia? Are small towns *as* cosmopolitan – or more so – than Australia's big cities?

I did my government work in multicultural affairs between 2009 and 2014, against the political backdrop of rising nationalist and anti-globalist discourse that predated the political ascendancy of Donald Trump. It was in 2010 that German Chancellor Angela Merkel famously declared to younger members of her conservative Christian Democratic Union that multiculturalism had failed. For Germans, said Chancellor Merkel, the so-called *multikulti* concept – where people could "live side-by-side" happily – did not work. She called on immigrants to do more to integrate including learning German (BBC News 2010).

The Chancellor's statement echoed worldwide, fanning nationalist discussions throughout the European Union, which would intensify in the coming years as countries such as France, Greece and Spain struggled to manage an influx of refugees fleeing humanitarian crises and the ongoing wars in Syria and Afghanistan (UNHCR 2018). In the United States, neo-nativist, anti-globalisation rhetoric eventually converted to hard political currency through the election of Donald Trump, whose Republican administration has since shown a willingness to endorse anti-immigration initiatives, and pursue an agenda of economic protectionism through renegotiation of longstanding international trade and security agreements. In the United Kingdom, the vote to Brexit has been similarly interpreted as cultural and economic protection, examples of a reactionary conservatism and growing reluctance to support the continued expansion of a globalised society (see for example O'Toole 2018).

In Australia, the anti-globalisation response has also been increasingly visible, if somewhat more restrained. We saw the resurgence of Pauline Hanson as a viable political force. Her One Nation Party became the legitimate political extension of right-wing advocacy groups such as the United Patriots Front and Reclaim Australia, which increasingly sought to

publicly frame their brand of racial and cultural protectionism as celebrations of (white) Australian heritage.

For me, working as a senior advisor in Multicultural Affairs for the Victorian State Government, Chancellor Merkel's proclaimed failure of multiculturalism had a peculiar resonance. Tasked with drafting what would become the state's new multicultural policy, *Victoria's Advantage* (2014), I was aware of a growing cognitive dissonance between my personal views about multiculturalism and my official position within its bureaucratic apparatus. I supported cultural diversity, but I found myself unable to shake a growing suspicion that multiculturalism *was* failing, though not in the assimilationist terms Merkel intended for a German audience. From where I stood, as a public servant in Victoria, Australia, multiculturalism was failing to adequately capture the dynamism of social and political diversity. As a lexicon, the failure of multiculturalism to capture what I suspected was happening in mediated spaces between cultures. It was failing to recognise and meaningfully engage its detractors. It was failing to embolden people to openly question and challenge culture. As multiculturalism was officially conceived, discussed and defended by the bureaucracy I was part of, the language of multiculturalism inadequately expressed the complexity of peoples' lived experience of diversity in Australia. As Jasayura (2008) observes, multiculturalism could be officially understood as a system for both recognising and managing diversity. From my perspective, there was more to multiculturalism than the official language of multiculturalism could express. Australian multiculturalism, I suspected, was already tinged with an under-examined and ill-defined cosmopolitanism. Perhaps I had already glimpsed its presence in regional towns where, as previously mentioned, I delivered civics lectures to refugees. I committed myself to further investigating the presence of Australian cosmopolitanism from outside the multicultural apparatus of the public service, where I could use the language I thought better expressed what I was seeing on the ground.

Within its official context, multiculturalism was succeeding in creating a limited public ethos of tolerance. It was successfully intimating that difference was inherently good and that culture was sacrosanct, perhaps even categorically beyond reproach (Hage 1998). For me, working as a public servant, challenging or attempting to deepen the language of multiculturalism met resistance at every level, from my subordinates to my superiors. Multiculturalism seemed to have become something congealed, a catch-all term that struggled to articulate the aspirations and conversations of the very people the word aimed to classify. It had lost its specificity, its vigour. As nomenclature, multiculturalism had become a cliché. In Australia, multiculturalism had come to signal many things. To the left it could be

a perennial celebration of cultural difference. To the right, it could be interpreted as a kind of tacit cultural relativism, steadily eroding Anglo, Christian values. As Jakubowicz (2010) observes, Australians' superficial engagement with cultural difference means that intercultural knowledge is limited, allowing racist views and politics to co-exist with notional celebrations of cultural difference. Australian multiculturalism is complex and can be simultaneously celebrated as a national success story, a measure of unity and cultural resilience and decried as a persistent and growing threat to the country's national identity as a proto-British society. Others have written extensively about the various successes, failures and shortcomings of multiculturalism (see, for example, Turner 1994; Jupp 2002; Hage 2003).

I do not intend to further pursue this line of inquiry here. While it is imperfect, I support Australian multicultural policy, if only because its formal presence keeps the broader issue of cultural diversity within the national conversation. Like Anthony Moran (2017, pp. 241–65), I believe that Australia's approach to multiculturalism is already broad and pragmatic, avoiding the need for a wholesale re-structure or formal, post-multicultural construct in this country. Existing notions of multiculturalism in Australia, I maintain, are broad enough to accommodate some cosmopolitan notions of cultural hybridisation without the need for formal policy intervention. I suggest that cosmopolitan interactions happen, whether we officially identify them as cosmopolitan or not. I agree with Moran's contention that formal policy intervention to encourage cosmopolitan outcomes may be counterproductive, and in turn risks eroding current support for multiculturalism as a functional and pervasive social principle. Instead, I explore cosmopolitan interactions that occur within the existing social construct of Australian multiculturalism. While the language of cosmopolitanism alone may not ensure meaningful cosmopolitan practice, I propose, as a minimum, that adding the language of cosmopolitanism vis-á-vis our literature, our journalism and our government reports may incrementally nudge Australians to more openly embrace cosmopolitanism as an extension of our multicultural paradigm.

Project scope

This PhD challenges assumptions that cosmopolitanism is an urban phenomenon and explores cosmopolitan social dynamics in the context of regional Australia. The novel and exegesis examine van de Vijver's (2015) contention that a nation state can be said to be cosmopolitan not by how rigidly or loosely it defines its terms of belonging. Cosmopolitanness, I suggest, can be measured by how much scope a nation's citizens have to

imagine and determine their own identities, how freely they can exercise their various loci of belonging. Both in fictional narratives and in real life, I suggest, towns offer us a microcosm to explore how such a fluid sense of belonging can be negotiated. To explore such a flexible sense of belonging, this PhD adopts a cross-disciplinary approach, pairing creative, practice-based research (the novel) with philosophical and ontological inquiry (Chapter One); social and economic theory, as well as case studies and examples (Chapters Two and Three). The multi-pronged (creative, theoretical, conceptual and empirical) approach of this PhD offers a diversity of modes of inquiry and perspectives (creative and academic, logical and emotive) by which to contribute broadly to ongoing debates about reconciling competing cultural identities within Australia's multicultural society. Cumulatively, the novel and exegesis challenge conventional notions of assimilation, integration and national cultural identity, which, I argue, persist in the dominant view of Australian migration politics, where multiculturalism is often synonymous with social tolerance of cultural difference. By focusing on the nexus of social and cultural exchange, which I identify as cosmopolitan interaction, I aim to draw out the potential value of a cosmopolitan ontology which may yet benefit Australian society in cultural and economic terms.

Through the novel, I have taken up Nikos Papastergiadis' call to artists to redress what he described as the ambient fear of cultural difference in Australia post 9/11 (Papastergiadis 2013a). I have also embraced his proposition that art can offer a philosophical and cultural mediation between creator and receptor, that is, art as potentially offering both cultural translation and transformation (Papastergiadis 2011). In *White Foam,* I explore the limits of pursuing cosmopolitanism as a post-national ideal, deploying characters that embody both the failure and potential success of globalisation, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism. The novel's treatment of national symbols, such as war memorials and ANZAC mythology, for example, also dramatise national counter-narratives pursued by historians, such as Craig Stockings, who challenge popularised misconceptions about Australia's military legacy and their influence on our national history (Stockings 2012).

The novel and exegesis also challenge the assumption that big cities are cosmopolitan exemplars by default. I suggest that residents in smaller communities may, under favourable social and economic conditions, feel motivated to pursue cosmopolitan interactions because towns present individuals and groups with clear micro-interdependencies. A localised cosmopolitanism, I suggest, can be more meaningful, its impact deeper, its effect more lasting in shaping society than the cultural tourism enabled by large population volumes of modern multicultural cities. 'Villagers,' in a township or rural community, I argue, tend to be

more reliant on one another, are more passively interactive and, as a result, more interdependent than city dwellers. In the country, a community is more lived than imagined, a kind of 'big bang' to Benedict Anderson's famous thesis *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 2006). The interdependence of a small community can be fertile ground to sow the seed of cosmopolitan mediation and for cooperation to take root. I dramatised this argument in the novel and here I pursue it through more conventional scholarship in the three chapters which constitute the exegesis.

In Chapter One I define cosmopolitan interaction. I use the work of French Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy to describe the ontology of difference and use Nancy's idea of singular plural to articulate the essence of the cosmopolitan experience. This chapter demonstrates how cosmopolitan thinking is essentially an ontological metanarrative about being and belonging.

In Chapter Two I investigate the cosmopolitan potential of small towns versus big cities. I contend that, under favourable social and economic conditions, Nancy's concept of singular plurality may be more readily experienced in small towns than big cities. Cosmopolitan interactions, I suggest, can germinate in small towns because their social, economic and environmental conditions can help nourish cosmopolitan notions of humanistic solidarity. The social and economic interdependency of residents in the context of a small town can predispose them to try and make living together work, despite their differences.

In Chapter Three, I demonstrate the role that literature and narrative can play in extending the cosmopolitan imaginary. Specifically, I argue that representations of cultural diversity in small towns in Australian literature can do more to represent cultural mediations and cosmopolitan experiences that can happen in regional Australia.

Defining cosmopolitanism

As an idea, cosmopolitanism is by no means new. The word is derived from the Greek word kosmopolitês ('citizen of the world'), widely accepted as having been first used by the Greek Cynic, Diogenes, in the fourth century BC. His coinage registered the socio-political tension between identifying as a citizen of the polis, a member of the city, the Athenian city state, for example, and also identifying as part of the broader diversity on display in the cultural expanse of the Hellenic world (Kleingeld 2014). Aiming to reconcile social, cultural and geo-political divisions within culturally diverse societies, then, lies at the heart of cosmopolitanism as a tradition of thought and scholarship from its beginnings in antiquity.

At its root, cosmopolitan thought aims to understand and foster social and political engagement between all human beings across the world by underlining their individual commonalities rather than isolating their differences. Robbins and Cheah's *Cosmopolitics* (1998), Gerard Delanty's *Handbook of Cosmopolitan Studies* (2012) and Jacob and Malpas' *Ocean to Outback: Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary Australia* (2011) draw together a comprehensive collection of the modern discourse on cosmopolitan scholarship, demonstrating that political scientists, philosophers, historians, artists, as well as cultural and political theorists, have all found a deep well of ideas to explore in the central cosmopolitan pursuit of inter-connectedness. As Katie Hansord usefully phrases it, "Put simply, research into cosmopolitanism is really research into how to be and how to belong in the world" (Hansord in Thompson, Hansord and Noske 2016, p. 2). Cosmopolitan scholarship is a priori diverse. It is international, cross-cultural and draws from a rich tradition of interdisciplinary scholarship in the humanities and social sciences. Sociologists, such as Emile Durkheim, whose idea of the "cult of the individual" was seen as a call to a universal morality, could act as a binding aspect of the social fabric (Marske 1987). The eminent sociologist, Beck Ulrich, too, explored the interconnectedness of human societies to redress the nationalist focus of social theory, particularly in the wake of the Second World War (Beck 2006).

Nationalism in the modern context of globalisation offers an important economic and geo-political backdrop against which scholars today explore various iterations of cosmopolitanism, and its potential social and political applications (see for example James et al. 2014). As Peter Caterall observed, the effects of globalisation complicate the nexus between state, national and individual identity (Catterall 2011). Helping global citizens and migrant communities reconcile their international, national and personal identities is therefore central to the task of modern cosmopolitanism. Macovei (2014) has gone so far as to suggest that modern nation states increasingly compete for migrants who, once in their adopted countries, seek the freedom to explore their identity. Some academics, then, have embraced cosmopolitanism as a promising model to both understand and pursue social change.

This discussion also acknowledges that not everyone is convinced about cosmopolitanism as a viable approach to social, cultural or political organisation. We need only return to Martha Nussbaum's seminal essay, 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism' (1994), in which she argued that greater self-awareness, as well as moral and cultural sensitivity, could help induce a kind of international empathy which could help reduce global discord. Nussbaum's essay not only sparked renewed interest in cosmopolitanism as a social and cultural model in the mid 1990s, amidst that decade's attendant anxieties about globalisation.

The work also drew criticism from academics who accused Nussbaum of proposing noble, if flawed ideas. Naseem and Hyslop-Margison (2006) usefully distil the broad academic scepticism that met Nussbaum's cosmopolitan vision. Their summary of the ensuing debate catalogues what remain typical and persistent forms of resistance to cosmopolitan ideas, criticisms which Nussbaum herself re-published and responded to in her later work *For Love of Country?* (2002). I weave both the original criticisms and Nussbaum's responses into the discussion below.

To her critics, Nussbaum's ideas were variously defective, and ranged from being conceptually vexed (Gutmann 2002) and socially incomplete (Wallerstein 2002) as well as culturally and philosophically narrow (Appiah, 2002).

For Gutmann, merely contemplating shared humanistic values was insufficient to engender the broad sense of connectedness that Nussbaum advocated. Gutmann challenged Nussbaum's call for shared allegiance to a global community. "Where is there any such community?" she asked (p. 70). Meaningful solidarity, suggested Gutmann, relied not on parochial notions of global belonging but on tangible appeals for equality "according to principles of right and justice" (Gutmann, reprinted in Nussbaum 2002, p. 70).

Gutmann's assertions echo the concerns of others, for whom the proposed moral entanglement of cosmopolitanism is perhaps better enabled by extending the reach of our existing international structures, such as sharpening the instruments of the global economy to divide wealth more equitably (Piketty 2014), or tightening the grasp of international law through institutions such as the United Nations. Though not explicitly a cosmopolitan scholar, Philippe Sands (2006), for example, explored the limits of international law in exerting global justice through the international justice system.

These perspectives do not so much deny *that* people can come together, but challenge *what* people come together for and *how* they can best accomplish moral or socially progressive objectives on a global scale. Solidarity and global justice are, at their heart, still cosmopolitan values. There remains within this debate some notion, some possibility of shared (even if unobjective) moral agency.

In her own defence, Nussbaum ascribed individuals with greater moral and global agency than critics like Gutmann seem to allow. For Nussbaum, an individual's personal wealth, for example, can be freely given to advance moral causes on a global scale. Increased technological connectivity and access to information, retorts Nussbaum, can "multiply possibilities for action as a global citizen" (Nussbaum 2002, p. 135). Indeed, innovations in the financial sector, such as Muhammad Yunus'(2009) advocacy for micro loans, seems like

an example of the individualised, egalitarian moral agency that Nussbaum has in mind. Perhaps too, our local experiences of and engagement with cultural difference can change our perspective of the world at large, prompting greater interest in acting on the world outside our own borders.

Cosmopolitan advocates, like Nussbaum, have also been accused of ignoring or minimising the presence and influence of inequitable power distributions in society, divisions further complicated by factors such as race, class and gender. As Wallerstein (2002) asserted, an individual or group's political agency varies, depending on their social location. For Wallerstein, social, political and economic strength were measures of social privilege through which the advantaged defined the rules of social and political engagement. Only by succumbing to forms of pressured consensus and adopting the rules established by the dominant group, he argued, could the disadvantaged hope to participate in formal social and political arenas.

Blindness to forms of hegemony is a central criticism of cosmopolitanism more broadly. Naseem and Hyslop-Margison were also tentative about the normative implications of Nussbaum's cosmopolitanism. For them, Nussbaum advanced an idealised western view, particularly with respect to education, which limited the depth of her supposedly egalitarian global perspective. Nussbaum's insistence on the moral value of Socratic self-reflection as a way of encouraging a global perspective, they argued, assumed the supremacy of the western, liberal education model. For the authors, Nussbaum's implied advocacy of this model as a global education standard ironically constituted a normative, quasi-colonial perspective that would seem to contradict her nominally inclusive cosmopolitan vision (pp. 55–56).

I suggest a less prescriptive reading of Nussbaum's cosmopolitan vision and a more inclusive and broader view of cosmopolitanism. Self-reflection, I propose, remains a worthy pursuit, whichever religion, custom or educational system promotes its practice. The ontological benefits of self-knowledge can be profound, not only for the individual concerned, but for society more broadly, a position I have advanced in my novel, *White Foam*, and will continue to explore within this exegesis, particularly in Chapter One. The value of the personal interaction, I suggest, can help individuals meaningfully challenge normative impulses that can too easily intrude on intercultural exchanges.

Nussbaum's critics less frequently engage with the ontological subtext of her cosmopolitanism. The same can be said of cosmopolitanism's critics more generally. The author's personal invocation is nevertheless present. "One of the greatest barriers to rational deliberation in politics," wrote Nussbaum in her original essay, "is the unexamined feeling

that one's own current preferences and ways are neutral and natural" (Nussbaum 1994 reprinted in 2002, p. 11). Her vision of cosmopolitanism implies that to change the world, we must first change our selves.

One critic who *did* engage Nussbaum's ontological subtext was Anthony Appiah (2002). In his more constructive critique of Nussbaum's essay, Appiah recommended expanding Nussbaum's perspective, suggesting there may be value in exploring the plasticity of cosmopolitanism, and how adopting multiple, including non-western, cultural and philosophical traditions, could help make cosmopolitanism more nuanced, inclusive and palatable beyond the boundaries of the western world (Naseem and Hyslop-Margison 2006, p. 56).

The debate between Nussbaum and her critics captures broad and ongoing discussions about the complex challenge of adopting cosmopolitanism as a functional worldview. How, for example, asks Miller (2002) can we conceive of universal moral obligations through a shared, global community without resorting to the installation of a global state with which to police it? For Latour (2004) the basis of global cosmopolitanism is conceptually problematic and he cautions scholars to be wary of making western-centric assumptions about human needs and values when proposing universal notions of a cosmopolitan ideal.

What troubles some scholars is the false impression that cosmopolitanism is achieved primarily through broad (global) social and political consensus. For authors such as Appiah and Nava (2007), the object of cosmopolitanism is perhaps not a global consensus, whether forced, coerced or imagined, but instead to seek ways of engaging in meaningful dialogue through which people can negotiate differences, better understand one another and respectfully agree to differ. As Jeffers (2013) asserted, authors such as Anthony Appiah resist placing limitations on our human potential to co-exist, despite our cultural or geopolitical boundaries. Tomlinson (1999) also suggested the social, cultural and economic compression of globalisation could see the emergence of a more cosmopolitan society, provided we found ways of perceiving, experiencing and respecting cultural differences (see Tomlinson, especially pp. 181–207). I too believe in the possibility of such global forms of cosmopolitanism, in the emergence of what Tomlinson called "cosmopolitans without a cosmopolis" (pp. 198–199). Like Tomlinson, I resist approaching cosmopolitanism as an operative worldview or a defined international project. I also acknowledge that inequitable power distributions within society complicate cosmopolitan notions of solidarity. I therefore side with more cautious scholars, such as Pieri (2014), who conclude that an understanding of cosmopolitanism as "a cultural (and aesthetic) phenomenon," operating on the micro-scale of

the everyday may be an imperfect but constructive basis from which to conceptualise cosmopolitanism more broadly (pp. 35–36).

It is within such a personalised, ontological, communal *and* geo-political context of the inter-connected modern world that my project is situated. Through this research project, I join the conversation started by other contemporary cosmopolitan scholars, such as Martha Nussbaum (2010), Anthony Appiah (2005, 2006), Paul Gilroy (2004) and Mica Nava (2007), who approach cosmopolitan thought as a practical philosophical pursuit or experience, turning inward to explore humanitarian understandings of the relationships between the individual, their community, and their national and international identity. These scholars treat cosmopolitanism, not merely as an abstract concept, but as a practical and moral response to confronting differences in the social context of a community, global or otherwise.

I add to existing academic discourse on cosmopolitanism by proposing that cosmopolitanism is not an ideal or a stance. We are perennially influenced by every experience we have and everyone we meet. The cosmopolitan impulse may be little more than a by-product of our curiosity, our instinct to explore. Our very survival has often depended on our ability to adjust to our changing economic, political, cultural, geographic and climatological environment. Seen this way, the practice of cosmopolitanism is emblematic of our capacity for exploration and discovery, a symptom of humanity.

One of the most salient scholarly debates concerns the vexed issue of universality as a precept for cosmopolitanism as a cultural or political ideal. Does a cosmopolitan necessarily commit the naturalistic fallacy of pivoting from description to prescription, of turning an 'is' into an 'ought?' Immanuel Kant, for example, who serves as a kind of father figure for contemporary cosmopolitan theory, has been variously championed and derided for dictating normative cultural and political values from an assumed position of privilege and superiority, what Mendieta calls an "imperial" cosmopolitanism (2009). Cosmopolitanism as a project can thus be diagnosed in its most benign form as striving to establish a problematic humanist ideal, or, in its most malignant strain, a set of prescribed cultural and political imperatives with which to co-opt or 'civilise' difference as part of an imperial mission. As discussed earlier, critics of Nussbaum perceived a range of such issues in her cosmopolitan vision.

What if we suppose there is no endpoint to cosmopolitanism? And further, what if we frame it not as a quest to complete or fail, but as a process? What if we think of it not as a social construct to achieve, to live *under* or *up* to, but only as the practice of social and cultural mediation? What if we describe cosmopolitanism not as an ideal humanist state, but as a bottomless morass of learning and adaptation, always tumbling in on itself, changing,

hardening, dissolving and burning away meaning and identity in the cauldron of social transformation? What if we proclaim that change and flux are the only universals of cosmopolitanism? Could such a circular cosmopolitanism avoid being criticised as normalising, or civilising, and/or imperial or historically or materially rooted?

In fact, these qualities of thought or experience have been articulated by French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, who reflected extensively on cosmopolitan ideas of community and world formation in works such as *The Inoperative Community* (1990), *Being Singular Plural* (1996) and *The Creation of the World or Globalization* (2007). Nancean sites of social, cultural and political mediation are an important reference point for my definition of cosmopolitanism. My interpretation and application of Nancy's works is, in this respect, comparable to Berthold Schoene in his work, *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (Schoene 2009). My working definition and treatment of cosmopolitanism owes almost as much to Schoene as it does to the world-formation ideas of Nancy, which Schoene eloquently summarised: "Nancy introduces 'community' – be it global, national, familial or otherwise – always simply as the unwieldly structure of our shared existence, which at any moment remains prone to affiliation and capable of dispersion" (p. 17). My work also relies on Nancy's ideas of world creation, though I rely more heavily than Schoene on the ontology of difference which Nancy formulated in *Being Singular Plural.* I use Nancy's ontological concepts as a framework to extend the cultural reach of cosmopolitanism as mediated through Australian literature and glimpsed in interpersonal relationships in diverse Australian towns. While Schoene focused primarily on Nancian cosmopolitanism in British and Indian novels, I focus on cosmopolitanism in Australia and the role of Australian literature in depicting the cosmopolitan imaginary. My novel, *White Foam*, depicts what the experience of Nancy's singular plurality might look and feel like and how cosmopolitan interaction could affect one's worldview.

This project springboards from other existing scholarship too, such as Watson's (2018) research into how non-urban environments may offer people spaces of personal or cultural overlap, thereby creating opportunities for cosmopolitan interaction in Nancian terms. Watson proposed that communication and storytelling activities can bring diverse people together and draw out notions of shared identity that promote Appiah's notions of curiosity as a step towards mutual understanding, a perspective summarised neatly by Bertland (2011) who writes, people should aim to "share of themselves without trying to unify" (Bertland in Watson 2018). I extend Watson's assertions into the realm of small Australian towns and suggest they too can provide the kind of overlapping cosmopolitan

space that he describes. By exploring where and how social and cultural mediations can and do occur in Australia, I also expand on Margaret Jacob's ideas about hospitality and peaceful cohabitation as important aspects of cosmopolitanism as a lived experience (Jacob in Hansord, 2016). I extend what philosopher Eduardo Mendieta has called "the dialectic of difference and identity, otherness and sameness" (2009), and contend that individuals continuously perceive, evaluate, negotiate, accept, reject and reconcile otherness and sameness at individual, relational and community levels. Specifically, I suggest our capacity for self-reflexion, our ontology, confronts our experience of society in dynamic ways that sometimes reveal the essence of cosmopolitan interaction. The potential impact of such cosmopolitanism on individual and group identity is, I contend, proportional to the scale of one's social sphere. The smaller the group, I suggest, the more resonant a change from within.

Australia may yet broadly embrace a cosmopolitan view of belonging and cultural diversity. In the interim, I explore the unasked questions: what such an identity might look like, how it could work in practice, and what its benefits might be. This project explores ways by which we perceive ourselves as cosmopolitan agents. It investigates how the cosmopolitan dimension of multiculturalism and our ontology can influence the way we treat others as well as Others, within a community, a society, a nation. Our cosmopolitan multiculturalism can nurture curiosity and acceptance, complicating the nexus by which one identifies and articulates their participation in nationhood. This project is about how diasporic identities are accommodated in society through our culture, our art, our literature.

Cosmopolitanism and Aboriginality

Implicit in this idea of cultural dynamism are difficult questions about Aboriginality and the legacy of colonial dispossession of ancestral lands, as well as the destruction of traditional ways of life in Australia. If, as I assert, cultures adopt, adapt and recycle, then how do I acknowledge and respond to sensitive questions surrounding Aboriginal heritage, historical experience and the challenges of reconciliation? Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are, to some extent, also a diaspora. Their experience of Australia also draws from memory, navigating the pain of longing to return to a past that was taken from them. Aboriginal experiences, past and present, are also mediated by not one, but multiple affiliations and experiences of Aboriginality. I recognise that Aboriginality and multiculturalism have not been adequately negotiated. How do attempts at reconciliation

within a multicultural context negotiate Australia's colonial dispossession and active destruction of a culture?

While this project tacitly draws in questions about Aboriginality, I limit my direct exploration of cosmopolitanism to migrant communities in small town Australia. This work is dedicated to exploring and reconciling ontological and social processes of being and belonging that can mitigate our tendency to subordinate one group to another in modern Australia. It would be an unjust oversimplification to include questions about Aboriginality and multiculturalism into a discussion that focuses on refugees in regional Australia. Grafting notions of Indigenous heritage onto cosmopolitan ideas of cultural hybridisation, as Germaine Greer did in her controversial essay, *Whitefella Jump Up: The Shortest Way to Nationhood* (Greer 2003) is problematic. Greer rightly drew criticism from influential scholars, such as Marcia Langton, who accused Greer of unjustly moderating the impact of colonialism, and skirting real cultural and political impediments to reconciliation (Langton 2003). Greer's critics were vocal and numerous enough for the author to publish replies to her critics (Greer 2004). Langton, at least, remained convinced of Greer's duplicitous magnanimity, weary of the author's "cleverly disguised contempt for Aboriginal people, her desperate need to stereotype Aboriginal victimhood and nefarious white Australian attempts to oppress us" (Langton 2008, p. 11).

As this exchange demonstrates, confronting the challenges at the intersection between multiculturalism and Aboriginality is a distinct and important task. These discussions are happening elsewhere. Philosopher, Raimond Gaita, for example, explored the conceptual, linguistic and ontological entanglements of pluralism and Aboriginality in his UNESCO Chair Oration, 'Different ways of saying "We"' (Gaita 2018), which he presented through the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation. More broadly, Anthony Moran's (2017) book chapter, *Aboriginal and Multicultural Imaginaries: Tensions, Accommodations, Reconciliation* (pp. 207–240) provides a useful overview of some of the challenges which attend the intersection of multiculturalism and Aboriginality. I also acknowledge these unique challenges through my novel's Aboriginal character, whose role in the narrative conflict is deliberately uncertain and unresolved, honouring his distinct views and experiences of Australia's multicultural society. He is in, but not of, the same country as his migrant friends.

This project, overall, focuses more directly on how we expect migrants to negotiate their diasporic identities so that new residents avoid translating their immigration status as a rulebook for social and cultural engagement, a request for, as Hannah Arendt put it, "the right

to have rights" (1967). How can we promote what Calhoun terms the "density of relationships that turn national community, a metaphor, into local community, a social experience" (Calhoun in Eliassi 2014, p. 62). Focusing on the potential for dynamic cultural exchanges in Australia's towns, not cities, offers the conceptual framework through which to evaluate the potential utility of inviting cosmopolitan values into how we, as a society, manage cultural diversity in Australia.

Migration and cosmopolitanism in modern Australia

Australia is a migrant nation. The country *is* culturally diverse. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017), for example, registers that more than half of Australians were either born overseas or have a parent born overseas. While the principal source country of migrant intake remains Great Britain, the trend in the last national census showed a steady rise in migration levels from non-western countries, particularly India and China. It has always been pluralistic. Its Aboriginal history is also one of multiple languages, of many cultures and traditions, a set of histories too often subsumed under the reductionist moniker: 'Aboriginal.' The question, then, ought not to be whether we *are* a diverse society, or the *most* diverse. A more nuanced and revealing question is how do we, as a society, a culture, respond to that diversity?

Notions of what is truly Australian are complex. As Plage et al. (2017) contend, Australian nationalism and Australianness has an "amorphous character," born of a perennial tension between its identity as a white British settler nation and a country of diverse migrants (p. 330). Maybe this nebulous and perennially contested Australian character also draws on several additional factors. Perhaps our country's history as home to one of the oldest continuing civilisations on earth perpetually complicates *tabula rasa* notions of Australian culture. Our relative isolation from the zones of conflict in the world, our relative lack of power on the global stage, our position within the Asia Pacific region, our foreign demographic where half of us already come from or identify with somewhere else, and our open-minded brand of multiculturalism may also help Australianness feel somewhat fluid. Maybe an unfixed Australian character can also embolden us to tinker with the national imaginary. Perhaps we may there discover and experience a cosmopolitan Australia. This project explores the integration between nationalism, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism and how they combine to inform notions of Australianness, helping us to reject narrow definitions of belonging such as ethno-nationalism. That it was an Australian who recently

massacred fifty people in a New Zealand mosque reinforces the danger of leaving extremist views of belonging unchallenged. This project aims to draw cosmopolitanism in small town Australia into the national discussion by encouraging readers to talk about their own sense of multiculturalism's limits and their own measure of where the boundaries and songlines of Australia's national imagination exist.

Chapter One
Defining the Cosmopolitan Interaction

In this chapter, I situate my use of cosmopolitanism within its broad cross-disciplinary discourse. I do so by isolating the core ontological interaction that is central to my understanding of what cosmopolitanism is – not as a political project, but as a lived experience. The cosmopolitan experience or interaction, I suggest, helps to enable the social impact of migration in a multicultural environment. Positively, these effects may include social harmony, economic prosperity, cross-cultural collaboration, cultural complexity. Negative social experiences of migration are synonymous with social ills such as discord, inequality and racism. While these social and cultural attributes are typically defined as multicultural successes or failures, arguably the relative success or failure of multiculturalism, in social terms, may be a result, a symptom of a deeper process – the cosmopolitan interaction. Using Jean Luc Nancy's idea of singular plural, I tease out what the cosmopolitan interaction may be, suggesting it can underpin the ontology of difference as experienced in multicultural Australia. I then posit that Nancy's singular plurality may flourish in small towns, not just big cities.

The ontology of difference

Nancy's philosophy set out in his work *Being Singular Plural* (2000) is an ontological attestation that we can but define our individual selves in relation to others. Plurality as a human condition, defined socially and politically by Hannah Arendt (1958, pp. 7–8) is here extended ontologically by Jean Luc Nancy. What Nancy upends is the notion that humans operate in individual or socially autonomous spheres. He contests individuation as the premise of ontology because plurality, in the sense that we are beholden to others and Others, requires us to navigate socially and define ourselves in relation to them. Others, says Nancy, are inescapable. The question of social being, he asserts "must, in fact, constitute the ontological question" (p. 57). For Watkin (2007) Nancy's departure from the philosophical tradition of a same/other dichotomy repositions the "primacy of relation" (p. 51).

For me, a family tree provides a useful analogy by which to absorb Nancy's deep self/other ontology. Like a family tree produces individuals – 'branches' on the tree – a single appendage is inextricably bound to the edifice from which it grows. It requires the existence of the tree and exists in relation to it. For *its* part, the tree is no more independent than the

branch. The tree does not grow from nothing. It too is interdependent, bound: to the soil, to sunlight and the rain which nourish the tree. While the tree's limbs and branches do not register its remote past, its evolutionary history, the combined influence of these elements remain as the unseen subatomic particles which nevertheless give the tree an appearance of solid form. The tree, however, is in fact less distinct from its surroundings than our eyes alone would have us believe. It is the simultaneity of this awareness of the totality of past, present and future that essentiality and inextricably binds our sense of individual distinction to others. For Nancy, Being is hermeneutic assembly, self by association, a form of ontological entanglement through co-existence (pp. 37–41).

According to Nancy, "There is no meaning if meaning is not shared, and not because there would be an ultimate or first signification that all beings have in common, but because meaning is itself the sharing of Being" (2000, pp. 2–3) For Nancy, the act and recognition of being is inseparable from and in relation to another being. He writes:

> [T]here is no other meaning than the meaning of circulation. But this circulation goes in all directions at once, in all the directions of all the space times [*les espace-temps*] opened by presence to presence: all things, all beings, all entities, everything past and future, alive, dead, inanimate, stones, plants, nails gods–and 'human,' that is, those who expose sharing and circulation as such by saying 'we,' by saying we to themselves in all possible senses of that expression, and by saying we for the totality of all being. (p. 3)

As with my analogy of the family tree, relationality does not end with the kinship represented by the tree. The tree itself and the branches of the family are no less beholden to other forces: physical, social, political that have come before. For better or worse, Nancy describes a fundamental interdependency as inescapable to being, to consciousness itself. As Watson observes, the implications of Nancy on community, in the traditional sense, are profound. "Consequently, community does not embody some pre-given identity which we own or possess; rather, community is our being-in-common through the act of sharing a world" (2018, p. 218).

A cosmopolitan ontology

Interculturally, Nancy's singular plurality goes beyond tolerance as a means to social harmony. The Nancian social interaction does not demand that people ignore one another or treat each other with kid gloves. The Nancian cosmopolitan interaction invites people to perceive culture itself as already the by-product of multiple cultural affiliations compounded over time, the likely results of victories and losses in war or commerce. Seen this way, a 'proud' culture is assumed to shoulder some blame in having suppressed another at some

point. A sense of the cumulative value of cultures may emerge: not a moral equivalence, but a recognition of the symbiosis of cultural construction as one culture is invariably subsumed and re-created in the forge of being. An individual can therefore reasonably challenge the cultural assumptions of another openly because, for Nancy, the cosmopolitan interaction does not pursue an end. It just is. It can be constructive or destructive. It is always both and it is so continuously. The cosmopolitan interaction breaks down, mixes, rebuilds cultural interaction, language, ways of thinking, spirituality and religion primarily by letting go of the idea that anything in a culture is sacrosanct. The act of being is both mediation and contestation.

Like Appiah's moral dimension of cosmopolitanism, when we begin to explore culture, we begin to discover that while its manifestations may differ from place to place, the central narratives or purposes of culture often remain familiar. "[T]he great lesson of anthropology," Appiah reminds us," is that when the stranger is no longer imaginary, but real and present, sharing a human social life, you may like or dislike him, you may agree or disagree; but, if it is what you both want, you can make sense of each other in the end" (2006, p. 99).

At worst, the cosmopolitan interaction can be violent and destructive as people force or speed up the process of cultural change through, for example, violent conflict or other forms of subjugation. We may only take small comfort in knowing that today's destruction can eventually foster tomorrow's construction. The cosmopolitan interaction is perhaps best described as the cultural equivalent of the second law of thermodynamics, where energy (culture) is neither lost nor destroyed, but merely displaced or converted into alternative cultural expressions. Cosmopolitanism is a recurring struggle for social and cultural relevance and equivalence.

The cultural implications of cosmopolitanism mean that it avoids straight cut moral distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad. There is no good cosmopolitanism; there is only cosmopolitanism. Philosophically, then, cosmopolitanism embraces Derridaean notions of aporia, or puzzlement, by eschewing simplistic cultural dualism – 'us' and them (Nancy 2000, p. 23). Uncertainty is central to the communal experience. Rather than identifying change with discomfort or offense, friction as necessarily antithetical to a community, it can also serve the community and establish it as a creative force. For Nancy, a community is a perennial negotiation.

Returning to the ontology of difference, Nancy (2000) writes:

> We say 'people are strange.' This phrase is one of our most constant and rudimentary ontological attestations. In fact, it says a great deal. 'People' indicates everyone else,

> designated as the indeterminate ensemble of populations lineages, or races [*gentes*] from which the speaker removes himself. (Nevertheless, he removes himself in a very particular sort of way, because the designation is so general–and this is exactly the point–that it inevitably turns back around on the speaker. Since I say that 'people are strange,' I include myself in a certain way in this strangeness). (p.6)

There is an important distinction to be made here about Nancy's intended meaning within this passage as it relates to my description of the cosmopolitan interaction within this thesis. As translators of the original French text, Richardson and O'Byrne point out how their translation of Nancy's original phrasing, "*Les gens sont bizarres,"* was translated to *People are strange* in order to "preserve the idiom" (p. 195). I contend the distinction between strange and bizarre is here more important than retaining an Anglophonic idiom and that use of the term *strange* obscures important shading in Nancy's intended meaning. Strangeness is foreign. It connotes behaviours and perspectives that lie outside of accepted, normalised boundaries. The distinction is sharp and cuts neat in/out divisions within a society, a culture, a nationality – it recalls themes of alienation in Camus' novel, *The Outsider*, *L'Etranger* (1942).

Bizarreness, on the other hand, is unusual, but not necessarily foreign. Ontologically, one may perceive kindredness in bizarreness. The word (and concept) is softer, more fluid than strangeness and allows for more leeway towards accepting a universality of the peculiar in human behaviour that may remain under observation, undiagnosed, whereas strangeness (foreignness) holds within it both a diagnosis and prognosis: us and you, in and out.

My point is therefore more than semantic – I believe it clarifies a central element in Nancy's ideas about being singular plural. Ontologically, we too can accept that we are bizarre and that bizarreness is not the same as foreignness. That is why Nancy himself explores the etymology of the word bizarre and ponders the connotations of "valor, commanding presences and elegance" in the word's Basque and Arabic derivations (Nancy, 2000, p.10). Terminology is central to understanding Nancy's perspective on the ontological dynamic between people. He writes:

> Everything, then, passes between us. This 'between,' as its name implies, has neither a consistency nor continuity of its own. It does not lead from one to the other; it constitutes no connective tissue, no cement, no bridge. Perhaps it is not even fair to speak of a 'connection' to its subject; it is neither connected nor unconnected; it falls short of both; even better, it is that which is at the heart of a connection, the interlacing [l'entre*croisment*] of strands whose extremities remain separate even at the very center of the knot. (p. 5)

In the phenomenology of social interaction that Nancy describes, there is a uniqueness to individuality that remains ontologically intact. "All of being is in touch with all of being,"

he writes, “but the law of touching is separation; moreover, it is the heterogeneity of surfaces that touch each other. Contact is beyond fullness and emptiness, beyond connection and disconnection” (Nancy, 2000, p. 5). And yet this self-awareness paradoxically honours another being while preserving one’s own individuation. Nancy writes:

> If ‘to come into contact’ is to begin to make sense of one another, then this ‘coming’ penetrates nothing; there is no intermediate and mediating ‘milieu.’ Meaning is not a milieu in which we are immersed. There is no mi-lieu [between place]. It is a matter of one or the other, one and the other, one with the other, but by no means the one in the other, which would be something other than on the other (another essence, another nature, a diffuse or infuse generality). From one to the other is the syncopated repetition of origins-of-the world, which are each time one or the other. (pp. 5–6)

With the previous passage in mind, people’s distinction between what is strange (definitive) and what is bizarre (indefinite) is important because it draws in Nancy’s idea of what a meaningful interaction is. For Nancy, an individual’s observation of strangeness (bizarreness) offers every self (singularity) a point of access to the word (2000p.14). What Nancy suggests in being singular plural is that an individual, that is a consciousness, ontology is necessarily dependent on one’s relationship (opposed or otherwise) to another. There is no teleological sense of being; there is a rootedness of being in relation to another being. The relationality of being is, for Nancy, central to meaning. He writes, “There is no meaning if meaning is not shared, and not because there would be an ultimate or first signification that all beings have in common, but because *meaning is itself the sharing of Being*” (p. 2, original italics).

Nancy contends the city has long been the historical space for the articulation of his philosophy, for cities are the foundation of community. [C]ommunity, in turn, is the foundation of Being” (pp. 22–23). Nancy suggested the need to extend oneself; to be sensitive to others was central to Rousseau’s social contract and embodied in Rousseau’s call for a civil religion based on empathy. “Rousseau is called ‘sentimental,’ and one of the fathers of romanticism,” said Nancy, “because he senses more intensely than anyone that sentiment is in the process of transformation, perhaps even withering away. It is through sentiment—or in other words, the possibility of being in the world, of existing—that the need to sense oneself existing comes into being. And this is both telling and serious: If one must sense oneself existing, then existing is not enough, is not fully sensing” (Armstrong, Smith and Nancy 2015). For Nancy, sentiment or feeling, play central roles in the synapse between being and belonging. It is therefore worth exploring conditions that may promote sentiment or draw out empathy.

Place, interstice and singular plurality

Geospatiality is an important dimension of Nancy's plural ontology. Space, location and time are central elements of Nancy's ontological singularity: "Together means simultaneity (*in, simul*), 'at the same time.' Being together is being at the same time (and in the same place, which is itself the determination of 'time' as 'contemporary time')" (2000, pp. 60-61).

Place and time are also important pscycho-social dimensions of my novel, *White Foam*. The central character experiences progressive awareness of his relationship to others, past and present, which influences his sense of belonging to the world at large. His ontological awakening simultaneously reinforces and weakens his existing notions of being and belonging. Critically, the book's setting of a small town helps induce the character's shifting identity by forcing the protagonist into a sustained contemplation of others in relation to himself. The social compression of the small town promotes the central character's cosmopolitan interactions. The character's experiences in the town are weighed against the character's initial international dimensions – the protagonist is an urbane, multilingual, multinational cosmopolite whose vocation as an international student admissions officer at a university would seem the apotheosis of urban cosmopolitanism. And yet, despite his outwardly cosmopolitan credentials, the character remains socially and culturally isolated by the anonymity he experiences while living in a globally connected, multicultural city. The increased potency and meaningfulness of the character's cosmopolitan experience outside the city emerges as one of the novel's central assertions.

Nancy's singular plural ontology contributes a sub-cultural, sub-dermal layer to the argument I pursue in this thesis. If we accept Nancy's position – that existence itself is only ever experienced by being in relation to another being – then the context of that relation may also matter. I suggest that a smaller social environment can help draw out, or engender awareness of Nancian ontology, because condensed social spaces contain fewer beings to negotiate and evaluate oneself against. In a city, there are a greater number of anonymous people, others who may quickly become Others. The relative anonymity of a city means that if you dislike what you see, you can turn away and beings will be quickly replaced by the *tableau vivant* of the metropolis. In a town, socialisation is both simpler and more complex. Also, you may not necessarily like or approve of another in a town, but your restricted social environment requires that you at least contemplate one another. In this way, towns can both reinforce prejudice and homogeneity, but they can also engender powerful personal

interactions. Nancy's idea of singular plurality helps articulate what may happen, at an ontological level, within the cosmopolitan interaction.

I suggest that towns can help singularities perceive bizarreness where city dwellers may perceive strangeness. Perhaps townsfolk can see others where city folk see Others. Nancy's ideas about world creation through social, cultural ontological contact behoves us to explore how physical spaces encourage or discourage meaningful social interaction. Perhaps towns and villages, cities, neighbourhoods and communities can be read as social dimensions which variously enable, coax and nurture our glimpses of Nancian bizarreness and with it, points of access to the Nancian social/ontological interaction.

In my novel, *White Foam,* I explored such a cosmopolitan interaction – a cosmopolitan experience that related specifically to the Australian context and how some negotiated cultural boundaries can be re-imagined. The novel is an Australian contribution to an emerging cosmopolitan literature, which Schoene describes as "Nancean world creation" "a mode of resistance to the largely passively endured fate of globalisation" (2009, p. 25).

As a novel, *White Foam* locates the universal moral dimensions of Anthony Appiah's cosmopolitanism within individuals themselves by presenting cosmopolitanism as phenomenon, a process of ontology and individuation. For Anthias (2006) such self-referential contemplation of one's own location and positionality may help "denaturalise difference and identity by showing the ways they are located historically and as social constructs (p. 30). With this insistence on self-reflection, I aim to unpack cosmopolitanism as defined by Rapport, for whom it "entails insisting upon a recognition, which is both moral and rational, of the individual particularity and the human singularity that cultural forms might disguise" (2012, p. 104). In other words, cosmopolitanism, both in my novel and in this exegesis, emerges as an activity, a social engagement, which starts and continues with the individual and their measure of free will. As Rapport puts it, "For cosmopolitanism, the individual human being and the human species alike exist beyond culture: both possess an ontological reality – as things-in-themselves – which culture and its symbolic-rhetoric constructs do not" (p. 104). Rapport gives us additional language by which to articulate what may happen, psychosocially, inside the mini-big-bang of a Nancian socio-cultural collision.

And yet, I hesitate to accept the implied uniformity of the individual experience in Rapport's notion of cosmopolitanism. Rapport allows himself to imagine an individual operating almost entirely uncoupled, or independent from the social or cultural conditions which inform their way of navigating, interpreting or interrogating their own sense of self in relation to the world. "The individual," asserts Rapport (2012), "is the sentient rights-bearing

being and the unity of humanity, not the collectivity – family, community, church, nationality – to which he or she may (or may not) at present affiliate or be classified" (p. 106). He continues: "Whatever the cultures and communities, the religions and pastimes, the world-views and life-projects, of those who have preceded them and whatever the desires and expectations of those who surround them in the present, individuals have the right to 'become' themselves as they see fit, and to keep on so becoming throughout life" (p. 106).

Rights are one thing. Abilities are another. While people may, or even should, in Rapport's view, be allowed to invent and reinvent themselves, human behaviour, action, reaction, is at some level conscious of, or responsive to, the present and the past, if only in a dialectic sense of evaluating, weighing and mapping choice of actions against an understanding of past, present and future states or realities. While cosmopolitanism may support a theoretical right to self-invention, I am cautious about Rapport's free spiritedness, because I suspect that future-orientated self-creation is always, to some degree, beholden to and mindful of one's present and past, if only as measures of departure and distance travelled from the original source. We cannot simply ignore our past. (I dramatised this assertion in my novel.)

The value of connection is also part of why I assert that a village may be an ideal site to coax out the ontological "mediation between individuality and humanity" that is part of defining oneself as simultaneously part of polis and cosmos central to Rapport's idea of emancipatory cosmopolitanism. The village, I suggest, contains a compression of history and society that can spur the individual to weigh up their position relative to the comparatively clear social and cultural dimensions of their local milieu.

As Jessica Berman reminds us, sustainability, in all its forms, requires us "to imagine a political realm where incomplete communication or disagreement over shared values is the norm, and where translation is always fraught with difficulty" (Berman in Schoene, p. 181). The town and not just the city may constitute such a realm. In the next chapter, I will argue that towns can offer alternative cosmopolitan sites to big cities. The small Australian country town there emerges as a distinct social territory, which may help spark cosmopolitan interactions in Nancian terms.

Chapter Two
The Town as Cradle of Cosmopolitanism

In this chapter I explore the fecundity of cosmopolitanism beyond the city. I propose that small Australian towns may, under favourable social and economic conditions, engender the development of social capital through cooperation. This social capital, I suggest, may be a catalyst for the cosmopolitan interaction I described in the previous chapter. I propose the social compression of a small town may help draw out the social value of communal activity. Such activity may, in the relative social confines of a small town, encourage a cross-pollination of ideas and values and cultures which, I contend, are the basis of cosmopolitanism as I define it in this project. I also suggest that some small Australian towns may already be incubators of such a cosmopolitan experience. Included in this chapter are two case studies of Australian towns where there is evidence of intercultural social experiences that I argue are part of cosmopolitan interactions. I present these empirical examples as potential emerging alternatives to urban cosmopolitanism in Australia.

Non-urban cosmopolitanism

Much existing scholarship on cosmopolitanism focuses primarily on urban environments as the assumed incubators of cosmopolitanism. Through scholarship such as Binnie, Holloway, Millington and Young (2006) the city emerges as the premiere site of cosmopolitan experience. For some, the large, multicultural city is not only a symptom of globality but also a measure of a city's cultural capital on the global stage (Benton-Short, Price and Friedman 2005). Urban-centric views of cosmopolitanism have established global, multicultural cities such as Paris, London and New York as *the* cosmopolitan exemplars: dynamic cities which find their Australian counterparts in the urbane diversity on display in the cities of Melbourne and Sydney. In the twenty-first century, then, it would seem the city has become both a central conduit and a metaphor for the process of globalisation itself. "For a growing number of analysts," writes Madden, "boosters, critics, and political actors this is the era of megacities and urban hyperdevelopment, an epoch marked by the demise of rural autonomy and the unprecedented permeation of the world by urban society" (2012, p. 772). Cosmopolitanism, it would seem, is an urban phenomenon.

However, there is also an emerging scholarship of non-urban cosmopolitanism. For example, Yeoh and Lin (2012) contest the notion that cities are cosmopolitan exemplars by default. They suggest that while cities can demonstrate a capacity for bringing people

together across cultural lines in interactive, mutually beneficial ways; the authors also suggest that non-urban environments can offer alternative examples of cosmopolitan societies. The experience of cosmopolitanism, they say, requires more than the mere "co-presence" of a diverse population. "Fixating on the urban sphere alone," they write, "harbours the risk of blindsiding research to the prospect that cosmopolitanism can sometimes take on more compelling and intimate forms outside the context of the city" (Yeoh and Lin, p. 214). The authors explore some scholarly treatments of non-urban cosmopolitanism, such as Besnier's (2004) contention that local Tongan markets are socially and economically driven sites of intercultural performance, as well as Notar's (2008) research on cosmopolitan attitudes toward visiting foreigners by the Indigenous rural population of Yunnan Province in southwestern China.

In Australia, too, there are good reasons to look for cosmopolitan exemplars outside the city. Successive governments have explored regional migration initiatives to both stimulate regional economic growth and spread population beyond the country's large urban centres. Australia's ongoing national commitment to regional migration suggests it is worth exploring the cosmopolitan potential of smaller, non-urban areas in the medium to long term. Can Australia's regional towns offer cosmopolitan alternatives to its big cities? I think they can.

Many small towns in Australia are suffering population decline. The Australian Bureau of Statistics report, *Small Towns* (2018), records a steady decrease in small town populations nationally. As people move to larger, urban areas with populations greater than 10,000, small towns are often left with ageing populations and eroding social infrastructure, compounding a social degradation which the Australian Federal Government recognises as having an impact on economic growth in regional Australia (*State of Regional Australia 2015: Progress in Australian Regions*). These towns are also home to a population which is less culturally diverse than Australian cities, with only 11 percent of residents born overseas, less than the average of big cities, where 32 percent of residents were born overseas (ABS 2018). Demographic changes and their attendant consequences in regional Australia have left policymakers looking for solutions.

Regional refugee settlement initiatives have been one approach to help repopulate and reinvigorate country Australia. As Piper (2017) documents, some regional towns need an influx of new people to regenerate them, a necessity that many existing residents recognise as well. Locals don't want their towns to disappear. "Communities in many towns and cities across regional Australia," writes Piper, "know they have to change in order to survive. They

need to attract new industries to their areas and, with this, they need people" (p. 3). As Piper's research on regional refugee settlement initiatives highlights, properly supported migration initiatives are helping to revitalise some towns across Australia. Her research examined outcomes of refugee re-settlement initiatives across eight towns in four states: 1) Mingoola, New South Wales; 2) Warrnambool, Victoria; 3) Shepparton, Victoria; 4) Ballarat, Victoria; 5) Nhill, Victoria; 6) Limestone Coast, South Australia; 7) Murray Bridge, South Australia; and 8) Rockhampton, Queensland.

Piper's report concluded that factors such as employment and training opportunities, available housing as well as the host community's support and goodwill, underpinned positive settlement outcomes, both for new migrants and for the existing community (2017, p. 3). Piper's report stresses the importance of phased initial and ongoing support to facilitate regional migration. A combination of whole-community and refugee-specific assistance, such as community consultations, volunteering opportunities, health, employment and housing assistance can be networked with complimentary support services, such as English language education as well as translating and interpreting services. Combined, these programs and services help facilitate the arrival and transition for the town's new and existing residents, allowing both to engage and prosper from their collective existence in a shared space (p. 7).

I contend the mutually beneficial social and economic outcomes of such regional re-settlement initiatives can not only re-vitalise towns by filling their schools and local government coffers. As new and existing residents share their commitment to making life work in the condensed social and economic environment of small towns, they also create ripe conditions for cosmopolitan interaction. Critically, among the listed benefits of regional settlement, Piper noted that such initiatives are socially constructive and "enables local people to have meaningful engagement with people from different backgrounds" (p. 8). In a section of the report titled *Harnessing the Goodwill of the Community*, Piper also cites community involvement as an important binding element for social cohesion. She lists sample initiatives such as hosting community meetings or celebrating multicultural festivals or multi-faith initiatives as examples of this support. I suggest that *meaningful engagement* and *goodwill* can be described differently, and perhaps more accurately, in cosmopolitan terms.

I will presently return to two of Piper's case studies in the towns of Mingoola and Nhill and mine them for examples of cosmopolitan interaction. Before I do, it is first useful to ask, how would we know it was cosmopolitanism if we saw it? If, as I suggest, towns can

internally stimulate the ontological confrontation I described in Chapter One, then how might that interiority manifest externally in qualitative ways?

Social dimensions of non-urban cosmopolitanism

Shipway (2011) argues the "emancipatory" or "redemptive" value of cosmopolitanism is bound up in the question of choice. He claims "that openness to the other and capacious tolerance as endogenous, instinctive properties or tendencies are perhaps, in their own right, not as significant as the hard won decision to switch from the non-cosmopolitan to the cosmopolitan world view, to choose openness and broadmindedness voluntarily, that is, over insularity, homophobia, xenophobia or misanthropy" (p. 208). Can towns, rather than cities, ponders Shipway, invite such empathetic openness and thereby transcend the kind of weak, "culture-as-consumer-choice-scenario" he derides as shallow, commercial expressions of urbane cosmopolitanism (p. 212)?

I contend that Shipway's cosmopolitan choice can sometimes not only be taken up more easily in towns but that its expression can also be more meaningfully, productively and profoundly realised than can manifestations of cosmopolitanism in cities. Like Shipway, I am interested in exploring the less asked question of what may be happening – and what could happen – at social and cultural levels between existing communities and new arrivals as they both mediate notions of belonging to a shared community. Some Australian towns with favourable social and economic conditions may be places of deep empathy that can harbour kinetic social transformations, places of meaningful social and cultural exchange. In a word, they may be cosmopolitan.

The social impact of the small town as a site of spatial interconnectedness has been well explored. In Robert Putnam's seminal work *Bowling Alone* (2000) the sociologist demonstrated how small towns can be conducive to building social capital where social networks form on the basis of trust, reciprocity and mutual assistance. When comparing social capital in small towns to big cities, Putnam argued that "virtually all forms of altruism – volunteerism, community projects, philanthropy, directions for strangers, aid for the afflicted, and so on – are demonstrably more common in small towns" (2000, p. 138).

There is little doubt that towns can also amplify feelings of otherness and isolation, that homogeneity can compound feelings of being ostracised and strengthen the pull of conformity. An oppressive social dynamic can easily form in the clichéd social fabric created by ignorant country townsfolk, who explicitly and implicitly enforce social norms. The socially backward small town is a well-worn narrative that finds many examples in the

literature, which I will explore in Chapter Three. Putnam, too, recognises the relative individual freedom of cities versus towns. “To be sure, weaker informal social control in cities also makes them freer places to live – ‘City air liberates,’ as the medieval proverb had it. Enfeebled, thin trust may be a fair price for that freedom. Nevertheless, when urbanites express social distrust, they are accurately reporting something about their social environment” (p. 138). The town and the city bear close consideration as distinct social environments that can promote the cosmopolitan interaction I described in the previous chapter.

Smaller communities can engender what Putnam describes as thick trust, whereby social capital is built on successive interactions built up between people over time. Putnam (2000) writes:

> There is an important difference between honesty based on personal experience and honesty based on a general community norm – between trusting Max at the corner store because you’ve known him for years and trusting someone to whom you nodded for the first time at the coffee shop last week. Trust embedded in personal relations that are strong, frequent, and nested in wider networks is sometimes called ‘thick trust.’ On the other hand, a thinner trust in ‘the generalized other,’ like your new acquaintance from the coffee shop, also rests implicitly on some background of shared social networks and expectation of reciprocity. Thin trust is even more useful than thick trust because it extends the radius of trust beyond the roster of people whom we can know personally. (p. 136)

With caveats, then, the close social proximity of residents in a small town can enable positive social interactions because shared experience lies at the heart of living, and sharing the experience of living in a small town. Villages can be progenitors of both thick and thin trust. Putnam (2000) cautions, “As the social fabric of a community becomes more threadbare… its effectiveness in transmitting and sustaining reputations declines, and its power to undergird norms of honesty, generalized reciprocity, and thin trust is enfeebled” (p. 136). The scale of the shared space, then, appears to set internal limits on the scope of trust within a given community. A large, city, according to Putnam’s description, may stretch the social fabric of trust.

It is therefore worth asking what notions of trust, generated by repeat interactions with individuals, may do to one’s sense of negotiating life with others and Others in small communities. I contend social capital in small towns can be more quickly accrued and thereby encourage social interactions which may also help residents mediate cross-cultural lines. Watson (2018) argues that social and cultural overlap among diverse participants in storytelling groups can draw out meaningful cosmopolitan interactions. I propose that small towns provide similar opportunities to accrue social and political capital.

That said, social capital can also be quickly lost and difficult to regain. As Putnam cautions, social capital can also ostracise people who come to be viewed as outsiders (2003, pp. 3, 206–24). For Putnam, the accrual of social capital, then, is a mediation between fellowship and ostracism. Critically, he says that creating robust social capital takes time and effort. "For the most part, it develops through extensive and time-consuming face-to-face conversation between two individuals or among small groups of people" (2003, p. 9).

In small towns, that dynamic progenitor of social capital may be constructive in cosmopolitan terms. I agree with Putnam that social capital "represents not a comfortable alternative to social conflict but a way of making controversy productive" (2003, p. 3). I contend the small town may be able to harness the productive aspect of social capital by harbouring the creation and recreation of new forms of community through social resilience and dexterity. Small towns may incubate Putnam's thick trust and reciprocity. The interconnected spatiality of small towns may be more conducive to engendering the self-conscious singular plurality of Nancian ontology I described in Chapter One. A small population base, I propose, may play a critical role in coaxing out the cosmopolitan interaction because a smaller population limits the number of others by which individuals reflect upon themselves, allowing individuals in the town at least a second look at their social counterparts, whereas in a city people – diverse or otherwise – other people may simply fade into the homogenised backgrounds of the socially cluttered urban environment. As Putnam asserts "social capital is necessarily a local phenomenon because it is defined by connections among people who know one another" (2003, p. 9).

We should therefore remind ourselves to occasionally look beyond the city for examples of cosmopolitanism. For Yeoh and Lin, too, researchers should be dubious of accepting cosmopolitanism as a city-bound phenomenon. Citing the work of Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan (2003), they suggest that research may profit from understanding "a more general ... experience of living in a state of flux, uncertainty, and encounter with difference that is possible in rural, urban [and] metropolitan settings" (Sivaramakrishnan in Yeoh and Lin, p. 215).

In contemporary Australia, a handful of small towns may be cosmopolitan exemplars on the periphery of the urban experience, places where the social and economic necessity of re-population encourage migrant settlement initiatives which enable meaningful encounters with difference that are central to the cosmopolitan interaction. The following case studies are presented and discussed.

Mingoola

One example of a practical initiative that incorporates a cosmopolitan approach to migration is developing in the rural township of Mingoola. The small, rural community of Mingoola, on the New South Wales–Queensland border, was facing an uncertain future, with a declining population and economic stagnation. In 2016, the local community initiated a plan to attract refugee workers with school-aged children who could, as long-term residents, help revitalise the town in both social and economic terms.

Mingoola local, Julia Harpham, and others worked with refugee advocate, Emmanuel Musoni, who had observed socialisation issues with some refugees from countries in central Africa, many of whom had rural, agricultural backgrounds in their countries of origin and were struggling to adapt to life in urban Sydney. The Mingoola community set about renovating several abandoned farmhouses and arranging job opportunities, inviting some refugee families to live and work in the community, not only because they were refugees, but because they were and are farmers, migrants whose culture – their connection to and understanding of land – predisposed them to flourish in this small agricultural community.

In April 2016, the first African families moved to the area. This migration initiative was captured by the social documentary series *Australian Story*, and aired on the ABC, Australia's national broadcaster. The television program openly endorsed the small migration scheme as a potential national example to build upon. Then Deputy Prime Minister, Barnaby Joyce, introduced the program, saying Mingoola was "a bold initiative" that "could help save other small, rural towns across the country" (*A Field of Dreams* 2016).

The documentary went beyond exploring the obvious economic benefits of regional migration and captured intimate gatherings between existing Mingoola locals and new arrivals, highlighting the existing community's willingness to accept refugees from countries such and Rwanda and The Democratic Republic of Congo. Could such interactions help bridge racial and economic divides that critics such as Wallerstein (2002) suggest keep minorities disadvantaged? Can intercultural exchanges help ease exerted or subconscious pressure on migrants to assimilate to Anglo-Celtic, white Australian norms and values, which cultural critics, such as former Australian Race Discrimination Commissioner Tim Soutphommasane (2019) maintains are the actual and implied measures of belonging in this country? Perhaps.

I certainly have reservations about underestimating the social and political agency of refugees as advocates for their own lives and the causes they believe in. Advocacy groups started and run by refugees and asylum seekers, such as *Rise*, actively challenge portrayals of

refugees as society's perennial victims. In my experience, both as a public servant who worked with refugee communities, as well as the two years I spent as managing editor of *Home Truths: An Anthology of Migrant and Refugee Writing* (2015), many refugees are socially and politically astute; they are sometimes dissidents and community organisers with a strong sense of conviction in their own moral and political agency, qualities which sometimes contributed to their becoming refugees in the first place. It is an unjust and incomplete portrayal when we assume that all refugees, while perhaps vulnerable, are necessarily powerless and succumb too easily under the systemic pressures of mainstream cultural and political influence. The unlikely publication of Behrouz Boochani's (2018) exposé on his incarceration in the Manus Island detention facility serves to remind us that refugees and asylum seekers can and do find ways of making their voices heard, even when jailed and ostensibly forgotten. Their voices deserve to be amplified through organisations such as Pen International.

In my novel *White Foam*, vulnerable refugee characters nevertheless assert themselves in various ways, such as the Afghani man who complicates Officer Miles' defence of Australian free speech by raising the issue of Section 18C (the "racial hatred" amendment) in Australia's Racial and Religious Vilification Laws. Like the Kalonji family, such characters do not wait for permission to act; they use whatever social and political capital they hold to assert their interests.

It is worth remembering that when refugees eventually become Australian citizens they can choose to exert their formal political agency by voting. Action on political issues, such as immigration policy, may yet be increasingly shaped by migrants themselves. There appears to be room for a greater, and more intimate, confrontation between aspects of difference in Australian society than some skeptics allow.

In Mingoola, the migration initiative appears to be forging deep connections between locals and new arrivals. Interviewed for the program, refugees-turned- Mingoola residents, Fainess Kabura and Jonathan Kanani, both agreed the Mingoola community were "like family". Living in Mingoola was, for them, an opportunity to work the land in peace as they had always done. As Mingoola community advocate, Nadine Schema said, enabling people with agricultural backgrounds to tend gardens and work the land helped them return to their cultural roots. Long-time Mingoola residents and agricultural workers-turned-refugees from countries, such as Rwanda, it would seem, shared in their connection to land and agricultural practice, a fundamental aspect of their identity. Can such glimpses of cosmopolitan overlap

indeed help bridge racial and economic disparities that constitute real barriers for some of the most disadvantaged people in our communities?

In Nancian terms, these interactions amount to beings in common. Could such shared identities and values lay social foundations and economic conditions that engender further cooperation? Can the social dynamics of regional re-settlement projects like this also encourage the sharing of other values and approaches, such as cultural observance or alternative land practice? Could Mingoola indeed offer a model to help struggling rural communities across Australia, not just in economic terms, but in cosmopolitan terms as well? Perhaps, though, it is still too early to be certain. While compelling, the Mingoola case is less than three years old. The initiative does, however, deserve close and ongoing study.

Nhill

A more established and well-researched example of local cosmopolitanism on a larger scale may be on display in the town of Nhill, a relatively isolated agricultural town in the Wimmera region of Victoria. The settlement of 160 Karen refugees from Myanmar to the small town of Nhill provides another compelling case study. Here, too, did the settlement of newly-arrived migrants and refugees save the local economy and revitalise the community, its schools and services, by bringing young families who intended to stay in that town at a time of declining population, combined with low unemployment.

The social and economic impacts of this re-settlement have been well documented. A joint research report published by Deloitte Access Economics and the settlement agency, AMES, found the initiative added more than $40 million and 70 jobs to the local economy (AMES Australia 2015). The economic drivers of regional re-settlement projects like this are becoming well understood.

Economic drivers may also have social implications, perhaps even cosmopolitan ones. Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) recalibrated the fulcrum between society and economy. Piketty suggests analysts should interpret society and economy according to one another. For Piketty, one affects, informs and shapes the other. The availability of longitudinal statistical data on income and wealth enabled Piketty to explore the historic distribution of wealth in different societies. Piketty stressed that one cannot meaningfully discuss inequality without data on income and wealth distribution which, he argues, both frame and inform one's social inquiry. Central to Piketty's research is the question of what wealth distribution could look like in the future, and what that distribution could mean for the relative equality or inequality of those future societies.

Though Piketty accepts that the history of inequality is shaped by the coordinated impact of social, political and economic actors, he stresses the importance of wealth distribution, what he calls the "dynamics of wealth distribution," to help reveal social and political "divergence and convergence" as a way of presenting the experience those actors brought about (2014, p. 21).

Could the documented economic benefits of regional migration spur or mirror socio-cultural benefits by generating an economic parity that belies greater social equality? Piketty identifies the "diffusion of knowledge and investment in training and skills as the main mechanisms of convergence, or greater equality in society (p. 21). A society which conceptually encourages social convergence should, theoretically, benefit from economic convergence as well. If social equality begets economic equality, then perhaps promoting interconnected societies can lead to greater social and economic convergence as well. Perhaps greater equality can also engender cooperation or solidarity. The economic impact of migration in small town Australia may also have social and political benefits as distribution of wealth promotes broader convergence.

Research found the economic impact of the Karen settlement in Nhill improved the refugee community's standards of living.

> In overall terms the Karen families and individuals who have moved from Melbourne to Nhill have settled in a place where there is steady employment, where they can afford significantly improved standards of living compared to what was/would be available to them in the city, where there is a small and welcoming host community and where, as a largely rural people, they can enjoy returning to a rural environment and lifestyle. (p. 23)

In Nhill, some Karen could afford to buy property, an important marker of upward mobility not lost on the immigrant community itself (AMES Australia, p. 23). Property rental and purchase in Nhill has offered the Karen a rung up on the socio-economic ladder that could, in time, lead to greater social and political agency. Prosperity may help bridge further social and economic disparities between new migrants and the established communities in which they live. Historically, some members of Australia's Greek, Italian and Chinese communities have converted personal and professional success into social and political capital. A list of current sitting Australian members of parliament reveals law makers too have migrant pasts.

That said, as Pietsch (2018) observes, migrants in Australia have been historically under-represented in formal political circles when compared to other Commonwealth countries, such as Canada. For Pietsch, the legacies of colonialism and the White Australia Policy are partially responsible for reducing the political agency of Australian migrants. Pietsch's argument is compelling. The White Australia Policy, which formally and informally

restricted migration from non-European countries for much of the 20th century, certainly limited Australia's cultural diversity until the policy's official repeal in 1973. (For more information on the White Australia Policy, see, for example, National Museum of Australia 2019.) For Pietsch, the cultural and economic insecurities of non-European migrants in a predominantly white, European environment further compounded obstacles to their engagement in Australian civic life.

Perhaps continued migration from non-European countries will help challenge this discrepancy, particularly as English-speaking, Indian migrants represent a growing segment of the Australian migrant population (ABS, 2015). Perhaps too, small towns can yet prove to be good incubators for social and political participation, spaces where new migrants can cut their teeth on civic engagement in a manageable- sized civic arena.

The Nhill case recalls the regional cultural overlap we saw in Mingoola, but also draws out the socio-cultural value of economic benefits. Importantly, the joint research report on social and economic impacts of the migration scheme also documented increased bridging social capital in Nhill, which it defined as "social networks that allow different groups to share and exchange information, ideas and innovation and builds consensus among groups representing diverse interests" (AMES Australia p. 23). One of the aspects of the Nhill settlement initiative that most surprised the Council executive was the social impact of the migration initiative. In the words of Hindmarsh Shire Council CEO: "The social impact of the Karen settlement is extraordinary. Nhill, a very conservative community, has embraced and opened their minds and hearts to the Karen. This has made Nhill a better place to live. The community has accepted the Karen magnificently" (p. 26). It would appear the Nhill settlement initiative may have engendered a social accord with shades of cosmopolitan solidarity.

Robert Fine's notion of cosmopolitan solidarity (2012) further supports the idea that connected multicultural, if not cosmopolitan societies, may have social benefits. Building on the work of Bhaba (1994) and Gilroy (2000), Fine suggests that cosmopolitan solidarity offers people a negotiated middle-ground by which to complicate, contest or offer alternatives to the lure of dualisms such as race, class and gender, which present simplified ways of navigating the inherent complexities of our modern, interconnected age. Fine writes:

> The dualism cosmopolitan solidarity defies is not simply given. Its origins lie in the social processes through which we construct unity out of heterogeneous elements by means of homogenising typications. Cosmopolitan solidarity is, if you like, the politics of phenomenology. It is by no means an alternative to action; it is a form of action. It takes the side of those who oppose the dualisms of our age – racism, antisemitism, homophobia,

> xenophobia, national exclusivity, the subordination of women, punitivism – in whichever camp they find themselves. It is oriented to what we have in common as human beings, to a human complexity that is irreducible to a single category, to an engagement with other cultures that declines to turn difference into a capital Difference. (pp. 384-385)

Fine proposes cosmopolitanism solidarity as a potential product of social cooperation and suggests such cooperation can be nurtured through legal and policy frameworks (p. 384).

Though cooperation and social capital are not, as Putnam reminded us, in and of themselves virtues, as they can be used for good or ill, we owe it to our society to explore ways of engendering a more complex (cosmopolitan) view of society, one that can complicate tendencies towards dualist identities of us and them. The constructive cooperation/solidarity that Fine envisions may be part of that process.

Mingoola and Nhill may well harbour Fine's notions of cosmopolitan solidarity. They may be fertile ground for the development of social capital as described by Robert Putnam and prime sites for mediated cosmopolitan social interaction and the plural ontology articulated by Nancy. One example of such an intercultural mediation is through the educational experience in Nhill. The Assistant Principal of Nhill College noticed the positive affect of the Karen migrants on both existing students and College staff. "The cultural diversity aspect of having significant numbers of Karen students at the College is also very positive," said the Assistant Principal. "There has been a broadening of the perspectives of the other students, who are extremely respectful of their Karen school mates, and interested in both learning about them and teaching some 'Australian' ways" (AMES Australia Report p. 21).

If the social dynamic between Karen students and the existing community gives the impression of being notionally assimilationist, there is further evidence to suggest that what may be happening, psycho-socially, in Nhill is a mutually beneficial mediation of values and approaches. According to the College's Assistant Principal:

> They [the Karen] bring a drive to the school that is having an impact on the other students – who are responding by noticeably trying harder at their studies and other school activities. There has been an 'overwhelmingly positive response from teachers, who have become more reflective in their practice and responded to the challenge of how best to include the 'new kids.' This has a positive effect from local students as well – who benefit from teachers' reflection on their practice as well as from responses to questions raised by the Karen students which they may not have been willing to raise themselves. (p. 25)

This reported mediation and self-reflexive practice is central to the iterative, self-evaluative process of the cosmopolitan interaction as defined in this thesis. In Nhill, there appears to be a sharing and exchange of perspectives and approaches to life and work. The cosmopolitan

interaction here is not merely productive in an economic sense, but constructive in social and ontological senses as well. The students appear willing to change some of their behaviour, to contemplate new approaches to their study and perspectives of the world at large. This mediation is an example of the potential for deep and meaningful cosmopolitan exchange. As the manager of Halfway Motors in Nhill described his experience of the Karen, "Aussies can learn a lot from them and their values. They have strong family values, they're conscientious, kind, polite, they work hard and they're happy" (p. 25). The cultural overlap here again seems like a strong basis for further cooperation. The potential intercultural experience presented by the Nhill case study is considerable. Perhaps the social compression in regional communities can, in time, help stimulate further cosmopolitan interaction through cooperation and communal activity.

This outlook is optimistic. I expect that not everyone, however, will share my optimism. Scholars such as Wallerstein (2002) may contend that factors such as class and/or race and gender are too powerful as determinants of social status in an inherently biased socio-political system. Such doubts are well founded. Can we, in Foucault's terms, meaningfully resist the social consequences of normative disciplinary systems (Foucault 1979) and the influential apparatus of his governmentality (Foucault, Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991)? These are worthy questions. As Cheah argues "…what we have learned from Foucault is that civil society is not necessarily a space of autonomy in relation to the state. It is an object that is produced by technologies of government" (Cheah in Pieri 2014, p. 31). I will not explore these questions in greater detail here. They are taken up elsewhere (see for example Walters 2012).

As a former public servant, I will only say that the unintended consequences of using government systems and processes makes me hesitant to advocate for too many direct government interventions or heavy-handed regulations to induce a more cosmopolitan society. Others, such as McKinlay and Pezet (2017) seem more optimistic about managing the influence of governmentality when developing social programs. Thalor and Sunstein's (2009) treatment of nudge theory, whereby small environmental changes and incentives can incrementally influence broad social and behavioural change, may serve as a model for future cosmopolitan initiatives. I will presently explore this idea in greater detail. Regardless, the question of who occupies formal and implied status and power in our society will, I hope, remain an ever-increasing part of our broad, civic discussions as we negotiate our shared experience of the society we live in – the society we help to create. Perhaps conviviality in culturally diverse small towns will help to empower future generations of migrants.

Hopefully, our personal reservations can avoid stifling the conversation to begin with, and encourage us instead to find innovative ways of creating a more inclusive society. While increasing social and economic opportunities for migrants and refugees in regional areas such as in Nhill and Mingoola are unlikely to level the playing field, that does not mean we should give up trying to redress inequity.

Perhaps I *am* optimistic for interpreting instances of bridging social capital in places such as Nhill and Mingoola as hopeful signs of multicultural cooperation and cosmopolitan solidarity. I have good reason to be hopeful. Despite the somewhat flat and managerial connotations of the term, bridging social capital can engender deep personal and social change. Tantalisingly, in his memoir *American Youth* (2017), former white supremacist leader, Christian Picciolini, attributes his repeated social interactions with people of different races and points of view as instrumental in helping him give up his life as an advocate for the white power movement in the United States. If bridging social capital can help reform a neo-Nazi, then perhaps we can afford to be optimistic that intercultural exchanges can also help bring about more constructive and open-minded social change elsewhere. It is also worth remembering that, in Nancian terms, members of a healthy community continuously negotiate their coexistence. In Australia, television programs such as *Go Back to Where You Came From* (2011–2018) repeatedly demonstrate how social interactions between asylum seekers and those who oppose their arrival in this country can help soften hard-nosed views about border protection.

The Australian Government's current policy of mandatory detention for asylum seekers arriving by boat can leave us feeling hopeless. But there is hope to be found in the human relationships that form between people, between our government's less humane policies. Intercultural exchanges in regional towns may be part of a growing counter-narrative to our national story. There, longstanding residents have demonstrated a willingness to not only accept, but seek out refugees, not only as antidotes to economic stagnation and population decline, but as active members of their dynamic communities. The people sharing these towns demonstrate that mediation is possible, that humanity and solidarity can be lived experiences and can serve us all as examples of Australia's cosmopolitanism.

A cosmopolitan Australia?

We may, as a society, choose to further pursue cosmopolitan solidarity by nurturing inter-cultural dialogue and cooperation more broadly. We may change government funding models in multicultural affairs to encourage cross-cultural cooperation; we may bolster support for

migration and economic development in smaller communities; and we may seek to encourage the education of cosmopolitan ethics and values in schools to promote ours as a society of worldly people who are trained to think and plan in global ways and be comfortable with social and cultural difference, not merely be mindful of them. Some scholars have already called for such innovations. For example (Popkewitz 2008) sees the educational apparatus as instrumental in building a more cosmopolitan citizenry. There are mechanisms by which we can deliberately pursue a more cosmopolitan society.

Cosmopolitanism, I have suggested, is already happening in this country, enabled by broad notions of acceptance in our existing multicultural paradigm. Motivated and supported by a mutually beneficial, dynamic and self-sustaining cultural and economic centre, a multicultural village can be fertile ground for cosmopolitan interaction to take hold, empowering its residents to engage in meaningful cross-cultural dialogue Moral philosophy is integral to Appiah's understanding of cosmopolitanism. Appiah explores cosmopolitan responses to globalisation, emphasising the potential mutual benefits of treating others and Others not just with liberal doses of gentle understanding, but with curiosity as central to the cosmopolitan ethic, the pursuit of understanding (Appiah, 2005). The social proximity of the small town may help coax out Appiah's cosmopolitan curiosity, it may draw on our human capacity for empathy.

I propose that, when properly planned and supported, and under favourable social and economic circumstances, smaller communities may better induce cosmopolitan interactions than big cities. What may happen in the medium to long term, at a cultural or ontological level, is the possibility of cultural fusions, people negotiating what it means to belong to a community, to a state, to a nation. Why? Because 'villagers,' in a township or rural community, tend to be more reliant on one another, are more passively interactive and, as a result, more interdependent than city dwellers. Towns simply do not have the population base of cities to create or sustain mono-cultural silos. In the country, a community is more lived than imagined. Cosmopolitan interactions, I suggest, can germinate in small towns because the social, economic and environmental conditions that promote successful regional settlement, which Piper catalogued, also help nourish cosmopolitan notions of humanistic solidarity. Chief among these conditions is the mutually dependent and mutually beneficial environment and objective the residents share. For both refugees and the existing community, the town is experienced as a compressed social and economic milieu within which residents share their lives. The town is the site of their mutual present and imagined future. The social

and economic interdependency of both groups in this context can predispose them to try and make living together work.

While such mutual dependency is no guarantee of social harmony, the compressed social, economic and cultural environment of a small town nevertheless presents a relational dynamic that can help draw out cosmopolitan interactions. People (on both sides) may still hold prejudices, but they may also be more likely to engage with difference, despite their reservations, if not out of willingness, then out of necessity. The resulting intimate confrontation of social and cultural differences can be mutually influential in deep ways, such as prompting self-reflection and ontological change, as well as more shallow experiences of alterity, such cultural performances and the tasting of ethnic cuisine. By engendering both deep and shallow intercultural experiences, small towns may be cradles of Australian cosmopolitanism. Towns are mediated spaces where curiosity and practicality have encouraged individuals to find and express how their multiple identities overlap with others. The smaller the community, I suggest, the more resonant, the more personally meaningful a change for the people within it.

As Rumford (2012) argued, cosmopolitan opportunities are made, not found. They do not appear as commodities, ready to deploy as an antidote to the "iron cage," of nationalism. They must be sought, pursued. He argues that national borders are harbingers of the cosmopolitan interaction. Borders, he argues, "are prime sites for connecting individuals to the world by creating cosmopolitan opportunities through the possibility of cultural encounters and negotiations of difference" (Rumford, p. 245). Rumford's ideas centre on the European experience, where national borders inside the European Union have become nearly arbitrary physical demarcations, ripe for the interstitial experience he describes. Rumford offers an interesting argument about how cosmopolitan interactions are not passively observed but seized by people in relevant geo-social locations, such as where borders meet, which, he suggests, invite intercultural dialogue.

Australia is in this respect unique. Ours is a culturally diverse nation with no physical borders to another country. Despite the traditional territories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and largely inconsequential state borders, Australians generally experience their country, geopolitically speaking, as an internally borderless plane. The fissures are more created, internal, constructed and reflected in the compartmentalisation of the towns and cities where the bulk of Australian citizenry lives. As a geo-social site, though, the multicultural town versus the city may offer its citizens similar opportunities to cross Rumfordian cultural borders, as much, if not more than do cities and their suburbs, where

there are little microcosmic states of para-national or ethnic existence. Towns may offer people opportunities to emerge from suburban insularity. As Rumford asserts, "This is the crux of the matter: opportunities are cosmopolitan when they cannot be reduced to a binary, and either/or, or, an us/them dichotomy" (p. 246). Rumford cautions us not to oversimplify the cosmopolitan opportunity. "[C]onnecting with the world is far from straightforward," he asserts. Opportunities to connect to the world in a "productive way (and which offer the potential of becoming a citizen of the world in a meaningful sense), are not always readily available or easy to find" (p. 252).

Multicultural towns, I suggest, may be one of the geo-social sites that can stimulate cosmopolitan interaction. Perhaps the culturally diverse town may well help complicate the binary dichotomy that Rumford sees as inhibiting constructive interaction, offering a different view of co-existence than the socialisation enabled in a large urban environment, helping townsfolk to draw connections between others here and the remaining others, like them, elsewhere in the world. Seen this way, cosmopolitanism is not about prioritising collective identity over the individual, it is about valuing a true community where individuals are assessed by their own merit. The social, cultural and economic conditions of the town appear critical in determining its social reality, sowing the potential for positive, constructive cosmopolitan interactions on the one hand, and risking social discord on the other.

It is worth exploring the social, cultural and economic dynamics of cosmopolitanism, particularly in small town Australia. We may learn from it and develop new policy directions to manage migration, and stimulate regional development and economic growth. In behavioural and socio-economic terms, perhaps regional settlement initiatives can also be understood in terms of Thaler and Sunstein's (2009) nudge theory where altering the lived environment can deliberately influence behaviour. Mutually beneficial settlement objectives may present community residents with a choice architecture that incrementally motivates people to change or adopt new perceptions of others and different behaviours toward each other. When properly resourced and supported, perhaps regional settlement initiatives can be interpreted as the socio-cultural equivalent of replacing chocolate with bananas in the impulse-buy section near the supermarket register. Essential to nudge theory is the idea of empowering people by making it easier for them to make constructive choices in what they do, and the ways in which they live and work. As the proponents of modern nudge theory assert, "Nudges are not mandates" (Thaler and Sunstein 2009, p. 6).

Interpreted more broadly, enabling willingly negotiated cosmopolitan interactions in country Australia could help incrementally nudge the rest of the country towards embracing

more cosmopolitan notions of alterity. The lived benefits of cultural diversity may broadly influence Australian ways of perceiving and engaging with the world at large. Our towns can help make us more cosmopolitan. They can also show us how cosmopolitan we already are.

Keith Jacobs and Jeff Malpas (2012) go further and contend the social, political and historical contexts of Australia and New Zealand offer policymakers favourable socio-political conditions within which to pursue cosmopolitanism as a "specific political project" (p. 516). Such a project, the authors suggest, could enable those countries to better harness diversity to deal with complex, interrelated contemporary issues, such as political and economic inequality or climate change: challenges for which multiculturalism, they say, with its emphasis on individuation over commonality, is underprepared to face. "In the area of social policy, in particular," they write, "cosmopolitanism has distinct advantages over the policies associated with multiculturalism that are now widely disparaged, perhaps unfairly, as privileging, overemphasising and institutionalising difference and reinforcing insularity" (p. 517). The authors contend that the legacies and socio-political realities of identity and indigeneity in Australia and New Zealand, should not only embolden, but perhaps even require policymakers to look to cosmopolitanism as an alternative social policy to more constructively manage growing diversity. The authors are direct and unequivocal in their assertion. For them, cosmopolitanism "represents the only viable mode of engaging with our contemporary situation: only if we are able to work collectively in ways that are addressed to the realities of the places that we inhabit – including the essential plurality, interconnectedness and complexity of such places – can we hope to respond productively to the challenges that currently face us" (p. 517).

Theirs is a bold and compelling assertion, which, if rephrased as political campaign rhetoric, roughly translates to: *global problems require global solutions, and the global perspective is in our own backyard*. *We have only to ask our own people how we proceed.* Dialogue is a sound idea. If we accept that multiculturalism has at least been successful in preserving diversity, then cosmopolitanism may well prove useful in focusing the attendant diverse perspectives on offer in a country such as Australia and bring them to bear on the pressing, common (i.e. global) issues the authors identify.

It is difficult to reject this argument. It is easier to see it as an incomplete picture. For the authors, the nature, structure and would-be policy outcomes of cosmopolitanism are underexplored. They frame cosmopolitanism as "a mode of engagement," (p. 517) a "political imaginary," (p. 518), an "alternative societal narrative" (p. 525). These descriptors are good starting points, but they require a deeper, clearer human dimension to become

practicable. For example, the authors point to the then Australian Prime Minister's 2008 apology to the stolen generations as an example of the kind of self-conscious national revisionism that aligns with their conception of cosmopolitanism as a specific Australian political project. Rudd's apology was, for the authors, a clear example of national identity "conceptualised as an ongoing cultural project in which the injustices of the past and present can be addressed through political endeavour" (p. 523). Fair enough. I agree. The apology was a long time coming. It marked an important moment in Australia's social and political history, a Prime Minister's willingness to acknowledge and atone for some of the atrocious government policies imposed on Australia's Indigenous peoples, historically condoned by the country's highest political offices. The authors are right to highlight the apology as an example of the social and political potential of cosmopolitanism.

However, an event of that scale is an historical anomaly, not a daily occurrence. What is missing in the authors' analysis is a more nuanced rendering of how and why the Rudd apology became socially and politically tenable. It requires human shading to better understand how such a seismic cultural shift in the Australian national and historical imagination became possible. Just as Kuhn (1962) demonstrated how scientific anomalies compound to bring about scientific revolutions, so too do I suggest that successive cultural negotiations and re-positioning can incrementally influence paradigmatic cultural change. The Rudd apology to the stolen generations is, I propose, both a political example of cosmopolitan values and the result of an existing socially mediated cosmopolitan ethos that made the apology possible. Importantly, the historical moment of the apology occurred within Australia's existing multicultural paradigm which I have already suggested is broad and accommodating enough to tacitly permit cosmopolitan experimentation. The Rudd apology would seem to support this view.

That said, I agree with Jacobs and Malpas (2011) that the qualities of the Australian cosmopolitan engagement remain underexplored. In this project, I have been largely interested in better understanding the cosmopolitan interactions that I suspect happen within our multicultural society. For Jacob and Malpas, the potential sites of that cosmopolitan mode of engagement, with its inherent social and historical interrogation, are unclear and emerge, almost as a socially organic by-product of a compressed, urbane diversity that necessarily becomes cosmopolitanism. Would-be policy directives which could produce the politicised cosmopolitanism the authors envision are more implied than identified. By focusing on the imagined, real and potential of existing multicultural interactions in small town Australia, I have expanded on the authors' assertions that commonality is an important condition for

meaningful social and political action. Some of Australia's small towns, such as Nhill and Mingoola, may already be kindling the kind of Nancian ontology which I have defined as central to the cosmopolitan interaction. They may also be sites of mutually negotiated cosmopolitan solidarity.

Nhill and Mingoola demonstrate regional Australia's capacity for resilience and adaptability. Their residents display a willingness to accommodate an influx of overseas migrants, and work through the cultural and economic challenges and opportunities they represent. For both new and existing residents, the future of their town often relies on making the experience of living together work. The social and economic benefits of the initiatives are promising, and may suggest that notions of sharing, diversity and cultural plasticity could increasingly become part of the ethos of small-town life in twenty-first-century Australia. Indeed, Wickramaararchchi and Burns' (2017) analysis of positive rural Victorian newspaper articles about the reception of humanitarian migrants further suggests a growing, if cautious, support for welcoming refugees into country towns.

There are reasons to be optimistic. But it is also important to remain cautious. Diversity is, by itself, a weak measure of social or cultural success. Whatever potential cosmopolitan interactions, which towns such as Mingoola and Nhill may engender, other factors will contribute to bolstering social cohesion. As Piper (2017) concluded, these factors include ongoing support and resources as well as the availability of economic and educational opportunities. Regional migration may continue to have a positive social impact on Australia's smaller towns and cities by increasing the population of pre-skilled and pre-educated members of regional communities. In time, the unique social dynamic in these more confined social spaces may also yield more hybridised, cosmopolitan, cultural expressions that can meaningfully build upon established notions of belonging and, like the Rudd apology, eventually culminate in seismic social and political change. These things take time.

Something may already be happening in small town Australia. The articulation of socially experienced cosmopolitanism may be more prevalent or directly felt in these regional social environments. We may, in time, need to adjust our imagination of the city as the only seat of the cosmopolitan experience. The ambient camaraderie I remarked upon, when working with refugee communities in regional Victoria, may well have been traces of this cosmopolitan interaction between new communities and existing locals. Regional migration in Australia may incubate the kind of non-urban cosmopolitanism that can present useful alternatives to urbanisation as a way of life in twenty-first-century Australia. That some migrants and refugees are choosing rural existences in their adopted homelands further

complicates the world-hive cosmopolis that is so often considered central to the cosmopolitan perspective. The town may be just as cosmopolitan as the city – perhaps more so. However, it is too early to be certain. The phased migration scheme in Nhill, for example, was only completed in 2010. The small-scale migration initiative of Mingoola is even more recent. It may take a multi-generational time-frame to truly appreciate the social and cultural impacts of such regional settlement initiatives. I have aimed to suggest what might be happening, what could happen and what we may learn from it.

In the meantime, art and imagination are useful ways of playing out possible outcomes. Creative thinking, planning and art are ways of exploring what may be happening or what could happen. Art is no mere distraction. Properly informed and emotionally truthful, artistic interpretations can make meaningful contributions to public issues. Delanty (2009) suggested the role of creativity and imagination has been underrepresented in political debates about cosmopolitanism. If we accept that one of the roles of art is to imagine the possible, to explore the potential of society, then it is worth trying. I made such an attempt by writing my novel, *White Foam*. As an author, I am not alone in exploring cosmopolitanism through story. In the next chapter, I will turn to cosmopolitan motifs in Australian literature more broadly, focusing particularly on depictions of cultural diversity within small town Australia.

Chapter Three

Cities and Towns: Competing Vision or Complementary Mission in the Practice of Cosmopolitan Literature

In this chapter I explore the role of literature in reflecting and shaping the cosmopolitan imaginary. My discussion of cosmopolitan literature is not intended to be an exhaustive overview of the subject. I present only some examples of cosmopolitan literature, chosen because these works represent a diversity of writers, styles, genres and eras, and because I am personally familiar with these works. My list of cosmopolitan novels can be expanded and I welcome additions to my overview of cosmopolitan literature. The works I've chosen also tend to focus on the Australian town as both a narrative setting and artistic site of cultural interaction. In drawing attention to literary depictions of Australian towns and suburbs, I draw out shifting perspectives of the cosmopolitan experience. I suggest that writers should think carefully before rendering towns as necessarily homogenous and insular spaces. Towns, not just cities, I argue, can serve the cosmopolitan imagination.

Literature as cosmopolitan mediation

Pheng Cheah (2012) argues that literature's role merits an aggrandisement from merely transcribing the world to re-imagining it. As Cheah said:

> Cosmopolitanism is primarily about viewing oneself as part of a world, a circle of belonging that transcends the limited ties of kinship and country to embrace the whole of humanity. However, since one cannot see the universe, the world, or humanity, the cosmopolitan optic is not one of perceptual experience but of the imagination. World literature is an important aspect of cosmopolitanism because it is a type of world-making activity that enables us to imagine a world. (p. 138)

For Cheah, the "peculiar ontological status" of literature marks writing and reading as the correct medium/nexus/matrix/ to directly unpick conceptions of the world and re-stitch them. "As something that is structurally detached from its putative origin and permits and even solicits an infinite number of interpretations," says Cheah, "literature is an exemplary modality of the undecidability that opens a world" (2012, p. 145). The creationist power of literature emboldens Cheah to suggest we should re-imagine the "vocation" of world literature as tasked with nothing less than engaging the world as a dynamic process with the dynamic writer/reader interaction inherent in the form. The relationship between writer and reader is critical for in that relationship the potential for the world creation he describes exists. Cheah contends the dynamic between literature and audience "does not refer to the reception of a piece of literature but to the structure of opening through which one receives a

world and through which another world can appear" (p. 145). For Cheah, world literature becomes cosmopolitan when it can do more than merely record historical flows, but actively resists and re-negotiates those flows and the interests (such as political or economic capital) they serve. "Literature can play an active role in the world's ongoing creation because, through the receptibility it enacts, it is an inexhaustible resource for contesting the world given to us through commercial intercourse, monetary transactions and the space-time compression of the global culture industry" (p. 145). For Cheah, the aim of world literature, then, is to engender a more complex, dynamic, active and layered conception of the world than the current inter-relational model of world literature. The ontological conjunction between the producer and the receiver of literature is central to the formation of any concomitant aesthetic or political by-product outcome of the union the literature enables (p. 145).

Nikos Papastergiadis tasks artists with no lesser role than using their art to explore what a cosmopolitan society might look like. Papastergiadis asserts that "artists do not deliver documents which reveal the condition of cosmopolitanism, but rather that they take an active role in the mediation of its emergence" (Papastergiadis in Schoene 2009, p. 183). The novel also engages Papastergiadis' conviction that what he calls "aesthetic cosmopolitanism" not only explores representations of cosmopolitanism, but offers a "cosmopolitan worldview" that is produced through the aesthetic of creative practice (Papastergiadis 2012, p. 221).

As artists and as cultural commentators, it behoves us to ask what such a world-making experience could be like? To me, for a sense of world creation to be meaningful, it must also be ontological, able to contest, if not break one's self-certainty about the 'rightness,' correctness or perceived virtue of cultural schisms and complicate the tendency towards a dualist or dialectic ontology. My novel explored such an ontological breaking point. Importantly, I chose the town and not the city as the setting for this cosmopolitan narrative. Most depictions of diversity in small town Australia fall short of rendering villages as cosmopolitan sites.

Defining literary frontiers in the cosmopolitan imaginary

Historically, Australia's cities and suburbs have best served our writers' cosmopolitan imaginations. Such urbane cosmopolitan literature is unsurprising. As Schoene contends, the English suburbs, too, have proved fertile ground for British cosmopolitan novelists who explore the suburbs as a site for the Nancean cauldron of socio-cultural transformation. In particular, Schoene unpacks Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park* (2006); and Jon McGregor's, *If*

Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things (2002), arguing their contemporary representations of suburbia illuminate the suburbs as a site to play out the Nancean concept of 'compearance', which describes the ontological oscillation informed by people's necessary relation to one another within a physically contained environment.

I contend the Australian country town has an equally strong illustrative potential of Nancean compearance, because the relative social and economic interdependence of small towns helps to break down the atomisation of the individual as distinct from community, bevelling the edges of the individualism that Nancy sees as impeding his productive notion of compearance. For Nancy, 'the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community. By its nature – as its name indicates, it is the atom, the indivisible – the individual reveals that it is the abstract result of a decomposition' (Nancy 1991: 3 in Schoene, p. 158). According to Ana Luszcyznska, the communal impulse central to Nancy's compearance may be most effectively animated in contexts "which have been least affected by a pervasive, overwhelming, and guiding notion of the individual" (2005: 197 in Schoene 179).

One such context may be the suburb over the city. Another possibility is the village over both. With my previous chapter in mind, if novelists aim to meaningfully explore cosmopolitan interactions, they may do well to set their novels in towns rather than cities. The town, I contend, offers readers and writers an emerging frontier in the cosmopolitan imaginary, a site for meaningful cultural exchange. Perhaps urban readers of such cosmopolitan literature can draw lessons from small town interactions and carry them into city life as an incentive to cross the cultural enclaves and silos enabled by the city's expanse. The town has been underexplored as a positive social milieu, a site of constructive social dynamics within a diverse, multicultural society. Instead, it is the cosmopolitan city that is more frequently rendered as the apotheosis of cultural depth and complexity. Towns or villages in Australian literature often remain depicted as fortresses of social homogeneity, places where citizens observe prescriptive social mores that narrowly define the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Jane Harper's rendering of the suspicious and tight-lipped citizens of 'Kiewarra' in *The Dry* (2016) offers a light-touch example of this phenomenon in contemporary Australian fiction. Here the residents' socially conservative instincts obstruct a murder investigation. The booze-soaked machismo of 'The Yabba' locals in Kenneth Cook's bleak and claustrophobic rendering of small town Australia in *Wake in Fright* (1961) offers a more extreme version of this insulating phenomenon where the townsfolk, living on an outpost of civilisation, gradually succumb to the counter-civilising influence of the wild. As a

psycho-social setting, the town in Australian literature is often on the edge: of civilisation; of (self)discovery; of disappearing, sometimes literally as in Shaun Prescott's, *The Town* (2017). The Australian town is frequently presented as a hard social arena where the residents are as tough as the land (or sea) from which they eke out a precarious existence. For a recent example, see *The Windy Season* (Carmody 2016). In stories such as these, characters are often eccentric or half mad from heat and isolation, townsfolk who contribute to a literary representation of the town as emblematic of an insular society. At worst, the town emerges as a physically and socially inhospitable place of narrow-minded backwardness that sharply defines boundaries of class, race and gender around its citizens. At their best, towns can be so much more.

The town need not be represented as a social outpost where restrictive social mores muffle residents' social and cultural curiosities. In contemporary Australian literature, the town may (and perhaps should) be more often represented as a constructive site of complex social dynamics, no less diverse and culturally fluid than its literary counterpart, the city. The town – not just the 'cosmopolitan' city – deserves to sit at the heart of cosmopolitan literature, helping art generally (and the novel specifically) complicate the existing socio-cultural dialectic of a porous, globalised society on the one hand (the city), and an impermeable society of insular nativists on the other (the town).

Though the dedicated cosmopolitan novel is an emerging literary genre, cosmopolitan motifs have long nestled within western literature. Olaudah Equiano's novel, *The Interesting Narrative* (1789), explored the duality of the migrant experience and championed a universal (albeit Christian) morality in calling for the abolition of the British slave trade. A similarly cosmopolitan ethos of compassion can be glimpsed in the romantic reverence of a doomed indigenous culture in, for example, James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826). But the humanist impulses expressed in these novels only stretch so far as examples of deliberately cosmopolitan fiction.

The worldly, cosmopolitan character who feels at home in the great cities of the world offers readers a cosmopolitan perspective which may fit more comfortably within contemporary notions of the cosmopolitan literary genre.

This perspective is hardly current. The novels of Henry James, for example, can be read as prototypical of an emerging cosmopolitan ethos (see for example Tintner 1991 and Berman 2001). As a cosmopolitan novelist, James was largely preoccupied with cosmopolitanism in the international, transnational or even anti-nationalist sense. James presented characters, often travellers or émigrés, whose status as cultural others set them

apart from the cultural mores of the national social establishment they visited. The Americans abroad in *Daisy Miller* (1879) and *Portrait of a Lady* (1881) serve as examples of James' outward-looking, international cosmopolitan literature where characters cross national borders and but against social and cultural boundaries abroad. The act of travel necessarily exposed James' characters to cultural difference, which they were forced to confront in ways that occasionally made them more cosmopolitan. Isabel's overseas experiences in *Portrait of a Lady* make her worldlier.

Charlotte Bronte explored similar cosmopolitan motifs in her first novel, *The Professor* (1857). Here, too, does the author's narrative conceit of the traveller, via the itinerant labour of education, draw characters from various cultural backgrounds together as schoolteachers, where they explore their cultural similarities and differences. Bronte's variously French, British, Swiss and Belgian characters are self-reflexive about their cultural identities, teasing out the identity politics of mid-nineteenth-century Europe.

Across the channel, Gustave Flaubert's anti-national sentiments incorporate his work into this historical bookmark of cosmopolitan literature as well. "I'm no more modern than ancient, no more French than Chinese," wrote Flaubert in 1851. "[T]he idea of a native country, that is to say, the imperative to live on one bit of ground marked red or blue on the map and to hate the other bits in green or black, has always seemed to me narrow-minded, blinkered and profoundly stupid. I am a soul brother to everything that lives, to the giraffe and to the crocodile as much as to man" (Flaubert in De Botton 2002, pp. 99-100).

As American, British and French authors, James, Bronte and Flaubert all wrote within the ambient imperialism of mid-to-late nineteenth-century Europe. It is notable that these authors all contributed to questioning the idea that national identity was somehow synonymous with personal identity. Flaubert, James and Bronte were self-reflexive about what it meant to be patriotic in the international environment of nineteenth-century Europe. "He's what's called a cosmopolite," says Isabel in *Portrait of a Lady*. "That means he's a little of everything and not much of any[thing]. I must say I think patriotism is like charity – it begins at home" (p. 139). In *The Professor*, Bronte's half-English, half-Swiss character of Mademoiselle Henri and the nominally English Hunsden similarly debate the merits of nationalist patriotism and cosmopolitan universalism. "I am English, too," proclaims Mademoiselle Henri, "half the blood in my veins is English; thus I have a right to a double power of patriotism, possessing an interest in two noble, free and fortunate countries" (p. 229). Hunsden goads Henri, claiming "I'm a universal patriot, if you could understand me rightly: my country is the world." Henri dryly replies to this cosmopolitan boast, "Sympathies

so widely diffused must be very shallow" (p. 229). James' and Bronte's novels serve as timely reminders: that debates about nationalism and identity predate the age of globalisation. The passages above underline their authors' engagement with a cosmopolitan leitmotif by questioning romantic nineteenth-century notions of 'national character' and 'national identity' as expressions of nationalism in and of themselves, complicating the individual as a metonym for the nation.

Just as James, Bronte and Flaubert all relied on the character of the traveller as a narrative device to draw attention to social and cultural difference, so too does my novel, *White Foam*, situate the educated and upwardly mobile traveller or wanderer as both observer and experiencer of cultural difference.

For Berthold Schoene, such a deliberately global perspective is inherent in the definition of the cosmopolitan novel. "Central to the cosmopolitan novel," he writes, "is its representation of worldwide human living and global community" (Schoene 2009, p. 17). Many of the most celebrated exponents of the modern cosmopolitan novel, authors writing in the post-colonial world of the 1990s and 2000s, maintained such an outwardly global or transnational perspective in their work, often using their novels to more closely examine the social and cultural dimensions of globalisation. Novels such as David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), Richard Russo's *Empire Falls* (2001) and William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (2003) explore globalisation as social and geo-political phenomena, where technology, the global economy and/or consumer culture are part of a narrative strategy by which the authors explore themes of dislocation or interconnectedness in the postmodern, western world of the twenty-first century. Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) is perhaps the pre-eminent example of this version of the cosmopolitan novel, where the volatility of the global stock market at the New York Stock Exchange serves as both a plot device and a central metaphor for the ebb and flow of political capital that corporate wealth enables.

Individually and collectively, these novels challenged the assumption that globalisation was synonymous with progress, inherently inclusive and uncomplicated by ethical dimensions such as race and class. Australian writer, Christos Tsiolkas contributed to this vein of criticism with his novel *Dead Europe* (2005) which draws out the destructive influences of anti-Semitism and the inherent greed of capitalist consumer culture (McCann 2005 in Huggan 2001, p. vii).

Like Henry James and Charlotte Bronte before them, the cosmopolitan treatment of the subject matter in these novels remains outwardly focused on an international or transnational scale; their narratives are cosmopolitan in so far as they interrogate global

systems and processes: the internet, the stock market, the gears of consumer culture, the history and process of migration itself. The intercultural dynamics of these global citizens, however, often fade into the background and subtext of these stories. They are predominantly ambitious novels that carry big ideas through symbolic metanarratives.

More imaginatively, Ursula Le Guin's narrative meditations on what different worlds might look and feel like, which the author explored in her book, *Changing Planes* (2003), can be read as her engagement with seismic global shifts that attended the book's creation in the age of globalisation and America post 9/11. For LeRoy-Frazier (2016), Le Guin's science fiction enabled the author to radically re-imagine the familiar traveller narrative and present alternative versions of globality in cosmopolitan terms.

The creative licence offered by science fiction has encouraged other authors to use the genre to explore alternative visions of cosmopolitanism. On a similar, otherworldly scale are forms of cosmopolitan literature that question the social and political viability of nation states themselves. David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004), for example, can be read as a critique of nationalism and identity politics, particularly through the novel's presentation of a dystopian post-national future where technological advances have created an expendable, quasi-human labour force.

Kelly Frame's literary analysis of the novel illustrates the difficulties of defining a book (and that particular book) within the emerging literary genre of cosmopolitan fiction (Frame 2016).

Cloud Atlas nevertheless contributes to the genealogy of fictional landscapes that depict cultural melting pots, the kind of amalgamated mega cities that will feel familiar to science fiction enthusiasts and finds clear cinematic expression in the cityscapes of the *Blade Runner* films (1982 and 2017). These stories intimate the nation state as social and political centre has been superseded by cosmopolitan (perhaps interstellar) hives of social activity. Here cultural hybridisation is often presented as a survival skill, a kind of imposed cosmopolitanism as response to a cataclysmic event (often implied) and its attendant social rupture. Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988) and *Oryx and Crake* (2004) can be added to such dystopian cosmopolitan novels.

Cosmopolitan art, then, is difficult to contain precisely because its terms of reference are expansive. Cosmopolitanism in literature is effectively a portmanteau where virtually any book with an international character or a theme on global issues reasonably fits, by some measure, within a cosmopolitan sub-genre.

In that way, authors whose works of fiction currently sit under the broad rubrics of modern and post-colonial literature are also being re-read and re-interpreted as contributors to the emerging cosmopolitan literary genre (Spiegel 2015). Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1998), for example, has been read as a narrative collision of post-colonial identities in the age of globalisation, a "transgressive cross-caste romance" which, for Tickell (2003), is simultaneously counter-hegemonic *and* an inadvertent vestige of the very colonial ethnocentrism that post-colonial books like Roy's aim to confound (pp. 76–78). For Schoene, Roy's complex treatment of subaltern identities reveals the global objective of her work. Schoene writes:

> Roy's main interest is in the individual's self-orientation within the world at large, their ongoing struggle of negotiating globality's far-from-straightforward interpermeation with the local, the complex enmeshment of these two spheres that determine our lives and absorb, yet also never quite cease fundamentally to repel and contest, each other. (p. 130)

Complicating fixed notions of national identity emerges as a common trait of cosmopolitan literature. Staying with South Asian novelists writing in English, we may also turn to Salman Rushdie, the likely progenitor of this cosmopolitan inclination in modern Indian fiction. Rushdie's novels consciously reflect on the composite nature of his identity as neither British nor Indian, but a hybrid of both. Rushdie's globalised treatment of identity has compelled some literary critics to add 'cosmopolitan' as a sub-label to Rushdie's categorisation as a post-colonial writer (see for example Luburic-Cvijanovic and Muzdeka 2016; Huggan 2001). Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1995) offers a compelling example of this dual categorisation where India, at the moment of its independence, faces an open but uncertain future. The same future-oriented searching for identity from the perspective of an uncertain social and political present exists in the novels of South-African-cum-South-Australian writer, J.M. Coetzee, whose novel *Disgrace* (2010) can be similarly read with a cosmopolitan sub-label to its established place within the post-colonial literary genre, this time in post-apartheid South Africa.

Literature clearly plays an important role in the self-reflexive process of navigating multiple cultural affiliations, with some novels aiming to consolidate multiple (sometimes competing) cultural and national identities.

The value of cosmopolitan literature

For Schoene, cosmopolitan literature can do more than contemplate this cultural fluidity between nation states at the macro level; writers should delve into cosmopolitan experiences at street level. Schoene (2009) suggests the cosmopolitan author looks beyond the 'fixed' or more rigid structures of nationality or internationalist statehood, in order to experiment with

'cellular modes of representation' that exist beyond the different systems of political rule, exploring ways that human beings negotiate their sense of belonging (p. 27). He aligns his views about the potential for cosmopolitan literature with Ulrich Beck's vision of local cosmopolitanism as making real and viable contributions to cultural hybridity on smaller scales than the supra national dimensions of, for example, global financial markets or international politics. Quoting Beck, Schoene writes:

> The cosmopolitan novel, must aim 'to break out of the self-centred narcissism of the national outlook and the dull incomprehension with which it infects thought and action, and thereby enlighten human beings concerning the real, internal cosmopolitanization of their lifeworlds and institutions.' (Beck in Schoene p. 15)

For Schoene, literature – and the novel in particular – assists in "imagining ourselves as belonging to something far less securely defined and neatly limitable than the nation, that is, to conceive of ourselves first and foremost as members of humanity in all its vulnerable, precariously exposed planetarity" (p. 180). The novel, he writes, has the power to break up identitarian myths and "acknowledge our actual position within the world, which is simultaneously aspirational and free, finite and framed" (p. 180).

And yet, Schoene also points out the novel's familiar structural, narrative reliance on the individual as potentially inhibiting the novel as cosmopolitan project. The novel's historic focus on the individual, he suggests, "proves counterproductive to whatever envisioning of community it may be seeking to accomplish at the same time" (p. 158). To overcome this shortfall in perspective, Schoene calls for a "radical reconceptualisation of subjectivity" in the narrative structure of the contemporary cosmopolitan novel (p. 158).

While such a re-imagining of subjectivity will no doubt advance the literary grammar of the cosmopolitan novel, I suggest the illustrative potential of Nancian compearance can also be achieved without the radical re-imagining of subjectivity that Schoene calls for. Paradoxically, the novel's traditional focus on the individual provides a useful vantage point from which to challenge the primacy of subjectivity itself. The 'I' perspective offers a narrative insight by which to intimately track the ontological decay of the socially atomised individual in relation to the singularity of their community. I present my own novel in defence of this assertion. The decomposition of the individualised narrator in *White Foam* is central to exploring the novel's cosmopolitan ideas. Marc's sense of himself is broken down and revealed as intrinsic to the formation of a self and community, distinct only in so far as his self-awareness contributes to a deeper understanding of how and where he fits and contributes to communal responsibilities, local and global. The novel's central character profits from the material benefits of globalised cosmopolitanism (a global marketplace,

opportunities for international travel, professional mobility) but remains socially isolated from the cultural diversity that globalisation represents. The character only superficially engages the cultural diversity that surrounds him, limiting the depth of his cosmopolitan experience. Confronted by trauma, the protagonist in *White Foam* is forced to re-imagine himself as part of a small, regional community, and become an active participant in its social, cultural and emotional expressions. The novel's setting of a small town forces the protagonist to engage with its residents in direct ways that are unfamiliar to the urbane anonymity he is used to experiencing 'back home.' In this self-reflexive process, 'cosmopolitanism' as an abstract concept, a worldview, becomes cosmopolitanism as a lived experience. Perhaps my treatment of individuality in *White Foam* is, in this respect, precisely the kind of "malleable" and "accommodating" notion of self that Schoene calls for where the self is presented as "a relation instead of a fixity" (p. 159). If so, I suggest that embedding a metamorphic individuality within a character's arc of change can help fiction articulate the ephemerality of individuation itself.

My treatment of cosmopolitanism in *White Foam* also accords with Cheah's understanding of cosmopolitan literature. For Cheah, world literature becomes cosmopolitan when it can do more than merely record historical flows, but actively resists and re-negotiates those flows and the interests (such as political or economic capital) they serve. "Literature can play an active role in the world's ongoing creation because, through the receptibility it enacts, it is an inexhaustible resource for contesting the world given to us through commercial intercourse, monetary transactions and the space-time compression of the global culture industry" (2012, p. 145). For Cheah, the aim of world literature, then, is to engender a more complex, dynamic, active and layered conception of the world than the current inter-relational model of world literature. The ontological conjunction between the producer and receiver of literature is central to the formation of any concomitant aesthetic or political by-product the union between reader and writer enables.

Like Beck, Delanty, Schoene and Cheah, I too contend that literature has the potential to help render cosmopolitanism as a lived experience; a deeply felt and meaningful response to difference that transcends the mere outward-facing contemplation of globality when confronting nationally significant dimensions such as an overseas war, a natural disaster or some other humanitarian crisis. The potential of literature as world creation is potent, and aligns with the perennial state of self-reflection and social contestation described by Nancy. I tell such a cosmopolitan story as it relates to the Australian context and how some of the negotiated cultural boundaries can be re-imagined. *White Foam* is an Australian contribution

to an emerging cosmopolitan literature, which Schoene would likely identify as a Nancean world creation, "a mode of resistance to the largely passively endured fate of globalisation" (2009, p. 25).

By focusing on the experience of cultural difference as it percolates through one's lived experience of everyday life, the global village emerges as a particular village. Engagement at the social level helps draw out a connection to the wider world by simultaneously recognising the migrant as foreign and individual, separate from their international past, but permitting, through them, a tangible sense of the broader world. I maintain that cosmopolitan literature is cosmopolitan when it is deliberately self-reflexive and aware of the fluidity of social and cultural boundaries. While I accept that the meaning of a literary text may be unstable, awaiting 'discovery' by the reader, I contend that literature is deliberately cosmopolitan when the narrative is openly curious about exploring how cultural or national values, myths and traditions are created. It is also, a priori, accepting of the idea that culture is iterative. Literature is thus cosmopolitan when it openly challenges notions that identity – personal, national or otherwise – exists in a vacuum or has ever been part of an uninterrupted cultural continuity.

Australian literature is, by this more inward-looking definition of cosmopolitan literature, well represented. As an immigrant nation, there is in Australia, a longstanding literary dedication to various forms of 'traveller' and 'settler' narratives where characters physically confront unfamiliar (often harsh) terrain while internally (metaphysically) battling to recalibrate internal, familiar notions of home against the unfamiliar social and cultural backdrop of their adopted country. For some scholars, these narratives of encounter are part of Australian literature, as revealing texts on Australia's colonial and post-colonial projects, where social and cultural forces compete to define and redefine the borders of the national imaginary. For some authors, this challenge has served to sharply define the boundary between existing, dominant (white, Anglo) culture as it resists incoming subcultures (see Vijay Mishra's *Dark Side of the Dream*: *Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (1990); Geldor and Jacobs (1998). Literary critic, Graham Huggan, warns cultural critics against reading too much into national literature, as if its collected weight represents a conscious national project. Australian literature, he says, is both reflective and iterative and we, as cultural critics, should think of it as having absorbed the history of Australian social relations. It offers us, as readers, occasionally coherent and varying answers to the question of what it means to be Australian (Huggan 2007). The vastness of the land, the bush, and not the sea, frequently lies at the core of the essential Australian experience, particularly the

foreigner's experience of Australia. Huggan counts Henry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife (1892)* and Stella "Miles" Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901) as prototypical stories about eking out a precarious and isolated existence that forces their protagonists to continuously refine their ability to belong in the harshness of the social and physical environments of outback Australia (Huggan, pp. 52–62). Novelist, Tim Winton, has found a somewhat poetic balance between life pushed to the edges of the continent, between rock and sea. Winton's characters are often beholden or subordinate to the ocean, which he presents as the nexus of a fragile balance between order and chaos, a symbiotic leitmotif in much of his work. Whatever else they might be, Winton's characters are subjects of nature (see for example, *Breath* (2008) and *Land's Edge* (2010).

The feeling of belonging and not belonging, then, both in the environment, the new country and no longer belonging to the old, emerges as a perennial theme of Australian literature. Huggan reminds us that the work of Australian nineteenth century colonial writers such as Marcus Clarke, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, (first serialised in the early 1870s), Henry Kingsley (Geoffry Hamlyn (1859), Rolf Boldrewood, *Robbery Under Arms* (serialised in 1882) and Rosa Praed, *The Romance of a Station* (1889) also sought to make sense of the new world, predominantly from the perspectives of the English, or at least Anglo, émigré experience, though Praed has the distinction of having been born in Queensland (Huggan, p. 51).

I contend this language of discovery and exploration, of simultaneous attraction to and rejection of the new world engages one of the central questions of cosmopolitan literature: *how do 'I' fit within the world around me?* To this end, multicultural, non-Anglo-Celtic authors have added their own versions of the settler narrative, offering their own perspectives on identity and experience of alterity. For literary critic, Jean-François Vernay (2016), migrant writers such as Sophie Mason, Ania Walwicz and Adib Khan, as well as Australian-born writers with an immigrant heritage, such as Eva Sallis, collectively helped challenge fixed notions of Australian Anglo-Celtic identity by writing about their hybrid cultural experiences of living in modern Australia. Like Vernay, I too am cautious about rushing to proclaim such multicultural literature has successfully smoothed out cultural difference (p. 84).

It is worth noting that Australian literature is global, not just as an export industry, but also by the diversity of languages in which it is written. The Australian Multicultural Writers database records thousands of works by Australian writers who identify with cultural heritages other than Anglo-Celtic. Thousands of Australian literary contributions are written

in languages other than English including Greek, Italian and Chinese. Those publications should be read not only as contributions to multicultural literature, but to the global scope and legacy of Australian writing itself (Jacklin 2009).

Perhaps the cultural impact of such writing could be amplified if this volume of work were more broadly accessible. We may begin by translating more of it into English. It seems likely that English readers would find within these stories further evidence that Australia's cultural identity remains unresolved. Even without the benefit of this work, social otherness remains an enduring theme of Australian literature, not just on the land, or in the wild, the outback, but in the city too, particularly its suburbs.

Suburbs as cosmopolitan sites in Australian literature

The suburbs perennially feature as real and imagined spaces within which readers can peruse the social dimension of Australian pluralism. In the suburbs, readers can fly over back fences and see how the bush has been subdivided into neat quarter-acre blocks that contain the diversity the nation formally celebrates. Though diversity is proclaimed as a national value, the suburbs often serve to reinforce divisions between class and race, and are often presented as an alienating place, where cultures are thrown together, perhaps aware of one another, but largely contained by separate and narrow bands of the cultural prism enabled by the suburban experience. The works of Judah Waten, for example, exemplify this social experience in some of the popular multicultural literature that emerged from the period of post-war migration. In his *Alien Son* (1978 [1952]) and *Distant Land* (1978 [1964]) the lenses of Russianness and Jewishness define and limit the social sphere of Waten's Australian life. For Waten, multiple identities: Russian, Jewish, working class simultaneously defined, refined and contained his sense of belonging to broader society. But Waten also portrays the result of the cosmopolitan process at work as Russian Jewish émigrés struggle to recognise and reconcile the hybridised version of their own culture when they discover the Australianised iteration abroad. Home is again displaced in the cultural melting pots of suburbia.

Unsurprisingly, suburbia remains a focus of multicultural fiction elsewhere too. In the United States, works by Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for example, and her novel *Americanah* (2013) explore personal experiences of race and identity within the cultural melting pot of a modern American cosmopolitan society. Australian writer of African-Caribbean descent, Maxine Beneba Clarke, offers a similar perspective for the Australian context, negotiating otherness and sameness within the diasporas of Australian multiculturalism in her memoir *The Hate Race* (2016). Beneba Clarke joins a growing list of

Australian authors, who also sought to reconcile competing cultural identities as part of the cosmopolitan experience. Alice Pung, whose ethnic Chinese parents fled Cambodia's killing fields and found asylum in Australia in the 1980s, adds another distinctive voice to the experience of difference, a story long narrated by male voices, such as Waten's. Though born in Australia, Pung's memoir *Unpolished Gem* (Pung 2006), details the challenges of her multicultural family life in the Melbourne suburbs of Footscray and Braybrook. Pung registers the voice of migrant women who often defy the demure social roles expected of their traditional cultures. For example, Pung writes:

> To raise a girl, I realised, you'd need gallons of Social Conditioner with added Spirit Deflator. Rub onto every limb, until limp, put the child into a chair and wait until she sets. When appendages harden, you know you have a perfect young woman – so still and silent and sedate that you could wrap your precious one up in cotton wool and put her in a cabinet. Ah, look at the darling geisha behind glass. (pp. 105–106)

Writing as a minority woman, Pung's challenge to cultural orthodoxy simultaneously contributes both a feminist resistance to patriarchy and a multidimensional cosmopolitan alterity to her work.

For Gunew (2017), multicultural voices such as Pung's and Clarke's contribute to an emerging literature of *neo-cosmopolitan negotiators*, writers whose multiple identities nuance simplified notions of difference. This perspective is articulated by other scholars too, who contend that alternative forms of narrative art, such as video games (Cole 2018), also contribute to more complex depictions of race and gender in consumer culture, which cumulatively challenge facile representations of difference in Australian popular culture.

However, while powerful complex stories and depictions may be as vectors of social change, the impact of diversity in Australian literature is also limited, asserts (Kon-yu 2018), by the predominance of white male perspectives, propagated by Australia's largely myopic and conservative publishing industry. This dialogue of how Australian writing and the publishing industry both advances and holds back the narrative of difference nevertheless remains an important contribution to the iterative process of writing and understanding cosmopolitan literature itself.

Through both advances and retreats in our narratives of difference, the Australian suburbs have persisted as prime sites of multicultural interaction. Like Adichie's *Americanah*, Beneba Clarke and Alice Pung's experiences of the suburbs, for example, effectively tranche the multicultural city into a sometimes cohesive, sometimes fragmented puzzle of multiple cultural affiliations. The experience of the suburbs has been a central feature of multicultural literature in modern Australia and the suburbs is often used as a

setting with which to isolate the relationship of one group to another as part of a broader cultural tableau. Christos Tsiolkas, for example, used his writing to explore conflicts between sexual, cultural and class identities in, for example, *The Slap* (2008) and *Loaded* (1995). Both novels, however, are again dependent on their urban and suburban settings, effectively reliant on turning the city into a compartmentalised village to explore the author's themes of social dislocation and inter-cultural/generational conflict (Papastergiadis 2013b).

Rather than emancipate cultural diversity, the suburbs have more often served to contain it. Pung wrote of the physical and cultural isolation she witnessed in the Melbourne suburbs of Footscray and Braybook. "Inside these double-storey brick-veneer houses," she wrote, "countless silent women were sitting at their dinner tables. They were living the dream lives of the rich and idle in Phnom Penh, and yet their imposed idleness made them inarticulate and loud. They didn't know how to live this life of luxury and loneliness" (p. 147). The suburbs, as Turner (2008) usefully suggests, are themselves increasingly politicised, with middle and outer suburbs playing home to cultural and economic divisions that further complicate the mythology of the Australian suburbs as a social leveller. The idle housewives Pung described would likely agree with Turner's assessment. A postcode is not a community.

Michel de Kretser's novel *Questions of Travel* (2012) provides a compelling fictive example of how silos of cultural diversity are parcelled up in the Australian suburbs. In *Questions of Travel*, the suburb again serves not only as a setting, but as a narrative device through which to explore cultural diversity in contemporary Australian society. Here 'cosmopolitan' Sydney is a source of cultural discovery for one of the book's central characters, Ravi, a Sri Lankan asylum seeker fleeing the violence in his country in the early 2000s. Most interestingly, Ravi seeks an 'authentic' Australian experience and resists offers to be put in touch with people "like him," other Sri Lankans awaiting department of immigration rulings on their applications for asylum. De Kretser's novel is here cosmopolitan because it embraces a representation of the refugee as having an individual experience rather than metonymical of a collective dispossession. Critically, Ravi is self-aware of his new cultural surroundings and wants to experience Australia, loves its multicultural food et cetera. Culture, de Kretser intimates, is porous and allows for the transnational experiences of her central character. "By the end of that summer," Ravi meditates, "Australia had entered Ravi. Now it would keep him company no matter where in the world he went" (p. 264). The Indian, Greek, Italian and Russian neighbours who share Ravi's multicultural Sydney neighbourhood, we assume, share this transnational contemplation. Ravi reflects on how such

miscegenation is unthinkable back in Sri Lanka. However, those culturally diverse neighbours are but glimpsed; furtively from over the fence line, sighted as they head off to work or come home. Diversity is at arm's length in the suburbs. Despite its multiculturalism, the city is still a social labyrinth where superficial interactions, particularly at work, further complicate certainties about where home really is. Michel de Kretser's *Questions* dramatise these issues.

The suburbs have absorbed the bulk of immigrant experience since the great wave of migration after the Second World War, so it is unsurprising the suburbs have featured so prominently in Australia's literature of diversity.

Towns as underexplored cosmopolitan settings in Australian literature

As regional migration continues in Australia, our narrative of diversity may shift locations, de-emphasising the suburbs and re-characterising the town as an important site of multicultural experience and, perhaps, of cosmopolitan exchange. To what extent will the town, as a real or fictive social setting, be rendered as distinct from the city, and how will the imagined residents respond to those increasing multicultural interactions? Will they be exemplars of the cosmopolitan interaction as in the case of *The African Doctor* (2016), a cinematic adaptation of a true story about a Congolese physician whose family breathes new life into the small community of Marly-Gomont in rural France? Or will Benjamin Law's memoir *The Family Law* (2010), in which he details experiences of marginalisation while growing up Asian and gay in an Australian small town, remain the anticipated outsider's experience of cultural isolation in regional Australia?

Whichever eventuates, the Australian town currently remains an underexplored opportunity to better examine the real and imagined negotiations of interactive pluralism. What does the comingling of races and languages do to the experience of culture in smaller social settings? Are there opportunities there for mutually invigorating cultural hybridisations of cosmopolitanism? How can the town, as a smaller social space, contribute to drawing out this cosmopolitan experience? How and where are these interactions, real or imagined, inscribed in contemporary Australian literature?

The village – not the city – as the site of cosmopolitan interaction is a literary opportunity to expand the representation of cultural diversity and historical dynamism, an opportunity that is beginning to be taken up by contemporary novels such as *Carpentaria* (Wright 2006) or *Jasper Jones* (Silvey 2009), which re-imagine and complicate the largely culturally and racially homogeneous Australian towns of Tim Winton's imagination as

potential sites of cultural expansion. Jasper Jones' fictive town of Corrigan at first depicts a 'typically' Australian rural town, complete with ambient xenophobia and an old man who lives in a shack on the outskirts of town. And yet, at the centre of the story are multicultural relationships between Indigenous and Vietnamese characters who defy xenophobic stereotypes by finding various footholds of common ground. The story is set in 1960s Australia, an important detail, because the relative open mindedness of the young central characters presage a more open and tolerant society, opening the door to the multicultural future that was to come. In *Carpentaria,* the fictional town of Desperance, set in Queensland, is the site of transgenerational trauma wrought by colonialism, a central wound that compounds through generations in different and destructive ways. The narrative is more cosmopolitan in the relational sense of Nancy's pluralistic ontology, the broad interplay between 'me' and 'you' that is both constructive and destructive. The novel captures the lived experience of colonial dispossession and the ongoing struggle to rebuild one's self and one's culture. The interplay of characters in the book are important because, through each other, they strive to reconceive a physical and cultural sense of place.

Re-imagined notions of 'home,' I contend, are influenced by opportunities for and experiences of passive cultural interaction. A community is built and sustained by actively participating in other people's lives, not just being aware of them over the fence line. Interaction is central to the character of shared social experience, for better or worse. The town, and not just the suburb, may offer a dynamic site for this cosmopolitan interaction. Town residents may negotiate diversity outside of official multicultural policy, offering insights into the "everyday" experiences of cultural diversity as explored by scholars such as Wise and Velayutham (2009).

That said, Watson (2018) cautions us against romanticising the cosmopolitan potential of shared spaces, such as classrooms or workplaces, where different people regularly interact. Citing work by scholars such as Clark, Dixon and Tredoux (2005) as well as Dixon and Durrheim (2003), Watson reminds us that social research challenges the extent to which shared space can meaningfully contest existing social divisions based on race, class and gender.

Sites of coexistence, however, where people's interactions are less superficial, argues Watkins, can draw people together in more meaningful ways. For Watson, Human Libraries, for example, which bring diverse people together in meaningful personal dialogue, "are examples of spaces for coexistence because they bring strangers together and enable them to cross boundaries, erode divisions and challenge practices of informal segregation" (2018, p.

222). I suggest towns can also serve as spaces of coexistence. In the previous chapter I articulated the possibility of such cosmopolitan solidarity in regional Australian towns.

In works of fiction, we can allow ourselves to imagine such cosmopolitan sites more fully. Authors can invoke the angels and devils of their characters' nature to challenge social norms and depict robust examples of cosmopolitan intersection outside the city. The subjective and aspirational nature of art has long permitted artists to depict the human experience as more noble than the artist's own experience of life or social milieu might have warranted. Localised forms of cosmopolitanism can be rendered in narrative, which link local diversity to the global community from which it hails, creating opportunities for convivial openness. To reflect on that cultural junction is transnational, to build on it is cosmopolitan, particularly if the social construction, as Nancy contends, is never finished, but forever built and dismantled in the perennial negotiation of his 'inoperative community.' Australian literature can do more to explore such cosmopolitan intersections.

As a novel, White Foam contributes to the depiction of the town as fertile ground for cosmopolitan interaction. Structurally, the novel combines the traditional, outward facing, transnational cosmopolitan perspective with the inward, ontological narratives that have become synonymous with multicultural fiction. In *White Foam*, readers rediscover the familiar cosmopolite of Charlotte Bronte and Henry James, the urbane and upwardly mobile international character, whose, 'Othering' perspective recalls Edward Said's *Orientalism*, whereby non-western perspectives are assumed to be culturally and politically servile to European imperial societies (Said 1995). The Orientalist perspective of my novel's main character undermines the humanist notions of his supposed cosmopolitanism. In *White Foam*, such an implicitly imperial character collapses into an equally familiar narrative where multiple cultural affiliations are inwardly and outwardly negotiated. The collision of these perspectives offers readers a cognitive dissonance through which to evaluate their assumptions about what is old and new, blurring the perceptual boundary between who and what is explorer and explored. *White Foam* expands the familiar settler narrative of discovery with additional scope for personal and cultural mediation in the form of a choice between local cosmopolitanism and tribalism.

Like Nino Culotta's *They're a Weird Mob* (1957) the book focuses on small group dynamics central to determining the character of the migrant experience. Where Culotta's novel supports an assimilationist view of migration, *White Foam* offers a cosmopolitan perspective. Where Cullota's narrative is set in Sydney and its suburbs, my novel is set in a coastal village. In my contemporary work of fiction, the expansive social and cultural

mediations of urbane cosmopolitanism converge in the village, encouraging readers to re-evaluate the city as the cosmopolitan ideal.

The resulting narrative also hints at the lost opportunity for dialogue between the encounterers and the encountered, challenging the assumed boundary between them. Like the few settler characters who show an openness to the Aboriginal community in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005), *White Foam* contributes to the presentation of the Australian town, not only as a setting, but also as a social environment within which to explore cultural diversity, the interaction of multicultural, intercultural or transcultural society. Grenville's story is about Aboriginal dispossession, yes; it dramatises some of the worst excesses of colonial greed and violence. But it is also a novel about the missed opportunity of colonial and Indigenous interaction. By the end of the novel, the sole remaining and emblematic Aboriginal character sits outside of his traditional hut. He eschews all the foreigners' goods, his food, his clothing. He has deliberately stripped himself of all but his original possessions, which he now cherishes as his only links to an irretrievable past. Grenville intimates that a door between the two cultures, once open, has been shut. The novel expressly warns about the equal dangers of stereotyping and fetishising cultural diversity. It openly eschews valorising ethnicity as a stable and sacrosanct state of cultural existence and openly challenges multiculturalism as the dominant social ethos, too often imagined as a bland and respectful mutual cohabitation of cultures with its emphasis on tolerance as the apotheosis of civic virtue. Stasis, the novel bloodily asserts, is not how cultures interact. There is a dynamic contest between them. In the relationship between the Aboriginal community and the colonists in Grenville's *Secret River*, that relationship showed moments of intercultural potential, glimpses of mutually rewarding exchange, hope for dialogue and mutual respect. The fragile potential of this cohabitation is ultimately destroyed by the twin impulses of greed and violence. The potential cosmopolitan intersection, as Grenville shows us, can be both constructive and destructive. But the author holds it up to us, if only to appreciate the opportunity for connection, whether lost or destroyed, was once there to be taken.

The violence at the end of *White Foam* draws on a similar tragedy of lost opportunity. The vehicular homicide mirrors the violence in the American town of Charlottesville, Virginia, where James Alex Fields Jr. drove his car into a crowd of counter protesters at a white nationalist rally in 2017, killing Heather Heyer, aged 32. In *White Foam*, the car represents both Marc's anger, as well as that of the protestors assembled in the fictional town

of Niminbinji. The vehicle emerges as both a symptom and a metaphor for the social isolation and cultural dislocation of violent extremism itself.

The murder in *White Foam* also served as an intertextual reference to the phenomenon of terrorists, more broadly, who increasingly use vehicles to inflict indiscriminate damage in a way that is detached and insulated from their human targets/victims. As the not-for-profit organisation, Counter Extremism Project, reports (2019) there has been a global increase in the use of vehicles as weapons of terror. A rental car used as a weapon in my narrative was therefore a deliberate choice. Linking my central character's murder with this macabre global trend was intended to highlight the material risk of apathy, tribalism and factionalism, wherever they occur. In Australia, I suggest, we are not immune to such violence. Terror, I imply, can also be waged upon ourselves. Developing emotional maturity and growing our capacity for empathy may help protect us from our darker impulses.

Whether characters are constructive or destructive, whether stories advance, delay or retreat the narrative of difference, we can nevertheless find, in literature, a coherent response to social and cultural change over time. The town offers writers underexplored opportunities to thicken stories about the Australian multicultural and cosmopolitan experience. A community can be both inclusive and exclusive; novels can and should explore how socialisation in small towns can influence both inclusivity and exclusivity. At worst, the town can remain the insular nightmare depicted in *Wake in Fright.* At best, towns can engender a collective disposition towards openness to others. Cultures clash. When they do, the results can be bloody and destructive, but they can also be creative and mutually invigorating. As when galaxies collide, the forceful re-arrangement of stars is no less beautiful or interesting than before. In fiction, at least, we owe ourselves the luxury of speculating what such a rearrangement might look like.

Conclusion

This project has questioned some tightly held assumptions about cosmopolitanism. I first challenged the notion that cosmopolitan thought is primarily an outward-facing global worldview. While a global perspective and engagement may eventuate from a cosmopolitan outlook, the catalyst of cosmopolitan thinking is often deeply personal and tethered to an individual's sense of being, their understanding of their own purpose and identity in the world.

I relied on Nancy's philosophical ideas about pluralistic ontology to articulate such a shared notion of being, which I propose underlies cosmopolitan thinking and feeling at an interpersonal level. Becoming and being a *citizen of the world,* I suggested*,* requires more than a passport and an understanding about the social, political and economic interconnectedness of the world. Being cosmopolitan is a deeply personal experience that involves how we view ourselves in relation to our own past, and to others and theirs. Formal political projects and social policy levers can only do so much to encourage cosmopolitanism. It begins with us.

In modern Australia, I suggested that broad notions of cultural acceptance, enabled by our pervasive multiculturalism, support the emergence and expression of cosmopolitanism in this country.

Australian cosmopolitanism, I argued, may extend beyond the so-called cultural melting pots typically associated with large cities, such as Sydney or Melbourne. And further, small towns may help to draw out cosmopolitan exchanges by enabling recurring social interactions between people.

To support this view, I applied Robert Putnam's (2000, 2003) research into trust, reciprocity and the building of social capital in towns versus cities to articulate the possible socio-political dynamics of small, diverse towns.

I explored some examples of cosmopolitan interactions in Australian towns vis-á-vis case studies where there was potential for cultural fusions between existing residents and new migrants in small towns. The willingness of some townspeople to adopt new perspectives and practices may not only be a measure of cultural diversity or of assimilation but may be evidence of cosmopolitan practice as well. Existing regional refugee resettlement initiatives offered examples of how planned and supported migration initiatives could not only restore social and economic vibrancy, but also engender meaningful cosmopolitan interactions at

street level. Such initiatives in the Australian townships of Mingoola and Nhill, I suggested, may already be encouraging the cosmopolitan socialisation of its residents, where different cultures and perspectives influence each other in meaningful ways. New and existing members of the community, I suggested, were motivated by a mutually beneficial objective of revitalising these towns. Their shared future together was linked to the social and economic viability of the town itself, encouraging their shared desire to make living together work.

Such towns offer a condensed social, economic and political arena that can help draw out the socio-cultural value of communal activity in cosmopolitan terms, including Fine's (2012) notion of cosmopolitan solidarity; Rumford's (2012) ideas about cosmopolitan borders as deliberate sites of cosmopolitan exchange; and Watson's (2018) ideas about open, social environments that can nurture meaningful intercultural dialogue.

In behavioural and socio-economic terms, I also suggested that regional settlement initiatives may yet be understood in terms of Thaler and Sunstein's (2009) nudge theory where altering the lived environment can influence behavioural change. Perhaps such settlement initiatives provide residents with a choice architecture that makes it easier for people to change the ways they perceive and treat each other.

I cautioned that it may take time to identify and articulate the long-term social and cultural impact of what may be happening in some of these Australian towns. It remains to be seen whether such initiatives can help residents redress socio-economic disparities and overcome political disadvantages associated with marginalisation. In time, we may better appreciate if they are truly examples of an emerging local cosmopolitanism or merely further examples of Australian cultural diversity exported to small towns.

I therefore undertook the artistic challenge set out by Pheng Cheah and Nikos Papastergiadis who suggested that art, particularly literature, offered useful tools by which to imagine what a more cosmopolitan experience might look like. To this end, I wrote a novel set in a fictional town, Niminbinji, which dramatised the challenges and opportunities of cosmopolitanism in small town Australia. To write *White Foam,* I drew on my own lived experiences as a migrant, as well as my professional experiences of researching, and working with migrants and refugees.

What I discovered in completing this project is the value of combining creative work and scholarly text, what David Herman calls 'trandisciplinarity' which is about more than borrowing methodologies between scholarly disciplines and is about actively melding them in a cross-fertilized approach that is centred on creation (Herman in Thompson, Hansord and

Noske 2016)). Braiding together real and imagined experiences of cultural diversity through case studies, scholarly research and personal narrative, my work helped make abstract notions of cosmopolitanism, nationalism and identity politics more tangible. For example, my novel explored what a Nancian experience of singular plurality might look and feel like, a destabilizing experience with potential for renewal. The combination of novel and exegesis in this project collectively contribute to the debate about reconciling competing cultural identities within Australia's multicultural society. By focusing on how cosmopolitan ideas and feelings may play out in a hyper-local Australian context, this project has expanded the existing academic discourse on cosmopolitanism and, crucially, brought a synthesized version of this global academic tradition to bear on a specific Australian context, the modern Australian country town. As a novel, *White Foam* contributed to an emerging cosmopolitan literature in Australia by proposing that small towns may be ripe for cooperation and cosmopolitan solidarity. Cosmopolitan interactions, I contended, can engender a socio-cultural mode of questioning and self-reflection about oneself and the world around us. I suggested that when we engage or interact with someone different to us, we also may also begin to see difference as merely a manifestation of the totality of the human experience. By drawing together sociological scholarship on cosmopolitan notions of empathy with case studies of convivial multiculturalism in small Australian towns, I have demonstrated the potential for cosmopolitan experience may be more broadly accessible and widespread in Australia than intuition might lead us to believe. From the case studies and social research I have presented, shared space and mutual responsibilities can engender feelings of empathy which I have shown are linked to cosmopolitan notions of solidarity. Social, cultural economic and geographic factors were shown to play an important role in generating positive emotional responses to cultural difference.

With that awareness, we may begin to glimpse that our own cultural experience is but one of many possible permutations, helping us glimpse an elemental human dignity behind the cultural veil. Such an experience may help us expand the real and imagined boundaries of belonging in national terms. In the future, Australians may continue to pursue cosmopolitan ideas in art and culture. To this end, I also explored the role of Australian literature in advancing the cosmopolitan imaginary. Towns, not just cities, I argued, could serve writers pursuing their cosmopolitan imaginations. I discovered the town is underrepresented as a narrative setting for positive representations of cultural diversity. Therein lies an opportunity for writers to challenge assumptions that residents of small towns are closed-minded about diversity. From my research in cosmopolitan literature, the novel also emerged as both a

measure and instrument of social and cultural change, which writers and readers can use to help us better understand and express our feelings and experiences of cosmopolitanism. In my own novel, *White Foam*, I showed how our capacity for self-reflexion, our ontology confronts our experience of culture in dynamic ways that sometimes reveal the essence of cosmopolitan interaction. By exploring the potential and utility of cosmopolitanism as a social construct within an engaging and approachable creative work, I aimed to encourage broad discussion about how we collectively decide who and what is Australian.

We may also choose to examine how social policies can be used as instruments of cosmopolitan change. We may adjust government multicultural funding models to encourage further cross-cultural cooperation. We may increasingly support innovative migration and settlement initiatives in smaller communities. We may fund the education of cosmopolitan ethics and values in schools to encourage a society of worldly people who are trained to think and plan in global ways and be comfortable with social and cultural difference, not just mindful of them. These ideas are worth exploring, both in acts of creation, such as novels, as well as through government policy. Australian multiculturalism has not failed. Ours is a robust and enduring approach to diversity that can accommodate further change.

And yet, universalism, humanism, cosmopolitanism may seem harder to accept today than these well-meaning concepts sounded even a decade or two ago. Today, one can be forgiven for thinking they sound idealistic or naïve. Populist cynicism is understandable. Far from signalling the beginnings of a global détente, the Arab Spring did not move us closer to a general stilling of global discord, as many of us allowed ourselves to hope. Regional wounds, throughout the world, have torn open, destabilising those areas but also the rest of the world by how various countries react to and are affected by real and perceived threats of global terrorism, refugee crises and economic shocks. Ongoing global conflicts, such as those in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, have become emblematic of a hostile planet, a fractured global citizenry, one that has ironically never been more interdependent on dwindling natural resources, the instantaneous movement of capital across national borders, the flow of international migration and our constant reliance on technology.

However connected we may be; these variables today seem less likely to be read as a potential basis for global cooperation. They are more likely to be interpreted as a threat. The vote for ‘Brexit’ in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump in the United States have been interpreted as symptoms of a nationalist impulse gripping the developed world, a cultural and economic protectionism hardened by real and perceived threats of terrorism and economic shocks (see for example O'Toole 2018).

Anti-globalisation and nativist sentiments have gathered momentum in Australia too. The resurgence of nationalist politics in Australia, of which One Nation is perhaps the most visible formal political expression, find antecedents in the growth of (white) nationalist sentiment and the rise of quasi-militant social protest groups such as Reclaim Australia and The United Patriots Front.

Long marginal ideas of so-called alternative right groups have been emboldened by a global swell of formal anti-global and anti-immigration political stances, such as Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, The National Front in France, as well as a resurgent nativism in the United States, sloganeered by the 'America First' ideology of Trump's America.

Ironically, such nationalist rhetoric draws strength and momentum from the very connectedness that opponents of globalisation claim to reject. Irony notwithstanding, political forces are gathering to voice their opposition to globalisation as the status quo through social protest and racist political rhetoric.

In Australia, we can do better. Our multicultural society can be held up as an example for others to follow. As a successful, relatively harmonious, culturally diverse society, we can embrace the dynamic social and cultural mediation of cosmopolitanism to expand the terms of Australian national identity. Existing notions of multiculturalism in this country, I suggest, already prime cosmopolitan thinking and action. We are well-positioned to update our understanding of what both nationalism and multiculturalism can be and what they can do to accommodate the rapidly changing world around us.

Such reimagining is particularly urgent because the threat of global climate change seems likely to push us and the rest of the world closer together, forcing us to confront multiple and simultaneous crises such as war, famine, resource scarcity and refugee crises, or all of the above.

It seems prudent for us to explore ways of priming our citizens to adopt an Australian self-image that is robust and flexible enough to accommodate these possible experiences, a national imagination that can better absorb the combination of naturally occurring and forced co-mingling of cultures and people, the impact of immigration by choice and out of necessity.

Our national self-image can withstand the reality that people identify with multiple cultural affiliations. Empathy is one of the defining features of Australian multiculturalism. Australian multiculturalism is up to the task of evolving, of fusing with cosmopolitanism. We can explore this fusion through our imagination, our language, our policies and our actions.

Many Australians are already cosmopolites. Our cosmopolitanism is not really an 'ism' at all, but an endless process of learning and adaptation, always changing in the cauldron of social transformation. We are cosmopolitans when we take a self-reflexive interest in understanding our selves and our place in the world. We pursue a more cosmopolitan society whenever we ask ourselves questions such as: What is similar between me and that person? Is there anything I can learn from this person? Is there anything I can teach this person? Is the way I/we have done things in the past necessarily the best way of doing it now?

We, as a society, are already demonstrating our willingness to adopt a more cosmopolitan outlook in defining our cultural experience. The readiness of some local councils in Melbourne to stop observing Australia Day, because of the date's insensitivity to the historical experience of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, is a useful example of the kind of cosmopolitan impulse I have been describing in this project. These are cosmopolitan actions because they are self-conscious about how traditions are constructed and critical of how and why cultural myths are upheld. Such opposition to mainstream culture demonstrates our capacity to formally challenge, or even change 'national' traditions. I suggest our existing multicultural paradigm allows for this kind of cosmopolitan dialogue and this can help us to reframe concepts of belonging in Australia, because we acknowledge the complexity of individual identity and the limitations of an essentialised identity. To what extent does the culturally diverse, socially and economically progressive town, the global village, also complicate this nexus of belonging? And to what extent does Australian multiculturalism, as it exists, accommodate or underwrite the cosmopolitan experience?

As presented here, the town may already be fertile ground for the ontological singularity described by Jean Luc Nancy. The town, fictional and real, may have the potential to complicate the existing dynamic of us and them. In a town, it seems more plausible to argue that they are us and we are them. How we respond to diversity helps determine the character of our social experience. Through our towns, we can appreciate that ours is a resilient population that can willingly enter a dialogue and prepare to come out of it changed.

Updating our understanding of how nationalism, multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism can work together may help us accommodate the changing world around us. Cosmopolitanism can not only help us adapt to and benefit from the world around us, it could ennoble this country, begin to forgive us our trespasses and may yet reveal the grace of our people.

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