



Creative responses to uncertainty: the representation of environmental
change themes within recent fiction

by

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Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

Date:

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Introduction

Climate change is widely regarded as one of the foremost threats to human survival. My research investigates how fiction writers explore the emotional impacts of physical changes in the environment. This exegesis discusses the representation of environmental change in recent Australian fiction across a range of styles, as well as providing a critical analysis of the scholarly literature on this subject. In addition to this exegetical analysis, my creative novella presents a personal exploration of these themes through an original literary artefact.

In my novella *A Widening Gyre*, the main character grows to understand her own and others' responses to environmental change through a range of character- and place-interactions across five chapters. I present varying responses to climate change in each character through exploring issues that contribute to personal meaning, identity, wellbeing, and resilience against the context of a changing physical environment. *A Widening Gyre* uses environmental change as a premise for investigating human uncertainty about the future.

Milech and Schilo describe the exegesis as an opportunity to define a research question and investigate how other 'artists, producers and theorists'¹ have addressed that topic. My exegetical research therefore asks the initial question: how have other authors of fiction explored and represented emotional responses to environmental change?

Muhlhausler and Pearce define the human exploration of environmental change issues, or environmental discourse, as 'the linguistic devices articulating arguments about the relationship between humans and their environment'.² Fiction presents a powerful environmental discourse, as it has the capacity to explore emotional and intellectual responses to both actual and imagined environmental changes.

Narrative theorists value environmental discourse in understanding fiction that discusses relationships between humans and their non-human surroundings. The extensive group of environmentally-focussed enquiries initially introduced to critical theory as 'Ecocriticism' is the field in which they analyse these relationships. This exegesis explores the extent to which ecocritical enquiries provide an analytical framework for discussing fiction that focusses on environmental change. Glotfelty

¹ Barbara H. Milech and Ann Schilo, "'Exit Jesus": Relating the Exegesis and Creative/Production: Components of a research thesis.' *TEXT* Special Issue 3, (2004).

² Peter Muhlhausler and Adrian Peace, 'Environmental Discourses' *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 35 (2006) 457-479.

contends that ecocritical analysis ‘consider[s] nature not just as the stage upon which the human story is acted out, but as an actor in the drama’.³ Chapter One introduces the broad field of critical enquiries into environmental changes as represented in fiction. Ecocriticism formally emerged in the mid-1990s. I focus on recent developments, specifically enquiring into the challenges posed to literary critics in the climate change era.

I introduce the elements of ecocritical analysis in Chapter One, and observe that literary criticism of environmental concepts continues to develop in complexity with emerging themes. For example, theorists like Buell contend that ecocritical analysis of literary sources now encompasses enquiries related to the psychological, transnational, and gendered elements of relationships between humans and their surroundings. The advent of the Anthropocene is another recent discussion among critics. The discussion about Anthropocene challenges the relationships between humans and their surroundings. Post-materialism, or the new materialisms, makes a case for the recognition of non-human entities of all kinds, even those not recognised as biologically alive. A further thread of recent discussion relates to place-making and the roles of local versus global responses to environmental change. My overview of relevant critical issues concludes with the observation that authors can use environmentally-themed writing to discuss cognitive and emotional concepts, including human responses to uncertainty. This approach is much more complex than early theorists such as Glotfelty and Fromm would have anticipated, and reveals the constantly evolving nature of environmental issues and their related discourse.

Chapters Two to Five investigate how other authors have used narratological devices and stylistic elements of fiction to depict humans responding to environmental change. I respond to this analysis throughout my exegesis, by reflecting on the process of creating my own novella. My novella discusses climate change, and I am therefore investigating other writers’ approaches to it.

In Chapter Two, I reflect on emerging critical discussions relating to realist climate change fiction. My research contends that fiction is a powerful and wide-reaching way of communicating about climate change. I explain the valuable roles of narratives in understanding the impacts of climate change. My analysis incorporates discussions that emerged during the period of my research in 2010 – 2015. Further

³ Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, (Eds) *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*, (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1996) p. xxi.

discussions have occurred since then, which are discussed in response to feedback provided during the examination process. Responses are limited as a consequence of the scope restrictions of the exegesis.

In the period 2010-2015, literary analysts identified the challenges of writing novels about climate change. These challenges relate to timescale, structure, and genre. I summarise the main arguments presented about the difficulties of using story telling formats to explore climate change issues. I analyse a range of climate change-related fictional texts and conclude that several novels have been able to contribute to climate change discourse by portraying potential scenarios across varying styles of fiction.

I then explore views about climate change novelists as behaviour-change agents, evangelists, and/or activists, both from the perspective of how writers see themselves and how readers perceive them. This is a relevant issue because climate change responses need to be mainly in the area of behaviour change at both the individual and collective levels of society, and that the main reasons why there is a lack of social and political progress on climate change, and why action has not yet been taken, is due to a lack of direction on what action to take. I conclude that writers do not have obligations to promote 'green' agendas, and that readers do not expect fiction writers to be climate change evangelists. The suggestion that climate change fiction writers should be promoting a green agenda comes mainly from literary critics and reveals a clash between ecocriticism and its subjects. That is, ecocritical analysis aims to promote a green agenda, and is used to examine sources to understand the extent to which they advance a green agenda. When an ecocritical process is used to analyse sources that discuss climate change, its philosophical position can become conflated with the philosophical positions advanced by writers.

In Chapter Three, I explore how categories of fiction such as Young Adult fiction, science fiction, speculative fiction, and dystopian fiction envision the psychological and social impacts of environmental changes. I summarise the debate about the differences between speculative and science fiction. Dystopian visions have become an almost ubiquitous feature of early 21st century speculative fiction, and these seem to have particular appeal for young adults. I discuss the dystopian surge in chapter three, and distinguish between the elements of dystopian novels aimed at adults and those aimed at a Young Adult (YA) audience. The variety of recent fiction illustrates that both young adult fiction and adult fiction approach climate change

discourse using different narratological techniques, with differing messages, and differing outcomes. As the impacts of climate change will occur in both the short and long-term, generational responses to the impacts will differ.

Chapter Four explores the specific role of Australian fiction in climate change discourse through analysis of selected recent texts. Relationships with the physical environment are a well-documented mainstay of Antipodean fiction. In the climate change era, it is pertinent to this research to examine how Australian relationships with place are reflected in recent realist speculative fiction, and the extent to which these recent texts engage with the themes of environmental change and uncertainty. In this chapter I select three Australian novels that have addressed environmental change themes in ways that have influenced my novella. These include Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957), Steven Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming* (2009), and Sue Isle's *Nightsiders* (2011). These narratives demonstrate a range of authors' techniques in discussing environmental change issues. As their target audiences differ, these texts are also useful in contrasting stylistic techniques used in adult and YA fiction. Further, they demonstrate the influential role of fictive discourse in cultural development. That is, each novel raises thematic concerns that are specific to the historical period in which each was written and demonstrates the diversity of issues that have influenced Australian cultural awareness of human and non-human agency.

I discuss practice-led research in Chapter Five, and reflect on the challenges and limitations of writing fiction about environmental issues. I conclude that authors of climate change narratives need not aim to achieve paradigm change or an omnipotent perspective. I contend that authors need only contribute to a growing multi-disciplinary discourse about the possible impacts of climate change.

A body of novels from multiple genres is needed for readers and writers to engage in climate change discourse, for several reasons. Firstly, multiple points of exposure to issues contributes to wider understanding, and raises opportunities for further exploration. That is, the more novels that are written about climate change, the more nuanced reader engagement with issues is likely to be. Similarly, a body of novels rather than a single text is likely to be more effective in exploring any given social issue. The power of one text is multiplied when numerous texts approach the same issue from differing perspectives. Further, paradigm changes do not occur suddenly, and usually not in response to a single event. Change occurs over time, and incorporates milestones. Multiple contributions to literary discussions about

climate change can accelerate the progress of change. A body of climate change-related fiction is slowly emerging, but, so far, literary critics recognise very few novels as ‘successfully’ depicting climate change. This indicates that more time and more contributions are needed. Writers who have sought to produce climate change-related fiction in the past 15 years have encountered serious interrogation of their motives, including being urged to write behaviour-changing novels. Should novels be educative? Should novels try to convince readers of a particular viewpoint? Even if we momentarily disregard the view that climate change is now inevitable, I argue that novelists should not be required to adopt an agenda. Writers can, however, claim and create new realities by contributing their explorations of climate change as narrative and as a social justice issue, as well as responding to the implications of humans being a geo-physical force for the first time in history. Novels can usefully explore human connections with ‘place’ and the influences of our ‘surroundings’, whether we adopt a global or a bioregional perspective.

Chapter One: The Evolution of Literary Criticism in responding to environmental change scenarios

Introduction

This chapter discusses the evolution of the field which began its development best known as ecocriticism. Initially, it was possible to group the analysis of relationships between humans and their physical surroundings within fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, within a broad field, but environmental change themes have become a concern for theorists in so many disciplines that it is now viable to recognise these investigations as discrete entities. The following overview shows how literary criticism continues to evolve in responding to environmental change scenarios. It is significant for my research because my novella presents an environmental change scenario, and the remaining chapters of this exegesis discuss environmental change themes in recent fiction. In this chapter, I outline the development of ecocriticism. I then investigate the relevance of literary criticism in an era of impending climate change, and explore its emerging issues. I lastly investigate the Australian context for literary criticism of environmental change.

The significance of environmental change for literary criticism

Literary critics analyse sources to understand how authors represent the relationships between humans and their environments.⁴ Literary criticism acknowledges the links between environmental, and cultural and political issues,⁵ as well as the contextual relationship between literary analysis and the natural sciences,⁶ based on the premise that human cultural activities are encompassed by a natural world.⁷ While critics such as Glen Love argue that the humanities disciplines are sometimes ‘afraid’ of the natural sciences,⁸ other humanities practitioners, such as Kerridge, argue that empirical evidence obtained through scientific study provides the basis for human observations about the environment.⁹

Early attempts to delineate a broad field of thematic concern can be noted in the range of names used to recognise that multiple disciplines were analysing the complexities of

⁴ Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (eds). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. xviii.

⁵ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p. 189; Ursula Heise, ‘Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism’, *PMLA* 128.3 (2013) p. 638; Gert Goemmine and Karen Francoise, ‘The Thing Called Environment: What it is and How to be Concerned with it’, *The Oxford Literary Review* 32.1 (2010) p. 110

⁶ C.A. Cranston and Robert Zeller, *The Littoral Zone* (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2007) p. 13.

⁷ Glen A. Love, ‘Science, Anti-Science, and Ecocriticism’. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 6.1 (1999) 65-81.

⁸ Love, p. 65.

⁹ Richard Kerridge, ‘Ecocriticism’ *The Year’s Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, 21 (2013) p. 6.

relationships between humans and their physical surroundings, including examples such as ‘green cultural studies’, ‘literature and environment studies’¹⁰ and ‘environmental literary criticism’.¹¹

In its developmental stages, analysis of environmental change themes within fiction could be identified as an umbrella field with inter-disciplinary offshoots, including but not limited to eco-composition, psycho-ecocriticism,¹² eco-geology,¹³ and ecofeminism.¹⁴ Ecocriticism developed to raise awareness about environmental issues and promote environmental consciousness within fiction.¹⁵ Ecocritical analysis is not objective: it considers whether an author is adopting a ‘green’ perspective in representing non-human agency.¹⁶ Buell identified several ‘waves’ of ecocritical theory.¹⁷ In the first wave, early theorists such as Glotfelty and Fromm urged humanities practitioners to appraise the role of the environment within texts, to recognise an emerging ‘environmental’ ethic, and to explore potential links between humanities and life sciences. For example, in 1996 Glotfelty recommended that ecocritics should enquire into how nature is represented in a text, what role the physical setting plays in the plot, whether the textual values are consistent with ecological wisdom, and the impacts of an environmental crisis on contemporary literature and popular culture.¹⁸

These foundation inquiries remain relevant to literary analysis of environmental change themes, but a twenty-first century context demands consideration of a wider ambit of issues. Theorists such as Potter¹⁹ argue that the proliferation of ‘green’ critical fields in the humanities over the past thirty years means that it is no longer possible to view these fields as belonging to an umbrella. Instead, it is now more appropriate to recognise the range of differing perspectives with which literary criticism is now interacting.

Bergthaller summarises the twenty first century concerns of literary criticism as being both understanding ‘how particular texts represent the interactions between humans and their

¹⁰ Michelle Balaev, ‘The Formation of a Field: Ecocriticism in America – An Interview with Cheryl Glotfelty’ *PMLA* 127.3 (2012) 607 – 616.

¹¹ Laurence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Blackwell: Malden, Massachusetts, 2005), p. viii.

¹² Rishikesh Kumar Singh, ‘Postmodern Psychological Aspects of Ecocriticism within/beyond the Ambit of Human Behaviour’ *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 4.5 (2013) p. 1.

¹³ Robert Tally Jr, (ed), *Geocritical Explorations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁴ Astrid Bracke, review of ‘Feminist Ecocriticism: Women, Environment and Literature’ *English Studies*, 96 (2015) 483-485.

¹⁵ Glotfelty and Fromm, p. xxiv.

¹⁶ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* Second edition, (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), p.3.

¹⁷ Laurence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2005) p. 17.

¹⁸ Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (eds). *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in literary ecology*. (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

¹⁹ [Pers. Comm., March 2018](#)

ecological environment’, and ‘how such representations reflect and shape real-world environmental practices’.²⁰ That is, contemporary criticism ~~ecocritics~~ must be aware of environmental values within texts, and also aware of how or whether such texts influence or reflect environmental policy beyond literary artefacts. Writers are exploring environmental themes in multiple genres, and by using complex reflexive and meta-fictional devices. Chapters Two, Three and Four of this exegesis discuss numerous texts in varying genres that explore environmental themes in a range of ways. The diversity of approaches to writing about environmental issues means that ~~ecocritics~~ critics must analyse texts from a range of genres and styles. Critics must also recognise that the range of material suitable for analysis is ever expanding, in accordance with the increasing complexity of environmental issues. For example, ‘environment’ can encompass urban, built and natural conditions, interrogate the social justice dimensions of environmental conditions, investigate relationships between local and global, and recognise emerging constructs such as the Anthropocene. Most recently, the advent of post materialist approaches entreats both readers and critics to adopt new ways of considering non-human agency, which may have potential for shifting the power base away from an Anthropocentric paradigm.

The relevance of literary criticism in an era of impending climate change
Literary critics actively debate the relevance of their methodologies to contemporary environmental discourse. The climate change era poses vexing challenges. Planetary sustainability appears a distant possibility, or even improbable. In what ways, if any, is literary criticism of environmental change scenarios relevant in an era of impending climate change? What roles can literary criticism of environmental changes scenarios play, if any, in responding to climate change?

Literary critics have several challenges in responding to climate change in a way that they themselves can recognise as being meaningful. Firstly, they struggle with the possibility of being perceived as irrelevant. The increasing urgency of climate change means a mandate of ‘less talk, more action’,²¹ but this is an ontological conundrum for literary critics whose currency is words.

²⁰ Hannes Bergthaller, ‘Introduction: Ecocriticism and Environmental History’, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 22 (2015) p. 6.

²¹ William Major and Andrew McMurry, ‘Introduction: The Function of Ecocriticism; or Ecocriticism, What Is It Good For?’ *Journal of Ecocriticism* 4.2 (2012) 1-7, p. 2.

Literary criticism is a product of the academy, so it has received little recognition outside academic communities. Major and McMurry comment that ‘criticism is most relevant within the secure confines of academic specialisations’, with its messages being transmitted to a select audience through teaching and publications.²² The academy communicates through established markers of success, and it is possible that these are not suited to the transformative social work that climate change mitigation requires.²³

The most significant challenge for literary critics in the era of impending climate change must surely be powerlessness. If climate change cannot be averted, all humans are fighting a losing battle. Literary critics may be simply another group of irrelevant observers. Ecocriticism could be ‘an environmental discourse *that understands itself* as both necessary and absurd’ (emphasis added).²⁴ Poignantly, critics are contributors to and observers of climate change, and must therefore acknowledge their role as ‘part of the problem’,²⁵ as well as suffering the impotence of having insight into a problem for which there are seemingly no definitive solutions.

Timothy Clark argues that ecocriticism is ‘inadequate, partial or insufficient’.²⁶ He contends that individuals have little power to change an unsustainable system, even though most of their daily consumer decisions contribute to it. Clark contends that ecocritical analysis adopts the perspective of individual behaviour change, without challenging existing models of the state, ideology, and consumption patterns. Paradoxically, collective social narratives such as increasing material prosperity, population expansion, and longer life expectancies actually undermine sustainability goals.²⁷ In Clark’s view, narratives that focus on individual responses to climate change mislead readers with an illusion that ‘reality and power remain a matter of individuals pursuing their rights and opinions’.²⁸ According to Clark, individuals pursuing their rights and opinions are an expression of consumerism, which legitimises consumer democracy.²⁹

While Clark and Major and McMurry make relevant and valuable points, I see ecocriticism and other types of literary criticism that examine environmental change scenarios as having ongoing relevance in the era of climate change. The original purpose of

²² Major and McMurry, p. 2.

²³ Major and McMurry, p. 4.

²⁴ Major and McMurry, p. 7.

²⁵ Major and McMurry, p. 1.

²⁶ Timothy Clark, ‘Some Climate Change Ironies: Deconstruction, Environmental Politics and the Closure of Ecocriticism’ *The Oxford Literary Review* 32.1 (2010) p. 142.

²⁷ Clark, p. 146.

²⁸ Clark, p. 141.

²⁹ Clark, p. 147.

ecocriticism, to illuminate the 'green' agendas within texts, provides a useful foundation for developing more sophisticated responses to environmental concepts in twenty-first century fiction. Later waves of criticism can analyse complex environmental issues, such as the nexus between environmental and social justice issues, post-humanist perspectives, the literature that emerges from modified environments, and specific issues in regional literature, for example Australian literature. Why undertake analysis of environmental change scenarios as these are depicted within literary sources? Because humans are interested in the dynamic relationships between themselves and their surroundings, and because studying these relationships are one way of understanding human responses to climate change.

Critics must be prepared to challenge constructed concepts, so that the analytic process is dynamic, not static. For example, Bracke encourages contemporary ecocritics to 'actively criticise and challenge constructions of nature'.³⁰ To this end, I find Bristow's arguments compelling. Bristow claims that ecocriticism is 'a collective cultural project that is rewiring ecological wisdom'.³¹ I understand this to mean that literary criticism of environmental change scenarios, whether recognised as one field or separated into many, remains an active form of social criticism that is involved with the processes of understanding, appraising, contributing to, and modifying social agendas by offering original and/or creative perspectives. Literary criticism helps both readers and analysts to frame discussions on new nature writing, post-humanism, place-making, and globalisation, among other issues. Further, literary studies is a humanities discipline that analyses cultural artefacts. Ecocriticism brings a unique perspective to cultural analysis, that is, one underpinned by an understanding of scientific information. Unlike Clark, critics including Huggan and Tiffin, and Schatz, claim that ecocriticism can also be a political process when it deliberately reveals activist and/or subversive viewpoints against dominant institutional structures.³² This is far more complex than Glotfelty's original aim of analysing fiction to reveal its environmental agendas.

Schatz argues that getting as many people invested in responding to climate change as possible is the primary goal. This is because when all humans believe that they have a 'shared

³⁰ Astrid Bracke, 'The New British Nature Writing: Forms, Themes and Ecocritical Approaches' [unpublished conference paper], <https://www.academia.edu/4404758/The_New_British_Nature_Writing_Forms_Themes_and_Ecocritical_Approaches> [accessed 27 April 2017].

³¹ Thomas Bristow and Grace Moore, 'Ecocriticism: environment, emotions and education' *The Conversation* 31 May 2013, p <<https://theconversation.com/ecocriticism-environment-emotions-and-education-13989>> [accessed 27 April 2017].

³² Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (Routledge: London, 2010) p. 27; J. L. Schatz, 'The Importance of Apocalypse: The value of end-of-the-world politics while advancing ecocriticism', *The Journal of Ecocriticism* 4 (2012) 20-33.

stake' in influencing outcomes, they can form a collective response that apportions responsibility to all.³³ He contends that ecocritics should try as many strategies as they can, rather than trying to mastermind one ultimate strategy.³⁴ Despite all of the challenges, literary criticism offers proof that scholars within Creative Writing and Literary Studies disciplines are taking notice of 'the wreckage piling up all around us'.³⁵ Even if our tools are words, we are not oblivious. Even if humans cannot ultimately avert climate change, criticism allows literary academics to express their values³⁶ by communicating an environmentalist agenda. This provides purpose. Singh argues that there is hope for the future if small actions can help to tip society in the direction of more responsible environmental management.³⁷ Schatz builds on this by saying that large-scale transformation takes place through collective action. Ecocritics, literary theorists and authors can inspire collective action by passing on the tools of their trade: ideas, thoughts, and actions.³⁸

Bergthaller contends that ecocritics should strive to demonstrate how human relationships with 'environment' could be illuminated in ways that are, 'more explicit and more productive'.³⁹ I interpret this to mean that the most useful critical contributions will be those in which the analyst demonstrates the usefulness of discussing relationships between humans and their surroundings. He further contends that contemporary ecocritics must make meaningful links between textual representations of environmental change, and real-world social and policy developments in this arena.

Emerging issues for literary criticism of environmental change
Current discourse in criticism as it relates to environmental change scenarios explores the recognition of the Anthropocene, its counter position embodied in the 'new materialisms', 'new' forms of nature writing, and the role of place-based writing and bioregionalism within a globalised world. The following sections discuss these themes in greater detail for the purpose of providing a context for the themes that I explore in my novella.

³³ JL Schatz, 'The Importance of Apocalypse: The Value of End-Of-The-World Politics While Advancing Ecocriticism', *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, 4.2 (2012) pp.20-33. (p. 28).

³⁴ Schatz, p. 30.

³⁵ Major and McMurry, p. 4.

³⁶ Major and McMurry, p. 5.

³⁷ Niall Harrison, 'Writing Climate Change: A Round Table Discussion' *Strange Horizons* 27 February 2012, p. 7.

³⁸ Schatz, p. 29.

³⁹ Bergthaller, p. 2.

Literary criticism in the Anthropocene

Humans are both dependent on their surroundings and capable of causing global environmental changes. All locations on Earth have been influenced by human activity, so that all environments are now modified to a greater or lesser extent. For example, humans have altered the carbon cycle and the nitrogen cycle, affected the rate of species extinction, created atomic isotopes and plastics, erected megacities, changed the pH of oceans, and established novel ecosystems on all parts of the earth by mass movement.⁴⁰ Atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen used the term ‘the Anthropocene’ in 2000, to define the historical period in which humans act as a single dominant species to permanently modify their environment.⁴¹ This term is now widely used in literary criticism circles to describe our current era,⁴² but existing geological classifications remain under consideration.⁴³

Officially recognising the current era as the Anthropocene would be a radical departure from all previous concepts of nature. It would effectively transform the concept of ‘environment’ from an external entity that is beyond human control,⁴⁴ into a set of systems that are ultimately controlled by, and dependent on, human decision-making. It would involve acknowledging that humans are ultimately accountable for maintaining or bettering the current standard of planetary survival, and for preventing its demise. It would therefore also involve acknowledging the essentially cultural identity of climate change problems. If humans assumed accountability for climate change, they would need to make discretionary decisions about which human objectives to prioritise above others. Kerridge posits that humans have made an irreversible impact on their surroundings, so that the idea of ‘ceasing to interfere with nature’⁴⁵ is not possible. Even if a recovery of pre-Anthropocene conditions is a goal, it cannot be achieved without a structured management strategy. Humans therefore have no choice but to confront environmental change. Put simply, ‘[w]e take collective responsibility or risk runaway disaster’.⁴⁶

The concept of the Anthropocene has provoked varying responses among literary critics. Nixon identifies ‘command and control Anthropocene optimists, and those who are

⁴⁰ Rob Nixon, ‘The Anthropocene: The Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea’, *Edge Effects* (2014) <<http://edgeeffects.net/anthropocene-promise-and-pitfalls/>> [accessed 27 April 2017].

⁴¹ Richard Kerridge, ‘Ecocriticism’, p. 2.

⁴² For example, Kate Marshall ‘What are the novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Time’ *American Literary History* 27.3 (2015) 523-538.

⁴³ Eoin Flannery, ‘Ecocriticism’ *The Year’s Work Critical and Cultural Theory* 23.1 (2015) 134-161.

⁴⁴ Flannery, p. 150.

⁴⁵ Kerridge, p. 349.

⁴⁶ Kerridge, p. 349.

sceptical of such a mind-set'.⁴⁷ Sceptics view the Anthropocene as a crisis, or as Kathleen Dean Moore describes it, 'the Unforgivable-crime scene'.⁴⁸ Critics who perceive the Anthropocene as a crisis would focus on analysing the extent to which narratives are discussing the ethical and cultural implications of crisis, and communicating the urgency of a collective response.⁴⁹

Optimists view Anthropocene as a turning point towards more responsible stewardship of ecological systems.⁵⁰ Being optimistic about the human capacity to responsibly manage the Earth is consistent with post-equilibrium ecology.⁵¹

In its infancy, literary criticism also adopted prevailing concepts of ecosystems as harmonious, balanced and self-regenerating.⁵² Mentz suggests that humans must make sense of a new 'normal', which is characterised by change and chaos. He argues that literary studies can assist in understanding and dissemination of this new normal, by 'showing how cultural meanings emerge through encounters between human experiences and disorderly ecologies.'⁵³

Potter views the Anthropocene as presenting environmentalists, and therefore also literary critics, with the opportunity to claim a more powerful position of accountability. She contends that both the material environment and the internal psychological environment are dynamic.⁵⁴ We should therefore appraise ourselves and our surroundings as complex and ever changing, and recognise that 'all life is enmeshed in never-finalised relations'.⁵⁵ This perspective might enable environmentalism and literary criticism to evolve from its early ethics of conservation and preservation. I'm particularly interested in this position, because the key enquiry of my novella is related to how characters can achieve a sense of stability when they face internal feelings of uncertainty or fears of the unknown, as a consequence of external environmental changes. Iovino argues that this new paradigm necessarily gives rise to a 'moral horizontality' between human and all non-human subjects.⁵⁶

⁴⁷ Nixon, 'The Anthropocene: The Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea'.

⁴⁸ Nixon, 'The Anthropocene: The Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea'.

⁴⁹ Kerridge, pp. 349-50.

⁵⁰ Nixon, 'The Anthropocene: The Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea'.

⁵¹ Ursula Heise, Jon Christiansen and Michelle Niemann, *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017).

⁵² Ursula Heise, 'Greening English: Recent Introductions to Ecocriticism' *Contemporary Literature*, 47.2 (2006) p. 294.

⁵³ Steve Mentz, 'After Sustainability', *PMLA* 127.3 (2012), p. 588.

⁵⁴ Emily Potter, 'Ecological Consciousness in Australian Literature: Outside the Limits of Environmental Crisis', (Hawke Research Institute Working Paper Series No 29, University of South Australia 2005).

⁵⁵ Potter, p. 7

⁵⁶ Serenella Iovino, 'Material Ecocriticism: Matter, Text and Posthuman Ethics' in Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman (Eds), *Material Ecocriticism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press. 2014), p. 57.

Material Ecocriticism

Material ecocriticism, also known as ‘new materialisms’, counters the argument of Anthropocene. It argues that all matter has agency because it can play a role in occurrences and events on Earth. The concept of ‘matter’ is all encompassing, so that even entities not considered biologically ‘alive’ are recognised as playing a role in Earthly phenomena.⁵⁷ Further, all matter is always changing and should therefore be viewed as subject to ongoing processes of ‘materialising’. The new materialisms movement potentially offers a new way of considering non-human entities. It argues against Anthropocentric assumptions by showing that humans are only one of many agents, and aims to provoke a radical reconsideration of all systems in decision-making.

In terms of literary criticism, material ecocriticism expands its lens beyond ‘nature’ to include the ongoing dynamic relationships between all forms of ‘matter’.⁵⁸ As Iovino and Sepperman observe, ‘every being has a story to tell’.⁵⁹ Material ecocritics interrogate the meanings and influences that arise as a consequence of all matter having agency, connection, and dynamism. Interpretation of these layers of narratives provides tools for understanding ecological crisis.⁶⁰

Marshall hypothesises that stories influenced by the new materialisms will explore post-human perspectives, and new genre or stylistic explorations. Post-human perspectives would arise from humans according non-human living entities such as animals, plants, and landscapes, with agency, or at least managing them with the goal of responsible stewardship.⁶¹ She also suggests that responses to the Anthropocene will raise literary questions about agency, and history, and result in authors reflexively exploring styles such as ‘speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, or the new materialisms’.⁶² Arguing along similar lines, Flannery comments that post-humanism can ‘recalibrate notions of selfhood and subject hood’.⁶³ Similarly, Bird contends that ‘the organism-and-its environment’ would be recognised as necessary for survival. That is, human relationships with non-human

⁵⁷ Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman (Eds), *Material Ecocriticism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014), p. 3.

⁵⁸ Iovino, p. 57.

⁵⁹ Iovino and Opperman, p.7.

⁶⁰ Iovino and Oppermann, p.6.

⁶¹ Marshall, pp. 523-538

⁶² Marshall, p. 537.

⁶³ Flannery, p. 140.

surroundings and entities would be acknowledged as 'relational', in that humans could not exist independently of their surroundings.⁶⁴

My initial reaction to the new materialisms was scepticism, based on doubts that humans would be interested in any narrative perspective other than their own. I then remembered the 1973 Australian Young Adult classic, Patricia Wrightson's haunting novel, *The Nargun and the Stars*. Wrightson presents both human narrative voices in her novel, and those of land spirits. It may be, then, that the new materialisms presents an opportunity for the recognition of the land's 'stories', as Alexis Wright describes in her essay 'Deep Weather'.⁶⁵ The new materialisms seems to me an exciting concept in literary application. It opens possibilities for an extraordinary range of new narrative perspectives.

Huggan and Tiffin view post-colonialism and ecocriticism as utopian discourses that explore transformative possibilities.⁶⁶ That is, these discourses discuss the types of transformative changes that need to be made in reorganising relationships among humans, and between humans and environment. Robin also argues that the main issue centres on how humans respond to a changed world, and how they take responsibility for it. She eloquently summarises that '...the answer is not simply scientific and technological, but also social, cultural, political and ecological'.⁶⁷ These optimistic perspectives show that writers and other humanities practitioners play a crucial role in responding to environmental change. As such, Rigby contends that:

new forms of knowledge will need to come from a different epistemological, ontological and ethical place from that afforded by the standpoint of mastery.⁶⁸

As I argue in Chapter Two, it is imperative to write about environmental change issues because humans have no instructions that direct them away from climate change threats, and towards a more stable future. This lack of guidance is partly due to fear. Running away from the problem seems more comfortable than dismantling the comforts, privileges, and individual and ethnic identities that have developed through an anthropocentric relationship with environment.⁶⁹ Kerridge argues that modifying the western lifestyle is

⁶⁴ Deborah Bird Rose, 'Connecting with ecological futures', (Position paper prepared for the National Humanities and Social Sciences Summit, Canberra, 26-27 July 2001) p. 3, <https://openresearchrepository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/41038/2/cef.pdf> [accessed 27 April 2017].

⁶⁵ Alexis Wright, 'Deep Weather', *Meanjin* 70.2 (2011) pp. 70-82.

⁶⁶ Huggan and Tiffin, p. 10.

⁶⁷ Nixon, 'The Anthropocene: The Promise and Pitfalls of an Epochal Idea'.

⁶⁸ Kate Rigby, 'Dancing with Disaster'. *Australian Humanities Review*, 46, (2009) p. 5.

⁶⁹ Greg Garrard, 'The unbearable lightness of green: air travel, climate change and literature' *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* 17.2, (2013) p. 179.

counter-cultural, because ‘short-term animal instincts and appetites, persisting in distorted consumerist forms, are so difficult to restrain’.⁷⁰ Hamilton even claims that most Australian people don’t *want* to make substantive lifestyle changes.⁷¹ As the current population of humans will experience the short-term but not the long-term impacts of climate change, altruism is required to take action in the present. Author Ian McEwan wryly observes that ‘it’s not human nature to do favours for people that you don’t yet know’.⁷² Nevertheless, fear-based responses such as denial are unproductive, meaning that theorists must confront and discuss existing social and cultural models as part of challenging our current era as an Anthropocene.

Beyond literary sources, potentially the most powerful impact of the new materialisms may be in recognising the value of previously silenced *human* voices speaking for ‘country’. Iovino contends that narratives provide a platform for reassessing the relationship of reader to all matter, and therefore for initiating changes in the ethics that underpin that relationship.⁷³ This position may well foreshadow the future. As at the time of writing, however, humans have not yet chosen to recognise agency of non-human entities, much less non-living matter. Ultimately, humans need to make the choice to shift the power base away from themselves. Further, humans are the witnesses to stories, and the ones telling the tales. Even when we do accord all entities with ‘agency’, we view that agency in terms of its impact on ourselves, that is, our ability to survive on a planet affected by the agency of non-living entities such as cyclones and tsunamis. In terms of decision making on everyday behaviours, a new materialist viewpoint may therefore be an abstraction only, at least at the time of writing this exegesis. Having worked as an environmental policy-maker, I am doubtful that most Australian consumers, with the exception of those specifically informed, would recognise ‘agency’ within their takeaway coffee cup or plastic packaging in choosing whether to purchase it or not, even when the evidence and impacts of marine debris and landfill disposal is presented in sobering images through mainstream media.

While I see the new materialisms as offering some new approaches for writers and literary critics, I see its application in real-world contexts as extremely limited. I am not convinced that it progresses the foundation argument of environmentalism beyond

⁷⁰ Kerridge, p. 366.

⁷¹ Clive Hamilton, ‘Best of 2012: The church and the ethics of climate change’, *ABC Religion and Ethics*, 20 January 2013 <<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2013/01/20/3672839.htm>> [accessed 27 April 2017].

⁷² Anne C. Mulkern, ‘Will Prize-Winning Novels shift Attitudes on Global Warming?’ *New York Times*, 6 May 2011, < <http://www.nytimes.com/gwire/2011/05/06/06greenwire-will-prize-winning-novels-shift-attitudes-on-g-65686.html?pagewanted=all>> [accessed 27 April 2017].

⁷³ Serenella Iovino, ‘Material Ecocriticism: Matter, Text and Posthuman Ethics’ p. 64.

restatement. That is, the foundation challenge of environmentalism has always been: how much value are non-human entities recognised as having, based only on their intrinsic existence? This is the struggle for environmental policy-makers, who realise that unfettered growth and human use of the Earth's assets cannot continue. The challenge of addressing environmental change is in humans renouncing power, or in modifying their behavioural patterns. While the new materialisms is a thought-provoking development that certainly presents options for change, at the time of writing, it provides insufficient mandate for human behavioural change.

'New' Nature Writing

The environmental movement initially sought to protect wilderness areas and maintain an aesthetic appreciation of nature.⁷⁴ In parallel, literary criticism initially defined environment as 'natural environment'.⁷⁵ As explained above, all environments are now modified, so that critics in the Anthropocene must be aware that they are analysing representations of human-altered environments. In the Anthropocene, writers and critics must reconceptualise environment as an intersection between culture and nature. Bennett argues that traditional nature writing and pastoral are incapable of representing this intersection, and are therefore actually exclusive of contemporary urban life:

The deep ecological perspective adopted by many ecocritics...will always be incomplete; it will also be unpersuasive and unavailable for most city dwellers and ultimately inadequate for nonurbanites as well.⁷⁶

Bracke defines 'new nature writing'⁷⁷ as narrative that centralises human influences on the environment.⁷⁸ New nature writing therefore communicates the value of modified landscapes.⁷⁹ Analysing modified environments signifies that critics value diversity in human experiences of environment. New nature writing offers a 'counter aesthetic of landscape'⁸⁰ that is ripe for investigation. Bracke contends that ecocritical analysis of 'negative aesthetics

⁷⁴ Ursula Heise, 'Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism', *PMLA* 128.3 (2013) p. 639.

⁷⁵ Laurence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*. (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2005) p. 21.

⁷⁶ Michael Bennett, 'From Wide Open Spaces to Metropolitan Places' *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 8.1 (2001) p. 36.

⁷⁷ Bracke, review of 'Feminist Ecocriticism' p. 483.

⁷⁸ Bracke, 'The New British Nature Writing' p. 4.

⁷⁹ Bracke, 'The New British Nature Writing' p. 5.

⁸⁰ Kerridge, p. 369.

of nature'⁸¹ is a key emerging area. She argues that both ecocriticism and urban studies have hitherto depicted a 'one-sided, biased and frankly privileged perspective of nature',⁸² by restricting writing about nature to positive and/or sublime experiences. Bracke surmises that urban nature is a different and valuable type of 'nature' experience from that depicted in traditional nature writing.⁸³ She argues that the different types of nature, like urban refuges and parks, could be depicted in valuable ways. Bruce Bennett also argues that degraded landscapes should 'be taken just as seriously as natural landscapes'.⁸⁴ Cohen agrees, arguing that the value of environmental literature applies equally to idyllic and marginalised responses:

the joy of open spaces, but also what it feels like to...be a victim of toxics, be deprived of an ancestral place in the sun.⁸⁵

Analysis of urban environments can also explore the themes and processes associated with place modification. Place modification changes the connections between humans and their surroundings. Analysing human changes to environments thus provides a way to explore a human connection to nature,⁸⁶ whether or not this is the same connection as existed before the place modification occurred. I find these arguments compelling in an era of impending climate change. If nature writing has disengaged or excluded urban readers and writers, the possibility of using 'new' nature writing to explore new responses to environment is an opportunity to produce innovative discourse. Place modification analysis may also assist humans to understand our impacts on our physical surroundings and ultimately, and possibly most significantly, our dependence on and embeddedness in them.

Place-making

Literary criticism aims to raise consciousness about the relationships between humans and their environments, both in narrative and in its reflected social and political decision-making. Carter describes place as 'space to which meaning has been ascribed'.⁸⁷ This accretion of

⁸¹ Astrid Bracke, 'Wastelands, Shrubs and Parks: Ecocriticism and the Challenge of the Urban', *Frame* 26.2 (2013) p. 7.

⁸² Bracke, 'Wastelands, Shrubs and Parks: Ecocriticism and the Challenge of the Urban' p. 19.

⁸³ Bracke, 'Wastelands, Shrubs and Parks: Ecocriticism and the Challenge of the Urban' p. 11.

⁸⁴ Michael Bennett, p. 32.

⁸⁵ Michael Cohen, 'Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism under Critique' *Environmental History*, 9.1 (2004) p. 27.

⁸⁶ Bracke, 'The New British Nature Writing' p. 5.

⁸⁷ Erica Carter, James Donald and Judith Squires (Eds), *Space and Place: theories of identity and location* (London: Lawrence and Wishart. 1993), pp. vii-xv.

meaning occurs through place making: the creation of connections between humans and specific spaces. Place making is thus an important facet of writing about environmental change, and there is an active discussion among critics about whether place-based approaches are effective in furthering an environmentalist agenda. I am interested in representations of place because several of the chapters in my novella investigate human relationships with specific places. The individualistic and community aspects involved in the process of place-making are reflected in my novel through the character of Em, who claims to feel homeless no matter how much exploring she does, but ultimately identifies with a community when she becomes involved in its place-making activities.

Poet and activist Gary Snyder describes the earth as a conglomerate of localised worlds known as bioregions, rather than an amorphous entity 'nature'.⁸⁸ While Snyder's is a biological distinction, other theorists apply the bioregion concept to identify the types of meaning that can be attached to space. Ecocritical analysis can assist in revealing a bioregional perspective within text. Place-based writing aims to communicate localised or individual connections, and convey the sense of a place. It communicates diversity, specificity, and complexity of human relationships with their surroundings.

Sense of place is subjective and experiential, and thus places great importance on individual meaning.⁸⁹ It also demonstrates multiple individual and social influences. For example, Buell includes the physical elements of a location and the social constructions overlaid on it by humans.⁹⁰ Gaard names these elements as, 'place-specific politics, economics, and lifestyles'.⁹¹ Adams and Mulligan include all activities associated with a particular location, and the feeling of belonging to place.⁹² Ryan argues that place-based writing can have bio geographical, scientific, ethnographic, literary, personal, and political or social dimensions.⁹³ These potential inclusions demonstrate that 'place' is an ethereal and challenging concept.

⁸⁸ Tom Lynch, Cheryl Glotfelty and Karla Armbruster (Eds), *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology and Place*, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012), p. 226.

⁸⁹ Daniel Berthold-Bond, 'The Ethics of 'Place': Reflections on Bioregionalism', *Environmental Ethics*, 22.1, (2000), p. 7.

⁹⁰ Buell, p. 84.

⁹¹ Greta Gaard, 'New Directions for Ecofeminism', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17.4 (2010) p. 656.

⁹² William M. Adams and Martin Mulligan, *Decolonising nature: Strategies for conservation in a post-colonial era* (Earthscan: London 2003) p. 173.

⁹³ John Ryan, 'Recalling Walden: Thoreau's Embodied Aesthetics and Australian Writings on Place' *The Journal of Ecocriticism* 3.2 (2011) p. 48.

Ecofeminist Val Plumwood further argues that individual perceptions cannot be separated from race, class, or gender, and that individual experiences also occur within the context of relationships with social structures.⁹⁴ Human constructions of nature are culturally shaped, so that cultural judgements about what constitutes a 'natural' experience mediate the individual response to place.⁹⁵ An individual's experiences of previous places as familiar or unfamiliar can influence attachment to a new place.⁹⁶ Childhood memories also inform adult behaviour.⁹⁷ A place can also communicate with an individual in many ways, for example through natural features, animals, poetry, symbols and dream images.⁹⁸ Adopting a new materialisms approach may assist in identifying some of the agents, voices, relationships and stories that form a concept of place. As previously discussed, material ecocritics recognise agency in and between all elements.

The subjectivity of a place-based representation enables the writer and their readers to overcome anonymity or homogeneity implicit in concepts of nature.⁹⁹ A strong sense of a place gives that physical environment an identity.¹⁰⁰ Buell and Berthold-Bond argue that this identity could be used to challenge the paradigm of human domination over environment,¹⁰¹ by recognising that all non-human inhabitants of a place also have inherent status and value.¹⁰² Buell argues that 'environmental criticism' must aim to replace the anthropocentric and dualistic relationship between humans and the environment with the recognition that nature and culture are mutually reinforcing rather than separate entities.¹⁰³ That is, ecologists examine non-human ecologies, while humanities practitioners write about human perspectives. Both of these approaches view humans and environmental processes as separate. It would be revolutionary if writers and critics could realise Buell's vision by merging nature and culture into one entity that entails relationships of interdependence. This would represent the type of transformative change that Huggan and Tiffin also see as necessary to address environmental change issues, and even to minimise the projected impacts of climate change.

⁹⁴ Adams and Mulligan, p. 181.

⁹⁵ Heise, 'The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism', p. 512.

⁹⁷ Bruce Bennett, 'Some Dynamics of Literary Placemaking An Australian Perspective', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 10.2 (2003) p. 103.

⁹⁸ Adams and Mulligan, p. 181.

¹⁰⁰ Adams and Mulligan, p. 176.

¹⁰¹ Daniel Berthold-Bond, p. 8.

¹⁰² Berthold-Bond, p. 19.

¹⁰³ Buell, p. 67.

A theory of reconfiguring power relationships between humans and the environment through narrative depiction is compelling, but how can it be demonstrated? Can strategic place-making redress power relationships between humans and their surroundings? I suspect that it is probably more accurate to say that place-based writing can assist readers' understanding of environmental issues by describing them in real, tangible, personally relevant contexts. For example, a writer who evokes daily, lived experience of a certain place might provoke more benevolent responses towards a local environment than a non-specific vision of apocalypse or ecotopia.¹⁰⁴ As a result, discussions centred on local places may help in putting broad scientific and cultural issues into perspective. I adopted a place-based approach in my novella *A Widening Gyre* to explore characters' emotional responses to changes in their environment.

Place-based writing is also a way for an author to explore their individual identity. Jacobs contends that authors who write about personally significant places can speak meaningfully about themselves without doing this directly.¹⁰⁵ While humans react aesthetically to places, I suspect that there is an egoistic element to place-based writing. That is, the writer is exploring themselves in the context of a certain place, and thus achieves an image of self as reflected through place, as opposed to an image contextualised in another situation.¹⁰⁶ This human curiosity for self-exploration could be harnessed in writing about environmental change.

Critics also recognise the limits of place-based writing. Following Peter Berg's pioneering bioregional vision, place-based writing calls its writer and readers to 'live-in-place' through sensory immersion.¹⁰⁷ But how do we know when we are 'in place'? Immersion might also be anthropocentric: being able to write about any environment necessarily occurs as a result of place modification, so even writing that recognises the value of place perpetuates a dominating approach to it.¹⁰⁸

A tension exists between bioregionalism and eco-cosmopolitanism. For example, Heise argues that place-based writing does not provide models of collective experiences of nature,

¹⁰⁴ Adams and Mulligan, p. 174.

¹⁰⁵ Elliot Jacobs, 'Re (Place) your typical writing assignment: An argument for place-based writing,' *English Journal* 100.3 (2011), p. 51.

¹⁰⁶ Rishikesh Kumar Singh, 'Postmodern Psychological Aspects of Ecocriticism within/beyond the Ambit of Human Behaviour', *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 4.5 (2013) pp. 1-5.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, 'Rehabilitating California', in Cheryll Glofelty and Eve Quesnel (Eds) *The Biosphere and the Bioregion: Essential Writings of Peter Berg*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015) pp. 35-40.

¹⁰⁸ Allan Pred, 'Place as historically contingent process: Structuration and the time-geography of becoming places,' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 74.2 (1984) 279-297.

which is problematic because the individual cannot be separated from a cultural context.¹⁰⁹ Heise argues that bioregional perspectives are too ‘territorial’; she recommends that environmentalists should instead focus more broadly on a ‘systemic sense of planet’.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, critics such as Litfin disagree, arguing that, ‘the global view cannot adequately depict environmental problems because the impacts of these problems vary with class, gender, age, and race’.¹¹¹ Furthermore, Lockwood very effectively posits Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* as a text that describes local environmental issues, but which can also be publicly contextualised.¹¹²

Globalisation, social justice, and environmental justice

Robinson describes social justice as ‘a climate change technology’,¹¹³ meaning that an effective global response to climate change includes addressing social justice issues. Environmental justice agendas take into account goals for addressing social inequality as well as progress and sustainability goals.¹¹⁴ Environmental justice agendas focus on the moral dimensions of solutions instead of limiting policy options to legal, scientific or pragmatic considerations.¹¹⁵ There are a number of issues that would need to be addressed in order to achieve greater social and environmental justice.

Firstly, the widespread nature of environmental impacts presents significant challenges. That is, issues that occur in one part of the world cannot be separated from their impacts on the remainder.¹¹⁶ This would include examples such as the dispersion of contaminants and pollution, as well as global climate change more broadly.

Additionally, environmental justice agendas need to consider the impact of political decisions on people and the environment.¹¹⁷ For example, policy measures to promote fuel sources other than petroleum, such as ethanol, also impact on land and water use.

¹⁰⁹ Heise, ‘The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism’, p. 512.

¹¹⁰ Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 56.

¹¹¹ Karen T. Litfin, ‘The Gendered Eye in the Sky: A Feminist Perspective on Earth Observation Satellites’, *Frontiers*, 18.2 (1997), 26-47.

¹¹² Alex Lockwood, ‘The affective legacy of *Silent Spring*.’ *Environmental Humanities* 1.1 (2012) 123-140.

¹¹³ Kim Stanley Robinson, ‘Roundtable Q&A’, *Puerto Del Sol*, 47.2 (2012) 55-59.

¹¹⁴ David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996), p. 385.

¹¹⁵ Ali Brox, ‘The Process of Disaster: Environmental Justice Discourse and Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*’. *Green Humanities*, 1 (2015) p. 51.

¹¹⁶ JL Schatz, ‘The Importance of Apocalypse: The Value of End-Of-The-World Politics While Advancing Ecocriticism’, *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, 4.2 (2012) 20-28.

¹¹⁷ Graham Huggan, ‘Greening Postcolonialism: Ecocritical Perspectives’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50.3 (2004) 701-733.

More particularly, some sectors of the global economy exercise power through economic domination and exploitation of people and resources in their own territories, and by arrangements with other nations.¹¹⁸ First World consumption of all types of resources often impacts on Third World nations. For example, global use of palm oil products has significantly affected rainforest areas through destruction of forests for plantation palm sources. Developing economies are also disadvantaged by the ‘burden of sustainability’, because they cannot undertake mass economic expansion using the same polluting methods and at the same speeds as previously developed economies.¹¹⁹ Further, allowing developing nations to bear the burden of sustainability perpetuates disadvantage, as it reinforces power structures established through imperial expansionism in previous centuries.¹²⁰ The structures of a globalised economy reinforce the dominant model of human standing, whereby humans are the only living entities with moral status,¹²¹ and even then, only certain humans. While it is beyond the scope of my current research, ecofeminist criticism responds to a range of issues of gender-, race-, and species-based discrimination.¹²²

A related and emerging field is that of environmental justice storytelling, which is likely to play a significant role in an era of climate change. It should be clarified that storytelling can take the form of fictional narrative, or provide perspectives on a particular environmental occurrence as a form of political discourse. Houston and Vasudevan recognise environmental justice storytellers as transformative practitioners working at the intersections of ‘academic scholarship, scientific practice and cultural activism’.¹²³ They recognise multiple important roles for story telling in this space. Firstly, environmental justice storytelling offers reflections on a past where exploitation has caused damage to the Earth and to humans, and explores future prospects.¹²⁴ I discuss the varying degrees of hope adopted by storytellers in Chapter Three in my exploration of dystopian, science fiction and futuristic perspectives. Houston and Vasudevan emphasise the importance of hope in

¹¹⁸ Ali Brox, ‘The Process of Disaster: Environmental Justice Discourse and Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke*’, *Green Humanities*, 1(2015) 37-59.

¹¹⁹ Greg Garrard, ‘The unbearable lightness of green: air travel, climate change and literature’, *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 17.2 (2013) 175-188.

¹²⁰ Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, ‘Green Postcolonialism’, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 9.1 (2008) 1-11.

¹²¹ Daniel Berthold-Bond, ‘The Ethics of “Place”: Reflections on Bioregionalism’, *Environmental Ethics*, 22.1 (2000) 5-24.

¹²² Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen, *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹²³ Donna Houston and Pavithra Vasudevan, ‘Environmental Justice Storytelling’, in Ryan Holifield, Jayajit Chakraborty and Gordon Walker (Eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Environmental Justice*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018) pp. 241-251.

¹²⁴ Houston and Vasudevan, p. 241.

environmental justice storytelling. This exegesis explains why dystopian and other less hopeful perspectives can be equally powerful in galvanising a response. Houston and Vasudevan also emphasise that environmental justice storytelling can straddle and confront the nature of reality.¹²⁵ An important element of environmental justice storytelling is its unique position; it is narrative that can encompass ‘academic knowledge, scientific and political authority, and personal experience’.¹²⁶ In this way, it offers a forum for exploring cultural practices, illuminating their impacts, and deriving meaning from experience.¹²⁷ I reflect on my novella as environmental justice storytelling in Chapter Five, and on the examples I analyse in Chapter Four.

Environmental concepts in Australian literary theory

The first fifteen years of the ecocritical movement focussed on analysing nineteenth century British and American literature.¹²⁸ Ecocritical analysis of Australian literature did not occur until the early twenty-first century,¹²⁹ and then as a derivative of postcolonial analysis. Postcolonial analysis interrogates post-Enlightenment European imperialist and colonist narratives to illuminate themes of mastery and authority, reveal ‘ideological contradictions’,¹³⁰ and expose ‘literary and historical epistemic violence’.¹³¹ However, environment has always been a ‘default concern’ for Australian writers.¹³² Frost observes that ‘place was always more than setting’.¹³³ The prominence of landscape within the Australian literary imagination originated with the colonialist paradigms of settling and nation building.¹³⁴ Huggan and Tiffin also identify anthropocentrism as a central tenet of Eurocentric colonialist ideology.¹³⁵ Consequently, the themes of mastery and authority over

¹²⁵ Houston and Vasudevan, p. 242.

¹²⁶ Houston and Vasudevan, p. 242.

¹²⁷ Houston and Vasudevan, p. 245.

¹²⁸ Michael Bennett, ‘From Wide Open Spaces to Metropolitan Places’, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 8.1 (2001) 31-46.

¹²⁹ Heise, ‘Globality, Difference, and the International Turn in Ecocriticism’, *PMLA*, 128.3 (2013) 636-643.

¹³⁰ Graham Huggan, *Australian Literature: Postcolonialism, Racism, Transnationalism*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 33.

¹³¹ Eoin Flannery, ‘Ecocriticism’, *The Years Work in Cultural and Critical Theory*, 23.1 (2015) 134-161.

¹³² Kim Wilkins, ‘Popular genres and the Australian literary community: the case of fantasy fiction’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 32.2 (2008) p. 268.

¹³³ Lucy Frost, ‘Escaping the Bush Paradigm’ in Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (eds), *Imagining Australia*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004) 53-65.

¹³⁴ Frost, p.55.

¹³⁵ Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, ‘Green Postcolonialism’, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 9.1 (2008) 1-11.

people and environment dominate colonial narratives.¹³⁶ Rose eloquently summarises that Australian societies are built on dual wars: against nature and against the natives.¹³⁷

There are multiple persistent narrative myths of Australian environment. These include its depiction as an alien, strange, and sinister wilderness to be conquered,¹³⁸ with paranormal and nightmarish depictions of the unknown dreamscape 'the bush'.¹³⁹ There is a dichotomy of 'primitive' and 'civilised'¹⁴⁰ that includes cultural prejudices relating to Indigenous/non-Indigenous people and city versus country,¹⁴¹ a 'battle' to tame a 'harsh' land¹⁴² and overcome hostile 'natives'¹⁴³, with the male hero as the 'battler'.¹⁴⁴ Other prominent White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP)-ish figures¹⁴⁵ form the mainstay of Australian historical identities, with conversely under-represented feminine histories. Rowley contends that the journey theme is a trope of Australian literature, to signify the physical and metaphorical journeys of Australian people.¹⁴⁶ Rowley notes that the journey theme is gendered as masculine and often more specifically signifies rites of passage, transformation and conquering.¹⁴⁷ All of these myths conglomerate in narratives that delineate 'conqueror' and 'conquered', in both human and environmental forms. For example, Maxwell explains that

¹³⁶ Williams M Adams and Martin Mulligan, *Decolonising Nature: Strategies for Conservation in a Post-Colonial Era*. (London: Earthscan, 2003).

¹³⁷ Deborah Bird Rose, 'Connecting with ecological futures', (Position paper prepared for the National Humanities and Social Sciences Summit, Canberra, 26-27 July 2001) p. 3, <https://openresearchrepository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/41038/2/cef.pdf> [accessed 27 April 2017].

¹³⁸ Noelene J Kelly, 'Singing Up' the Silences: Australian nature writing as disruption and invocation', *Australasian Journal of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, 1 (2011/2012) pp.1-11; Lucy Frost, 'Escaping the Bush Paradigm' in Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (eds), *Imagining Australia*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004) p. 53-65; Libby Robin, 'The Problematic Pastoral: Ecocriticism in Australia' a review of C. A. Cranston and Robert Zellers (eds.) *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and their Writers*, *Australian Humanities Review*, 42, (2007), p. 7.

¹³⁹ Sue Rowley, 'Imagination, Madness, and Nation in Australian Bush Mythology', in Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner and Sarah Nuttall (Eds), *Text, Theory, Space: Land, literature and history in South Africa and Australia*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 137, 140.

¹⁴⁰ Bruce Bennett, 'Some Dynamics of Literary Placemaking: An Australian Perspective', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 10.2 (2003) 97-109.

¹⁴¹ Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, 'Green Postcolonialism', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 9.1 (2008) pp. 1-11; Sue Kossew, *Writing Woman, Writing Place*, (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁴² Deb Anderson, 'Drought, Endurance and 'The Way Things Were': The lived experience of climate and climate change in the Mallee' *Australian Historical Review* 45 (2008) 1-10.

¹⁴³ Deborah Bird Rose, 'Connecting with ecological futures', (Position paper prepared for the National Humanities and Social Sciences Summit, Canberra, 26-27 July 2001) p. 3, <https://openresearchrepository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/41038/2/cef.pdf> [accessed 27 April 2017].

¹⁴⁴ Sue Kossew, *Writing Woman, Writing Place*, (London: Routledge, 2004), p.12.

¹⁴⁵ Lucy Frost, 'Escaping the Bush Paradigm' in Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crabbe (eds), *Imagining Australia*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004) 53-65.

¹⁴⁶ Sue Rowley, 'Imagination, Madness and Nation in Australian Bush Mythology', in Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner, and Sarah Nuttall (eds), *Text, Theory, Space: Land, literature and history in South Africa and Australia*, (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁴⁷ Rowley, 'Imagination, Madness and Nation in Australian Bush Mythology'.

untameable and alien landscapes have been portrayed as ‘other’ in similar ways to non-western people/cultures,¹⁴⁸ and females.¹⁴⁹ Tredinnick extends this discussion to the connection between environmental change issues and the Australian identity, which is still in evidence in twenty first century depictions of the Australian environment and its heroes and battlers. He observes that Australia’s weather is depicted as damaging and ruinous of human endeavours, but that Australian people are represented as resilient troopers who bravely ‘bear it and get on’.¹⁵⁰

In historical and contemporary offerings, Australian writing displays an ongoing obsession with environmental themes. Huggan and Tiffin even comment that environmental themes are becoming ‘more prominent’ in Australian prose fiction texts.¹⁵¹ A distinct field of Australian literary criticism relating to environmental change themes is developing in the twenty-first century. Cranston and Zeller contend that ecocriticism provides the critical framework necessary to analyse Australian literature in a time of environmental crisis.¹⁵² Yet, very few Australian texts that raise environmental themes have been studied from an ecocritical perspective. Undertaking this analysis would offer readers valuable new perspectives on texts and content.¹⁵³

Australian literature can also contribute to global ecocritical scholarship. Any field of analysis grows through use, so, most simply, extending ecocritical analysis to Australian literature ‘extends the range of texts to which we apply ecocriticism’.¹⁵⁴ Environmentalism has developed in similar ways in Australia and North America, so that analysis undertaken in both cultural contexts provides for comparative exploration of critical practice. While it is beyond the scope of this exegesis to discuss the differences in detail, Tredinnick’s text *The Land’s Wild Music* offers a comprehensive comparison.

Relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are significant in both the Australian and North American canons. However, Australian literary history derives from vastly different physical and cultural contexts than North American literature, so that

¹⁴⁸ Anne Maxwell, ‘Postcolonial Literary Criticism and Global Warming’, *Sites: New Series*, 5.1 (2008) 82-101.

¹⁴⁹ Sue Rowley, ‘Imagination, Madness and Nation in Australian Bush Mythology’, in Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner, and Sarah Nuttall (eds), *Text, Theory, Space: Land, literature and history in South Africa and Australia*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p.134.

¹⁵⁰ Mark Tredinnick, *Australia’s Wild Weather*, (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2011), p. 18.

¹⁵¹ Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 13.

¹⁵² C.A Cranston and Robert Zeller, *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and Their Writers*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007) p. 13.

¹⁵³ Huggan and Tiffin p. 13.

¹⁵⁴ Cranston and Zeller, p. 13.

ecocritical analysis can provide a contrasting perspective.¹⁵⁵ By connecting with other disciplines, ecocriticism can be used to foster cross-disciplinary understanding about how literature impacts environmental thinking.¹⁵⁶ Like other cultural narratives, the emergent challenge for Australian literature and criticism will be that of representing environmental issues in the climate change era.

This exegesis discusses environmental themes in non-Indigenous Australian literary fiction. Although a thorough review of Indigenous narratives is beyond the scope of this research, I note that there are several critical issues relating to the Indigenous contribution to Australian literature. Kelly argues that nature writing is positioned to provoke transformations in relationships between Australian people and place, by disrupting previous erroneous viewpoints. She recommends that Indigenous place-making must be recognized within Australian texts, and that ecocritics must examine issues of agency, psychological connection, and power, with the aim of ‘repositioning’ humans and their surroundings.¹⁵⁷ Wright appeals directly to readers in her essay ‘Deep Weather’, in which she contends that Indigenous knowledge about Australian environments holds the key to the future survival of all Australians. Yet, indigenous perspectives on climate change are ignored. She describes a ‘silence’ within Australian culture, in which indigenous knowledge is held closely guarded because it is considered irrelevant, and is not ‘respected, honoured and upheld’.¹⁵⁸ In arguing for treaties, Wright argues for a need to ‘accept and give respect to other forms of knowledge.’¹⁵⁹

Huggan and Tiffin acknowledge that there is a contest between non-Indigenous conservationist ideals and Indigenous custodians of place.¹⁶⁰ Rose discusses this issue as having several elements. Firstly, Indigenous systems of knowledge are different from those in western cultures and have different outcomes.¹⁶¹ Indigenous writers read the landscape in ‘double vision’, as Melissa Lucashenko puts it. ‘We see the world that white people see but we are also seeing a mythic landscape at the same time and an historic landscape.’¹⁶² Despite this strong Indigenous ‘connection to Country’, Australian ‘wilderness’ is largely an

¹⁵⁵ Cranston and Zeller, pp. 9-10.

¹⁵⁶ Cranston and Zeller, p. 13.

¹⁵⁷ Kelly, p. 9.

¹⁵⁸ Alexis Wright, ‘Deep Weather’ *Meanjin*, 70.2 (2011) 70-82, p. 79.

¹⁵⁹ Wright, p. 80.

¹⁶⁰ Huggan and Tiffin, p. 3.

¹⁶¹ Rose, p. 6.

¹⁶² Melissa Lucashenko quoted in Susan Chenery, ‘The Interview: Melissa Lucashenko’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 March 2013, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/the-interview-melissa-lucashenko-20130306-2flr6.html> [accessed 28 April 2017].

imported construct. Indigenous scholar Marcia Langton points out that, ‘the concept of wilderness that equates “natural” with the absence of human trace or culture is a highly westernized and relatively recent construct’. Rose secondly states that Indigenous systems of knowledge are not adequately recognized, having been rendered ‘invisible’ by legal and scientific understandings that privilege non-Indigenous scholarship.¹⁶³ The resulting lack of recognition (whether unwitting or deliberate) inflames this sense of displacement.¹⁶⁴ Kelly discusses the ongoing and seemingly intractable issues associated with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people’s belonging to place. She argues that several early contributors to the body of work that celebrated Australian landscapes aimed to build affinity with the adopted environment through writing about ‘local symbols of sentiment’.¹⁶⁵ However, the process of accreting ‘belonging’ to an adopted place through eliminating its prior owners and establishing the ‘terra nullius’ doctrine was, and continues to be, offensive: For settler Australians, representing the land from a position of knowledge and intimacy in the way that nature writing requires, is clearly problematized when that same land is the site of Indigenous dispossession and on-going regimes of violence, social marginalization and economic disadvantage.¹⁶⁶

Wright explores the need to overcome the negativity of colonialization practices. She suggests that new Indigenous narratives can ‘recreate memory’ in a way that challenges the ‘overwhelming effects of an unacceptable history’, and offers both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers access to a ‘contemporary continuation of the Dreaming story.’¹⁶⁷

Adams and Mulligan discuss the problematic questions of perspective and subjectivity¹⁶⁸ in non-Indigenous place narratives, including the following: what value do we place on non-Indigenous connections with places? Can Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives be fairly compared? Can any perspective represent a place more ‘truthfully’ than another? If we understand connections with place as subjective and therefore diverse and valuable, how do we reconcile the value of non-Indigenous sense of place with the knowledge that these connections were formed through a process of depriving Indigenous

¹⁶³ Marcia Langton, *Burning Questions, emerging environmental issues for indigenous peoples in northern Australia*, (Centre for Indigenous Natural and Cultural Resource Management, Northern Territory University, Darwin, 1998).

¹⁶⁴ Hannah Donnelly, ‘The Unnatural Way of Things’, 17 March 2016, Writers Bloc, <<https://thewritersbloc.net/unnatural-way-things>> [accessed 28 April 2017].

¹⁶⁵ Kelly, p. 2.

¹⁶⁶ Kelly, p. 3.

¹⁶⁷ Alexis Wright, ‘On Writing Carpentaria’ *HEAT*, 13 (2007) 79-95, p. 82.

¹⁶⁸ Adams and Mulligan, p. 183.

people of their connections with place?¹⁶⁹ Wright also reflects on the challenge of representation. Additional to the issues of acknowledging and hearing Indigenous voices, are the oral and epic traditions of Indigenous storytelling. Wright observes that Indigenous people live ‘with the stories of all times of this country’, with time being a non-linear construct, so that even telling a story within the established context of what constitutes an Australian novel illuminates a disconnect between representative forms and languages.¹⁷⁰

Rigby contends that the new materialisms can potentially facilitate a significant ‘cross-cultural conversation’.¹⁷¹ She summarises that ‘[c]ountry is sentient, agentic, and speaking matter’,¹⁷² which can be voiced and heard through a material ecocritical paradigm. Unlike any other framework for approaching environmental concepts, the new materialisms posits that all voices are valid and equal, so that its greatest value arises from establishing ‘a nexus of communication... in and through a shared, if variously experienced, physical reality.’¹⁷³

The recognition of a nexus rather than a hierarchical approach,¹⁷⁴ and a mode of expressing all inputs within that nexus, seems to represent a frontier for narrative that has not yet been explored. This deserves *extensive* further exploration. While further investigation is beyond the scope of my immediate research, the role of the new materialisms in illuminating Indigenous perspectives appears a potent tool for addressing the ethical dimensions of human interactions in and with ‘place’.

Conclusions

In this chapter I identified ecocriticism as the framework that initially introduced Literary Studies practitioners to analysing fictive representations of relationships between humans and their non-human surroundings. I then discussed developments in the field, and emerging constructions of ‘environment’ that challenge critical responses to environmental change. The range of critical responses to environmental change issues is now so divergent and so dynamic, that some theorists consider it inaccurate to view these as belonging to even a

¹⁶⁹ Adams and Mulligan, p. 173.

¹⁷⁰ Wright, ‘On Writing Carpentaria’ pp. 80-81.

¹⁷¹ Kate Rigby, ‘Spirits that Matter’, in Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, *Material Ecocriticism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2014) p. 283.

¹⁷² Rigby, p. 284.

¹⁷³ Rigby, p. 286.

¹⁷⁴ Pippa Marland, ‘Ecocriticism’ *Literature Compass*, 10.11 (2013) 846–868, p. 858.

broadly defined conglomerate like ‘ecocriticism’. Whether critics continue to refer to ecocriticism as a field or adopt separate fields of enquiry, there are shared challenges for critics responding to environmental change issues in an era of climate change. To maintain ongoing relevance, critics need to define why literary analysis forms part of an important response to climate change. They need to demonstrate that it has a tangible value, and a role to play in framing discussions about climate change. If literary criticism of environmental change cannot demonstrate its value, it risks being discarded as simply another mechanism for talking about a problem rather than contributing to solutions. In the preceding discussion, I argue that literary criticism as it responds to environmental change scenarios, will continue to be relevant in the era of climate change. The original role of ecocriticism as an appraisal mechanism for ‘green’ agendas within texts will provide a useful foundation to develop more sophisticated responses to environmental change themes in fiction into the future. Critics in the climate change era are continually expanding the existing frameworks of critical inquiry so that they analyse authors’ engagement with more complex environmental issues, such as the nexus between environmental and social justice issues, post-humanist perspectives, the literature that emerges from modified environments, and specific issues in regional literature, for example Australian literature.

One significant challenge to the traditional concepts outlined through the ecocritical lens has arisen through the advent of the new materialisms, which aims to overturn humans as the central agents in environmental change, by arguing for the recognition of agency within all forms of matter. If this viewpoint successfully permeates literary sources, it is quite likely that the human perspective may be only one of many available narrative voices adopted by authors. New materialist perspectives introduce readers to new concepts of viewing matter beyond themselves, which could be the first step in adopting a new perspective to underpin behavioural choices.

The main issues for literary ecocritics of environmental change scenarios in the twenty-first century have impacted on my novella, *A Widening Gyre*. In writing it, I was aware of the dynamic relationship between human and ‘environment’, and queried what role urban environments play in this relationship. I was also aware that environmental issues affect different socio-economic groups in varying ways, and was able to explore this issue through my interests in local heritage conservation and place-based identity. As an Australian writer, I am cognisant of the post-colonial context of writing about environment, though I did not explore Indigenous relationships with place.

As I explain in Chapter Two, writing about climate change engages audiences in discourse about environmental issues. I wrote *A Widening Gyre* with the aim of contributing to an expanding body of writing about climate change themes. The existence of such a body of work indicates that humans are concerned about the impacts of the Anthropocene. By first acknowledging that we are responsible for modified environments, we can then identify ways to address this with a sense of responsibility.

Chapter Two: Climate Change Fiction

Introduction

As the twenty-first century progresses, the anticipated impacts of climate change draw closer and continue to amplify in the absence of globally agreed mitigation measures. Arguably, communication between experts of all disciplines and the general public is part of the difficulty in reaching consensus about responding to climate change threats. In the previous chapter, I presented ideas from critics about how the humanities can respond to climate change and the types of issues that will become relevant in contemporary environmental discourse. Fiction could be a powerful medium for communicating about climate change with readers, and for inviting them to formulate reader responses to climate change issues. This chapter addresses recent theory on climate change fiction, including early critical thoughts about what constitutes a realist climate change novel, supported by examples. I also discuss the importance of aesthetics and activism to climate change fiction. Urgent action is needed

to respond to climate change, but should fiction be used to galvanise public support or promote an environmentalist agenda?

Why is it important to write fiction about climate change?

Our very survival depends on the success of discourse about environmental changes.

Fassbinder states succinctly:

society needs...people who are concerned with the environment not because it's wilderness in need of preservation, nor because the capitalist system needs improved management, but rather because they live there, and want to continue to do so.¹⁷⁵

Yet, humans are not responding to climate change communications in a timely way. Perhaps we lack insight into its magnitude. Numerous critics contend that climate change is challenging to communicate because its scale, complexity, and incalculability are difficult to both conceptualise and represent.¹⁷⁶ Environmentalist Bill McKibben cites scale as the main problem in writing about climate change.¹⁷⁷ In a seminal article, McKibben describes climate change as 'a world war', stating that '[c]arbon and methane now represent the deadliest enemy of all time.'¹⁷⁸ That is, the magnitude of climate change is so serious that it is difficult for writers to respond to skilfully, and so enormous that the figurative 'elephant in the room'¹⁷⁹ is terrifying to identify.

Garrard discusses the 'unbearable lightness of green' paradox, where humans psychologically minimise the impact of individual actions, so that these assume almost no significance in comparison with collective agency.¹⁸⁰ Perversely, a lack of individual responsibility ripples into a lack of collective responsibility, and also results in humans

¹⁷⁵ Samuel Day Fassbinder, 'Greening Education', in *Greening the Academy: Ecopedagogy Through the Liberal Arts*, ed. by SD Fassbinder, A.J Nocella II and R Kahn, (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012), p.7.

¹⁷⁶ Timothy Clark, 'Some Climate Change Ironies: Deconstruction, environmental politics and the closure of ecocriticism', *Oxford Literary Review* 32.1 (2010), 131-149, (p. 132).

¹⁷⁷ Bill McKibben, 'Introduction', in *I'm with the Bears: Short Stories from a Damaged Planet*, ed. by Mark Martin, (London and New York: Verso, 2011), p. 1.

¹⁷⁸ Bill McKibben, 'A World at War', *New Republic*, 15 August 2016, <<https://newrepublic.com/article/135684/declare-war-climate-change-mobilize-wwii?utm=350org>> [accessed 8 October 2017].

¹⁷⁹ Stephen Wright, 'The Elephant in the Room', *Overland*, 15 March 2010, <<https://overland.org.au/2010/03/the-elephant-in-the-room/>> [accessed 3 May 2017].

¹⁸⁰ Greg Garrard, 'The unbearable lightness of green: air travel, climate change and literature', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 17:2 (2013) 175-188, (p.185).

falsely detaching from their relationship with the environment. Another element of this paradox is that if humans did take into account their individual actions, they would be confronted with the overwhelming, bewildering scale of their impacts. Clark articulates this in the following way:

even trivial personal decisions about food, ways of travelling to work, gardening et cetera all become significant or not depending on the contingency of how many others have done or doing or will do them, anywhere on earth.¹⁸¹

Despite the difficulties of communicating about, and responding to, climate change, all disciplines have the opportunity to contribute to climate change discourse. Hulme argues that climate change is not a premise requiring scientific discovery, proof or disproof, and is not a problem waiting to be solved.¹⁸² He makes an analogy between climate change and clashes of political ideologies or religious disputes. Just as these differences are foreseeably ongoing and unlikely to ever be ‘resolved’, climate change is a scenario that represents continually changing positions on human relationships with ‘Nature’ and culture. I find this argument compelling. If humans accept that we are not waiting for a single solution or metaphorical magic bullet, then we can use whatever resources we have to address climate change. One of these resources is fiction.

The relationship between fiction, scientific data, and behaviour change Relationships arise between fiction, scientific data, and behaviour change in the area of climate change because experts in all disciplines have a common mission: to effectively communicate the likely threats posed by climate change. The most effective forms of communication are surely those that inspire the behavioural and cultural responses necessary to mitigate climate change threats.

Humans are primarily aware of environmental change because of scientific research.¹⁸³ Scientific research produces data, but data must then be interpreted. Interpretation occurs through creating narratives,¹⁸⁴ which construct understandings of the world.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ Clark, p. 136.

¹⁸² Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. xxvi.

¹⁸³ Richard Kerridge, ‘Ecocriticism’, *The Year’s Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, 21 (2013), 1-30, (p. 5).

¹⁸⁴ Emily Potter, ‘Climate Change and the problem of representation’, *Australian Humanities Review*, 46, (2009), 69-79, (p. 70).

¹⁸⁵ Potter, p. 77.

According to Buell, stories, images and artistic performances use the resources of aesthetics, ethics and cultural history to transform human perceptions, will, and behaviour.¹⁸⁶ Critics such as McCullough argue that artistic mediums are a way of communicating scientific information to ‘the public at large [who] is not drawn naturally to science education’.¹⁸⁷ Climate change is an extremely complex issue that few people understand. Because it is occurring gradually and is also potentially very frightening, climate scientists have needed to persistently reiterate their view that climate change is ‘real’ for at least the last 30 years. The tasks of climate scientists are multi-faceted and extremely challenging: to overcome denialism, to demonstrate human causation in climate change, and to communicate the urgency of mitigation and adaptation measures. For audiences who do not have the skills or inclination to directly interpret data, reading stories *may* be a more readily accessible and less threatening way of obtaining information.¹⁸⁸

Garrard contends that environmental problems manifest in physical terms and require scientific analysis, but that environmental problems are also the product of cultural practices, which therefore also require analysis.¹⁸⁹ Humans simultaneously occupy a position of agency and dependence on their surroundings. Fiction discusses the nuances of human/nature relationships and the roles of the parties to these relationships.¹⁹⁰

Fiction can address the problems of scale by discussing both individual and collective actions, and thereby assist readers to understand the relationships between personal and social responsibility. This is one of the key themes in Ian McEwan’s dark satirical novel 2010 *Solar*, in which the main character Michael Beard is apathetic towards climate change and even amused by, and disparaging of, his colleagues’ zeal for renewable energy. By depicting Beard as an anti-hero, McEwan effectively represents many ordinary people who are either disinterested in climate change, or unaware of its impact on their own lives. Beard is so unlikeable that he challenges the reader to care about climate change, without making the reader feel uncomfortable. In fact, as a reader, I feel superior to Beard, because I am at least aware of the climate change threat, even if I’m not sure how to meaningfully respond to it in

¹⁸⁶ Laurence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Blackwell: Malden, Massachusetts, 2005), p. vi.

¹⁸⁷ Matthew Rimmer, ‘The culture wars of climate change’, (conference proceedings) in *Law, Literature & the Humanities Association of Australasia: Interpellations*, (Canberra: Australian National University, 5-7 December 2013) p. 22.

¹⁸⁸ Lisa Kadonaga, ‘Depictions of global environmental change in science fiction: An overview of educational applications’ in Daniel Scott et al. (eds.) *Climate Change Communication: Proceedings of an international conference*, (Ontario: University of Waterloo, June 2002), D210-18 (p. D216) <http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/En56-157-2000E.pdf> [accessed 4 May 2017].

¹⁸⁹ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* Second edition, (Oxon: Routledge, 2012), p. 16.

¹⁹⁰ Stephanie LeMenager and Stephanie Foote, ‘The Sustainable Humanities’, *PMLA* 127.3 (2012) 572-578.

my everyday habits. Author Kate Grenville argues that people sharing their experiences in stories, is a ‘good place to start’ in overcoming the helplessness that individuals feel in the face of an urgent catastrophe. Grenville suspects that writers must feel this helplessness even more keenly, because their helplessness is compounded by their perceptions of themselves as having nothing ‘nothing especially profound to say’.¹⁹¹

Creative visualisation is a powerful technique for preparing for future events. Fiction writers can simulate experiences of environmental disasters, offer possible solutions, and explore the accompanying ethical issues.¹⁹² Fiction can use imaginative visualisations with an almost unlimited palette of scenario possibilities. Stories can explore ambiguity, reflect on representation, and discuss information deficits.¹⁹³ Kerridge contends that writers can imaginatively extrapolate the possible outcomes of scientific information.¹⁹⁴ The experiential nature of the imaginative process could be used to map a desirable future,¹⁹⁵ stimulate new directions for scientific research, or uncover new insights.¹⁹⁶

Fiction also uses the powerful tool of emotional appeal, which scientific data generally does not use. Rawson observes that ‘[f]iction...can help us really *feel* the horror of what we’re headed for’.¹⁹⁷ Providing a ‘sense’ of a situation gives readers an overview of how that situation might *feel*, rather than a detailed explanation of scientific predictions.

Readers are also active participants in the imaginative visualisation process, because they contribute a personal set of memories, feelings, and ideas.¹⁹⁸ Oatley argues that fiction simulates a scenario, which provokes an emotional response in the reader in several ways. Firstly, when the story presents a scenario that resonates with the reader’s own personal concerns, the reader explores the emotions that arise and, in doing so, reflects on the implications of that scenario within the reader’s own life. Stories engage their readers in relationships, too. Readers form relationships with fictional characters,¹⁹⁹ and these

¹⁹¹ Kate Grenville, ‘Artists and Climate Change’ [lecture], June 2009, *Festival of Ideas: Climate Change/Cultural Change*, University of Melbourne, <http://kategrenville.com/artists_and_climate_change> [accessed 3 May 2017].

¹⁹² Peter Middleton, ‘How novels can contribute to our understanding of climate change’ in Mark Levene, Rob Johnson and Penny Roberts (eds.), *History at the End of the World?: History, Climate Change and The Possibility of Closure* (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2010), p. 225.

¹⁹³ Middleton, p. 232.

¹⁹⁴ Kerridge, p. 6.

¹⁹⁵ Lynn Keller, ‘Beyond Imagining, Imagining Beyond’, *PMLA* 127.3 (2012) 579-585 (p.582).

¹⁹⁶ Kadonaga, p.16.

¹⁹⁷ Jane Rawson, ‘Can climate change fiction succeed where scientific fact has failed?’, The Wheeler Centre, 5 June 2014, <<http://wheelercentre.com/dailies/post/e291b384291e>> [accessed 4 May 2017].

¹⁹⁸ Middleton, p. 225.

¹⁹⁹ Colin Hoogerwerf, ‘The Crevice Dwellers: using Images and Story to Communicate Climate Change’ (Masters of Environmental Management thesis, Duke University, 2013), p. 4.

interactions can influence the reader's opinions or at least their level of awareness about specific issues.

Imaginative exploration of environmental change scenarios may also involve examining uncomfortable thoughts or images. Grenville argues that writers can safely guide readers vicariously through 'dark places'.²⁰⁰ Writers can magnify, exaggerate, or minimise the magnitude of discomfort involved, when using a fictional scenario. For example, fiction can simulate resource scarcity scenarios that might arise from climate change, as does Saci Lloyd in *The Carbon Diaries*, where UK residents are required to adopt a 'low carbon lifestyle'. No-one wants to think about giving up the lifestyle that westerners have achieved by depending on fossil fuels,²⁰¹ but perhaps readers can safely confront a 'worst case' option by vicariously experiencing it through an immersive visualisation, such as Lloyd presents.

The role of fiction in communicating about climate change: aesthetic or activist?
Given the multiple roles that fiction can play in communicating with readers about climate change, writers must then consider important questions about the relationship between scientific sources and fiction. If fiction *can* use specific resources to influence behaviour change, *must* it? That is, if stories, images and visions help people to understand a potentially intractable issue like climate change,²⁰² do authors have an obligation to use these resources to communicate scientific data? Is fiction obliged to communicate with any degree of scientific accuracy? Is fiction responsible for influencing behaviour change outcomes?

Environmentalist Bill McKibben argues that the writer's task is aesthetic, rather than scientifically accurate. McKibben claims that writers can provide a 'sense' of what life 'might be like' under changed environmental conditions, but that, ultimately, their job is 'to illuminate and to bear witness'.²⁰³ Furthermore, critics like Keller argue that writers undertake 'serious imaginative exploration of what constitutes a desirable future'.²⁰⁴ I interpret this to mean that writers must construct scenarios that offer hope.

On the Beach is a novel that conjured a fear of human annihilation, which was very real at the time it was written. Former Vice President of the Australian Conservation Foundation Peter Christoff claims that *On the Beach* 'helped catalyse the 1960s anti-nuclear movement'. He argues that similar fictive texts are needed in discussing climate change:

²⁰⁰ Grenville, 'Artists and climate change'.

²⁰¹ *Merchants of Doubt*, dir. by Robert Kenner (Participant Media, 2014).

²⁰² Peter Gingold quoted in Rimmer, p. 37.

²⁰³ Rimmer, p. 9.

²⁰⁴ Keller, p. 582.

These are distressing, some will argue apocalyptic, imaginings, but without them, we cannot undertake the very substantial efforts required to minimise the chances of their being realised.²⁰⁵

If climate change novels must aim to change behaviour or ‘enlighten’ readers, then it would be difficult to name any that have so far provoked a behavioural revolution. Middleton observes that no novel of climate change has been able to change people’s understanding of environmental crises, in the way that popular science narratives like *Silent Spring* or Lovelock’s 1972-1974 *Gaia* theory did.²⁰⁶ In making a judgement that climate change novels have so far ‘failed’ to change the general population’s understanding of environmental crisis, Middleton seems to suggest that novels must seek this outcome. Andrew Milner also engages in this assumption in critiquing George Turner’s novel *The Sea and Summer*. He comments, ‘*The Sea and Summer* is clearly not...paradigmatic climate change dystopia’.²⁰⁷ These differences in critical opinion highlight that there can be many roles for fiction writers in communicating about climate change, but there is no consensus on whether writers must communicate scientific information.

How do critics define and recognise realist climate change fiction? Fictive contributions to global change discourse will come from diverse sources. Genre, structure, form, rhetoric, and theme are among the many devices that narratives can use to communicate with audiences about climate change.²⁰⁸ Because of this potential diversity, and the scale, complexity, and political aspects of climate change, realist climate change fiction is an emerging category that is steadily being differentiated from environmental change discourse in other fields of fiction. In the following discussion, I investigate some potential defining characteristics of realist climate change novels.

Realism

Logically, the first indicator of a realist climate change novel is its use of realism. It is significant that for the purposes of discussing a future speculative scenario such as climate

²⁰⁵ Peter Christoff, ‘The end of the world as we know it’, 2008 <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/opinion/the-end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it/2008/01/14/1200159359396.html>> [accessed 23 July 2017].

²⁰⁶ Middleton, p. 221.

²⁰⁷ Andrew Milner, ‘The Sea and Eternal Summer: Science fiction, futurology and climate change’, *Australasian Journal of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, 3 (2013/2014) 125-130.

²⁰⁸ Keller, p. 582.

change, realism itself is a contentious concept that can be related to the ‘literary’ quality of a novel, or to stylistic elements. For the purposes of this discussion, I focus on realism in its interpretation as events that are replicative of everyday life. Williams defines a realistic object as one that is not ‘really lifelike but by convention and repetition has been made to appear so’.²⁰⁹ Cuddon similarly defines realistic events in literature as those that could conceivably occur as part of the life experience of the man on the Clapham bus. Cuddon also notes that realism is often defined by way of contrast to non-realistic events, for example those that would be ‘unrealistic, fantastic, improbable, fanciful’²¹⁰ and therefore beyond the range of the experience of an ordinary person. In Chapter Three, I discuss some examples of non-realist styles.

Taking these ideas about realism into account, we can format broad parameters for realist climate change novels. Marshall uses a broad definition in describing climate change novels as those ‘that pose climate catastrophe as the greatest threat to species survival’.²¹¹ In reference to realism, we must modify this slightly so that it applies in texts where the greatest threat of survival is to humans living on Earth, or to Earth’s physical environment and its non-human terrestrial components as we now recognise it.

Johns-Putra argues that the realist novel’s hallmarks of plot, character, point of view, setting, and themes are inadequate to represent climate change. Due to scale and complexity, she describes climate change as ‘the postmodern unrepresentable’.²¹² Author James Bradley similarly contends that climate is challenging to the methodology of the realist novel. He argues that the tools of the realist novel are characters, human relationships, and plot events, while climate change and its time-scale are hyper objects. In Bradley’s view, science fiction and nature writing are two modes that have established narrative devices for communicating the enormity/infinity of time, not realism.²¹³ Can realist climate change novels adopt the devices used in other genres, or must authors develop new devices to represent climate change? I discuss the challenge of realism further in reflecting on my creative process, at Chapter Five.

²⁰⁹ Keller, p. 261.

²¹⁰ J. A. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 5th Edition, (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) p. 729.

²¹¹ Kate Marshall, ‘What are the novels of the Anthropocene? American fiction in geological time’ *American Literary History* 27.3 (2015) 532-528 (p. 532).

²¹² Adeline Johns-Putra, ‘A new critical climate’, *symploke* 21.1 (2013), 7-10 (p. 8).

²¹³ James Bradley, personal communication, 3 March 2015.

Structure

Climate change is challenging to represent as a conventional story arc because it is an unfolding phenomenon rather than one event or a series of events.²¹⁴ Kerridge argues that everyday, individual actions are ‘too trivial to feature in conventional narrative’.²¹⁵ The impacts of climate change are also likely to occur gradually, over multiple generations. The impacts of everyday actions will be felt years into the future, so that the lag between action and consequence becomes ineffective from a story-telling perspective.²¹⁶ However, in truth, it’s possible that every lifestyle decision made on a daily basis has the potential to impact on the speed and severity of climate change depending on how many other people decide likewise, including past and future decision making processes.²¹⁷ This is overwhelming for most people to confront in their decision-making, let alone for writers to articulate coherently.

There is no doubt that representing a phenomenon as overwhelming and irreducible as climate change will pose substantial challenges to traditional narrative forms. Authors such as Kim Stanley Robinson admit²¹⁸ that long-term impacts may need to be represented through multiple sequential texts, as he has done in his *Forty Signs of Rain* trilogy. Authors Will Self and David Mitchell experiment with enormous narrative time shifts of hundreds of years backwards and forwards within a single text to manage the scale issues of climate change in their respective novels *The Book of Dave* (2006) and *Cloud Atlas* (2004). Literary critics Trexler and Johns-Putra recognise Ian McEwan’s 2010 novel *Solar* as adopting a somewhat innovative format, consistent with their argument that climate change cannot be represented using the tools of a conventional realist novel. McEwan focuses on climate change as a present threat, rather than using a future history format. McEwan therefore potentially moves beyond simply using a climate change setting, into a potential exploration of climate change impacts through plot.

My analysis of several texts in Chapter Four demonstrates that discontinuous narrative structures may also become more prominent in realist climate change narratives, as a response to the difficulties of timespans and scales involved in environmental changes. Other techniques may include multiple settings and multiple narrative points of view to

²¹⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change’ *New Literary History*, 43.1 (2012) 1-18 (p. 13).

²¹⁵ Kerridge, p. 17.

²¹⁶ Kerridge, p. 17.

²¹⁷ Clark, p. 136.

²¹⁸ Kim Stanley Robinson, ‘Roundtable Q&A’, *Puerto Del Sol*, 47.2 (2012) 55-59.

manage issues of scale. For example, Turner's 1977 novel *The Sea and Summer* uses elements of a future history tale, but the main plot is set in a changing environment, which provides the premise for character construction and development, and some plot developments. Similarly, Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* is set against a changing environment in the form of a nuclear crisis, and through multiple narrators, explores how each character confronts their mortality.

Plot

Chameides contends that climate change needs to be a major theme and plot driver in a climate change novel.²¹⁹ Dobson agrees, claiming that the climate change theme should drive most of the plot.²²⁰ Similarly, McKibben contends that climate change narratives are concerned with the relationship between humans and 'everything else' rather than just relationships between people.²²¹

Conversely, Bracke argues that Barbara Kingsolver's 2012 novel *Flight Behaviour* 'works because it's not about climate change'.²²² By this I understand Bracke to mean that the novel employs climate change as only one of its narratives, among others. In novels such as *Flight Behaviour*, climate change is a theme that provokes some plot developments and character development but not all, and is much more a subtle influence than a decisive one. This is also true of Jonathan Franzen's 2010 novel *Freedom*, in which Franzen explores environmental change themes through the main character, Walter Berglund. Franzen depicts Walter's identity as an environmental activist and his concerns for habitat destruction and overpopulation. It's true to say that Walter's actions are motivated by his individual response to environmental change issues. Environmental change is, however, not the main theme of the novel. A critic might dismiss *Freedom* as not being a climate change novel, on the basis that it explores other issues, like family structures, the marriage institution, and existential character-based enquiries about the purpose of an individual's existence and contribution.

²¹⁹ Bill Chameides, 'The rise of climate fiction' *Conservation Magazine*, (17 December 2013) <<http://www.conservationmagazine.org/2013/12/rise-climate-fiction/>> [accessed 5 May 2017].

²²⁰ Andrew Dobson, 'The fiction of climate change', openDemocracy, (18 September 2010) <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/andrew-dobson/fiction-of-climate-change>> [accessed 5 May 2017].

²²¹ Bill McKibben, 'Introduction', in Mark Martin (ed.), *I'm with the Bears: Short Stories from a Damaged Planet*, (London: Verso, 2011), p. 4.

²²² Astrid Bracke, 'Why Flight Behaviour Works as a Climate Crisis Novel – and why Solar doesn't' (1 May 2013), <<https://astridbracke.com/2013/05/01/why-flight-behaviour-works-as-a-climate-crisis-novel-and-why-solar-doesnt/>> [accessed 4 May 2017].

Trexler and Johns-Putra argue that climate change should theoretically produce texts that innovatively discuss its ‘global, networked and controversial nature’.²²³ My analysis of early twenty-first century realist climate change fiction in Chapter Four shows that climate change is only sometimes represented as a ‘global, networked, and controversial phenomenon’. For example, in Sue Isle’s novella *Nightsiders*, her characters move west to east across Australia, and also to Australia from New Zealand. Several other recent texts, however, demonstrate an engagement with the global nature of climate change. For example, Douglas Copeland’s 2010 crisis novel *Player One* occurs as a result of the sudden collapse in global oil markets, as does James Scarrow’s 2007 novel *Last Light*.

One author who adopts a differing, more localised approach is Barbara Kingsolver, who depicts a climate change event gravitating around a small town and group of characters in her 2012 novel *Flight Behaviour*. Bracke argues that Kingsolver successfully achieves plot complexity and nuance, and is able to thoroughly explore environmental crisis by using the butterflies as a synecdoche.²²⁴ The approach of representing climate change impacts on a small scale is one that I chose to use in my novella. While it is not the central theme of any particular chapter, climate change is discernibly occurring and impacting on the characters’ lives and decisions.

Timothy Clark disagrees that individuals should be a plot focus of climate change novels, because individual rights and opinions are illusory in matters such as climate change. A collective, global response is necessary.²²⁵ While Clark has a valid point that reality and power are far more complex than one individual’s viewpoint, an individual story is a platform from which to articulate a position. Writers ‘bring words to experiences’,²²⁶ which other people can then use to corroborate their own experiences. When accompanied by a narrator, the reader derives hope and comfort from knowing that they are not alone in responding to complex issues.²²⁷ On a practical note, it would be very difficult or even impossible to create a novel that presents a truly global view of climate change.

On balance, critical opinions seem to argue that climate change should be a key issue within a novel, but perhaps not the only one. Dobson offers a tongue-in-cheek analysis,

²²³ Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra, ‘Climate change in literature and literary criticism.’ *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 2.2 (2011) 185-200 (p. 196).

²²⁴ Bracke, ‘Why Flight Behaviour works as a Climate Crisis Novel – and why *Solar* Doesn’t,’ 2013, <<https://astridbracke.com/2013/05/01/why-flight-behaviour-works-as-a-climate-crisis-novel-and-why-solar-doesnt/>> [accessed 23 July 2017].

²²⁵ Clark, p. 141.

²²⁶ Grenville, ‘Artists and Climate Change’.

²²⁷ Hoogerwerf, p. 8.

which concludes that climate change novels should focus on climate change, ‘...not an exploration of middle-aged angst, teenage hormones or any of the other themes that get in the way of the topic at hand’.²²⁸ Author Margaret Atwood claims that ‘novels are always about people even if they purport to be about rabbits and robots...because that’s who we are and that’s what we write stories about’.²²⁹ Atwood seems to be saying that it would not theoretically be possible to write a novel about climate change without it also being a novel about middle-aged angst, teenage hormones, et cetera.

Experimenting with concepts of agency and exploring the extent to which the physical environment directs the plot and character development in climate change novels would be interesting. But these enquiries are not specific to climate change fiction, or even to nature writing. A vast canon of Australian work represents environment as ‘more than setting’. As I discussed in Chapter One, imputing qualities to physical surroundings is one of its established tropes. Diverse examples include Miles Franklin’s epic family saga *Up the Country*, Garry Disher’s young adult novel *The Sunken Road*, Joan Lindsay’s mystery *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, Kate Grenville’s historical *The Secret River*, Patricia Wrightson’s haunting children’s book *Nargun and the Stars*, and so on. Is there a balance point, then, between a theme that drives ‘most of the plot’ and ‘other themes that get in the way’? Not one recognised by critics, as yet. A sensible starting point might be to recognise climate change as being a key theme of a narrative.

Setting

Setting and its relationship to plot events is one of the most problematic parameters in defining realist climate change novels. As well as the difficulties of representing scale and using a plot that engages a reader’s affective response, the issue of anticipating a climate change scenario that could potentially occur within the experience of the person on the Clapham bus is significant. I suspect that this is one of the reasons that Trexler and Johns-Putra emphasise the important role of genre fiction in contributing to climate change discourse.²³⁰ That is, the imaginary setting or world premises on which the novel is based provide for far more plot flexibility than strict realism. Dobson presents a list of ‘ideal’

²²⁸ Dobson, ‘The fiction of climate change’.

²²⁹ Margaret Atwood, quoted in Ed Finn, ‘An interview with Margaret Atwood’, *Future Tense*, *Slate*, (6 February 2015),

<http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2015/02/margaret_atwood_interview_the_author_speaks_on_hope_science_and_the_future.html> [accessed 5 May 2017].

²³⁰ Trexler and Johns-Putra, p. 186.

elements for climate change fiction, but the slightly jesting tone of his article neatly sidesteps questions about whether climate change fiction should be realistic, accurate, or based on scientific evidence, whether authors have any obligations to truthfulness, or whether the novel should aim to inspire or guide behaviour change. Dobson argues that the novel should be set in an imagined world, appropriately date-stamped, and probably dystopian, with ‘[l]ots of weather - preferably wild and wet’. A future setting is preferable, one where living conditions are ‘grim’. The plot should explore human ethical and moral responses to extreme circumstances through characters that develop for better or worse, and maybe include a journey and a lost character.²³¹

On a more serious note, Chameides argues that the recognisably ‘real world’ setting of *Flight Behaviour* adds to its strength as climate change discourse.²³² Science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson mentions that he has experimented with real-world settings because they can effectively convey people’s attachments to place, unlike the usual imaginary settings used in science fiction.²³³ For me as a reader, this point resonates. One example springs immediately to mind. I suspect that *On the Beach* influenced my novella because it was set in Melbourne. Through Shute’s plot and characters, I could visualise a nuclear disaster affecting Australia, which brought an element of personal impact.

While Barbara Kingsolver identifies her setting as Appalachia, it does not always need to be the case that a setting is identified as a specific location. Margaret Atwood defines her writing as speculative fiction that is set on Earth.²³⁴ Her *MaddAddam* trilogy adopts a futuristic setting filled with genetically modified creatures controlled by a mega-corporation government. Although she does not identify a location, as a reader I make the assumption that the setting is Earth.

Style

Garrard contends that only certain narrative styles should be used to represent climate change.²³⁵ This is because generic conventions limit the narrative. For example, plots that could occur in one type of narrative are unfeasible in another. He uses Ian McEwan’s satire

²³¹ Dobson, ‘The fiction of climate change’.

²³² Chameides, ‘The rise of climate fiction’.

²³³ Bud Foote, ‘A conversation with Kim Stanley Robinson’, 1994, <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/interviews/foote62interview.htm> [accessed 23 July 2017].

²³⁴ Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2011) p.1.

²³⁵ Garrard, ‘The unbearable lightness of green’.

Solar as an example of a style that does not allow full character development.²³⁶ Le Guin agrees that ‘complex, unpredictable individuality is really very rare’ in satire, but cites Atwood’s 2009 novel *Year of the Flood* as an ‘extraordinary’ realist satirical novel where the female characters are fully developed, and which discusses environmental change issues in a work of ‘unusual cautionary imagination’.²³⁷

Whether or not the style of a narrative limits certain aspects of its development, categorising it as one style or another does not detract from its ability to contribute to climate change discourse or to be recognised as a ‘climate change novel’. My research reveals that many styles will necessarily contribute to climate change discourse. The diversity of these voices is valuable in responding to climate change challenges.

Characterisation

Does realist climate change fiction need a hero, a loveable protagonist, or at least a character who is a productive contribution to environmental debates? In Chapter Three I discuss dystopias, in which protagonists are often symbols of resistance against a hegemonic political structure. Their likeability is not often discussed, but their role as critics and outsiders is acknowledged as a measure of success of dystopian fiction.

In recent examples of realist climate change fiction, critical responses have centred around the effectiveness of main characters as activist symbols. For example, Garrard and Bracke have both criticised Ian McEwan’s protagonist Michael Beard. Bracke summarises him as ‘thoroughly unlikeable’.²³⁸ Garrard expresses disgust both for Beard’s appearance and his inability to emotionally engage with his career, his relationships, and the challenges posed by climate change. Garrard states that Beard knows more about climate change than most, but his knowledge seems not to evoke any emotional response.²³⁹ I found this perspective particularly interesting because it seems to suggest that the main character of a climate change novel needs to be either likeable or an activist. To my surprise, I found that this assumption also seemed to operate in my own mind when I read McEwan’s novel. To me, Beard seemed disengaged and disinterested in his own life. I noticed that I involuntarily responded to his apathy with my own disinterest about his circumstances. While one reader’s response to a character is not indicative of how the novel will be received by other readers, it struck me that Beard’s approach to climate change could so easily be a metaphor for that of

²³⁶ Garrard, ‘The unbearable lightness of green’, p.180.

²³⁷ Ursula Le Guin, ‘The Year of the Flood by Margaret Atwood’, *The Guardian*, (29 August 2009) <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood>> [accessed 5 May 2017].

²³⁸ Bracke, ‘Why Flight Behaviour works as a climate crisis novel’.

²³⁹ Garrard, ‘The unbearable lightness of green’, pp.180-182.

the general public. That is, McEwan could be making a statement that if someone like Beard is disinterested and even ridiculing of efforts to address climate change, then what hope has a member of the general public who is far less aware of the scientific data underpinning climate change predictions?

By contrast, Kingsolver's protagonist Dellarobia is not 'unlikeable' in the way that McEwan's Beard is, but she certainly has human flaws, such as her love affairs outside her marriage and the lack of communication with her husband. As a reader, I am interested to see whether Dellarobia is able to make choices about her future, and I appreciate the layers of life experience that Kingsolver includes to create Dellarobia as a well-rounded character. On this basis, I contend that an engaging character is what readers need to sustain their interest in realist climate change novels, rather than a hero or an activist.

Trexler and Johns-Putra raise another important discussion about characterisation in climate change novels. They claim that 'innovations in characterisation' may occur from representations of climate change that focus on its global and networked nature.²⁴⁰ It's difficult to know what innovations in characterisation might look like in realist climate fiction, but several examples of very innovative characterisation have appeared in non-realist recent climate change texts. In Margaret Atwood's 2003 novel *Oryx and Crake*, genetic modification has produced the humanoid race of Crakers. Will Self's 2006 novel *The Book of Dave* depicts the society of motos, non-human creatures reminiscent of pigs. Numerous sections of the book are narrated from the perspective of these creatures.

Conclusions

Tredinnick observes that '[w]eather is the oldest story in the world'.²⁴¹ Human survival depends on environmental conditions that will support life. The importance of communicating about environmental change is foremost about making the choice to preserve human life. In this chapter, I have discussed climate change fiction, and its related critical discourse. This discussion provides a context for writing about climate change in my novella.

The extent to which an author engages with climate change discourse in a novel, whether explicitly or subtly, assists readers and critics to identify individual texts and build a body of climate change fiction. Literary critics recognised very few novels as 'climate change novels' during the period of my research in 2010-2015. The field is newly emerging, and literary critics contributing to the field of criticism about climate change fiction are still

²⁴⁰ Trexler and Johns-Putra, p. 185.

²⁴¹ Mark Tredinnick, *Australia's Wild Weather*, (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2011), p. 1.

developing a set of parameters that differentiate realist climate change novels from other categories of environmentally-themed fiction. Recent critical discussion raises the following questions, among others. How does an author produce a novel that is about climate change, and not about human relationships? How can an author depict nature as plot rather than setting? Can a gradually occurring phenomenon like climate change drive a plot? Would anyone read a novel that is about nature, not relationships?

Despite there being very few realist climate change novels so far, critical discussions unanimously agree that it is important for fiction writers to write about climate change for multiple reasons. Fiction is accessible to a wide audience. It explores relationships, and power dynamics within those. It can reflect on relationships within the natural world, between humans and the natural world, between humans, and internal processes within humans. It appeals to the emotions in ways that scientific information does not, and uses imagination and visualisation to achieve this.

Novelists are observers, interpreters, scribes, and explorers of prevailing social concerns. Writing about environmental change is a way of communicating the urgency of responding to it, whether or not the author intends to contribute an activist voice to a social discourse. I argue that while fiction *can* endeavour to present information about environmental change in the interests of informing readers or trying to evoke behaviour change, novels are *not obliged to* represent scientific scenarios. While artists of varying disciplines have contributed to behaviour change and law reform in numerous ethical and cultural arenas,²⁴² and environmental writers such as Rachel Carson and James Lovelock have played important roles in communicating scientific concepts to a non-scientific audience, fiction is primarily an aesthetic medium rather than a political one.

It strikes me that some of the difficulties in defining and recognising climate change novels arise because of confusion about whether these novels need to have a behaviour change ‘purpose’. If we accept Mike Hulme’s premise that there is no definitive solution to climate change because climate change is simply a series of changing relationships between entities, it logically follows that we are not, then, waiting for a novel that delivers the map or solution needed to change behaviour. By re-framing the enquiry about what constitutes a climate change novel and accepting that it need not have a ‘paradigmatic change’ effect, texts like *Flight Behaviour* and *Solar* might be considered ‘climate change novels’. That is, we can

²⁴² Tim Hollo, *Key Change: The Role of the Creative Industries in Climate Change Action*, (Canberra: Green Music Australia, 2014).

reframe the definition of climate change novels to include realist novels that discuss the relevant issues. If we accept Hulme's definition of climate change as a set of issues with multiple potential responses, then 'climate change novels' are those that contribute to answering the many questions that climate change compels humans to consider. If we accept the position that climate change is a narrative of ongoing and dynamic relationships between humans and their environments, then each novel becomes a point in time contribution to a complex and evolving field of narrative.

In 2005, Bill McKibben observed that climate change 'isn't part of our culture' and 'has not registered in our gut'.²⁴³ A climate change novel that does have a behaviour-changing impact would be recognised as 'revolutionary' in comparison with other novels, but I'm not convinced by arguments which suggest that existing novel structures cannot produce realist climate change novels. I don't think climate change is so unrepresentable that only non-realist categories can describe it. This is because the affective and cognitive investigation that fiction writers so ably undertake may be the most effective way to integrate climate change into our culture and register it in our collective gut. Trexler and Johns-Putra observe that:

many novels...explor[e] how climate change occurs not just as a meteorological or ecological crisis 'out there' but as something filtered through our inner and outer lives.²⁴⁴

This is the approach I sought to explore in writing my novella. It depicts characters' responses to environmental changes and investigates how humans manage a sense of impermanence within the human-nature relationship. Writers can explore climate change as part of the inner psychological landscape: that is, how the context of climate change becomes embedded in an individual's identity, and in the individual's feedback to/from their physical surroundings. When we view ourselves and our surroundings as constantly changing, the unpredictable and unknown elements in climate change issues present a way to explore and understand the relationships between internal and external.

²⁴³ Bill McKibben, 'What the Warming World Needs Now is Art, Sweet Art', *Grist*, (22 April 2005) <<http://grist.org/article/mckibben-imagine/>> [accessed 5 May 2017].

²⁴⁴ Trexler and Johns-Putra, p. 195.

Chapter Three: Different approaches for writing about environmental change

Introduction

This chapter investigates how authors use forms other than realist fiction to write about environmental change themes. I have considered these forms as part of my research, because categories such as dystopian fiction, speculative fiction, and science fiction have influenced my own writing, and also because these forms offer strong and complex contributions to environmental change discourse. In this chapter I discuss environmental themes from a dystopian perspective, and investigate the recent surge in dystopian Young Adult fiction. I also summarise critical theory related to environmental themes in science fiction and speculative fiction. This chapter shows how forms other than realism can use their established tropes to accommodate the difficulties of writing about environmental change. For example, Australian science fiction novels such as *The Sea and Summer* use devices such as long shifts in time to illustrate long-term impacts of climate change. Speculative fiction author Margaret Atwood frequently uses non-human characters to illustrate how human intervention into technological issues might impact on humans and their physical surroundings. This chapter argues that non-realist forms can potentially engage a wider range of readers in environmental change discourse.

The importance of different forms in environmental discourse

The human response to, and representation of, the external physical environment, is at the core of discussions about what constitutes environmental writing. In a recent article, Link contends that literary naturalism and science fiction share ‘intellectual and thematic interests’. He argues that both styles seek to answer one common question: ‘what can science tell us about...the relationship between humans and their environment?’²⁴⁵ In Chapter Two, I discussed the flourishing field of realist climate change fiction; however, as Trexler and Johns-Putra²⁴⁶ and Clode and Stasiak²⁴⁷ emphasise, a plethora of significant contributions to environmental discourse can also be found in fiction other than realism.

²⁴⁵ Eric Carl Link, ‘Introduction: Naturalism and Science Fiction’, *Studies in American Naturalism*, 8.1 (2013) 1-5 (p.3).

²⁴⁶ Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra, ‘Climate change in literature and literary criticism.’ *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 2.2 (2011) 185-200.

²⁴⁷ Danielle Clode and Monika Stasiak, ‘Fictional Depictions of Climate Change: An Analysis of Themes from Contemporary Climate Change Literature’, *International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses*, 5 (2014) 19-29.

A review of critical literature reveals numerous compelling reasons why readers, writers, and literary scholars should be interested in the contributions to environmental discourse from categories other than realist fiction. Novels lead readers through the process of investigating 'what if...?' speculations. Middleton argues that this occurs in three important ways: firstly by 'immersive simulations of hypothetical situations', secondly through 'investigations of the textual consequences of our rhetoric of crisis', and thirdly by examining 'the socio-cultural ramifications of global environmental stress'.²⁴⁸ In other words, authors create fictive worlds whose plot events are dependent on defined premises. They then use literary devices to respond to and explore ideas presented in environmental discourse. Because of its dual interest in social institutions and in biological systems, science fiction, for example, is particularly effective for exploring sustainability issues from multiple perspectives. Pak suggests that such perspectives might also include 'ecological, economic, scientific, and technological knowledge, as well as socio-political practices, lifestyles and thought' across disciplines.²⁴⁹

Coming to terms with genre and nomenclature in non-realist fiction
Early in my research I sought to map the categories of fiction that impact on my novella, so that I could set the investigative parameters for my research. Initially I applied a taxonomical approach, in which I could include some categories and exclude others from the ambit of my research. I discovered that the boundaries between relevant categories are fluid and subject to active debate. I also discovered that the nomenclature used in defining categories is premised on relationships between the categories, which creates further complexity related to how much 'assumed knowledge' a reader should have. Genre communicates the meaning of a narrative by using signals that the reader can use to contextualise the work within a canon and within a set of social norms.²⁵⁰ However, genres are ongoing processes of negotiation, not fixed entities.²⁵¹

Trying to differentiate between categories also reveals persistent tensions and paradoxes within the worlds of 'popular' and 'literary' fiction, even though these terms are

²⁴⁸ Peter Middleton, 'How novels can contribute to our understanding of climate change' in Mark Levene, Rob Johnson and Penny Roberts (eds.), *History at the End of the World?: History, Climate Change and The Possibility of Closure* (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2010), p. 222.

²⁴⁹ Chris Pak, 'The goal of Martian economics is not 'sustainable development' but a sustainable prosperity for its entire biosphere: science fiction and the sustainability debate', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 19.1 (2014) 36-49 (p. 49).

²⁵⁰ John Rieder, 'What is SF? Some Thoughts on Genre', in Lars Schmeink (ed.), *A Virtual Introduction to Science Fiction*, (2012), <<http://virtual-sf.com/?page+id=137>> [accessed 13 May 2017].

²⁵¹ Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint, *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

themselves difficult to define. In the Australian context, Golding observes that science fiction is popular among readers, but very little of it is published in Australia.²⁵² He attributes this to three main reasons: firstly, literary preference for realist fiction, or ‘snobbishness’; secondly, market competition between science fiction and fantasy; and thirdly, domination of the market by imported products.²⁵³ Wilkins similarly argues that the Australian literary community recognises ‘work that is literary, set locally, and that employs realism’.²⁵⁴ Macrae describes Australia’s speculative fiction scene as ‘a parallel writing community’,²⁵⁵ although he also claims that the gap between speculative and literary fiction has narrowed in the last thirty years.²⁵⁶

In the second half of the twentieth century, literary critics sought to differentiate realism from science fiction by analysing the two different genres in different critical spaces. Another category arose in the 1960s when science fiction editor and writer Judith Merrill provided a definition for the term ‘speculative fiction’ (which had first been used by author Robert Heinlen in 1947). Merrill visualised speculative fiction as literary narratives, which would promote intellectual responses among readers who were keen to understand ‘the nature of the universe, of man [sic], of reality’.²⁵⁷ The designation of speculative fiction allowed science fiction writers to appeal to an audience seeking artistic sophistication and challenge, without seeking mass appeal and high sales.²⁵⁸

Such high hopes for a new genre don’t seem to have prevailed. Instead, speculative fiction is now a term used to encompass many categories of fiction in which the setting is other than the author’s empirical world.²⁵⁹ Ironically, speculative fiction is also a term often used to support a commercial imperative,²⁶⁰ and so it is constantly under revision. Wilkins describes any categories of speculative fiction as, ‘arbitrary and ideological’.²⁶¹ Rieder claims to be able to list thirty significantly variant definitions of terms relating to speculative and

²⁵² David Golding, ‘No Future? The Lack of Science Fiction Published in Australia’, *Publishing Research Quarterly*, 27.1 (2011) 62-71, (p. 62).

²⁵³ Golding, p. 69.

²⁵⁴ Kim Wilkins, ‘Popular genres and the Australian literary community: the case of fantasy fiction’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 32 (2008) 265-278, (p.265).

²⁵⁵ Andrew Macrae, ‘Alternative Worlds’, *Overland*, 195 (2009) 29-31, (p.29).

²⁵⁶ Macrae, p. 29.

²⁵⁷ Judith Merrill, ‘What do you mean: Science? Fiction?’ in Rob Latham [ed.] *Science Fiction Criticism: An anthology of essential writings* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 22-36, (p. 27).

²⁵⁸ Rieder, p. 2.

²⁵⁹ Darko Suvin ‘On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre’, *College English*, 34 (1972), 372-382, (p. 373).

²⁶⁰ Russell B. Gill, ‘The Uses of Genre and the Classification of Speculative Fiction’, *Mosaic*, 46 (June 2013), 71-85 (p.71).

²⁶¹ Kim Wilkins, p. 270.

science fiction.²⁶² Ward Shelley's map 'The History of Science Fiction'²⁶³ shows, 'complex affiliations and crisscrossing itineraries of a multitude of actors, motives, practices, movements, traditions, and tendencies'.²⁶⁴

This complexity and fluidity is true of publishers and marketing efforts as well as of readers' comfort with their choices being identified within genre boundaries.²⁶⁵ I have encountered this as a reader while enjoying Margaret Atwood's work. While *Year of the Flood* (2009) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) depict speculative settings and plot premises, I view them as examples of literary fiction. They can be categorised as dystopian because they present negative perspectives on significant social issues, but are clearly also aesthetically beautiful in skilfully employing a multitude of literary devices. The recent debate between Ursula LeGuin and Margaret Atwood about the difference between science fiction and speculative fiction²⁶⁶ also demonstrates that writers themselves confront ongoing difficulties about embracing nomenclature.

As I researched the categories that have influenced my work, I became convinced that Frow's conclusions about genre are a sensible point from which to begin a discussion. Frow contends that texts do not belong to genres. Readers, writers, and other parties in the process of producing fiction, use genres for a range of purposes, including marketing and purchasing decisions. Genres are therefore more accurately described as relationships between texts, by their intertextuality, rather than properties of a single text in isolation. Frow argues that almost every text displays elements of multiple genres.²⁶⁷

By analysing texts in Chapter Four of this exegesis, I formed the view that categorising my own or others' work *exclusively* on the basis of genre was tangential to my overall research goal. For example, it can be argued that *On the Beach* is science fiction because it explores the impact of nuclear weapons as a scientific development. Shute contends that nuclear technology has the potential to alter human relationships with the non-human world, perhaps even at the cost of human survival. Although it is set in an alternative reality, its style is realist: its setting is named as Melbourne, and Shute goes so far as to nominate the years and seasons in which the narrative occurs. In relation to my difficulty in categorising the text, I accept Rieder's point that:

²⁶² Rieder, p. 3.

²⁶³ Ward Shelley, 'The History of Science Fiction, ver. 1 (2011)
<<http://www.wardshelley.com/paintings/pages/HistoryofScienceFiction.html>> [accessed 13 May 2017].

²⁶⁴ Rieder, p. 12.

²⁶⁵ Trexler and Johns-Putra, p. 187.

²⁶⁶ Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2012).

²⁶⁷ John Frow, *Genre*, 2nd Edition, (New York: Routledge, 2014).

we might more usefully think about the science fictional elements in a story rather than worry about whether we can identify it as a thing called science fiction.²⁶⁸

Canavan makes an interesting observation that the age of ecological crisis has amplified the gap between realist and speculative writing.²⁶⁹ This view supports my own discoveries, which are that there are multiple similarities between novels that depict environmental change, even if these novels appear to belong to different categories. Trying to analyse each novel and apportion it to a category is an interesting but possibly unproductive undertaking. Instead, I have sought to identify the elements within my own and others' work that represent environmental change issues and acknowledge that there is a diversity of narrative responses to environmental change. The more important task is to understand why this palimpsest of contributions is socially and aesthetically valuable in exploring humans' responses to environmental change. In the following sections I summarise how the non-realist categories of fiction that have influenced my work are contributors to environmental change discourse.

Dystopian fiction

I initially suspected that I was writing a dystopian text. In the following sections, I summarise my investigations into dystopian representations of environmental change and identify the extent to which my novella incorporates elements of dystopian visions. Utopian and dystopian visions form an extensive literary canon reaching back to classical antiquity and including biblical tales. Dystopias and utopias have traditionally been analysed as belonging to the same canon, as alternative perspectives on the same issues.²⁷⁰ The breadth of this canon demonstrates a long history of literary engagement with thematic issues relating to the future, or with existential human enquiries about the human condition.

Dystopias and utopias emerge at predictable historical milestones as responses to prevailing social and cultural issues. Torday eloquently argues that the memorable dystopian novels of the twentieth century:

²⁶⁸ Rieder, p. 14.

²⁶⁹ Gerry Canavan, 'Keen, Sober and Smart Green Speculations: Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism by Eric C Otto', *Science Fiction Studies* 40 (July 2013) 387-389 (p.388).

²⁷⁰ Andrew Milner, 'Changing the climate: the politics of dystopia' *Continuum Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 23 (2009) 827-838, (p. 827).

took the emotional landscape of the time, the rivers of anxiety, the valleys of fear – which mapped out so much of the collective social subconscious and made them real.²⁷¹

Dystopias can critique timely political issues,²⁷² provide positive and/or negative leverage on a historical context,²⁷³ and offer ‘aesthetic or epistemological encounters’.²⁷⁴ World War II is a significant milestone in the history of dystopian narratives.²⁷⁵ Dystopias of the 1980s responded to a grim ‘economic, political and cultural climate’.²⁷⁶

Dystopias set in different locations also respond to regional social, economic and political conditions. Milner, for example, analyses English texts that respond to East-West political relationships and nuclear threats.²⁷⁷ Much has been written about Australia being settled by Europeans with a distinctly utopian premise, but this does not appear to have soaked into our own literature. Walton argues that Australians have ‘their own variety of critical, passive-aggressive testing and contesting of utopian ideas.’²⁷⁸ Socialism, feminism and environmentalism all find their own local expressions here, the latter for example in a kind of grass-roots community-based, anti-heroism.

Warning devices in dystopian fiction

Dystopian settings depict extreme and undesirable scenarios. Baccolini and Moylan describe dystopian settings as ‘places worse than the ones we live in’,²⁷⁹ and ‘terrible new world[s]’.²⁸⁰ Authors of dystopian stories use ‘terrible new world’ settings to offer a negative perspective on *current* society.²⁸¹ This warns readers against society moving in undesirable

²⁷¹ Piers Torday, ‘Why writing stories about climate change isn’t fantasy or sci-fi’, *The Guardian*, 21 April 2015, < <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2015/apr/21/climate-change-isnt-fantasy-sci-fi-piers-torday> > [accessed 13 May 2017].

²⁷² Graham J Murphy, ‘Dystopia’ in Mark Bould, Andrew M Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint, *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction* (Oxford: Routledge 2009) p. 477.

²⁷³ Milner, p. 830.

²⁷⁴ David Seed, *A Companion to Science Fiction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 270.

²⁷⁵ Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan (eds.), *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, (London: Routledge, 2003) p. 1.

²⁷⁶ Baccolini and Moylan, p. 3.

²⁷⁷ Milner, pp. 827-838.

²⁷⁸ Robyn Walton, Utopian and dystopian impulses in Australia, *Overland*, 173, (Summer 2003), 5-20 (p. 6 and 13).

²⁷⁹ Baccolini and Moylan, p. 1.

²⁸⁰ Baccolini and Moylan, p. 5.

²⁸¹ Milner, p. 830.

directions. Hallmarks of a terrible new world setting might include satire,²⁸² prophecy,²⁸³ and experimental, nightmarish speculative scenarios.

Dystopias that engage with environmental discourse are therefore socially critical. Some authors explicitly intend to warn audiences about environmental catastrophe.²⁸⁴ My novella is set in a future that envisages uncomfortable social and lifestyle changes. It portrays an undesirable climate change scenario, but is not intended as a warning. My plot premise is that climate change is inevitable and cannot be avoided. My setting is a period of time in which the characters are witnessing early impacts of climate change and are anticipating more drastic changes, but are powerless to avoid these changes occurring. My focus is on the characters' responses to an uncertain future rather than a warning to readers about the occurrence of climate change.

Oppression in dystopian fiction

Dystopian narratives respond to social conditions and use a common trope of exploring the role of institutions. Oppressive government regimes were a feature of dystopian novels published in the twentieth century, in response to world wars and the accompanying threats of invasion by non-western races and political systems other than democracy. Canonical examples include George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949) and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). The authoritarian government is a fear symbol: fear of collective freedom being removed,²⁸⁵ and of individual privacy being eroded.²⁸⁶

Twenty-first century subsets of oppressive dystopian societies include anarchistic, competitive and uber-capitalist cyberpunk settings, and leisure-hedonistic settings in which characters pursue soulless and meaningless distractions.²⁸⁷ These tropes explore the relationship between extreme consumerism and happiness, along with the notion of material success as the measure of the individual. Recent examples include Andrez Bergen's *Tobacco-Stained Mountain Goat* (2011) and Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010). Both of these novels are near future dystopian satires that feature a protagonist who is

²⁸² Scott Hopkins, 'Dystopia: Speculative Fiction, Society, and Warnings of Things to Come', *Newswrite: The NSW Writers' Centre Magazine*, 156 (2006) 7-12 (p. 7).

²⁸³ Baccolini and Moylan, p. 2.

²⁸⁴ Niall Harrison, 'Writing Climate Change: A Round Table Discussion', *Strange Horizons* (27 February 2012) <<http://strangehorizons.com/non-fiction/articles/writing-climate-change-a-round-table-discussion/>> [accessed 14 May 2017].

²⁸⁵ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011) p. 7.

²⁸⁶ Gottlieb, p. 11.

²⁸⁷ Hopkins, p. 7.

employed by an authoritarian government to maintain social order. Bergen's protagonist Floyd is a 'Seeker' who must find 'Deviants' in a future version of Melbourne, while Shteyngart's main character Lenny works for the American government, which has created a society based on happiness through consumerism, and eliminated free speech.

My novella explores government intervention in the lives of individuals, but not to the extent of oppressive surveillance, for example as depicted in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) or P.D. James' *Children of Men* (1992). In my novella, a democratic system is still in place, but the government imposes conditions on citizens, such as water rationing. My novella also speculates that more interventionist types of government might occur in parts of Europe as a response to resource scarcity, but does not otherwise draw heavily on the dystopian trope of a totalitarian government that oppresses individuals.

Resistance in dystopian fiction

Baccolini contends that dystopian texts 'work from the dialogic interaction of a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter narrative of resistance.'²⁸⁸ Authors use multiple devices to explore this dialogic interaction, including specific motifs. For example, the protagonist of a dystopian text can be a vehicle through which the author communicates resistance. This character can be part of a society but think as an outsider, or can be a geographical foreigner or outsider. Moylan cites the rebel or misfit²⁸⁹ character, and Hopkins describes the creative or sensitive free thinker.²⁹⁰ The thinking individual is a symbol of hope in contrast with the homogeneity of the ultra-regulatory society and its sleeping masses.²⁹¹ To develop ideas of hope and resistance, the author may depict such a character moving along a trajectory from an ignorant or contented position to one of defiance or scepticism.²⁹² Atwood's character Toby in *The Year of the Flood* is an example of a protagonist undertaking a journey of resistance, which forces her to endure sexual exploitation and violence, and challenges her to survive extreme elements of a dystopian world, such as ferocious genetically modified creatures.

The protagonist in my novella, Em, is aligned with environmental agendas and is critical of climate change deniers such as Josh. Em's friends, such as Jem, Alexander, and

²⁸⁸ Cited in Tom Moylan, "'Look into the dark": On Dystopia and the *Novum*'; in Patrick Parrinder (ed.), *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. 63.

²⁸⁹ Moylan, p. 63.

²⁹⁰ Hopkins, p. 7.

²⁹¹ Baccolini and Moylan, p. 8; Hopkins, p. 7.

²⁹² Baccolini and Moylan, p. 5.

Pam, demonstrate their awareness of environmental change and, like Em, ponder their accompanying internal uncertainty. I am therefore doubtful whether Em is the figure of resistance described by critics, because none of the other characters in the story are the ‘sleeping masses’. However, the characters of Jem, Alexander, and Pam make life decisions that contrast with those around them and so are figures of resistance. For example, Jem leads a life of solitude, Alexander joins a small exclusive community, and Pam is an activist against development in the Port.

Dystopias may also depict resistance symbols by exploring agency from a perspective of difference and/or multiplicity.²⁹³ They often create ‘space’ for groups who are not yet well represented in other narratives.²⁹⁴ This trend is clearly evident in sexuality and gender identification. Sue Isle’s *Nightsiders* (2011) includes the transgendered character Ash, Kim Westwood’s *The Courier’s New Bicycle* (2012) features the transgender narrator, Sal, and Steven Amsterdam’s *Things We Didn’t See Coming* (2009) discusses polyamorous relationships. The increasing number of non-heterosexual characters within speculative fiction provides authors the opportunity to respond to and ‘create space’ for recent gender equality and recognition debates.²⁹⁵

Dystopian texts therefore also explore prejudice or inequality within current society. Two texts that rely on prejudice as a key premise are Paolo Bacigalupi’s *Ship Breaker* (2010) and George Turner’s *The Sea and Summer* (1987). Social classes are clearly divided in both texts. Bacigalupi’s protagonist Nailer lives in a geographically remote community which salvages parts and oil from ships, and whose survival is dependent on an employer’s benevolence. Nita is a wealthy ‘Swank’ whose clipper ship is marooned. The clippers are free to move, while labouring communities like the ship breakers are physically and metaphorically stranded, impoverished and impotent. In Turner’s novel, the ‘Sweet’ are geographically separated from the ‘Swill’. The Sweet live in houses above the line of a rising coastal tide, while the Swill are relegated to overcrowded tenements at risk of flooding in the lower areas of Melbourne. Bacigalupi and Turner represent these stark differences as a social critique. Their point is that the vast gaps in living conditions within current societies would be exponentially more dramatic under an environmental change scenario. My novella does not explore social status or prejudice to the extent explored in the texts described above.

²⁹³ Baccolini and Moylan, p. 7-8.

²⁹⁴ Raffaella Baccolini, ‘The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science Fiction’, *PMLA*, 199 (2004) 518-521 (p. 520).

²⁹⁵ Devin Ryan, ‘Emerging Themes in Dystopian Literature: The Development of an Undergraduate Course’ (2014). *Honors Theses Paper 2466*, p.12.

My chapter ‘Pam’ describes how working people might fare if a government modified the social and physical infrastructure of the Port area. The primary intent of ‘Pam’ is to explore relationships between people and places, rather than offering criticism about prejudice or inequality, suggesting that *The Widening Gyre* does not rely heavily on this particular dystopian trope.

Hope in dystopian fiction

Hope is another salient theme in many dystopian texts. Hope often exists primarily beyond the dystopian text rather than in it, whereby readers can interpret dystopian narratives as warnings and thereby avert the terrible new worlds depicted.²⁹⁶ Baccolini and Moylan observe that many dystopian texts have ‘ambiguous, open endings’,²⁹⁷ which imply hope beyond the text. The characters may also symbolise hope through critical thought, which Murphy argues can also inspire readers towards more hopeful futures in their own lives.²⁹⁸ One technique for creating hope is the survival of the protagonist and other main characters.²⁹⁹ Cormac McCarthy’s seminal dystopian novel *The Road* powerfully engages with hope. It is unclear whether the son character survives beyond the end of the novel, or even whether an underlying premise of the novel is that humans will continue to survive at all. For some readers, the novel communicates that humanity’s survival instincts are unjustified, while others interpret the ambiguous ending as an expression of redemption. Nevil Shute covers similar territory in *On the Beach*, which I discuss in further detail in Chapter Four.

I include hopeful elements in my narrative, for example when the Port activists rally to save historical buildings from demolition, and when Jem survives her family crisis with a new sense of purpose for her future. However, hopeful themes within an ambiguous or open ending are not limited exclusively to dystopian narratives and appear in a wide range of other genres. This feature alone cannot be taken as indicative of a dystopian approach.

Science Fiction

Science themes emerged in fiction in response to the nineteenth century’s rush of innovation, technology and industrialisation.³⁰⁰ While dystopian narratives focus on political issues and

²⁹⁶ Baccolini and Moylan, p. 7; Milner, p. 833; Murphy, p. 477.

²⁹⁷ Baccolini and Moylan, p. 7.

²⁹⁸ Murphy, p. 477.

²⁹⁹ Taylor Antrim, ‘A Great Dystopian Novel’, *The Daily Beast*, (30 March 2010) <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/03/30/a-great-dystopian-novel.html>> [Accessed 14 May 2017].

³⁰⁰ Russell Blackford, Chapter 25 ‘Australian Science Fiction’, in Nicholas Birns and Rebecca McNeer (eds), *A Companion to Australian Literature since 1900*, (Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2007).

social relationships, science fiction enquires into technology,³⁰¹ the social implications of scientific and technological development, and ideas or discoveries posited through scientific research.³⁰² Consequently, pervasive themes explored in science fiction include fears of the future, fears of the unknown, and reflections on the nature of progress.³⁰³ Jones summarises that science fiction discusses the binary relationship between humans and technology, that is, fear versus insightful speculation of possibility.³⁰⁴

Science fiction is also primarily the field through which authors have explored environmental change themes.³⁰⁵ This is firstly because science fiction discusses relationships between humans and non-human entities, and secondly because it challenges the idea that there is a natural order over which humans preside.³⁰⁶ Seed analyses environmental themes in twentieth century science fiction. His analysis contends that twentieth century science fiction broadly illustrates two responses to ecological problems: alarmist and utopian.³⁰⁷ Chronologically, Seed summarises 1940s science fiction as being concerned with ‘unremitting progress’, in response to the development of nuclear weapons. The post-war baby boom is reflected through 1950s concerns with over-population themes. Eco-catastrophe appears in 1960s and 1970s science fiction, where humans are judged as culpable for damaging the earth through their obsessions with technology at the cost of spiritual connections with nature. A conservation ethic is clearly embedded in some science fiction texts by the 1980s, and novels of the late twentieth century show a pessimistic view in which eco-catastrophe is likely rather than possible. Clode and Stasiak³⁰⁸ argue that literary consideration of environmental themes appears late in the nineteenth century, with dystopian visions and fears about the power of technology overtaking earlier optimistic views quite early in the twentieth century. They concur with Seed that the mid-twentieth century concerns with nuclear technology dominate fiction in that period, and similarly recognise the reappearance of environmental themes in fiction from the 1960s onwards. Then they argue that environmental themes in fiction expand into forms far beyond science fiction from the

³⁰¹ Hopkins, p. 7.

³⁰² Elana Gomel, *Postmodern Science Fiction and Temporal Imagination*, (London: Continuum, 2010).

³⁰³ Antony Funnell, ‘Sci-Fi II’ *Future Tense*, Radio National, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (19 January 2012) [transcript] <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/futuretense/sci-fi-ii/3667372#transcript> [accessed 17 May 2017].

³⁰⁴ Funnell.

³⁰⁵ Laurence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2005) p. 56.

³⁰⁶ Rutledge.

³⁰⁷ Seed, pp. 131-140.

³⁰⁸ Danielle Clode and Monika Stasiak, ‘Fictional Depictions of Climate Change: An Analysis of Themes from Contemporary Climate Change Literature’, *International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses*, 5 (2014) 19-29.

1990s, with growing awareness of the role of human agency in climate change, and increasing complexity in social and political responses to environmental change issues.

Like dystopia, science fiction extrapolates current issues into imagined settings for the purpose of interrogating them. Though the term ‘science fiction’ originated in popular rather than literary publications, renowned analyst Darko Suvin defends science fiction as a form of literature. He defines science fiction as ‘the literature of cognitive estrangement’,³⁰⁹ where estrangement entails immersion in a reality that is different from the author’s own empirical environment, and cognitive entails reflexivity on social constructs. These two elements are Suvin’s hallmarks of science fiction.³¹⁰ Suvin uses the term ‘novum’ to describe science fiction settings, which are new worlds that readers will find ‘alien’ to their own experiences.³¹¹ This is intended to provide readers with a critical, transformative perspective on their own world. Delaney explains that science fiction also uses ‘the future’ as a narrative convention. ‘The future’ is simply a distorted version of the present.³¹² Atwood emphasises that science fiction must always be set in locations other than Earth.³¹³

The cognitive element of Suvin’s theory demonstrates the purposeful intellectualism of quality science fiction. He argues that significant works reflect on political, psychological, anthropological, and philosophical dimensions of science, particularly in relation to how scientific developments impact on social goals.³¹⁴ Both the author and the reader are expected to engage in cognitive reflection through a science fiction narrative. In depicting an alternative reality, the author creates a mirror of the society in which the text is created. Through immersion in an alternative reality, the reader explores the nature of reality.³¹⁵ Parrinder explains this concept in another way. He ventures that when we readers imagine strange worlds, we obtain insights and new perspectives on our own lives that are ‘potentially revolutionary’.³¹⁶ The idea that we could obtain ‘potentially revolutionary’ ideas about our lives by exploring alternative realities is valuable when thinking about how non-realist styles

³⁰⁹ Suvin, p. 372.

³¹⁰ Suvin, p. 375.

³¹¹ Suvin, p. 374.

³¹² Samuel Delaney, ‘Some Presumptuous Approaches to Science Fiction’ cited in Samuel Day Fassbinder, ‘Greening Education’ in Samuel Day Fassbinder, Anthony Nocella and Richard Kahn (eds), *Greening the Academy: Ecopedagogy Through the Liberal Arts* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers 2012), 1-22 (p.14).

³¹³ Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*, (London: Hachette Digital 2011) p.38.

³¹⁴ Suvin, p. 381.

³¹⁵ Suvin, p. 377.

³¹⁶ Parrinder, p. 4.

of fiction engage with environmental change issues. Milner describes this process as conducting ‘thought experiments’.³¹⁷

While science fiction explores scientific developments, it does not always need to aim for scientific accuracy. ‘Hard’ science fiction differentiates itself from other types of science fiction by focussing on plausibility,³¹⁸ but critics like Suvin claim that the future cannot be predicted, so there is no need to strive for this.³¹⁹ He argues that the believability of information presented in a text instead contributes to its aesthetic quality. He comments that ‘scientifically meagre’ novels are ‘aesthetically poor’.³²⁰

I discovered that Suvin’s theory of cognition within science fiction describes my precise aim in writing my own text. I was concerned to depict a setting that is sufficiently believable to prompt audience reflection. In doing so, I researched climate predictions for the Adelaide area and for Australia generally. In recognition that we cannot predict how quickly the impacts of climate change will occur in the Adelaide region, I used a scenario in which gradual and incremental changes are occurring, rather than a rapid change scenario. I wanted the scientific predictions about climate change to inform my characters’ reality, and I wanted their responses to portray a set of responses to environmental change that have already been observed by scholars across numerous disciplines. I deliberately used each character or situation to convey these issues or responses, and relied on supporting quantitative and qualitative evidence to present each chapter as an established behavioural scenario.

In each chapter of the novella, I sought to evoke a cognitive response in myself and in readers. Through the writing process I conducted research to investigate a range of behavioural responses that have been observed since the advent of the environmental movement, and explored these responses imaginatively through my characters and setting. My aim is for readers to reflect on their own behavioural responses to climate change, and discover the values that underpin their choices in the context of foreseeable environmental changes within our lifetimes. In reflecting on the point that it is useful to identify elements of a text but not get too concerned as classifying it within one category or another,³²¹ I am fairly sure that my work contains elements of science fiction, but also uses elements of other non-realist categories. Although it uses an alternative reality setting to provoke a cognitive

³¹⁷ Milner, p. 827.

³¹⁸ Gregory E Rutledge, ‘Futurist Fiction and Fantasy: The Racial Establishment’, *Callaloo*, 24.1 (2001) 236-252 (p. 238).

³¹⁹ Suvin, p. 379.

³²⁰ Suvin, p. 381.

³²¹ Rieder, p. 14.

response, the setting is near-future Earth which can't really be described as a 'novum'. Science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson observes that science fiction does not explore attachments to place and explorations of meaning of place for groups of characters, because it is set in imaginary places.³²² Attachments to place are an important element of my novella. I suspect that Suvin would deem my novella 'scientifically meagre'. This is not due to a lack of robust scientific extrapolation, but rather that the text's focus is its characters' psychological responses to uncertainty, not the climate change itself. This is consistent with Clode and Stasiak's argument that the proliferation of climate change-themed novels in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been in realist forms.³²³

Apocalypse

Apocalyptic narratives have become a ubiquitous feature of speculative fiction in the early twenty-first century, particularly in young adult fiction. Apocalyptic scenarios are part of a universal cultural register.³²⁴ They appear in canonical works, and even biblical tales. Originally, apocalypse referred to a process of revelation, sometimes even new hope.³²⁵ The popular connotation of apocalypse has become more dystopian. Curtis describes it as a 'disastrous, violent and catastrophic end event'.³²⁶

Why are apocalyptic scenarios so popular? Garrard cites several reasons. Firstly, they are much easier to depict than gradual behaviour change, slowly evolving social norms, or even physical change processes. Secondly, crisis engages readers with high levels of tension and emotion, so it is more exciting to read. Crisis also focuses on single-issue conflicts between recognisable figures, rather than longer-term contributions to social conditions.³²⁷ It is therefore less complex to follow, and can use conventional devices like story arcs and resolutions.

Apocalyptic narratives may also be giving voice to a zeitgeist that is specific to this point in history. According to Dodson, we are experiencing an existential terror waiting for

³²² Bud Foote and Kim Stanley Robinson, 'A Conversation with Kim Stanley Robinson', *Science Fiction Studies*, 21.1 (1994) pp 51-60 (p. 52).

³²³ Clode and Stasiak, pp. 24-25.

³²⁴ Mikkel Fugl Eskjaer, 'The Climate Catastrophe as Blockbuster', *Academic Quarter*, 7 (2013) 336-349 (p. 341).

³²⁵ Mark Levene, 'Climate Blues: or how awareness of the human end might re-instil ethical purpose to the writing of history', *Environmental Humanities*, 2 (2013) 153-173 (p. 168).

³²⁶ Elizabeth Braithwaite, 'The Perfect Place to Set a Novel about the End of the World?: Trends in Australian Post-Nuclear fiction for Young Adults', *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 53.2 (2015) 22-29 (p. 24).

³²⁷ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 2nd edition, (Oxford: Routledge, 2012) p. 114.

an uncertain drama to unfold.³²⁸ Estok similarly argues that we are feeling fear of the unknown, loss of agency, and loss of predictability.³²⁹

Throughout my research I have been intrigued by dystopian/apocalyptic fetish and fatigue. The volume of dystopias published within the past 15 years demonstrates their popularity with readers of all ages. As storytellers and readers, humans are inherently drawn to drama. There is no doubt that melodrama sells,³³⁰ and that apocalyptic narratives about environmental change are aiming to articulate genuine existential disenchantment. But there seems something specifically addictive about environmental crisis scenarios that authors are repeatedly engaging with. Facing the destruction of humans and other species on Earth, we want to explore the complexities of how this feels: our impotence, our fear, our desire to survive, and the risks and possibilities therein.

From this obsession arises questions about what impacts do the sheer volume of apocalyptic scenarios have on human perceptions of environmental change? And consequently, what are the impacts of popular apocalyptic fiction on environmental discourse?

Some critics view apocalyptic scenarios as powerful and motivating. For example, Schatz argues that apocalyptic imagery is ideal for strengthening environmental agendas. Images of apocalypse motivate people to act based on awareness of impending disaster.³³¹ Apocalyptic scenarios may therefore be posing a warning or challenge to avoid human annihilation in a crisis.³³² Like science fiction, post-apocalyptic and post-crisis dystopian storylines can employ a warning trope that urges humans to change their relationships with external environments, by presenting frightening possibilities for the future.

Other theorists claim that a barrage of apocalyptic fiction could cause fatigue, facilitate inertia, and diminish hope. Estok³³³ and Seltzer³³⁴ contend that apocalyptic scenarios numb our emotional responses. While emotional engagement, such as that promoted by fiction reading, is vital to promote behaviour change, excess fear actually reduces the

³²⁸ Eric Dodson, 'Post-apocalyptic film and the post-modern apocalypse', <http://www.paforge.com/files/articles/pa_essay1.pdf> [accessed 17 May 2017].

³²⁹ Simon Estok, 'Ecocriticism in an Age of Terror', *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 15.1 (2013) [accessed 14 May 2017].

³³⁰ Seed, p.139

³³¹ Joe Leeson Schatz, 'The Importance of Apocalypse: The value of end-of-the-world politics while advancing ecocriticism', *Journal of Ecocriticism* 4.2 (2012), 20-33, (p. 24).

³³² Schatz, p21.

³³³ Estok, p. 6.

³³⁴ Ethan Seltzer, 'Climate Change: Hope, Despair and Planning' Presented at the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) *Urban Studies and Planning Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 60. 2012, p.8.

likelihood of people recognising risk and taking appropriate steps towards mitigation.³³⁵ Estok makes the point that apocalyptic scenarios present the future as painful, and humans try to avoid pain.³³⁶ Garrard similarly argues that humans will only take responsibility for the planet if we believe that its environmental problems can be addressed and apocalypse avoided. If apocalypse is the only outcome, humans might renounce action, surrender to fate and embrace despair.³³⁷ This is exactly the scenario that Neville Shute explores in *On the Beach*, which I examine in Chapter Four.

Apocalyptic scenarios could also be misleading if the scenarios presented are emotionally powerful but scientifically implausible.³³⁸ In the case of climate change, apocalyptic scenarios could be used to support sceptical or denialist views. Marshall is concerned that sceptics might see apocalyptic stories as proof that climate change is itself fiction.³³⁹ Further, Garrard claims that apocalyptic rhetoric mistakenly maintains the search for guilty culprits and simplifies complex environmental issues into a single environmental crisis. Obviously such confusion is not helpful in informing the average person about environmental change, if a reader is seeking a 'realistic' portrayal of what a climate crisis might look and feel like.³⁴⁰ Apocalyptic narratives could also perpetuate a counter-productive anthropocentric relationship between humans and environment, where nature is an external force that punishes humans for damaging it.³⁴¹ Despite the disagreements between critics about the value of apocalyptic fiction in contributing to environmental discourse, such stories clearly resonate with readers and may have a literary or emotional value of their own, independent of environmental outcomes. As Mousoutzanis puts it:

... would we really like to see the 'end' of catastrophe fiction? For some, this would signify that political conflicts had ended, and social ills been cured; for others, it would mean that society has stagnated into a static, one-dimensional utopia. The

³³⁵ Clode and Stasiak, p. 19-20. For a review of fear in natural disaster preparation see Danielle Clode, *Coping with fire: Psychological preparedness for bushfires* (Mt Waverly: Country Fire Authority, 2010) pp.18-23.

³³⁶ Estok, p. 4.

³³⁷ Gomel, p. 51.

³³⁸ Mikkel Fugl Eskjaer, 'Communicating climate change in regional news media', *International Journal of Climate Change Strategies and Management*, 1.4 (2009) 356-367 (p. 343).

³³⁹ George Marshall, 'Climate Fiction Will Reinforce Existing Views', *The New York Times* (29 July 2014) <<http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/07/29/will-fiction-influence-how-we-react-to-climate-change/climate-fiction-will-reinforce-existing-views>> [accessed 14 May 2017].

³⁴⁰ Garrard, p. 115.

³⁴¹ Astrid Bracke, 'Why Flight Behaviour Works as a Climate Crisis Novel – and why Solar doesn't', (1 May 2013), <<https://astridbracke.com/2013/05/01/why-flight-behaviour-works-as-a-climate-crisis-novel-and-why-solar-doesnt/>> [accessed 4 May 2017].

continued imagination of the apocalypse suggests that it might not have happened yet.³⁴²

Young Adult fiction

Young Adult fiction (YA) is a 'somewhat arbitrary' category,³⁴³ often used as a marketing or publishing term³⁴⁴ rather than a literary categorisation. YA can be loosely identified as texts that appeal to audiences aged approximately 12-30 years, which explore the lives of young characters and/or offer a young person's perspective on life.³⁴⁵ Despite the rough audience parameters of 12-30 years, many YA texts are cross-listed for adults and vice versa,³⁴⁶ especially examples of speculative fiction.

As well as being marketed to younger readers, YA texts have strong distinguishing features from adult and children's narratives. The bluntest objective of YA fiction is that young people will enjoy reading.³⁴⁷ YA fiction connects with its audience through thematic relevance and technical devices.³⁴⁸ YA texts engage with their audiences through vivid characterisation and a fluid writing style. Shorter, more manageable chapters are customary, as are larger font sizes and more generous spacing between text.³⁴⁹

YA texts aim to describe a young person's worldview³⁵⁰ by constructing and communicating a young person's reality.³⁵¹ Thematically, YA fiction focuses on a young person's journey to emotional maturity, analysing characters' internal and emotional issues.³⁵² Manuel and Carter describe YA literature as focusing on 'rites of passage'.³⁵³ Themes usually include challenges in discovering or accepting identity, perceptions of being an outsider, family and peer relationships, growth in responsibility and issues of accountability or consequences, and sexuality.³⁵⁴ The young character(s) must develop over

³⁴² Aris Mousoutzanis, 'Apocalyptic sf' in Mark Bould, Andrew Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009) p. 462.

³⁴³ Sharyn Pearce, Vivienne Muller and Lesley Hawkes, *Popular Appeal: Books and Films in Contemporary Youth Culture*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p. 3.

³⁴⁴ Pearce, Muller and Hawkes, p.3.

³⁴⁵ Ernest Bond, *Literature and the Young Adult Reader*. (Boston : Pearson, 2011) p. 4.

³⁴⁶ Mark Bould, 'Language and Linguistics' in Bould, Butler, Roberts and Vint, p. 226.

³⁴⁷ Ernest Bond, *Literature and the Young Adult Reader*. (Boston : Pearson, 2011).

³⁴⁸ Joe Sutliff Sanders 'Young adult sf', in Bould, Butler, Roberts and Vint, p. 448.

³⁴⁹ Sanders in Bould, Butler, Roberts and Vint, p 443.

³⁵⁰ Bond, p7.

³⁵¹ Bond, p13.

³⁵² Sanders in Bould, Butler, Roberts and Vint, p 449.

³⁵³ Jacqueline Manuel and Don Carter, 'Current and historical perspectives on Australian teenagers' reading practices and preferences', *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 38.2 (2015), pp. 115-128, p.121.

³⁵⁴ Bond, p.234.

the course of the narrative.³⁵⁵ Important challenges for young adults navigating the maturing process include honour, identity, and autonomy.³⁵⁶

Manuel and Carter discuss the reasons why high-school aged students (12-16 years) selected texts as their favourites. Factors that inspired to students to select texts as their favourites include the following: themes that resonate with students' personal concerns, storylines that show young adults managing conflict either with peers, adults, and/or the self, key adolescent tropes such as facing and overcoming adversity, triumphs of the human spirit and exploration of the psyche.³⁵⁷ Readers also rate their favourite texts as having characters that they can identify with. These characters are 'imaginary proxies for friends, confidantes and role models'.³⁵⁸

Environmental change is explored in multiple YA narratives, and the popularity of YA dystopias offers an insight into young people's anxiety about the future.³⁵⁹ The YA market therefore presents a wealth of opportunity for discussing environmental change issues. Author Sarah Holding describes climate change as '...the most exciting and challenging subject area driving Young Adult literature'.³⁶⁰

As do dystopian fiction and science fiction, YA dystopias critique contemporary social ideology and practice, and inspire young people to respond to social challenges.³⁶¹ YA dystopias introduce readers to social norms and cultural mores,³⁶² and encourage them to critically examine social structures. Through considering fictional social structures, readers can begin to think about issues like: how far should regulation stretch? What are the purposes of social systems and processes? Who benefits from regulation? Who is disenfranchised by it?³⁶³ How can individuals change the world? What are the ethical and social dimensions of individual goals? How do humans relate to their extraneous environment and non-human entities?³⁶⁴

³⁵⁵ Sanders in Bould, Butler, Roberts and Vint, p 449.

³⁵⁶ Monica Rhor, 'Dystopias invite teenagers to bravely enter new worlds' *Houston Chronicle* (13 May 2012), <<http://www.bendbulletin.com/article/20120513/NEWS0107/205130340>> [accessed 14 May 2017].

³⁵⁷ Manuel and Carter, p.120.

³⁵⁸ Jacqueline Manuel and Don Carter, 'Current and historical perspectives on Australian teenagers' reading practices and preferences', *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 38.2, (2015) 115-128 (p. 121).

³⁵⁹ Moira Young quoted in Amanda Craig, 'The Hunger Games and the teenage craze for dystopian fiction', *The Telegraph* (14 March 2012), <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/9143409/The-Hunger-Games-and-the-teenage-craze-for-dystopian-fiction.html>> [accessed 14 May 2017].

³⁶⁰ Sarah Holding, 'Sarah Holdings's top cli-fi books' *The Guardian*, (24 April 2015) <<https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2015/apr/23/sarah-holdings-top-10-cli-fi-books>> [accessed 17 May 2017].

³⁶¹ Pearce et al., p. 4.

³⁶² Bond, p.13.

³⁶³ Bond, p.229.

³⁶⁴ Bond, p.234.

Like adult dystopias, YA dystopias focus on the heroic rebellious protagonist.³⁶⁵ One important element of contemporary YA dystopias is that the heroic rebellious protagonist can be either gender without detracting from its appeal to readers of both genders. Fiction that is relevant to contemporary readers of both genders includes themes such as body image, romance,³⁶⁶ betrayal, and learning from mistakes.³⁶⁷ Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) and Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008) are examples of phenomenally successful YA dystopias that feature a female hero. The appeal to female readers in twenty-first century dystopian YA can be partly explained by a social context that continues to strive for gender equality. The appeal of twenty-first century dystopian YA for young women can also be attributed to the portrayal of 'flawed, complex' characters like Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*.³⁶⁸ For girls who grew up with Hermione Granger in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* stories, heroines like Katniss maintain their exposure to powerful female characters who have big adventures, live by their values and their self-awareness, and don't wait for help.³⁶⁹

The recent popularity of YA dystopias also reflects the specific cultural zeitgeist of the early twenty first century. The first two decades have been dominated by political concerns with terrorism,³⁷⁰ environmental degradation, and social and cultural impacts of globalization, for example rapidly developing digital technologies and mass international mobility. It is therefore not surprising that young people seek fiction that discusses these themes, as a way of exploring their generation's perspective about the future.³⁷¹ Bond observes that the futuristic settings of young adult dystopias provide readers with the opportunity to examine issues from a distance,³⁷² though author Saci Lloyd³⁷³ contends that dystopias are only slightly removed from the reader's own world. This is certainly true of her own *Carbon Diaries* novels, which are dated '2015' and '2017'; not very distant from their publication dates in 2009 and 2010. Her novels also use the realist setting of contemporary Britain, rather than an imaginary science fiction novum. The sense of proximity evoked by near-future fiction can provoke young people to look differently at their lives. Craig argues

³⁶⁵ Rhor 'Dystopias invite teenagers to bravely enter new worlds'.

³⁶⁶ Craig, 'The Hunger Games'.

³⁶⁷ Moira Young quoted in Craig, 'The Hunger Games'.

³⁶⁸ Craig, 'The Hunger Games'.

³⁶⁹ Gemma Malley quoted in Craig, 'The Hunger Games'.

³⁷⁰ Pearce et al., p. 5.

³⁷¹ Craig, 'The Hunger Games'.

³⁷² Bond, p.229.

³⁷³ Craig, 'The Hunger Games'.

that the terrors portrayed in YA dystopias enable readers to place their own problems in perspective. Pimples and schoolwork pale in comparison with mass starvation.³⁷⁴

Readers can also draw parallels between the thematic concerns of their own lives and those of the fictional characters, such as the analogy between real-life bullying and dystopian survival struggles.³⁷⁵ Other aspects of dystopian life that might be similar to a young adult's daily challenges include 'constant surveillance, oppressive ruling regimes [i.e. parents!], lack of freedom, and forced conformity'.³⁷⁶ Rhor draws comparisons between the choices that characters in YA novels make, and those that readers need to make in their own lives.³⁷⁷ For example, while characters in a novel might need to make choices about survival, readers must make choices about their life paths and personal directions. Characters may need to negotiate the social organization of a dystopian society, while readers may need to negotiate the complexities of communication and social protocols.

Other critical views about the popularity of YA dystopias relate to hope. While adult dystopias allude to hope beyond the text, YA dystopias may be more hopeful within the narrative whether or not the author creates this deliberately.³⁷⁸ Dystopian survival scenarios model young people developing inner strength and self-dependence in crisis.³⁷⁹ Hope can also be depicted through individuals surviving scenarios where survival might be unlikely in real life.³⁸⁰ For example, in Scarrow's 2010 novel *Last Light*, the protagonist Leona and her brother Jacob are able to survive violent attacks and anarchy against all odds when an oil crisis strikes the UK. Similarly, Saci Lloyd's protagonist Laura, in her 2009 novel *The Carbon Diaries 2015*, survives flooding in London and is reunited with her family despite the disaster. The survival against all odds plot line teaches readers about resilience amid environmental changes. The protagonists represented in YA dystopias are resourceful, clever, and creative. This provides readers with hope in their own lives. Ryan comments that readers learn about the harm caused by environmental destruction, 'yet they still see that there are ways in which they can continue to survive'.³⁸¹

The prevalence of environmental change in YA dystopias makes this genre an important consideration in relation to climate change fiction as a whole. As an emerging, and

³⁷⁴ Craig, 'The Hunger Games'.

³⁷⁵ Craig, 'The Hunger Games'.

³⁷⁶ Ryan, p. 2.

³⁷⁷ Rhor, 'Dystopias invite teenagers to bravely enter new worlds'.

³⁷⁸ Monica Rhor, 'Dystopias invite teenagers to bravely enter new worlds'; Seed, p. 139.

³⁷⁹ Monica Rhor, 'Dystopias invite teenagers to bravely enter new worlds'.

³⁸⁰ Eskjaer, p. 341.

³⁸¹ Ryan, p.10.

somewhat ambiguous form, it is difficult to differentiate the key characteristics of YA in relation to either literary structures or even intended audience demographics. Young adults are potential readers of my novella because its narrative style is informal and episodic. Further, most of the characters in my text are youthful if not young. Bond comments that the characters can be literally any age but their youthfulness provides their appeal to YA readers.³⁸² Additionally, the key theme of environmental change in my text is most relevant to young people, whose lives will be affected by future climate changes. On the other hand, YA is frequently characterised by strong driving plots and/or main character arcs. The episodic ‘story-cycle’ structure of my novella (more common in literary fiction) would probably preclude it from a YA marketing classification despite other similarities.

Conclusions

Atwood observes that, ‘...genres may look hard and fast from a distance, but up close it’s nailing jelly to a wall’.³⁸³ By investigating the critical parameters of dystopian fiction, science fiction, and Young Adult fiction, I discovered that my work displays elements of multiple categories. Seemingly, the important thing about having undertaken an analysis of multiple categories of literature is not to get too hung up on stating that my work belongs in one category or another, if it does not. This accords with Rieder’s argument that genre is more about relationships between texts rather than in the properties of individual texts.³⁸⁴

Through undertaking research about the categories of fiction that have influenced my work, I have discovered that debates about genre are an active part of critical practice because they relate to the commercial aspects of producing fiction, as well as the academic and cultural contexts in which fiction is produced and received.

The impacts of fiction other than contemporary realism are significant for authors who want to engage with environmental change discourse. Because science fiction and other popular examples of speculative fiction are derided for their non-literary status, there is a missed opportunity to talk seriously about climate change. Debates around the ‘absence’ of climate change novels are often artificially restricted to contemporary realist novels - and particularly those designated as ‘good’ books of high literary merit. Neglecting the discussion of climate change fiction across a broader range of popular genres underestimates

³⁸² Bond, p.6.

³⁸³ Margaret Atwood, ‘The Handmaid’s Tales and Oryx and Crake “In Context”’, *PMLA*, 199.3 (May 2004) 513-517 (p. 513).

³⁸⁴ Rieder, p.14.

the impact writers have already had in this field as well as limiting the analysis of the diverse ways writers are already addressing the environmental challenges of the future.

Chapter Four: Textual Analysis

Introduction

Throughout this exegesis, I have discussed critical theory relating to the representation of environmental change themes in realist and non-realist novels. I distinguish realist from non-realist novels in my exegetical analysis because the role of fiction in responding to emerging social issues is one of my main research enquiries. With climate change presenting a threat to the future of the planet, I am interested to understand how other Australian authors conceptualise the sense of uncertainty that I have identified through my own novella. In this chapter, I comparatively analyse three realist Australian novels that speculate on how humans might respond to environmental changes. Nevil Shute's 1957 *On the Beach* is a classic Australian novel that depicts human responses to a nuclear crisis. Steven Amsterdam's 2009 debut *Things We Didn't See Coming* describes an early twenty-first century post-apocalyptic setting. Sue Isle's 2011 novella *Nightsiders* shows humans struggling for survival amidst a changed climate.

There are several reasons why I chose to examine these texts. They were primary influences for my novella because they focus on representing the emotive and cognitive responses to external environmental instability, rather than on the causes of environmental change. That is, these authors explore the personal and social impacts of environmental change. I also see these novels as significant because they provide evidence for my argument that the aesthetic and artistic elements of narratives can be far more powerful in connecting with readers than any deliberate attempts to engage in behaviour change agendas. Further, these novels demonstrate the difficulties of categorising environmental change fiction, as I discussed in Chapters Two and Three. It is important to acknowledge that 'realist' novels can be identified through Earth-based settings, terrestrial characters or situations, and demonstrate narrative techniques familiar to realist authors, but may also incorporate elements of non-realist categories. I wanted to identify the extent to which these texts show any tropes of the categories that I have previously examined. Lastly, I wanted to discover whether the authors are exploring any issues identified in Chapter One as significant for the future of literary criticism as a field.

Causes of environmental change within the novels

In each of the texts, the author depicts a decline, destruction, or significant change to the Earth's environment. Each novel also demonstrates the prevailing cultural influences at the

times in which it is set. As I discussed in Chapter Three, critics observe that dystopian novels are products of the time periods in which they emerge, and discuss the vital social issues being considered in that era.

Shute invites the reader to experience a grim environment affected by nuclear fallout as a consequence of wars between China and Russia, Arab States and Israel, and America and Russia.³⁸⁵ This reflects widespread social concerns related to the possibility of nuclear war between the West and the East in the period following World War II.

Amsterdam uses the Y2K bug as a premise for environmental changes.³⁸⁶ In the lead-up to the change of millennium, the Y2K bug was widely anticipated to have major impacts on technological systems and potentially on social systems. Amsterdam's scenario imagines widespread social collapse.

Isle depicts climate changes that have occurred as a consequence of Indonesia bombing Perth³⁸⁷ and disease epidemics.³⁸⁸ This likely reflects the perceived threat of the potential impacts of climate change in the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

A 'green' agenda?

The ecocritic's first task in analysing fiction is to examine whether the author supports or promotes an environmental agenda, and therefore communicates 'green' values. One way that an author might demonstrate green values is by using their novel to make critical judgements about human actions towards the environment.

All three novels present uninviting scenarios arising from environmental changes. However, Shute is the only author who seems to present the warning message that Baccolini and Moylan³⁸⁹ contend is a key trope of dystopian novels. Shute's warning is a broad statement about the futility of nuclear war, and the need for it to be prevented before it occurs. Once it has happened, his characters are simply resigned to their ending:

Then she said, 'There's no hope at all, is there? For any of us?
He shook his head. 'Nobody gets over this one, dear.'³⁹⁰

³⁸⁵ Nevil Shute, *On The Beach* (London: Peering, 1991), p. 411.

³⁸⁶ Steven Amsterdam, *Things We Didn't See Coming* (New York: Pantheon, 2009), p. 15.

³⁸⁷ Sue Isle, *Nightsiders* (Yorkine: Twelfth Planet Press, 2011), p. 56.

³⁸⁸ Isle, p. 73.

³⁸⁹ Baccolini and Moylan, *Dark Horizons*, p.7.

³⁹⁰ Shute, *On The Beach*, p. 540.

In texts that use the warning trope, the author's aim is to warn readers about environmental destruction by either subtly or explicitly commenting on how humans can use their agency in relation to the environment. None of the texts in this chapter depict characters as having any influence on environmental conditions, much less any power to 'save the Earth'. In all three texts, humans are simply surviving amid chaos.

Isle makes very few causal links between human behaviour and the setting. The plot events occur after a widespread evacuation of Western Australia. Neither Isle nor her characters make any observations on whether the bombings could have been prevented, or whether humans tried to avoid the changes in climate before they occurred:

'Why did the people go away?' she had asked Nerina once and the woman had shrugged.

'There wasn't any rain and it got too dry.'³⁹¹

Similarly, Amsterdam adopts the premise that the weather changes have simply occurred, and has gone so far as to state that he does not intend his text to be interpreted as warning. In an interview with Kevin Rabalais, Amsterdam comments: 'It's by no means a cautionary tale'.³⁹²

Credibility and emotional impact

Each of the three authors uses a dystopian perspective in representing environmental changes. To reiterate, Baccolini and Moylan define a dystopian setting as a 'terrible new world' or one that depicts life as relatively 'worse than our own'.³⁹³ As I discussed in Chapter Two, fiction achieves its impact through emotion. Realist fiction need not be scientifically credible to have an emotional impact on readers.

The three authors create alternative realities in different ways. Identifying his crisis as a nuclear war enabled Shute to explore the potential impacts with some degree of realism. For example, he describes the symptoms experienced by characters affected by radiation sickness, and speculates that a few animals might survive a nuclear crisis. The lonely dog barking at the Australian-American submarine mission in Cairns is a poignant moment.³⁹⁴

³⁹¹ Sue Isle, *Nightsiders* (Yorkine: Twelfth Planet Press, 2009), p.4.

³⁹² Kevin Rabalais, 'Steven Amsterdam', 2009 <<https://www.readings.com.au/interview/steven-amsterdam>> [accessed 7 July 2017].

³⁹³ Baccolini and Moylan, *Dark Horizons*.

³⁹⁴ Shute, *On The Beach*, p.441.

Numerous critics have observed that Shute's nuclear war scenario is not scientifically plausible,³⁹⁵ but this does not detract from its emotional impact.

Neither Isle nor Amsterdam rely on scientific plausibility to make their settings impactful. Isle's young people have 'cat-eyes, as well as heat tolerance and some other stuff'.³⁹⁶ One generation seems an unusually rapid rate of genetic adaptation to environmental changes. Yet, her premise that Perth has gotten so hot that its residents have reversed their lifestyles to become 'nightsiders', is powerful. Similarly, the barter economy she describes flourishing in a post-crisis city is possible. It's also possible that people would migrate to Australia as climate change refugees, as she depicts in 'Nation of the Night'.

Amsterdam describes floods, droughts, food shortages, insects, and disease, and simply drops the reader into this context without explaining a specific crisis. In 'Dry Land', the protagonist evacuates flooded settlements, while in 'Cakewalk' the landscape is a desert.³⁹⁷ In an interview with Meyer,³⁹⁸ Amsterdam comments that he avoided focussing on a single doomsday scenario. He deliberately did not identify one type of crisis, because this would have required knowledge to make meaningful predictions about the future. This comment suggests that Amsterdam was more interested in imagining how humans might cope with a range of difficult extraneous circumstances, than with the circumstances themselves. Despite this, his chaotic setting is compelling for readers, as he explores series of gradual changes over 40 years.

A key difference between Amsterdam's, Isle's, and Shute's novels, is that Shute provides a background explanation to establish the premise for his alternative reality. He explains that Albania initiated an Arab-Israeli war, which provoked a Russo-NATO war, which resulted in a Russo-Chinese war. This may reflect Shute's intent to engage with issues that were tangible threats for readers at the time the novel was written, and possibly even to signify the novel as a warning to society. Shute may have intended to explain to readers of the 1950s how a nuclear war could impact Australia, given its real possibility at that point in history.

³⁹⁵ For example, Andrew Milner, 'the Sea and Eternal Summer: Science Fiction, Futurology and Climate Change' *AJE: Australasian Journal of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, Vol. 3 2013/2014 125-130 (p.126); Desmond Ball, 'The Probabilities of On The Beach: Assessing Armageddon Scenarios in the 21st Century' (Canberra: Australian National University, 2006).

³⁹⁶ Sue Isle, *Nightsiders* (Yorkine: Twelfth Planet Press, 2009), p.90.

³⁹⁷ Amsterdam, *Things We Didn't See Coming*, pp.48-91.

³⁹⁸ Angela Meyer, 'Steven Amsterdam – a 'responsive' interview', 2009, <<https://blogs.crikey.com.au/literaryminded/2009/03/23/steven-amsterdam-a-responsive-interview/>> [accessed 7 July 2017].

Twenty-first century audiences may be more accustomed to fiction that doesn't explain its premises, especially speculative texts. Given the huge variety of speculative texts available on the market, and the difficulties of establishing any distinct categories, it may now be enough for an author to establish that a generally 'environmentally-related' crisis has occurred, and build an alternative reality from this premise. It's interesting to note that critics now also seem to support the position that lack of detail contributes to the power of a speculative novel. For example, Antrim contends that, 'the most convincing dystopias are those unencumbered by history',³⁹⁹ and Stinson argues that it is advantageous when an author does not explain a disaster because the reader then, 'encounters each new world on its own terms'.⁴⁰⁰

However, it's also interesting to note that even when readers accept a premise, they may still want detail. This has been recently evidenced by lively debate⁴⁰¹ about Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road*. The debate has centred around the cause of the apocalypse, and whether McCarthy's novel addresses the theme of climate change. Like Amsterdam, McCarthy does not provide definitive evidence about the cause of his disaster, and expects readers to accept that some sort of disruptive crisis has occurred. The point remains that readers have connected emotionally with McCarthy's novel, which demonstrates that a narrative lacking in both detail and plausibility can be powerful and evocative.

Behaviour change and transformation

In Chapter One, I identified that one of the roles for ecocriticism in an era of climate change is using fiction as a potentially transformative force for behaviour change. Sue Isle uses *Nightsiders* in a way that is potentially transformative, by engaging with readers about reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The need to recognize Indigenous relationships with place and use these as a basis for long-term stewardship of the Australian environment is a key issue both in addressing social inequality and addressing climate change. *Nightsiders* posits that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have

³⁹⁹ Taylor Antrim, 'A Great Dystopian Novel', *The Daily Beast*, (30 March 2010) <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/03/30/a-great-dystopian-novel.html>> [Accessed 14 May 2017].

⁴⁰⁰ Emmett Stinson, 'Things We Didn't See Coming by Steven Amsterdam', 2009, <<https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2009/march/1274509642/emmett-stinson/things-we-didn-t-see-coming-steven-amsterdam>> [accessed 7 July 2017].

⁴⁰¹ For example, see Clive Sinclair 'The Road, by Cormac McCarthy', 2006 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-road-by-cormac-mccarthy-424545.html>> [accessed 7 July 2017]; Rick Wallach, 'What caused the apocalypse in The Road?', 2014 <<http://www.cormacmccarthy.com/topic/what-caused-the-apocalypse-in-the-road/>> [accessed 7 July 2017]; William Kennedy, 'Left Behind', 2006 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/08/books/review/Kennedy.t.html?mcubz=1>> [accessed 7 July 2017].

knowledge to offer that would ensure that Australians survive a climate crisis. In ‘The Schoolteacher’s tale’, Isle depicts Ellen Wakeling as an ‘Elder’ of the Evacuation survivors, and Mag and Albert as Elders of the Indigenous ‘Tribals’. Mag meets Ellen on several occasions to plead with her about collaborative relationships and knowledge sharing, including suggesting a travelling teacher exchange: ‘We got stuff the others need to know, or we’ll all croak.’⁴⁰² While the Tribals have Elders as spokespeople, the non-indigenous older survivors have no official representatives to speak with outsiders. The older non-indigenous people like Ellen, her neighbours, and Professor Daniel still live in separate self-contained accommodation, and many of the Elders don’t venture beyond their homes at all. Ellen is at first sceptical of the Tribals’ suggestions, but when she is forced to articulate the importance of her teaching, she realises that she is clinging to an anthropocentric past:

these children need to know something of the world! They need to know how to read, write and figure numbers, so that they can understand how the world should work and how one day they can reclaim what’s fallen away...⁴⁰³

The final paragraph of *Nightsiders* powerfully communicates the transformative potential of climate change-themed fiction. Ellen joins the group of indigenous Elders to begin the process of shared education to all survivors. In two sentences, Isle resolves the tension of relationships between the cultures, and brings a palpable sense of hope for change, redemption from past trauma, and relief for the prospect of human survival:

It didn’t feel like anyone’s victory, or that I had lost an argument. More like the world had opened up enough to let them in.⁴⁰⁴

Isle’s and Amsterdam’s settings are both examples of post-equilibrium ecology, in which ecosystems are subject to change and adaptation is needed for survival. As I identified in Chapter One, this is a transformative issue being considered by ecocritics in the age of Anthropocene. Isle speculates that the people in Perth might change their routines entirely, and become night-dwellers to avoid extreme temperatures. Other people might live underground, such as the Drainers. Genetic adaptations might occur in which some people are less sensitive to sunlight. Some people would adapt by wearing cover-all garments to

⁴⁰² Sue Isle, *Nightsiders* (Yorkine: Twelfth Planet Press, 2009), p.131.

⁴⁰³ Isle, *Nightsiders*, pp.125-126.

⁴⁰⁴ Isle, *Nightsiders*, p.138.

guard against sun exposure. These are all extreme examples of existing methods by which humans and other animals survive in inhospitable climates, but Isle simply takes her speculations a little further and adapts them to a climate change context.

Amsterdam uses similar speculations. In 'Dry Land', he mentions rain horses, which are specifically trained to travel through downpours. He depicts constant rain as carrying the risk of rheumatism, so his characters need medication to combat this. His characters survive by eating small animals, bark, and plants. In 'Cake Walk', he creates a bacterial plague that kills most of the population. As science fiction critic Darko Suvin notes, an author's purpose in including vivid detail is partly aesthetic. Speculative fiction explores a 'what if...?' premise, so the extent of speculation used by both Isle and Amsterdam demonstrates their skill as literary writers, and their skills in creating a fully-formed alternative reality. It also allows the authors to explore how people might use their physical and emotional resources in responding to an environmental crisis scenario. Speculative scenarios are provocative because they immerse readers in a situation, and encourage readers to engage in their own potentially transformative enquiries: 'What if this happened to me? What might I value? How might I adapt? How would I survive?'

Universality, globalisation and localisation

As I discussed in Chapter One, another emerging theme in ecocriticism in the era of climate change is the extent to which fiction reflects on climate change as a global phenomenon. Isle engages with environmental justice and globalisation issues. In 'Nation of the Night', she describes relationships between the eastern cities of Australia, which are networked to maintain infrastructure, while Perth is evacuated and more or less abandoned by the other cities.⁴⁰⁵ Melbourne no longer welcomes new residents and has closed its borders to other Australians and foreigners alike.⁴⁰⁶ Refugees from New Zealand cannot access local schools.⁴⁰⁷ Through these scenarios, Isle speculates that Australia would become increasingly territorial under a climate change scenario, to the extent that even its own citizens would be separated according to geography. She forecasts that Indonesian-Australian relationships would be affected by climate change through the inclusion of the Indonesian bombing scenario, and includes Mike, Nella and the three children characters as climate refugees. Beyond this, she does not elaborate on Australia's position in relation to other global entities.

⁴⁰⁵ Isle, *Nightsiders*, p.45.

⁴⁰⁶ Isle, *Nightsiders*, p.83.

⁴⁰⁷ Isle, *Nightsiders*, p.72.

In a moment of meta-fiction, Isle's character Ellen Wakeling reflects that, 'the young folk don't seem curious about what happens beyond our borders'.⁴⁰⁸

Isle's text also raises the issue of localisation. *Nightsiders* is set in Perth, and this is significant for an Australian audience because it speculates that the western part of Australia might become deliberately isolated from the rest of the nation in a post-crisis scenario. This is a long-standing local political issue even in the current non-crisis context. If *Nightsiders* was set in another capital city or in a non-specific location, Isle would not have been able to explore this issue. For post crisis novels, then, there are several issues: does the text discuss a specific location? Is the specific location necessary to discuss local issues? Does that specific location interact with global crisis issues?

Conversely, Shute's novel is set in Melbourne, but readers understand that Melbourne is a microcosm for global events. Shute's characters regularly refer to world events beyond Melbourne, and are perversely both isolated from, yet intimately connected with, the radiation's movement. Melbourne is the most southerly Australian mainland city, and the main premise of the text is that the characters are waiting for the radiation to drift towards them. This is particularly obvious when the Navy mission goes exploring to assess the damage to other ports, and in periodic references to other places when radio communication eerily ceases.

Amsterdam's setting is not identified as a particular place and does not reflect on global issues. It is interesting to note that *Things We Didn't See Coming* was edited before publication in Australia to deliberately remove any geographical markers, and 'de-Americanise it'.⁴⁰⁹ Meyer comments that the anonymous setting allows greater accessibility for readers. The events Amsterdam that depicts could be happening anywhere:

it could be imagined in just about any Western country. A kind of nowhere land of modern Western civilisation.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁸ Isle, *Nightsiders*, p.114.

⁴⁰⁹ Glenn Davies, 'Things We Didn't See Coming: an imagined unimaginable future' 2011, <<https://independentaustralia.net/art/art-display/things-we-didnt-see-coming-an-imagined-unimaginable-future.3556>> [accessed 8 July 2017].

⁴¹⁰ Angela Meyer, 'Things We Didn't See Coming by Steven Amsterdam' 2009, <<https://literaryminded.com.au/2009/03/04/things-we-didnt-see-coming-steven-amsterdam/>> [accessed 8 July 2017].

Values communicated through the novels

Neither Isle nor Amsterdam have expressed a conscious desire that their novels be interpreted as dystopian warning tales, and Shute's novel has been interpreted as such, regardless of whether this was the author's intention. *On the Beach* is probably the only novel of the three that clearly examines the impact of technology on human advancement. A contemporary perspective could acknowledge the text as an important example of environmental justice story telling. Even as a fictional account, it confronts the possibility of nuclear war and therefore allows the speculative possibility of confronting the limits of reality.

All of the three novels engage with values that critics identify as being synonymous with dystopian speculative fiction, and with science fiction. All three authors clearly convey that external crises create personal psychological and emotional impacts. Lindvall observes that the characters in McCarthy's novel *The Road* explore the concept of hope and meaning through the symbol of the 'fire inside'. She contends that McCarthy's characters need to find their 'fire inside' to keep them going, that is, the one thing that gives their lives meaning.⁴¹¹ In my view, all three texts in this chapter examine similar significant existential issues, and communicate about the values that humans might find meaningful when responding to an environmental crisis. In other words, the authors are exploring the 'fires inside' that might become significant in an environmental crisis. These include issues of mortality, connectedness between humans, individualism, and personal resilience.

Shute's novel presents a global-scale event as having local and individual consequences. When a nuclear weapon is released, the characters must confront the knowledge that its impacts will be inevitable and irreversible. Each of the characters must then decide how to use their remaining time, what tasks to prioritise, and even how to plan their own death. Amsterdam's text also discusses mortality, and reaches the same conclusion as Shute. Amsterdam reminds readers that, 'the point is that the world keeps going (just maybe not with you in it)'.⁴¹²

Amsterdam's characters face the uncertainty of their extraneous physical environment changing, and changes in social structures. Antrim interprets this as an expression of resilience, and his 'take-home' message is that Amsterdam's novel, 'says get used to it, roll

⁴¹¹ Johan Lindvall, 'The Road to Despair: Hope and hopelessness in the post apocalyptic setting'. (unpublished thesis level G3, Linnaeus University, 2011).

⁴¹² Angela Meyer, 'Steven Amsterdam – a 'responsive' interview' 2009, <<https://blogs.crikey.com.au/literaryminded/2009/03/23/steven-amsterdam-a-responsive-interview/>> [accessed 8 July 2017].

with the punches, do your best'.⁴¹³ Meyer similarly interprets Amsterdam's text as a reflection on the existential challenges of being human. Our purpose is to make sense of whatever circumstances befall us: 'There will always be meaning to a fleeting existence'.⁴¹⁴

For Davies, the point of Amsterdam's text is to emphasise connectivity between humans as the one factor that would help us to survive a crisis. He comments that:

[*Things We Didn't See Coming*] is about accepting that it's all going to end and striving to connect, to love and be loved anyway.⁴¹⁵

This is also true of Shute's characters. Shute explores the relationship between Dwight and Moira to demonstrate that the human ability to cope with crisis ultimately depends on our connections with others.

An ongoing theme in Amsterdam's novel is the narrator's internal moral struggles. Multiple critics comment on Amsterdam's narrator as a character who is confronting the ethical trials of being human in a survival situation. Stinson describes Amsterdam's protagonist as an, 'Everyman non-hero'.⁴¹⁶ Amsterdam talks about the character as a 'normal guy'.⁴¹⁷ Amsterdam is encouraging readers to identify with parts of themselves in the character. Some readers might be prompted into reflecting whether they could survive a crisis, and how they might respond if they were 'Last Man Standing'. Evers contends that the narrator is 'adrift...ethically',⁴¹⁸ while Amsterdam describes his narrator as 'shifty'.⁴¹⁹ The narrator defends himself as acting in accordance with circumstance:

⁴¹³ Antrim, 'A Great Dystopian Novel'.

⁴¹⁴ Angela Meyer, 'Things We Didn't See Coming by Steven Amsterdam' 2009
<<https://blogs.crikey.com.au/literaryminded/2009/03/04/things-we-didnt-see-coming-steven-amsterdam/>> [accessed 8 July 2017].

⁴¹⁵ Glenn Davies, 'Things We Didn't See Coming: an imagined unimaginable future' 2011,
<<https://independentaustralia.net/art/art-display/things-we-didnt-see-coming-an-imagined-unimaginable-future.3556>> [accessed 8 July 2017].

⁴¹⁶ Emmett Stinson, 'Things We Didn't See Coming by Steven Amsterdam', 2009,
<<https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2009/march/1274509642/emmett-stinson/things-we-didnt-see-coming-steven-amsterdam>> [accessed 7 July 2017].

⁴¹⁷ Robert Manne, 'A Dark Victory: How vested interests defeated climate science', in Ramona Koval (ed.), *The best Australian essays 2012*. (Collinswood: Black Inc, 2012).

⁴¹⁸ Stuart Evers, 'Things We Didn't See Coming by Steven Amsterdam', 2010,
<<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/things-we-didnt-see-coming-by-steven-amsterdam-2061058.html>> [accessed 29 July 2017].

⁴¹⁹ Angela Meyer, 'Steven Amsterdam – a 'responsive' interview' 2009,
<<https://blogs.crikey.com.au/literaryminded/2009/03/23/steven-amsterdam-a-responsive-interview/>> [accessed 8 July 2017].

It was never a conscious wish of mine to become a criminal. It was an apocalyptic choice.⁴²⁰

Hope

Each of the three novels approaches the issue of hope slightly differently. Welker observes that Amsterdam's apocalyptic scenarios focus on the relationships between survivors, rather than labouring over the number or circumstances of human deaths.⁴²¹ This sets a tone of hope throughout. Amsterdam specifically devotes a chapter to theme of hope and redemption in 'The Profit Motive', in which he describes 'hope for a new nation' in 'an era of violence'. He comments that he also includes a hopeful ending in each chapter.⁴²²

Shute's novel ends unambiguously: the nuclear fallout steadily approaches Melbourne and each of the main characters ends their own life. Shute therefore anticipates that humanity would cease to exist, but he injects some hope into his apocalyptic scenario by forecasting that the radiation will be temporary:

summers and winters would pass by and these houses and these streets would know them...as time passed, the radioactivity would pass also... these streets and houses would be habitable again in 20 years at the latest... The human race was to be wiped out and the world made clean again for wiser occupants.⁴²³

Shute concludes that humans would accept their fate because there is no cure for radiation sickness. However, he adopts a classical view of apocalypse to salvage hope in the novel. While his characters die at the end of the text, he points out that the nuclear war may be ultimately redemptive for future generations, who will learn a lesson and hopefully avoid repeating the scenario. As Lindvall explains, apocalypse poses the question about whether any ending is truly an end, or whether it marks a change from one state to another.⁴²⁴

⁴²⁰ Amsterdam, *Things We Didn't See Coming*, p.145.

⁴²¹ Mark Welker, 'Author Interview: Steven Amsterdam' 2010 <<http://www.markwelker.com/2010/02/authorinterview-steven-amsterdam/>> [accessed 29 July 2017].

⁴²² Angela Meyer, 'Things We Didn't See Coming by Steven Amsterdam' 2009 <<https://blogs.crikey.com.au/literaryminded/2009/03/04/things-we-didnt-see-coming-steven-amsterdam/>> [accessed 8 July 2017].

⁴²³ Nevil Shute, *On The Beach* (London: Peerage, 1991), p. 525.

⁴²⁴ Lindvall, 'The Road to Despair', p.5.

Isle's ending is arguably the most hopeful of the three texts, possibly because of its orientation towards a YA audience. The young people begin to resettle the suburbs, a new generation is born, and the process of reconciliation begins between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. These events invite readers to think optimistically about the world depicted in the text. As I discussed in Chapter Three, hopeful endings are more common and also important for YA dystopias, because pessimistic endings would undermine hope for the future.

Structure

In Chapter Two, I identified that critics are interested in how fiction will accommodate the scale and magnitude of climate change. One current debate centres around the need for authors to use innovative rather than conventional storytelling devices to write climate change-themed fiction. Critics such as Johns-Putra and Trexler contend that narrative structures may be one of the areas affected by these challenges. In relation to the three novels analysed in this chapter, Shute's is the only one that adopts a conventional novel structure. That is, Shute adopts a main plot line and shows the interaction of characters along an arc of chronological plot development.⁴²⁵

Isle and Amsterdam use an episodic structure, in which a series of short stories are collected into a novel. Amsterdam's novel is set partly in the past and partly in the future, with the first episode occurring at the turn of the twenty-first century and the last occurring towards the end of the main character's lifetime. As readers witness character development over the time period of approximately 40 years, we also witness a change in the society that is depicted, including its physical settings. Isle's four stories are set in Perth approximately 40 years into the future but it is uncertain whether they are presented in chronological order.

In both novels, the authors use repetition of characters, and sometimes setting, to achieve coherence between the stories. Amsterdam's novel has nine chapters or parts. Evers describes it as 'a novel in stories',⁴²⁶ while Meyer terms it, 'a series of vignettes'.⁴²⁷ Antrim calls it 'fragmentary' storytelling.⁴²⁸

For both Isle and Amsterdam, the use of a discontinuous structure is an effective device to address and manage the complexity and scale of the environmental and personal

⁴²⁵ M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Seventh Edition (Boston, Massachusetts: Heinle and Heinle, 1999).

⁴²⁶ Evers, 'Things we didn't see coming by Steven Amsterdam'.

⁴²⁷ Meyer, 'Things we didn't see coming by Steven Amsterdam'.

⁴²⁸ Antrim, 'A Great Dystopian Novel'.

issues explored. It is therefore possible that these two novels demonstrate authors using stylistic adaptations to come to terms with climate change themes. In novels that portray environmental changes occurring over gradual timeframes, authors may present a plot in non-chronological order to emphasise the passing of time. Amsterdam also comments that using a discontinuous narrative structure allowed him to focus on the ‘interesting’ parts of his characters’ lives.⁴²⁹ It is also possible that both of the authors used an episodic structure to suggest hope beyond the ending, as is a trope of dystopian fiction that I discussed in Chapter Three. Where the ending is suggestive rather than definitive, readers must bring their own interpretation to the plot events.

The publication of Amsterdam’s novel also reveals some of the categorisation challenges that confront speculative fiction, which I discussed in Chapter Three. Amsterdam constructed the text as a series of short stories rather than as a novel.⁴³⁰ Yet, *Things We Didn’t See Coming* was marketed as a novel in Australia and as a series of short stories in USA.⁴³¹ This is because Australian readers’ purchasing decisions show a preference for novels, while in the United States, collections of short stories are more widely accepted.

Point of view

Each of the three texts offer multiple characters’ points of view on the plot events. This could be evidence of the authors adapting narrative devices to manage the scale, magnitude or duration of environmental change.

Amsterdam relates all of his tales in the first person narrative point of view, and reveals that he uses this device to garner maximum reader sympathy with his narrator. In an interview with Meyer, Amsterdam comments that a first-person point of view gives ‘closest view into [the narrator’s] conscience’.⁴³²

He also reveals that adopting a first person narrative perspective directs the focus of the novel away from the external apocalyptic events, and instead guides the reader towards exploring the characters’ responses to their surroundings.⁴³³ This focus on internal issues rather than external events is one of the reasons why Amsterdam’s novel was so influential for my own novella.

⁴²⁹ Meyer, ‘Things we didn’t see coming by Steven Amsterdam’.

⁴³⁰ Meyer, ‘Things We Didn’t See Coming by Steven Amsterdam’.

⁴³¹ Glenn Davies, ‘Things We Didn’t See Coming : an imagined unimaginable future’, 2011 <<http://www.independentaustralia.net/2011/literature/things-we-didn't-see-coming-an-imagined-unimaginable-future>, 3556> [accessed 8 July 2017].

⁴³² Meyer, ‘Things We Didn’t See Coming by Steven Amsterdam’.

⁴³³ Meyer, ‘Things We Didn’t See Coming by Steven Amsterdam’.

Isle also uses multiple characters for her stories, but because there is no ‘main’ character, unlike in Amsterdam’s novel, the effect of using multiple narrators is quite different. Isle uses multiple narrative points of view to build her plot premises and setting, to develop characters, and to engage with her intended Young Adult readership. In the first story, ‘The Painted Girl’, Kyra is the narrator. As a young teenager, the effect of her narrative voice directing the story is that readers see the plot events with the confusion that a young person’s lack of understanding might contribute. This is a clever way for Isle to open the novella, as the first story sparks readers’ curiosity and prompts questions about why the girls are moving across the landscape, and why most people move around at night. Ash is a transgendered character who narrates the second story ‘Nation of the Night’. Offering readers the perspective of a transgendered narrator is an interesting and unusual device, which demonstrates Isle using an ‘outsider’ character in a dystopian narrative. This is a common trope, which I discussed in Chapter Three. As Ash must travel away from Perth to Melbourne to receive gender reassignment surgery, the use of this narrative perspective enables Isle to compare the environmental changes going on in Perth with those occurring in Melbourne. This allows her to build her setting, and communicate with readers about the environmental change issues she is depicting. Like the previous two episodes, a young person, Shani, narrates the third story, ‘Paper Dragons’. Shani and her friends are too young to remember the Evacuation, which provides Isle with an ideal narrative perspective to contrast the experience of young people with older people in a post-crisis setting. The young people find a script for a television show that screened before the Evacuation. The older people find it enormously powerful, because it reminds them of how much their lives have changed in only one generation. Isle’s final story ‘The Schoolteacher’s Tale’ uses an older narrator, the teacher Ellen Wakeling. Ellen’s narrative perspective offers readers an understanding of the events prior to and since the Evacuation. Ellen is one of a few survivors who can tell a complete story about the impacts of environmental crisis, and thus give readers context for the plot events presented in the three previous stories. Her position as teacher is also a conduit between the past and the future. She has a close relationship with the younger people depicted, and this relationship enables her to articulate their perspective and ambitions for a post crisis world. This is a fitting closure point for Isle’s novella, as it brings the four stories together and foreshadows hope beyond the ending of the story.

Shute also shifts between characters in exploring the impacts of environmental crisis. He uses three characters to relate his tale, including Australian Navy Lieutenant-Commander Peter Holmes, United States Navy Commander Dwight Towers, and socialite Moira

Davidson. The effect of developing these three narrative points of view is to explore the impacts of environmental crisis on three different people in different life stages. For example, Moira initially uses alcohol to cope with the knowledge that her life will end at 24 years of age, never having experienced the milestones of career, relationships, or family. Mid way through the novel, she enrolls in a secretarial course despite knowing that her future is limited to a few months' duration. Moira tries to make the best of the time she has by being productive, which contrasts sharply with her character at the beginning of the novel. Shute explores her perspective to build her character, and to explain to readers how and why a 24-year-old woman might cope with mortality issues. Dwight and Peter are similar characters: both male, both aged in their early 30s, both with distinguished military careers and families. The main point of difference is that one is American: a cultural outsider. Shute also uses Dwight to explore the potential for a relationship between he and Moira. Ultimately, Dwight and Moira's relationship remains platonic because Dwight values his connection with his wife and family, even though it is likely that they have been killed in the war. For Moira, her connection with Dwight is probably the most important factor in coming to terms with her own mortality.

New Materialisms

In Chapter One I have included a post-examination discussion of the new materialisms as a potentially new paradigm for undertaking literary analysis. In view of the feedback offered by examiners in response to my thesis, I would like to undertake a more thorough analysis of the texts referred to in this chapter using a new materialisms approach, as an outcome beyond this exegesis. A new materialisms approach recognises the voice and agency of all matter, and aims to implement a values-base that views these perspectives as equal to a human perspective in their significance and impact. The following points are introductory and suggestive only, but serve to illustrate the potential for undertaking a new materialisms analysis.

A new materialisms approach would interrogate the texts to identify the agents, voices, relationships, and stories that contribute to a concept of 'environment' within a text. Material ecocritics recognise agency in and between all elements, so that multiple layers of agency would be revealed through a new materialisms reading.

A new materialisms approach could also incorporate enquiries about representation of novel ecologies within the texts. That is, if matter and resulting 'environments' are constantly

dynamic, how does this paradigm impact on the representations of environmental changes presented by the three authors?

For example, in relation to *On the Beach*, the inclusion of non-human agents or an understanding of novel ecologies could add significant further weight to understanding the impacts of nuclear war on the Melbourne 'environment' as depicted, and broadly, on all matter. A new materialisms enquiry might seek to understand whether these elements would make any difference to the decision-making processes involved in nuclear war. Shute seems to foreshadow such a perspective in his description of the environment slowly coming to life after 20 years. A similar analysis of *Nightsiders* and *Things we didn't see coming* could explore the role of differing environmental forces as agents within these texts. If systems were understood to be dynamic, how would this impact on the characters' reactions to environmental change scenarios? If additional non-human narrators were included in these three texts, who/what might they be? What perspectives would they add? What voices might be offered, which have not previously been provided with space? What stories would these voices tell? How would these voices be received? How effectively would they be heard by readers? How do these additional voices impact on the 'realist' aspects of the novels? Would these additional perspectives make a difference to the impacts of the novels? Are there any examples of existing novels where such perspectives have been included? What is their comparative impact and appeal for readers?

Each of the novels discussed in this chapter could be understood as environmental justice storytelling. A more extensive analysis of these novels as environmental justice storytelling might reflect on the extent to which the authors engage with its elements and the impacts of these. How do the novels contemplate concepts of time? How are the stories of change told in a way that acknowledges the impacts of change and provides transformative possibilities for the future?

Conclusions

The three novels I have considered in this chapter engage with some of the issues that my research has identified as being important for writing about environmental change. From an ecocritical perspective, my research has revealed that authors who write about environmental change need to consider the dynamic nature of the relationship between humans and their physical environments. This may warrant exploration of concepts such as globalisation, social justice, and environmental justice. My research has also shown that writers who represent dystopian, crisis or apocalyptic scenarios will also likely need to

engage with existential issues such as hope, connectedness between humans, mortality, and resilience. My research indicates that recent fiction may also be engaging with these themes by adopting innovative narrative structures and techniques for representing challenges such as scale. For authors writing stories about climate change, a significant issue is whether to use the aesthetic and emotional impacts of fiction to promote an activist agenda.

Each of the texts I have examined in this chapter have engaged with emerging issues in environmental writing, as identified by critics in the preceding chapters. Isle's novella is intended to be read by young adults, and therefore discusses issues such as relationships and social structures in a post-crisis situation, and other specific coming-of-age issues for adolescent characters. Portrayals of climate change that feature believable scenarios, characters with whom readers can empathise, and entertaining plot development, present ways of exploring climate change issues with young people. Isle also reflects on how climate change might specifically affect Australia, including the potential for some parts of the country to be abandoned, and the possibility of accepting climate refugees. Shute also considers Australia's relationships to other parts of the world under an environmental change scenario, but Shute's novel explores the most likely cause of environmental change at the time his novel was written: nuclear warfare. Shute's is the only dystopian vision of the three that I have considered in this chapter which could be interpreted as a warning: Isle and Amsterdam do not attribute humans with any responsibility for causing the environmental changes depicted in their novels. Structurally, Shute's is the only conventional novel: Isle and Amsterdam both use a series of connected short stories to address a wide range of environmental change impacts and explore the perspectives of varying characters.

Braithwaite contends that Australian fantasy and speculative fiction writers often use apocalyptic scenarios to explore cultural issues, rather than focussing on disaster or its causes.⁴³⁴ The three texts in this chapter have been particularly influential for me because they focus less on the external changes than on the personal psychological and emotional responses of their characters. As Lindvall observes, an apocalypse can be less relevant than what eventuates or does not eventuate after it.⁴³⁵

⁴³⁴ Elizabeth Braithwaite, 'The Perfect Place to Set a Novel about the End of the World?: Trends in Australian Post-Nuclear Fiction for Young Adults', *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 53.2 (2015), pp. 22-29, p.23.

⁴³⁵ Johan Lindvall, 'The Road to Despair' (unpublished independent thesis Basic level Bachelor's degree, Linnaeus University, 2011), p.6.

Despite the differences between them, these three texts illustrate the power of depicting how environmental change would impact on ordinary people. In all three cases, the authors adopt a frightening dystopian viewpoint that effectively portrays what it would be like to experience environmental crisis. The plausibility of the situations they present is what makes Isle and Amsterdam's texts as powerful as the warning that Shute communicates about nuclear war.

CHAPTER FIVE: PROCESS ANALYSIS - CREATING *THE WIDENING GYRE*

Introduction

Throughout this exegesis I have investigated how other writers represent environmental change issues in fiction. In the following chapter, I reflect on the methodological and narratological processes I undertook while creating *The Widening Gyre*. I further discuss how my novella relates to the critical discourse and textual analysis undertaken in the previous four chapters.

Practice-led research

One reason for producing a narrative that explores uncertainty about the future is my interest in whether, and how, literary narratives contribute to environmental discourse within the general population. My novella presents short stories that discuss climate change by exploring themes of popular culture, policy debates, and personal identity politics. The characters explore how a range of people might respond to the physical context of a changing climate, and to the messages conveyed by the various parties involved in environmental discourse. In undertaking doctoral studies through the practice of creative writing, I intended that my research would be useful in understanding uncertainty about a future impacted by climate change. The creative and analytical processes involved in producing this thesis have enabled me to explore the political dimensions of writing about ordinary people's responses to climate change, and incorporate political enquiry into my creative outputs.

After finishing undergraduate qualifications, I became a public servant and worked in environmental policy-making for 10 years because I wanted to influence positive social changes. Through my professional experience as a policy-maker, I observed policy options being developed in response to the emerging issue of climate change, and participated in communicating with the general public about environmental issues. I returned to university to

undertake doctoral studies in Creative Writing because I was interested in further exploring narratives and their role in social change.

My research contends that writers can contribute to social change through creating fiction about environmental change issues. As Wright observes so eloquently, the novel is ‘a story place where the spiritual, real and imagined worlds exist side by side.’⁴³⁶ Fiction writers can offer another ‘voice’ to environmental discourse. By writing fiction about climate change, writers can communicate with readers in different ways than public policy can. My research also examines environmental discourse through analysing relevant emerging issues for practitioners in the field of environmental writing, and by identifying literary trends, such as dystopian, speculative, and apocalyptic fiction. Through undertaking practice-led research, I can communicate with readers in different ways than I was able to while writing policy. I intend my exegetical research to contribute to the nexus between academic analysis, social discourse and public policy.

Creating dialogue with readers

Ecocomposition is a creative practice companion to ecocriticism. Ecocriticism primarily involves interpretation of other authors’ texts, while ecocomposition involves producing one’s own text, based on the premise that language is ‘the most powerful, indeed perhaps the only tool for social and political change’.⁴³⁷

Ecocomposition allows an author to express an individual viewpoint on environmental issues. I wanted *The Widening Gyre* to express my view that climate change will have internal psychological effects as well as extraneous physical impacts. I was inspired by Wright’s entreat to ‘write with the full consciousness of the [climate change] shadow over us’.⁴³⁸ In other words, I wanted to explore a ‘what if’ scenario in which climate change *is* occurring, and consider whether this knowledge might alter individuals’ life choices. I therefore aimed to produce a text that depicted environmental changes already occurring. In adopting an ecocritical methodology, I wanted to produce a text in which the environmental changes would not simply provide a setting, but would provide the premise for exploring how people respond internally.

⁴³⁶ Wright, ‘On Writing Carpentaria’ p. 85.

⁴³⁷ Sidney I. Dobrin and Christian R. Weisser, *Natural discourse: Toward ecocomposition* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002). p. 26.

⁴³⁸ Stephen Wright. ‘The Elephant in the Room’, *Overland*, 15 March 2010
<<https://overland.org.au/2010/03/the-elephant-in-the-room/>> [accessed 8 June 2017].

Authors intend to make readers ‘care’.⁴³⁹ That is, skilful fiction engages the reader in a dialogue that provokes them to examine their role and agency in response to themes raised by the text.⁴⁴⁰ My challenge has been to write speculative stories that meaningfully depict the gravity of uncertainty in an Anthropocene era. I have therefore needed to explore why I care about this sense of uncertainty, why my characters care, and what is the purpose of representing their uncertainties? In discussing ‘ecological anxiety disorder’, Robbins and Moore refer to a sense of ‘panic’ arising from an understanding that human transformation of the earth is irreversible, so that ‘whatever is in front of us is sufficiently different from the past so as to operate by its own rules.’⁴⁴¹ Uncertainty about the future is not unique to the current human population or unique to the issue of climate change, but I am compelled by Robinson’s proposition that the humans living now are the first to actively change their life paths in response to uncertainty about potential climate change impacts:

Young first world citizens exist in a crisis of meaning: they know life needs to be about more than hyper consumption, but what that ‘more’ might be is not clear...

This existential crisis is very real; we need meaning to go forward, and yet capitalist society doesn’t provide it.⁴⁴²

The process of narrative inquiry can comprise open-ended questions that may or may not yield answers. Reed and Speedy describe narrative research as a ‘nomadic inquiry process of always travelling and never arriving’.⁴⁴³ This idea has resonated throughout my research. It is obviously not possible to find out whether *all* people are concerned about the uncertainties of a future affected by climate change, but my personal observations suggest that this particular brand of uncertainty pervades at least a small segment of the population. Ecocritic Simon Estok hypothesises about ‘Eco phobia’, which is based on the real or imagined agency of nature, and entails a fear focussed on loss of agency and loss of predictability.⁴⁴⁴ Researchers from other disciplines observe similar phenomena, for example historian Mark Levene describes ‘acute psychological insecurity’ about a twilight zone for

⁴³⁹ Malcolm Reed and Jane Speedy, ‘Scrapbooks and messy texts’ in Sheila Trahar (ed.) *Learning and Teaching Narrative Inquiry: Travelling in the Borderlands* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2011), p. 115.

⁴⁴⁰ Amanda Boulter, *Writing Fiction: Creative and Critical Approaches* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 87.

⁴⁴¹ Robbins and Moore, p.8.

⁴⁴² Kim Stanley Robinson. ‘Remarks on Utopia in the Age of Climate Change’, *Arena journal*, 35/36 2011, 8-22, p.10.

⁴⁴³ Malcolm Reed and Jane Speedy, ‘Scrapbooks and messy texts’, in Sheila Trahar, *Learning and Teaching Narrative Inquiry: Travelling in the Borderlands* (Amsterdam Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2011), p.120.

⁴⁴⁴ Simon Estok, ‘Terror and Ecophobia’, *Frame*, 26.2, 2013, 87-100.

human existence,⁴⁴⁵ while urban studies practitioner Ethan Seltzer refers to, ‘a new sense that there might not be much of a future’.⁴⁴⁶

Fiction writers are witnesses and contributors to the zeitgeist. Climate change seems to be a new issue that provokes familiar themes. As Tuhus-Dubrow summarises:

There have always been disasters; there has always been loss; there has always been change. [Climate change novels] grapple with the particulars of their setting and use these particulars to illuminate enduring truths of the human condition.⁴⁴⁷

Robbins and Moore hypothesise that the antidote to ‘ecological anxiety disorder’ comes through confronting the anxiety. They argue that coming to terms with novel ecologies and the human role in this process enables people to take responsibility for our surroundings as: ‘gardens of our own crafting...monsters born of our tinkering...and as sites of struggle.’⁴⁴⁸ Fiction writers can be narrators of this confrontation process, and critics its analysts.

Robbins and Moore also discuss writing about desired futures as an antidote to ecological anxiety disorder.⁴⁴⁹ McKenzie Ward discusses similar ideas in his varied contributions to utopian theory within the context of popular media forums. His is a warcry, a rally to action beyond unquestioned narratives and patterns of consumerism, and their accompanying mediocre homogeneity and anonymity. He claims that, ‘what haunts our waking dreams is the power to imagine: the world made real’.⁴⁵⁰ From an entirely different perspective, Wright also reflects on the need to ‘claim’ reality. She cites her novels as rejoinders to culturally constructed narratives about Indigenous Australians. Similarly to Ward, Wright argues that there is a need to create the narratives that we want to hear. For Wright, her writing is an opportunity to ‘affirm our [Indigenous Australians’] existence on our terms.’⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁵ Mark Levene, ‘Climate Blues: or How Awareness of the Human End might re-instil Ethical Purpose to the Writing of History’, *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 2 May 2013, 147-167, p.154.

⁴⁴⁶ Ethan Seltzer, ‘Climate Change: Hope, Despair and Planning’ Presented at the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) *Urban Studies and Planning Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 60. 2012, p.2.

⁴⁴⁷ Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, ‘Cli-Fi: Birth of a Genre’, *Dissent Magazine* Summer 2013, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/cli-fi-birth-of-a-genre> [accessed 29 July 2017]

⁴⁴⁸ Robbins and Moore, p. 13.

⁴⁴⁹ Robbins and Moore, p. 13.

⁴⁵⁰ McKenzie Ward, ‘Be Impossible, Demand the Realistic’, *Verso* Blog 7 November 2011, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/792-be-impossible-demand-the-realistic> [accessed 14 April 2018]

⁴⁵¹ Wright, ‘On Writing Carpentaria’, p. 86.

Environmental justice storytelling provides the opportunity to make sense of a reality underpinned by values of environmental exploitation. Whether this is fictional, or a narrative of a documented crisis, my thesis argues that writers do not have an obligation to adopt a positive perspective. In adopting a version of ‘reality’ that is ruthlessly and ceaselessly dark, as do the authors in the texts I examine in chapter four, writers can produce powerful entreats towards environmental stewardship. Illuminating the need to avoid crisis is a legitimate strategy in exploring visions for future realities.

I did not intend my novella to be read as activist writing. I started writing the novella as an exploration of ‘what if?’ scenarios, but my exegetical research has enabled me to deepen this enquiry. By considering ecocriticism as an existing structure for analysing environmental themes in fiction, I gained insights into how literary critics make sense of emerging themes in environmental discourse, and appraise how authors are engaging with these themes. Through exploring how various categories of fiction respond to environmental change issues, I obtained context for my work. I discovered how authors use the conventions of literary styles to depict environmental change, which prompted me to think in much more detail about what I was trying to achieve in my writing. I was relieved to understand that categories of writing are not static, and may not be well-defined. This gave me flexibility to explore different techniques in my writing, and also introduced me first-hand to some of the challenges involved in writing about climate change. In answering the questions about why I, and other people, should ‘care’ about climate change, my research has allowed me to explore a range of personal responses, process my uncertainties about the future, and examine to what extent individuals are and should feel personally empowered to act on climate change. What began as a gentle exploration of ‘what if?’ scenarios has, in retrospect, become environmental justice writing.

Climate change prompts us to confront the ‘inadequate and anachronistic’ aspects of our behaviours and lifestyles.⁴⁵² An effective dialogue with readers about climate change must confront the uncomfortable truth of human contribution to it, for example the underlying assumptions of capitalism being economic growth and limitless prosperity.⁴⁵³ This is an adversarial point from which to begin a dialogue, and reader responses might include apathy, defensiveness, and/or accepting a status quo that climate change mitigation is

⁴⁵² Timothy Clark, ‘Some Climate Change Ironies: Deconstruction, Environmental Politics and the Closure of Ecocriticism’, *The Oxford Literary Review* 32.1 (2010), 131-149.

⁴⁵³ Levene, ‘Climate Blues: or How Awareness of the Human End might re-instil Ethical Purpose to the Writing of History’, p.160.

too difficult. I have approached this dialogical challenge by presenting a range of characters struggling for *personal meaning* and exploring issues that are immediately challenging for them. I argue that each character is examining their own role based on their own circumstances and individual paradigm.

In choosing what types of characters to use in my writing and therefore what points of view to present, I was inspired by the work of multiple analysts who have studied behavioural change patterns in relation to climate change. I was firstly interested in the research undertaken by Ray and Anderson, whose work reveals that a quarter of Americans are ‘cultural creatives’. ‘Cultural creatives’ are actively shifting their worldview, values and way of life towards prioritising relationships, communities, spirituality, and environmental sustainability goals.⁴⁵⁴ The most recent Australian study was undertaken in 2003 by Hamilton and Mail. It suggests that the proportion of cultural creatives in Australian society is likely to be similar to that in Europe and the United States, or perhaps even higher.⁴⁵⁵ These cultural creatives seem to represent some of my peers, in that I have noticed some friends and colleagues trying to combat future uncertainty or at least respond to it by undertaking small shifts in worldview at the individual level. In each chapter of my novella, the characters are ultimately searching for what meaning keeps them going, or their ‘fire inside’.

I was also interested in exploring Eckersley’s contention that psychological and physical health concerns are emerging in response to the current growth-driven social construct.⁴⁵⁶ As well as structural costs related to inequality, unemployment, overwork, pressure on public services, and increased geographic disadvantages, Eckersley notes that there are ‘psychosocial costs that relate to what might be called meaning in life – a sense of purpose, autonomy, identity, belonging, and hope’.⁴⁵⁷ He claims that up to one third of young people are suffering with physical or psychological problems related to stress and distress at any one time, based on a range of surveys undertaken across multiple cohorts of young people in different countries.⁴⁵⁸ I wanted to explore this possibility through some of my

⁴⁵⁴ Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives – How 50 Million People are Changing the World*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000).

⁴⁵⁵ Clive Hamilton and Elizabeth Mail, *Downshifting in Australia: A sea-change in the pursuit of happiness*, The Australia Institute Discussion Paper number 50, January 2003.

⁴⁵⁶ Richard Eckersley, ‘Progress, sustainability and human wellbeing: Is a new worldview emerging?’, *International Journal of Innovation and Sustainable Development*, 1.4 (2006), pp. 306-317.

⁴⁵⁷ Richard Eckersley, ‘The challenge of post-materialism’, *Australian Financial Review*, 24-28 March, *Review*, pp. 5-10.

⁴⁵⁸ Richard Eckersley, *Well and good: Morality, Meaning and Happiness* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2004) p.158.

characters, particularly through Em's existential crises and also through the character of Luke.

I was also influenced by Elgin and Mitchell's concept of 'voluntary simplicity', which describes people who live in a way that is 'outwardly simple and inwardly rich'.⁴⁵⁹ I used the character of Alexander to illustrate Elgin's point about people returning to a simpler life as a response to environmental changes, often through intentional communities. Alexander has chosen to become part of an intentional community located a long distance from the city. Em needs to travel far beyond her usual route to visit him, traverse unknown terrain to reach the community, and pass through guarded gates. Intentional communities are part of the utopian tradition, because they are imagined as a chance to start afresh and create an exemplary way of living.

According to Elgin and Mitchell, people who adopt a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity may exhibit values including 'material simplicity', 'ecological awareness' or 'a strong sense of environmental urgency', and a drive towards 'self-determination' as well as 'personal growth', or 'an intention to realize our higher human potential – both psychological and spiritual' most often 'in community with others'.⁴⁶⁰ As well as their awareness of environmental issues, voluntary simplifiers may be inspired to adopt this kind of lifestyle in response to, 'a growing distrust of and sense of alienation from large and complex social bureaucracies' and 'a growing social malaise and loss of social purpose and direction'⁴⁶¹ with 'rising levels of individual alienation'.⁴⁶² The interconnectedness and interdependence of people and resources is therefore a key belief among voluntary simplifiers.⁴⁶³ Nevertheless, voluntary simplifiers recognize that their chosen lifestyle is not a panacea and does not cure existing social problems, but it may provide a 'springboard' to consider the patterns needed for long-term survival.⁴⁶⁴ Voluntary simplifiers also recognize that not all people will be able to change their lifestyles. This is the subject of a heated conversation between Em and Alexander when she asks him about his reasons for moving to the community. Elgin and Mitchell's research show that voluntary simplifiers are usually young people in their 20s-30s, evenly divided between genders, mostly single people and young families, Caucasians, from

⁴⁵⁹ Duane Elgin and Arold Mitchell, 'Voluntary Simplicity', *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, Summer 1977 pp1-32, p.2

⁴⁶⁰ Elgin and Mitchell, p.2.

⁴⁶¹ Elgin and Mitchell, p.3.

⁴⁶² Elgin and Mitchell, p.14.

⁴⁶³ Elgin and Mitchell, p.7.

⁴⁶⁴ Elgin and Mitchell, p.12.

upper or middle-class backgrounds, well educated, politically independent, urban residents with some wishing to live in small town or rural environments.⁴⁶⁵

Narratological analysis

The following sections briefly discuss the narratological elements of *The Widening Gyre* to identify the technical devices used.

Structure

I used a discontinuous narrative structure with the intention my text can be read as a series of vignettes, or as a novel. The American concept of discontinuous narrative encompasses movements back and forward in narrative chronology, but an Australian approach to this concept is wider, and may also incorporate other devices such as setting, characters, themes, symbols, and narrative perspective to achieve an episodic or fragmented quality.⁴⁶⁶

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Steven Amsterdam and Sue Isle use similarly non-linear structures in their texts. These were very influential on my chosen structure as I wanted to introduce a range of characters and range of responses. Without the imperative of chronological linearity, I was able to explore differing viewpoints and issues. Each story adds an episode to a whole, but the only constant is the character Em. All other elements are variable.

A related challenge was that of narrative perspective. I experimented with multiple narrative points of view. I initially wrote the text in third person, then experimented with first person narrative perspective. I initially also wrote the narrative in past tense but realised that this created distance between the events and the reader, so I re-wrote in present tense.

Themes

I intended that each chapter would represent a differing response to uncertainty. Each story would incorporate both 'external' and 'internal' uncertainty: external uncertainty depicted in the physical surroundings, and internal uncertainty revealed through emotions and behaviour. The characters manage their responses to external uncertainty by searching for a sense of identity or personal purpose. Therefore, each chapter aims to establish the following elements: a setting that manifests environmental change, a character managing his/her response to a sense of uncertainty about the future, and a journey in which the character undertakes a personally significant enquiry.

⁴⁶⁵ Elgin and Mitchell, p.17

⁴⁶⁶ Nigel Krauth, 'Majorca: unreal estate', *TEXT Special Issue*, October 2010 pp 1-8.

Chapter One, 'Derive' introduces the protagonist Em. Em represents the key theme of uncertainty: she feels purposeless, placeless, socially disconnected, and uncertain about her identity. Em suffers ecophobia: she displays a higher level of anxiety about the future than her peers and fears a loss of predictability. She feels 'different' from others because her fear is almost overwhelming. Climate change damage is evident and irrevocable around her, but she nonetheless strives to live in a purposeful way. 'Derive' describes potential climate impacts in Europe, including extreme cold weather, resource scarcity, people smuggling, and prohibitive costs of travel. This environment is not a specific location in Europe but represents a dystopian place in which an authoritarian government controls resource distribution and people's movement. The population of this place adopt a 'feast or famine' response to external conditions; their consumption practices vary according to availability of resources. Em has relatives in this place, and is curious about whether it plays a conscious role in her identity. She embarks on a physical and metaphorical journey in searching for her identity.

Em visits her friend Jem in Chapter Two, 'Jem'. Jem adopts a self-sufficiency response to changing climatic conditions. She lives on secluded land in the hills, guarding against intruders and observers. This chapter depicts resource scarcity and impacts on primary production as outcomes of climate change: it refers to water shortages and seasonal changes. It also infers that a government would become more directive under a climate change scenario, and implies that citizens might undertake surveillance of each other.

Jem's personal search for meaning is that of legacy in the context of environmental changes. Despite feeling like an outsider in her family, a strong part of Jem's identity is her connection to her family's farm. The chapter shows Jem experiencing grief, loss and uncertainty about her future without this legacy. Without the family land and sense of belonging to its surrounding community, she feels purposeless. Jem's story subtly explores the role of places in shaping personal meaning, as I discussed in Chapter One of this exegesis. Theorists such as Heise, Bracke, and Potter argue that connections with place are likely to be significant fodder for future ecocritical enquiry.

Chapter Three introduces Pam, an activist who campaigns to protect built and social heritage. She is a leader who marshals grass-roots networks to empower local communities. Similar to Jem, Pam's identity is underpinned by physical sites. The Port has provided successive generations of workers and migrants with homes and workplaces, and this legacy has been eroded by destruction of heritage and community in the local area. This chapter speculates on the climate change impacts of resource scarcity and changes to communities

and infrastructure. It explores heritage protection as an aspect of uncertainty and asks what is the social value in protecting the past when the future is uncertain?

Luke is Em's brother, and his story is told in Chapter Four. This chapter investigates the potential human health impacts of climate change, as contemplated by Eckersley. The city is represented as a dangerous place: there is a heightened incidence of crime as a consequence of resource scarcity. This story speculates that people's behaviour would become increasingly self-serving under a climate change scenario, and that medical and health services would become difficult to access for individual victims of crime. When Luke is assaulted, he suffers irrevocable trauma and descends into depression and crime. Luke's story represents uncertainty about individual and social stability.

'Peaceful Warriors' represents a voluntary simplicity response to climate change uncertainty. Alexander feels disengaged from his career, where his role is ineffectual in preventing developments that damage the environment. He suffers loneliness and isolation arising from his relationship with his partner, and yearns to contribute to positive change for the future. Alexander represents a desire to salvage hope from the uncertainty of a climate-changed future. In moving to an intentional community, he works for improvement in the present. This chapter explores the voluntary simplicity movement as an example of small-scale change. While its individual participants derive a sense of community and contribution, its critics contend that it is a pastoralist or utopian⁴⁶⁷ response to environmental crisis that evokes nostalgia for the past,⁴⁶⁸ but is an inadequate response to climate change as a global issue.

This chapter also demonstrates the internal conflict within Em. She sees herself as constrained by the responsibilities of debt and her work, but doesn't see Alexander's solution as her solution. Through Em, I also introduce a dialogue about human accountability for climate change to demonstrate Garrard's concept of 'unbearable lightness of green', as discussed in Chapter One of this exegesis. To reiterate, Garrard argues that citizens become paralysed by the contradiction between their comforts/privileges/identities and the nihilistic implications of climate change.⁴⁶⁹ Em feels ashamed for participating in consumerism, but alternates between this and absolving herself as only one person among billions. She believes that her individual actions are tokenistic, which further disempowers her. She vacillates

⁴⁶⁷ For example, Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, and Garrard, *Ecocriticism*.

⁴⁶⁸ Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2010), p.84.

⁴⁶⁹ Greg Garrard, 'The unbearable lightness of green', p.179.

uncomfortably between various points of view and causes: should she look after the world? Should she participate in community? Does she have any stake in impacts that will occur beyond her own lifetime? My point in portraying Em in this way was to demonstrate that this personal sense of accountability is likely to be an emerging impact of climate change for many individuals. Individuals reflecting on their life roles are the people who Anderson and Anderson identify as cultural creatives, that is, people searching for personal meaning in response to a global environmental crisis.

‘Acts of God’ depicts climate change apathy in the character of Josh, with whom Em has a brief romantic affair. While Josh does not consider climate change as posing any threat to his future, the issue of uncertainty is explored through the characters’ abortive relationship. Em is anxious and uncertain about the future, but seeks to connect with another person nevertheless. She wonders whether a relationship would offer her some form of insurance against her uncertainty, and ponders whether social narratives about finding ‘the other’ might provide the belonging she is missing. Ultimately, the clandestine and tumultuous nature of her interactions with Josh demonstrate her uncertainty about creating a future with an unsuitable mate.

Smith and Leiserowitz propose that climate change will not become a priority policy issue until ordinary people perceive themselves at risk.⁴⁷⁰ Josh’s character exemplifies the point that the general public is not concerned about climate change because its impacts are likely to be felt in distant places, by distant people, in the future, or not by humans at all.⁴⁷¹ Josh mentions a tipping point, which, when passed, means that any action will be futile. This seems to contribute to his apathy. Smith and Leiserowitz cite five reasons why ordinary people feel apathetic about climate change. Firstly, they may believe that global warming is a natural process, as Josh demonstrates when Em talks about the increased intensity of weather incidents. Secondly, climate change could just be media ‘hype’. Thirdly, ordinary people may doubt the scientific basis for climate change and claim that there is no definitive proof that it exists. Alternatively, they may simply deny its existence altogether. Finally, they may rely on conspiracy theory and argue that climate change is an example of ‘environmentalist propaganda’.⁴⁷² This type of apathy leads to a lack of accountability, as Josh argues when he asks, ‘why should we have to do anything when no-one else is?’

⁴⁷⁰ Nicholas Smith and Anthony Leiserowitz, ‘The Role of Emotion in Global Warming Policy Support and Opposition’, *Risk Analysis*, 34.5 (2014), pp. 937-948.

⁴⁷¹ Smith and Leiserowitz.

⁴⁷² Smith and Lesierowitz.

Em finally feels a sense of belonging in the final chapter when she reflects on the connections to her home and local environment. This exemplifies the arguments discussed in Chapter One, about the potential power of place in environmental discourse. Singh argues that the individual can achieve a sense of Self or identity through their connections with a loved place, because that place inspires an emotional process of familiarity and attachment.⁴⁷³

Buell argues that place making and the ‘act local, think global’ mentality are key instruments of the environmental justice movement, whereby ‘grassroots’ concepts and ‘community’ are selectively harnessed to promote resistance and activism.⁴⁷⁴ I explore these possibilities in my text through ‘Peaceful Warriors’, in which Em visits Alexander in an eco-community that aims to establish a local group of people dedicated to living in a more ‘sustainable’ way. I also raise the issue of local activism in the chapter ‘Pam’, which explores the marginalisation and displacement of working people through re-development of the Port.

My novella also engages with social justice and environmental issues, which I discussed in Chapter One as likely emerging issues in contemporary ecocriticism. Huggan contends that the representation of ‘other’ is an issue that ecocritics should keep at the forefront of their analysis.⁴⁷⁵ While Huggan is referring primarily to the power and prejudice structures that underpin globalisation, I wanted each of the sections in my novella to address multiple points of view. While the characters are not exploring power structures on a global scale, they are responding to the potential impacts of uncertainty through identifying their values and sense of individual meaning or stability against a context of environmental change. For example, in ‘Acts of God’, Em and Josh discuss the lifestyle changes likely to impact on Josh’s children, such as the availability of transport and housing. In ‘Derive’, Em’s family appraise the lifestyle differences of European people versus Australian people. In ‘Jem’, I discuss regional communities and their sub-cultures.

Setting

Ecocritics view setting as more than a background to plot.⁴⁷⁶ How a writer depicts ‘the environment’ reveals their attitude towards non-human entities. My stories are set in a near

⁴⁷³ Rishikesh Kumar Singh, ‘Postmodern Psychological Aspects of Ecocriticism within/beyond the Ambit of Human Behaviour’ *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 4.5 (2013) p. 3.

⁴⁷⁴ Lawrence Buell, ‘Toxic Discourse’, *Critical Inquiry*, 24.3 (1998), 639-665.

⁴⁷⁵ Graham Huggan, ‘“Greening” Postcolonialism: Ecocritical Perspectives’, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 50.3 (2004), 701-733.

⁴⁷⁶ Thomas Bristow and Grace Moore, ‘Ecocriticism: environment, emotions and education’ *The Conversation* 31 May 2013, p < <https://theconversation.com/ecocriticism-environment-emotions-and-education-13989>> [accessed 27 April 2017].

future time period. I use a realist rather than a fantasy setting because I am interested in place awareness and attachment. A near-future setting encourages readers to engage with the foreseeable short to medium term impacts of climate change, rather than requiring them to extrapolate far into the future. My key reason for creating a near future setting was so that the characters could explore their own roles in climate change *after* having accepted that it is occurring. That is, the characters would be able to observe recent changes to their material surroundings, but I adopt a premise that they have acknowledged these changes. I also used a future setting as a way of exploring gradual environmental changes. Rather than describing a crisis scenario, I wanted to understand what types of change might manifest on a day to day basis.

I also hope that readers would be able to believe in the world portrayed. My text is nominally set in South Australia but is not identified by place names. I set the narrative locally because I am curious about the predicted impacts of climate change for the places to which I feel attached. In writing about what my home might look like in the future, I am experimenting with incorporating sense of place into speculative fiction. To create a believable ‘future world’, I investigated scientific predictions of likely climate change impacts. Garnaut predicts five main areas of climate change impacts for Australia, including in the areas of primary production, human health, infrastructure, tropical cyclones, and international trade.⁴⁷⁷ Although the consequences of climate change will differ between locations, other predictions include increased extreme weather events, such as storms, floods, landslides, heat, drought, and fires. Human health impacts may include loss of clean water, loss of shelter, loss of personal and household goods, migration, sanitation, hygiene, increased demands on waste management, pests, increased demand on the healthcare system, greater incidence of illnesses, toxic exposures, and food scarcity.⁴⁷⁸ By including some of these issues within my narrative, I used the speculative proposition ‘what if?’ to represent what impacts could potentially be felt in Adelaide/South Australia under a climate change scenario.

I experienced challenges with depicting a near future setting. I wanted to avoid including obvious markers of environmental change, but also wanted to meaningfully represent the predicted impacts of climate change. In Chapter Two of this document, I

⁴⁷⁷ Ross Garnaut, *The Garnaut Review 2011: Australia in the Global Response to Climate Change*, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.7.

⁴⁷⁸ ME Keim, ‘Building human resilience: the role of public health preparedness and response as an adaptation to climate change’, *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 35.5 (2008), 508-16, p.510.

discussed the difficulties of depicting a long-term, widespread, phenomena like climate change, and explored how critics are responding to depictions of climate change within recent fiction. The process of writing my novella has directly demonstrated these difficulties to me. In Chapter Four, I explored some examples of stories that present environmental change scenarios. I noted that Sue Isle and Steven Amsterdam use sparse explanations for their environmental change scenarios: they simply expect readers to engage with their settings. In Chapter Three, I also reflected on Suvin's point that a setting need not be accurate, because no-one can predict the future. Suvin argues that any information that a writer offers about their setting adds purely to the aesthetic quality of the story.

Psychogeography and the Flaneuse

Em is a character who walks, rides a bike, and uses public transport, out of necessity in a time of resource shortage, but also as a symbol of her personal power and independence. The amount of time that she spends alone travelling reinforces the reader's awareness of external and internal journeying. The solitary walker is a well-known figure in nature writing. The flaneur is a male solitary wanderer who muses on nature, existential, and mundane issues. The female equivalent is a flaneuse. Several flaneuse characters have appeared in recent examples of environmental change fiction, including Barbara Kingsolver's character Dellarobia in *Flight Behaviour*, and Kim Westwood's character Sal in *The Courier's New Bicycle*. In both of these narratives and in my novella, the flaneuse character wanders across landscapes both purposefully and randomly in different parts of the story. Em and Sal walk or ride a bike because these modes of transport are the safest, least costly, and most efficient in a world in which environmental changes are occurring. Both characters view themselves as warriors, and both are unsure about their purpose and identity, but view their modes of transport as an important statement of their values. In all three narratives, I view the characters' movement across landscape, sometimes without purpose, as a symbol of their feelings of uncertainty and lack of belonging or purpose. People move transiently through places as do objects and weather. Movement through place shows that a persistent sense of uncertainty is embedded in each individual's psychological identity as part of their coming to terms with a physical environment that is changing.

My character Em was intended to provide an insight into the personal reflection process undertaken while journeying. The first chapter is entitled 'Derive' because it intends to capture Guy Debord's psychogeography concept of the Derive. Debord defines the derive as fundamentally different from a journey or stroll in that is not intended to purposefully

carry the walker from one place to another. The derive is ‘drifting’, a walk in which the walker ‘let[s] themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there’.⁴⁷⁹ A derive is undertaken in an urban environment such as a city and its suburbs,⁴⁸⁰ which have layers of ‘possibilities and meanings’.⁴⁸¹ The derive may also provoke a ‘possible rendezvous’, in which the walker is open to the possibility of momentary and circumstantial interactions with others. On Em’s Derive, a rendezvous occurs in which she witnesses a crime.

Conclusions

Steven Amsterdam comments that *Things We Didn’t See Coming* is ‘less of a prediction than an exorcism of my fears’.⁴⁸² Like Amsterdam, my work *The Widening Gyre* has provided an opportunity to explore my feelings of uncertainty about a future affected by indicators of climate change. It also represents a contribution to environmental discourse. When I contribute to a discourse through my writing, I am bringing both my voice and my paradigm. My voice can be detected through the aesthetic qualities of my writing, and my paradigm through its content, including my choice of characters, setting, and themes.

My original aim was to produce a creative text that portrays psychological/behavioural uncertainty influenced by environmental changes. This idea originated from my observations in professional and personal contexts. I have observed a range of behaviours that suggest that my peers are thinking about how the predicted impacts of climate change might affect their lives, and are adjusting their life choices accordingly. In *The Widening Gyre*, I sought to represent this uncertainty and explore ‘what if’ scenarios through the medium of speculative fiction.

In my exegetical research, I sought to identify the extent to which other writers have made a connection between environmental change and uncertainty about the future. A historical overview of environmental themes within fiction in Chapter Three shows that writers explored their concerns about environmental change in parallel with themes of social and technological development throughout the twentieth century. This was obviously evident in science fiction, and became more thematically prominent in the dystopian visions of the

⁴⁷⁹ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, (New York: Viking, 2000), p.2.

⁴⁸⁰ Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, p.3.

⁴⁸¹ Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, p.3.

⁴⁸² Angela Meyer, ‘Things We Didn’t See Coming by Steven Amsterdam’ 2009, <<https://literaryminded.com.au/2009/03/04/things-we-didnt-see-coming-steven-amsterdam/>> [accessed 8 July 2017].

mid-twentieth century. Themes explored in adult fiction are mirrored in fiction aimed at younger readers. A surge in the range and popularity of environmentally-themed dystopian, speculative, and apocalyptic fiction began in the late 1990s and has continued. The emergence of an environmental movement in the late twentieth century and the range of fictive contributions about environmental themes provoked a specific field of literary criticism, most frequently named Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism initially aimed to identify an author's stance on environmental issues and their contribution to a growing body of environmentalist writing. I explored the development of this field in Chapter One of this exegesis, and argue that Ecocriticism has enabled literary critics to engage with emerging themes in environmental discourse. In Chapter Two, I discussed climate change themed fiction, which has emerged in the early twenty-first century. Fiction helps readers to visualise how climate change might impact individuals and the trajectory of society by immersing them in emotionally affective scenarios. While I do not view authors as having obligations to influence social change or adopt activist agendas, the emotional and cognitive processes involved in contemplating and responding to climate change themes through fiction cannot fail to influence individuals' understanding of the issues, even at the very least, by awareness of, or exposure to them. I contend that fiction has a significant role to play in environmental discourse and in influencing social responses to climate change, because climate change novels have become one of the ways that humans explore how environmental change could affect them.

In undertaking research related to creative writing, I was also curious about how writers have responded to the challenges of writing about environmental change, for example, its magnitude, and the gradual rate of its occurrence. In Chapter Four I analysed several novels that explore environmental change scenarios, with particular emphasis on human responses to the uncertainties that environmental change provokes. By analysing Neville Shute's nuclear war novel *On the Beach*, Steven Amsterdam's near-future speculative debut *Things We Didn't See Coming*, and Sue Isle's Young Adult novella *Nightsiders*, I was able to identify how the authors used a range of literary techniques to discuss environmental change. I also found evidence of the similarities and differences between fiction aimed at differing audiences, and in fiction written at different time periods.

By considering a range of fiction throughout my exegesis and through the process of creating my own novella, I have identified that environmental change scenarios cause people to consider their roles and values. Fiction writers can prompt their audiences to imagine how they might respond when these roles and values are challenged, by immersing them in the

uncertainties posed by ‘what if...’ situations. This can assist both writers and readers to understand their own individual perspective on environmental issues, and potentially, their accountability for individual actions and behavioural choices. In the absence of solutions to avert environmental crisis, and a global disinclination to implement mitigative measures, writers are ultimately witnesses. Authors of fiction continue to observe their surroundings and transform these observations into narratives. As Meyer observes, ‘we go on...even in the face of a difficult future...what choice do we have?’⁴⁸³

⁴⁸³ Meyer, ‘Things We Didn’t See Coming by Steven Amsterdam’.

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The Widening Gyre

Derive

Snow falls silently outside. Europe labours through the coldest winter on record. My uncle, Wil, slumps on the white leather couch, tapping his fingers and periodically clearing his throat. The satellite news loops continuously on the television. At the end of every half hour broadcast, Wil stands up, parts the white gauzy curtains, and stares out onto the balcony, muttering in a morose tone as he watches the snow bank grow. He reaches for the duck-down coat that hangs on the peg next to the window, rummaging in its pockets for cigarettes.

Aunty Danka snaps.

‘Shut the window! You're letting the cold in!’

Wil winks at me over Danka’s dyed-blond hair, which is piled high on her head with curlers.

I announce that I want to go for a walk to the shop. They look at each other and begin conferring rapidly. I don’t know what they’re saying, but I’m sure that they will try to convince me not to go out, even though the shop is just across the street.

‘No, Emka!’ Danka implores, ‘It’s so dangerous! You might get robbed, or worse!’

I know it’s unwise to wander here. I am from the other side of the world and I barely speak enough to be understood, or even to understand basic conversations. But I need some fresh air. I miss being outside, and my aunt and uncle probably understand that. They think Australians need lots of space. I need time alone, too. Every day here is a strain, stumbling through another language. My phrasebook fits into my handbag, but it only contains simple expressions. I’m mainly communicating with broken English and hand gestures.

Life here is communal. People live in apartments, in cities, and share their recreational spaces. In my home, in Australia, it is just me in a big house with a big garden. I feel guilty that Danka and Wil sleep on the sofa bed while I have the one tiny bedroom. The bedroom window overlooks the parking lot and an adjoining building. One of Danka’s maidenhair ferns cascades towards the window, pushing for light.

This building is one among the rows of identical square blocks, distinguishable by bold spray-painted numbers. Differing colours or graffiti murals disguise the original drab blue grey cast. Wil and Danka live in a lime green building, on the fifth floor: building 68. Their space is neat, scrupulously clean, and satisfyingly ordered. Plastic concertina screens swing across the doorways to conserve space. In the bathroom, I hold an extendable hose in

one hand and wash my hair with the other hand. A clothesline hangs above my head. From the shower space, I see a tiny washing machine and a shelf of cleaning supplies. I imagine the years sliding by, my aunt scrubbing, wiping and dusting.

After a short conversation in which Danka raises her voice slightly and Wil waves his hands around and shrugs, she pats me on the shoulder.

‘Be careful. Don’t talk to anyone. Just to the shop, and home, quick quick.’

I produce the mobile phone that Wil has given me and make a show of dropping it into my coat pocket. He smiles, and points at his wristwatch. That means ‘don’t be long’. I pull on the pink beanie that clashes with my red gloves, and open the door to the stairwell. Living on the fifth floor has its advantages in weather like this: the grey concrete stairwell is pleasantly warm.

Danka and I walk to the local shops most mornings, so I pick my way confidently across the snow-covered parking lot to the street. The snow is slushy and mud-strewn with footprints and dirty, crushed leaves. My feet are still slightly unsteady. It doesn’t snow at home in Australia, and I’m learning to balance. A man crosses the street ahead of me, but I suspect that very few people will venture out in this cold. My breath catches in my throat and I breathe down into the warmth of my scarf. Despite the cold, my spirits lift immediately.

The walking started when I was a child. From as early as I can remember, I followed my mother on her twilight wanders. I watched the line of her sun-browned arms, entranced as she pointed out languid shapes and bright colours: swelling pomegranates and unfurling hibiscus. As we walked, I built networks of internal maps. I made more maps as I grew older, and rode bicycles all over the city. My childhood skill has honed as I’ve aged. My map-making is automatic. I catch myself spontaneously orienting at unexpected moments; checking my internal compass like a child grasping a worn security blanket.

Even though I have always lived in the same city, I still feel a stranger. Eleven addresses under the same sky, but none permanent. A place to belong has eluded me. I have roamed all over my city, but my connections have been transient.

I am here, in Europe, in the snow, to see my grandmother’s childhood homeland. I can afford to travel only because I am visiting family. Soon, travel will be only for the extremely wealthy. My grandmother brokered the visit over the telephone, knowing the language barrier. She assured me that Wil and Danka speak a little English.

‘Everyone will understand each other, more or less...’

She instructs them not to let me out of their sight. A trusting Australian is easy prey in a dangerous place full of theft and poverty and opportunism.

Wil follows my grandmother's instructions to the letter. His proximity can be cloying. I languish blissfully alone in the evenings behind the concertina door, while my aunt and uncle camp in the lounge room. I feel intolerant and self-indulgent.

The weather was warm when I first arrived. We travelled to the places that my grandmother has woven into endless re-telling of girlhood tales. Her stories conjure rural scenes: vast green fields tipped with golden crops and wild poppies. Pleasant sunshine. As a curious child poking through her house, I saw this other culture: carved wooden folk art, floral embroidered textiles, brightly painted landscapes of blooming poppies, and alpine vistas. Dolls wear multiple skirts and flowers threaded through their hair. I am here, in Europe, looking for the familiarity of those dusty icons.

I knew that petrol would be costly beyond belief, but I paid, knowing that it would please her that I am visiting the places she loved. We drove six hours along winding roads to the village in the mountains where she had spent summer holidays. When she was young, people believed in the healing powers of alpine air. Back then the mountain people farmed goats on the hillsides, wore goatskin waistcoats and hand-sewn trousers, and played mountain music on hand-carved instruments.

When we arrived in the main street, a seedy sunburnt man in a leather waistcoat approached us, begging Wil for a cigarette. He explained that he knew somewhere nice to stay. Our accommodation was as seedy as the man; my bed consisted of two sofa cushions covered by a sheet. I avoided placing bare skin on any unknown surface. Our evening meal was included. Danka and I glanced at each other over a greasy piece of meat fried in a breaded batter. Vegetables drowned in a brownish-lilac sauce alongside. I ate two small doughy bread rolls from a grubby basket in the centre of the table, and refused the generic cake smothered in amorphous red jam. I went to bed as early as I could, and forced myself back to sleep whenever I woke up. When a morning breeze raised dusty air from the curtains I heard Wil and Danka bickering in the other room.

'Shh! You'll wake the Australian.'

We caught the cable car up the mountain. It terminated at a gaudy amusement park. Neon coloured plastic toys and streamers festooned the gaming stalls. Loud rock music blared through huge speakers. Local beer flags fluttered. It was barely 10 o'clock but groups of

people sat at tables drinking oversized bottles of beer, and eating starchy meals. I felt slightly disgusted and simultaneously guilty. The gluttony is a peculiar but familiar aspect of this culture. These people know oppression and starvation. They celebrate when they are not starving, and remind themselves that they may starve again in the future. Some of the traditional mountain houses remained: wood slab cabins nestled into the hillside among fields of blooming yellow alpine flowers. A mountain man in a traditional costume stood near a horse and cart, accosting tourists for paid rides in his cart. Wil and Danka posed for my photos.

Through a series of hand gestures, Wil suggested that he and I would take another cable car into the high mountains. A crowd jammed the approach to the ticket booth, bodies jostling competitively in the gentle morning sun. He gripped my shoulder firmly. In front of us, an enormous man herded his family. The young men here are gargantuan in stature, and their voices are loud and booming. I wondered whether such wide legs and massive chests need special clothes. The man's wife was much smaller, with bleached hair and crooked teeth. She wore a tight t-shirt advertising tequila. Their children whined impatiently, and she hushed them by placing her hands over their mouths. She offered them sugary drinks in plastic bottles and their father grunted sternly at them. The children were miniatures of their father: tall, with wide frames.

The crowd surged forward towards the ticket booth and Wil pushed me roughly through the turnstile where a cable car waited. It ascended the mountain packed with people. Wedged between Wil and a young couple, a bare elbow rested against my head and I smelt unfamiliar body odour. I shrunk away from watching the couple. The girl's hands roamed the man's body, caressing continuously. She kissed his face, stroking his hair and winding her hands around his neck. She kissed his lips tenderly, giving him meaningful and loving glances as she looked into his eyes, smiling. I noticed that a disfiguring mark covered one side of her face.

The next week we drove to visit my cousins in the capital. Leaving Wil and Danka's hometown we stopped at a shabby barricade, just a few pieces of lopsided rotting wood painted red. Two young soldiers sat at a card-table drinking coffee and chatting, guns resting between their legs. They squinted at me through the car window in the morning sun, and Wil passed his ID to them. Travelling required him to explain himself to the government. Most people stayed in the cities. My uncle shrugged when I asked him about it.

'The government doesn't like people moving around. They like to know where you are. Too much bother signing all those forms.'

He said things are better now than they were. He and Danka had lived through years of lining up for food every day, fighting with hundreds of others for sparse resources. The government starved and tortured people. Children were born deformed because no-one had enough to eat. I wondered how people maintained enough hope to have children. They survived changing governments and the changing weather. There are no food shortages anymore, but many cannot find work. Wil warned me about desperation. On my first day in the city, a stranger approached me asking for directions. He grabbed my arm tightly and told me not to talk to anyone.

'Just keep walking. They are not friends to you.'

Wil and Danka live quietly and frugally in their fifth-storey flat. Plenty of large families live in apartment block 68 and others surrounding it. Most families survive on one income, including children, parents, and grandparents. Wil occasionally fixes electrical items; he uses a work pass to travel beyond the city. Danka doesn't travel.

'When do you see your children?'

She looks down and twists her knuckles in her lap.

'They moved away to find a job. Young people go where there is work. I don't blame them for that.'

My city cousins greet me with interest. Like Wil and Danka, they live in a drab apartment block. Four people in a one-bedroom apartment. Nika, seven, and Michael, four, share the bedroom. Nika's bedspread is pink with a dancing horse motif. Michael's is blue, with racing cars. My cousin Sylvia shares a fold-up bed with her husband Peter in the lounge room. During the day, their bed becomes a sofa that the children bounce on. The dinner table moves freely from its corner into the centre of the room when it is required for a meal, and quickly folds up back into the corner afterwards. The only fixed item in the room is the TV cabinet. Peter eagerly questions me about Australian television. Do we have satellite? What about mobile phones? When I tell him that Australia has television and mobile phones, he seems satisfied that his country is keeping up.

My cousins' apartment looks onto a forest. In medieval times it was the King's Forest, and now it is a public park. The forest runs alongside a majestic river, and we walk there in the warm twilight. I gladly stretch my legs in the last golden rays of the day. I'm sure this is the land that my grandmother longs for. The light is gentle, unlike the harsh sun at home. It glitters through birch trees. People on mountain bikes whizz past us along the softly trodden trails. Michael whines that Nika is walking too fast, which elicits her an immediate reprimand

from their father. At four, Michael is already the centre point of his family. He is another generation of men in this country, and distaste curdles within me. I've noticed that Danka never questions Wil, and that I'm also expected to defer to his authority. One evening when we went out, he forgot where he parked the car. We followed his haphazard ramblings, despite me saying several times that I knew where the car was. I felt sorry for Danka, who was hobbling about in soft, slipper-like flip-flops.

For some people, walking is a political statement: a way of demonstrating that they care about their impact. Covering ground with my feet has always been my way of life. At home, I feel safe for the most part. It's unwise after dark, but I can run if there is limited light. I make a habit of scanning my surroundings, and I mumble a greeting if other people look friendly or acknowledge me.

Wil says people used to wander about all night here too, when it was safe. Lots of shops and businesses used to trade all hours. I see remnants of those times. Near apartment block 68, a ramshackle stall leans to one side. Someone has written their name in black marker over an ancient image of an ice-cream cone painted on its side.

Walking is clarifying, even in the cold. Energy flows down my legs into the ground, I am warm with circulation, and thoughts rise from the tangled clumps in my mind. I don't need a destination: just space, and the feeling of moving through it.

Small groups of people huddle outside the local shops, keeping warm with the lighting and the heated air from inside. Wil has warned me about beggars. They are not beggars but pickpockets: money is scarce. They make a pretence of asking for money, then surround their victim. Sometimes they are violent, but most of the time they work quickly and take whatever they find without harming anyone. Better not to attract attention. I walk past them towards the town centre, even though I promised Wil and Danka that I wouldn't be long. It's cold beyond the warm cabin of my parka, but my legs are appreciating movement and my head sings with fresh air.

The town is a stern yet beguiling mix of eras. On one of our first circuits in Wil's car, I clumsily compiled a simple sentence, 'I like this town'.

He glanced over with eyebrows raised.

'Do you? I don't.'

Perhaps not, if a person must spend their life in one place, prescribed by a government. The layers of history beckon to me. On the outskirts of town the streets are narrow, flanked by old three-storey row houses. These would have filled the town in my grandmother's youth. Their facades are white and flat. No balconies or flower pots on

window sills. They are functional houses, yet the navy paint of their external support beams is neat and jaunty. A new main road is being built along this stretch, parallel to the train line. New roads are part of the new agenda: the government is replacing old cracked roads even when people do not travel. Like everything here, the pace of the road works is slow. The endless detour routes prompt Wil to mutter in frustration whenever we drive anywhere.

The city is a grid. Two long boulevards lead towards its centre. On one side is the cemetery, and on the other, the walled public gardens. I stay on the cemetery side where the footpath is wide. People are out walking, even in the coldest winter on record. A young man and a boy are pitching a kite into the air in the corner of the cemetery. The boy resembles a tea cosy: bright woollen garments swaddle every part of his body. It is not windy enough for the kite to fly, but a small breeze catches it briefly. They cheer spontaneously.

The cemetery is quiet today. Usually old women hold card-table stalls in the shelter of the cemetery walls, selling vigil candles, flowers, and consecrated items. Today there are no stalls. The busy and colourful cemetery is white and silent. An older couple link arms as they pass me, nodding politely beneath fluffy fur hats. The gravestones rise between snow-laden trees. People spend hours here, wandering among the gothic-styled structures and stone ornaments. Some of the memorials are so big they could be churches. These are religious people; their burial sites are located in the middle of the city, and their homage to dead loved ones is impressive. The atmosphere here is always reverent: haunting yet peaceful. The Jewish cemetery is in another part of town. It has been bombed and burned in hate attacks twice since I have been here.

Near the cemetery boundary, I orient myself, looking for the red sloping roofs of the converted warehouses. Before the regime took power, the town was an industrial centre of mainly Jewish ownership. The solid red brick buildings were factories, but are now a shopping precinct. This country works hard to prove itself equally developed to the West, and sometimes it succeeds. One weekend I dragged Wil to the modern arts centre and felt amused seeing his baffled responses to the interactive installations. Sometimes music parties are held in the old railway barns near the arts centre. Parts of my grandmother's city are exciting and cosmopolitan.

The enchanting main square is the only part of the city that matches her descriptions, but it seems to have mere novelty value. On a walk with Wil there, I wanted to linger, but he herded me towards the new shopping centre impatiently.

'You'll like it. That's what the young ones like.'

The square is not square, but almost hexagonal. An enormous, regal roundabout designed for carriages is central. Flowers leap from its soil in the spring, but today it is another bank of snow. In every direction are small cobbled walkways filled with intriguing shops. The shop fronts are quaint, with goods hanging from wooden doors, and weathered stoops. Signs swing from curled wrought iron fixtures that creak under the weight of the snow. The shops are so small that they cannot fit more than a few people. Today the square is quiet, like the cemetery. Some shops are open, but there are no tables outside, and the doors are closed against the cold. A few women in long coats and fur hats bounce quickly along the walkway carrying wrapped packages, but no-one strolls or lingers, except me.

I peer into a window display that would have thrilled my grandmother as a young woman: delicate umbrellas for sudden rainstorms, lollies in glass bottles on high shelves, and green crystal beads that glitter in the light. The phone vibrates in my pocket. Wil knows I have limited language, so he commands sternly into my ear.

‘Five minutes!’

I hold onto my beanie and break into a clumsy run across the square. My favourite part of the city is the park across the main road from my Aunt and Uncle’s apartment block. People ride bikes there in the warmer months, and even in the cold it’s a popular route. I’ve made a habit of joining Wil on the balcony before dinner. He smokes cigarettes while I watch people walking. He and Danka don’t seem to enjoy exercise, but he has shown me the park because he likes the tiny brown birds that dart and hop among people’s ankles, looking for crumbs. Today most of the small paths are snowed over, and I half-run, sliding across the wet ground. I keep my eyes on the main road, looking for the shortest route to the green building where Wil and Danka will greet me with relief and irritation. I almost collide with a woman wheeling a pram in front of me. A small pink face peers out, wrapped in layers of blankets. The woman sees me looking at her baby, and smiles. She wears a bulky royal blue coat and a blue knitted hat that is sliding off. I touch my own head to check that I’m still wearing my beanie, and the woman tug hers back on. The green apartment building looms into view. I’m looking forward to Wil offering me a strong espresso with milk on the side. He laughs at my preference for milk in coffee; everyone here drinks it black. He will slurp his noisily to conclusion, and bang his cup into its saucer with satisfied unintentional force. Danka will scold him for making so much noise. He will raise long-suffering eyebrows at me.

I hear a shriek behind me and I slip over in the snow as I spin around quickly. The woman with the pram is screaming as a man runs away from her holding the baby. Its blankets trail from his arms and he loops them over his shoulder as he runs. The woman stumbles towards me holding her jaw, where blood trickles from a rapidly swelling wound. I can see the man running across the park between the trees, towards the city. There is no way I can catch up with him. The woman screams hysterically, pointing towards the man. I understand that she has lost her baby, but I don't have the words to explain that I'm a foreigner who doesn't know what to do. I take her hand and drag her towards the apartment, stumbling across the park in wet clothes. When we reach the stairwell at the bottom of apartment block 68, I realise that the woman's hat has fallen off somewhere, and that we've left the pram in the park. It could be evidence, or something. I beckon to the woman and point up the stairwell, leaping up the stairs until I reach Wil's door. I pound on it with my fist, panting breathlessly.

I push the woman into the hallway and feel suddenly overwhelmed by the heat in the flat. I wrestle my parka off, and lean, feeling light-headed, against the doorframe of my bedroom. Danka looks at me and touches my shoulder, softly muttering something that I don't understand. The woman has collapsed on the floor and Wil stoops over her, his hand on her shoulder. He is asking questions rapidly. The woman howls. Wil put his arms around the woman and lifts her onto her feet. He leads her towards the couch. The wound on her face is bleeding freely. Danka swoops towards it with a dishcloth, pressing the cloth against the woman's face with her right hand, and patting the woman gently on her shoulder with her other hand. Wil and Danka confer softly over the woman's head. I understand the word 'police'.

Wil collects his car keys and wallet from the telephone table next to the front door and reaches for the heavy coat on the rack. As always, he pats its pockets to check for cigarettes. In the slow, clear voice that she usually uses to communicate with me, Danka instructs the woman to hold the cloth to her face. She places a hand behind the woman's shoulder and guides her to stand up. It reminds me of my first conversation with Danka. Clumsily, we established that she had been a nurse before her own children arrived. It occurs to me now that her demeanour is professional as she holds the woman's elbow and steers her towards the front door. When Wil opens the door, I remember the pram in the park. I gesture urgently to my uncle, wheeling an imaginary pram and pointing towards the park. My

language is failing. I am not sure whether he understands me but he nods and we shuffle into the stairwell.

I spend the afternoon in the police station waiting to be interviewed. I sit on a plastic portable chair, staring at the posters on the walls. None of the words make sense. I play childish games because I'm bored. I swing my feet under the chair without letting them touching the ground, then try to make them squeak on the polished floor. The policeman stationed in the waiting room clears his throat and looks at me sternly. Two more police enter the room from behind a heavy glass door, and beckon for us to follow them. I stand up, but Wil waves me away. Pointing at me, he explains to the police that I'm Australian and I only speak English. When Wil and the woman disappear behind the door, I am left in the waiting room. I jam my hands in my coat pockets and bang my feet together in a random, tuneless pattern.

We sit on the white couch staring at the satellite news looping, as we have done for the last ten days. It is still snowing. I am looking forward to Thursday, when I will fly to London. Counting down the hours, I am mentally organising my suitcase. I hope the weather doesn't prevent me from flying.

The newsreader announces that the nation continues to search for a baby girl missing almost a week now, snatched from a park while out walking with its mother. The police have found no trace of a man who fled the scene on foot. The only witness to the crime was the baby's mother. A young tourist was passing by and helped the mother to safety. Cameras show church services being dedicated to pray for the infant's safe return, but grave fears are held for her welfare.

The reporter reveals that increasing instances of child trade have been reported in the past two winters. His bearded face flashes onto the screen. He is standing on the steps of a police station wearing a huge brown overcoat. Snow is falling behind him and I wonder why none has fallen onto the camera.

'Police fear that this may be a sign of the harsh weather. It's desperate actions in desperate times by desperate people. What do you make of that, Commissioner?'

A policeman in a tight uniform decorated in badges appears on the screen and the reporter thrusts the microphone into his face.

‘We are starting to see some unusual weather conditions. It’s possible that this is an extreme reaction to that. We know that people are struggling...but we only hope that this is not a pattern...’

Danka clicks her tongue and clasps her elbows.

‘It’s terrible, terrible.’ She shakes her head. ‘That poor child.’

‘What will happen to her?’ I ask.

I have finally used the correct grammatical tense.

‘Who can say?’, my uncle shrugs. ‘She’s gone. Sold, maybe? Robbers get good money for a baby...’

Danka twists her fingers together in distress.

Relief washes over me with the crisp English voice on the in-flight announcement.

‘Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard flight 722 to London.

Conditions are looking clear for a nice smooth flight today, so we should have you disembarking at Heathrow at our expected arrival time of 3:15PM.’

In two hours I will be in London, where I can speak more than a few words in every sentence. I’ll be able to talk with people. I’ll be able to walk about freely, feeling safe. On the TV screen in the seat in front of me, English satellite news shows a press conference: the baby’s distraught mother is appealing to the thief. Tears roll down her face as she pleads,

‘Bring back my child. Please, I beg you...’

Then more footage of snow storms across Europe. I adjust the seatbelt on my waist and close my eyes. I’ve been lonely here. I’ve missed being able to share my thoughts with others. Is language the barrier to my heritage? Perhaps I feel an outsider because I don’t understand, and people don’t understand me. I am disappointed, too. Here is not home. But it’s seven decades since my grandmother left. Should I have expected anything to be the same? Nothing is the same. It hasn’t felt home to me, even when I saw dolls in their brightly coloured dresses at the market stalls. I feel no affinity with these people, just tiny echoes of familiarity amongst all the strangeness and difference. Yet these people are distant members of my tribe, real and actual family! But there is only vague similarity between my grandmother and Wil and Danka, maybe only a slight family resemblance. When I think about it, there is only a vague similarity between my grandmother and myself, too. I have

discovered that I don't belong in this place. The man in the seat next to me raises his hand for the drinks cart. As he orders a beer, I notice his hand is missing several fingers.

Jem

Em rides in the early morning and at twilight to avoid the heat. It is a full day out: two hours' ride each way. She doesn't protest fuel shortages. She agrees with the government on that matter: they need fuel for official business. There are still plenty of cars on the roads, though. Some people spend money keeping up old ways, grasping for a sense of stability. Others make their own fuels. She will arrive at my house plastered in the dark grit of homemade black smoke.

Em is the daughter I don't have. She is the same age as the child I lost. I read somewhere that children are reincarnated forms of other people. Our relationship has a steady, unconditional quality. We mother each other: giving advice and bolstering esteem. We meet for jazz gigs, beers, and verbose ramblings. But I have seen less of her since the court case started. I built a rammed earth house in the hills. It is my fortress against the changes happening outside.

The hillsides are brown and the air uncomfortably hot and breezy in early summer. There are really only two seasons now. No more spring and autumn ambiguity. Now there is just a sudden switch: from overnight frosts, flood-deluged soil, and shrunken, rotting vegetables, to blistering heat when the dry grass crackles.

I'm in the garden marvelling that the chickens are still laying when the dogs announce Em's arrival. They move as a pack, brown and yellow hackles rising together. They know she is a friend but they growl a challenge, tails uncertainly raised between wag and attack. The electric fence whirs and pings. My boots crunch on dry leaves and bark strips. The dogs scatter with tails arched when I reach the fence and see her leaning over her bike. We hug in a wide-armed embrace. Our shared small-stature is comforting.

We walk to the house between the trees, trying not to make new paths. I peer around our feet, looking for vegetables that I've hidden among the natives. It is unwise to flaunt personal productivity in days of food shortage. Invaders run blitz attacks on food supplies and water. Thinking about them sends shivers up my spine, even in the hot sunlight. I motion to Em, pointing my crinkly sun-worn hand toward the soil. Real, fat, red strawberries sit gently concealed in the scraggly bushes. Strawberries are rare. They haven't been available for years. I'm quite proud of myself.

'How did you do this?' she whispers.

The city is on water rations, and non-essential water is supposed to be donated to the government. I put my finger to my lips and rearrange the bushes. I press the warm fruit into her palm and she cradles it like a small animal before furtively passing it from hand to mouth. On her face, I see a sugary explosion of long-gone childhood.

The kitchen is the centre of my house. The air is cool and pungent with the smell of old wooden furniture. Layers of my life litter the wide blackwood kitchen table: notes to myself, cycling equipment, and paperwork. This clutter symbolises my scattered emotional state. I have been fighting for more than twenty years. Sometimes I am an exhausted hermit alone in my burrow, and at other times, a butterfly flitting in search of company and amusement. I try not to let the depression win, but it's a struggle to keep functioning.

'Beer?'

I offer Em a brown bottle from the cooling space. I installed a brewing operation when I realised how much I was spending on alcohol. A fermenting vat bubbles steadily, amidst racks of washed bottles hanging neck-down. My products are heavy, cloudy ales that mix well with lemonade. The lemonade comes from a lemon tree guarded by its own electric fence. We clink our bottles together. A blackbird dances on the datura tree outside the window. In the kitchen dimness, my face wobbles even though I swore that I wouldn't talk about it. I've been looking forward to her visit, and I don't want to ruin it with misery. She's one of the only people I trust. It's easy to be myself around her.

'Jem, what's wrong?'

I see the concern in her eyes. I gulp my beer furiously. My face burns and tears pour.

'Court this week.'

I am the seventh generation raised on our family farm. I know all its contours. I can name every tree. I am the youngest of three children, an unexpected surprise late in my parents' marriage. They dispensed with the niceties lavished on my brother and sister. No city boarding schools or music lessons for me. I attended the local school and was expected to leave it early. I spent my school holidays trailing my father, who worked in the musty dark sheds. I can still smell old harnesses gone stiff on their pegs. While he worked, I searched for lost treasures and sang songs to myself. One day I discovered

a pinhole camera toy, carelessly dropped in a dark corner. Looking into it, I saw a child endlessly pushing a rolling hoop.

Every building on the farm is a treasure trove. In the big house, I know which chests contain clothing, and which ones smell like decaying paperwork. Old stock charts, invoices, and harvest records. The ancient gas lamps are in the roof with the bee smokers and some pianola rolls. Trophies of long-ago claimed glories line the walls, with aerial photographs of the district, and landscapes painted two hundred years ago. Every piece carries memories.

I left the farm to go to university. I did not tell my family that I had been accepted into the Conservatorium to study music. No-one travelled to the city to hear me sing. I gave up singing when I knew I wouldn't make it as a professional. After music came horticulture, which I studied in Amsterdam. I spent my time in bars, drinking and fucking strangers to feel like I belonged somewhere.

When I returned to the farm, I claimed the cottage for my space. It is the oldest building on the land, with three rooms, an enormous fire place, a dirt floor and straw that bursts through the walls like a chair losing its stuffing. I installed running water and an outdoor shower, which heats through a gravity feed mounted in the eucalyptus in the front yard. One morning I was making coffee when a black snake drifted in under the door. I climbed onto the redwood bench in my sarong, wielding the wood-chopping axe. The snake passed through and drifted out again. I conceived a child in the cottage, too. But I did not want to settle down with a local boy. I gazed along the valley at my family's house standing proudly on the hill. Terminated.

My father passed away not long after I moved to the city to start a theatre company. My mother lost her faculties, in turn giving lavish gifts and accusing visitors of stealing kitchen utensils. My brother Bill took possession of the farm despite the testament, which shared it between we three children. He wanted the wealth and status of our family name, but he never wanted to farm. Never could farm. He ran the property into a barren ruin. His moneymaking schemes failed. The changing weather brought drought and fire. He carved up our land into hobby allotments. After that I called the lawyers. My socialite sister Bron is useless. In the afternoons, she plays golf and tennis with her well-heeled girlfriends. Then she whines at me in harried phone calls from her husband's surgical practice.

'Do something about it!'

Now, Cinderella and her ugly brother and sister are battling each other in the Supreme Court for whatever is left. It would have been a mighty inheritance, but it will probably turn out a pittance. The battle for the farm is all consuming.

We carry bottles of beer and lemonade into the sunroom next to the kitchen, and settle into the faded velvet armchairs. The sunroom is my tranquil place. I've arranged the ancient saggy chairs around the windows, looking out onto the garden. Even on the coldest days a pleasant warm glow radiates through the glass. In the sunroom, I find relief from my distress, watching my propagated trees growing in their pots.

'Ah, it's so relaxing here. So what's the latest?', Em asks.

'It's hard to imagine how it could get any worse. All the books have been cooked. Some of them have just 'disappeared'. No-one will give me a straight answer on where the money is going. I'm meant to have power of attorney! In theory, I should be approving any expenditure, but I've got no idea what's what.'

It's a leaking abscess of suffering.

'I just don't know what to do anymore. What's it all for?'

We have debated this question a thousand times and never reached an answer. How can a legacy be put into words, and how can I explain it to an outsider? My family is a dynasty. They explored the northern regions in this state, and established many of the main industries. But people have realised that intensive farming is part of the problem, though, now, except my brother the fool, who is still trying to get rich by pillaging. It looks like the dynasty will end in a dustbowl.

I grab my red tin and wooden pipe and wave it at Em.

'Smoke?'

As in most other things in my life, I'm self-sufficient for dope. Street drugs are dirty and outrageously costly. I don't advertise my drug habit, anyway. I have a small crop. No-one knows where it is. The tin always makes me feel cheerful, with its image of a dog listening to a gramophone. Then it makes me feel sad. I found it at the farm with gramophone needles in it. I have spent a lifetime fossicking through my family's hoardings. I press the pipe into Em's hand and gesture towards the flue above the fireplace.

'Blow smoke up there, you never know who could be nosing around...'

The marijuana relaxes us both. We return to the sunroom with beers in hand. I sit in my favourite spot on the blue couch, next to my old stuffed dog toy. I pat his furry head.

'Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing. Why am I doing this to myself?'

My brain is spinning in slow circles with the beer and the dope. I can hear the self-pitying tone of a monologue, but Em doesn't seem to mind. When the pain escapes my mouth in waves of despairing vomit, she's one of the few people who listens. Of course, she doesn't understand, but I appreciate the shoulder to cry on.

'I've given up everything for this. Just look at me. I'm an old hermit living in my cave. I don't have a career or a partner or a family. I'm depressed and self-medicating. I drink too much of this stuff.'

I point at the beer bottle.

'That doesn't matter,' Em soothed, 'we all get through the day however we can. Anyway, you've said a family has never been on your agenda.'

'Oh, I'm just being self-indulgent. Humour me! It happened twice but neither of them was the right person or the right time, so it wasn't meant to be. I know it sounds crazy but I've been panicking about whether I made a mistake on that front. Of course, it's far too late, but in the last few weeks I've been waking up suddenly at night and wondering: if I win the court case, who will the money go to?'

I struggle with the concept of legacy. Dynasties survive by passing genes and assets to subsequent generations, always building wealth and cultural heritage. I never wanted to participate in empire-building bullshit, but maybe I've been selfish. Then again, what kind of world is this to be bringing children into?

'Maybe I should just think about myself,' I announce.

Who else can I think of? I've avoided dragging anyone else into this mess. My mind churns constantly with conflicting ideas.

'Maybe I should just focus on how much I need to keep myself comfortable for the rest of my life and start working towards a settlement. After that I can just walk away.'

She smiles, with eyebrows raised in a challenge. 'That doesn't sound convincing.' She's right. I haven't spent twenty years fighting just to walk away, but the great tower of my family is collapsing because of Bill's stupidity, not because of me. Instead of running his farm properly, he has spent the last twenty years twisting and manipulating his army of lawyers and accountants. The waiting and watching has been the worst part. I've tried being calm and patient, and I've tried ranting and raving. He always finds a way to escape a resolution. He loses documents, seeks adjournments, and has found every loophole that could exist. I've put my whole life on hold until the battle is done, because it's the only thing I have the energy to cope with. Now I'm twenty years older, the farm is all but lost, and maybe the only thing left to do is let go.

'Perhaps it's just a matter of seeing things differently. Maybe I need to recognise that it's just change maybe I'm just being old-fashioned, or stubborn Maybe it doesn't matter if we lose the farm. All good things come to an end.'

'Sounds good in theory.'

'I know, I know.'

The same discussions go around and around endlessly.

Em stands to go the cool room. She stops to stare at the photos pinned to the wall, as she always does.

'I love this photo of you.'

I know which one she means. I like it, too. It reminds me that there have been times in my life when I have felt like smiling. I remember grinning at the hired photographer at the gala ball, wine in one hand, a cigarette in the other. I wore my hair down with my favourite turquoise dress. The smoking kept me slim, and my young eyes shone. No responsibility, then.

'I found some other ones if you want to see them...'

'Oh yes!'

Em dances on the spot and claps her hands together. She's childlike, sometimes. I found the photos yesterday while I was hunting for tax documents for the lawyers. I've never been good at organising my belongings. I carry the box into the sunroom. The lid slips off and photos spill onto the floor. Their corners are creased and crumpled from being packed haphazardly. Em eagerly snatches up a pile, then sheepishly hands it to me.

'Sorry. I'm being nosy. I know it's hard for you. Is it OK to look at these?'

It is hard, but only because everything is collapsing, when once it was so mighty. I flap my hand dismissively.

'You're more interested in my family than I am!'

The first image is my mother, standing in front of the cottage wearing a puffy cotton dress and holding a bunch of lilies. In early spring, they surround the cottage in prolific clumps. My mother passed away not long ago. I pass the photo to Em. She studies it intensely.

I suspect that Em devours my stories because they're about belonging. Being part of a family tradition has given me strength and sass. I am a pearl that fits onto a long string. I am the oddly coloured pearl, but it's my identity. Em doesn't have that same rudder to steady her. She has family, but they're fractured. She has a brother who's always in trouble. Her relatives have spread out. They're not rooted in one area, like my

clan. So maybe it's about the farm. Having a place you belong to, filled with all your memories and treasures. My family have imprinted an indelible stamp on this place. Em's generation won't have the adventures I've had, either – unfortunately there is no point travelling to places even more insecure and unstable than here. I hitchhiked across the country at eighteen years old, wearing a pair of dirty denim shorts that didn't get a wash for months. Then I gardened my way across Europe with a backpack and as many men as I could enlist to my debauched cause. But I always knew I could go home any time. Maybe my memories spark Em's imagination.

'This is my great-great-great grandfather Joseph...'

I push a browning, dog-eared image into her hand. A balding man with a luxuriant beard leans on a curved walking cane, smiling benevolently into the distance.

'...and here's one of the homestead. My great-great grandmother Sarah was famous for getting around in that coach. Queen of all she surveyed.'

A buggy driver sits proudly upright, his small vehicle parked outside our gracious manor.

'How did you manage to get these ones? I thought they might be hanging in a hallway somewhere.'

'We're a long line of magpies. We collect things. I got these when Mum died. I made sure I got there before Bill did. He got all the valuable stuff, though. Bastard took the rings off her fingers in the coffin.'

'What?'

I roll my eyes deliberately and theatrically. 'The less said the better.'

I reach into the box and pull out another bent piece of card.

'Here's an old school photo '

I wonder whether Em will recognise me. She studies the rows of faces and points almost immediately. I know that I still have the same facial expressions. My build is still small, and my hair is still coarse and wiry. It was red, then, like the dust on the farm. Now it is streaked white. It is still thick, though, and falls in waves to my waist, mainly because I'm too lazy to cut it. It has always been long, though; I like to weave it around my neck like a cat curling its tail beneath its body.

'How old were you there?'

'About six, I think.'

It was a small country school and the entire student body filled the photo, from the tiny children my age, to the bulky teenagers.

'My great-great-grandfather Henry built that school. Well, he paid for it to built, anyway. As a community gesture. At the beginning, it was only for English and Irish kids – no Germans allowed...but by the time I got there it was just the local school. Odd.'

'What do you mean, odd?'

'Our family had its own school, just for our kids, and relatives. Then everyone went boarding schools in the city. I was the only one who went to the local school. We weren't meant to associate with labourers, but I didn't know any different. They were just people; some of their parents worked on our farm. They lived in their little cottages, and we lived in our homesteads. It was very strange spending all day with these people I wasn't meant to talk to.'

'That is odd. Didn't you want to go to boarding school? Didn't you feel left out?'

'At the time, yes. I felt ashamed of being different. Not as worthwhile as my brother and sister. I thought I was worthless, so I decided to *really* be different. Fuck 'em all! I went to the farm kids' parties and shagged the farm boys in the sheds. I drove all over the paddocks with them in the middle of the night. I helped Dad with farm stuff. I loved dancing. I wanted to be a dancer, but that was where my parents drew the line. Dancing was low-class.'

Growing up with money and status wasn't easy as easy as you'd think. We were aristocrats, but I went out into the world because I never felt part of my family. I was the black sheep, so to speak. I went searching for something to belong to, and I never found it. In a bewildering turn of events, I've spent the last twenty years fighting for an identity that never really fit me. 'That's the horses loaded up to go to the city.'

I point at a team of horses pulling sacks of cargo.

'What's in the sacks?'

'Looks like wool. We had 5000 head at one point. My brother still runs sheep; he buys expensive stock from all over the place. I think he still believes in riding the sheep's back. Not sure how he thinks he's going to make anything from that '

I try not to be sour about Bill, but it's difficult.

'Things got big when we got into horticulture. My rellies brought some grapes from England, and we grew the biggest vineyard in the colony. Even sent some of the wine overseas as a colonial offering. Only lasted a few years, though. Sarah was a Rechabite. She pulled all the vines out when her husband died and started the district Temperance movement.'

My sister Bron and I laugh about this. We both need a drink, sometimes.

'Sarah was quite a businesswoman; it was unusual for those times. After Henry died she bought property. We owned the whole district within ten years.'

'Do you have a photo of her?'

'Oh somewhere, probably...There was a photo in the hall, one of those portraits where she was always looking at you. It used to scare me when I was little. Dour. Big lacy collar, brooch, hair scraped back...you know the type...Anyway, she planted apple orchards after the vines. We had more than a hundred varieties! I used to sneak the old records into my room to look at the pictures Peach-red Summer Apple, Scarlet Nonpareil, Quince Reinette I knew them all. Berliner Sheepsnose, Pigeon Reinette.'

I miss growing apples. Watering them in summer is frivolous, and in winter they rot from flooding. I managed a few small, sour ones a couple of years ago, but I've given up on anything that needs fussing over. 'We had apricots, too, and pears. We did all the peeling and drying by hand. Most of the locals worked for us at some point in the year, and all the kids. We stored the crates and labels in the sheds. I made box houses out of them.'

'Is there any fruit left now?'

'No. Just the sheds. Whitewashed stone, cold inside. They still smell like fruit, though.'

Em looks disappointed. I know what she's thinking. It would be nice if fruit was surviving somewhere.

'The nursery was incredible, too Henry had 100,000 plants. He propagated whatever he could: roses, fruit trees, ornamentals...He had three hothouses for experimenting. He built pipes that ran across the roof and released steam into the air to control the temperature. Ingenious, for those days. He was quite a famous collector. He loved his plants. The nursery was his world.'

I can understand how Henry must have gotten engrossed in his nursery. My garden is my world, too.

'And all that led to flower shows!'

I laugh unintentionally. It is the first time I've heard myself laughing in a long time. Em joins in without knowing why.

'Why is that funny?' she asks.

'Oh, god, the flower shows! They were the highlight of the year. Imagine a bevy of ladies in straw hats and sensible shoes carrying posies of violets and sultana cakes. My stomach still feels queasy when I think about making cups of weak milky tea.'

'So what has happened to the nursery now?'

A wave of nausea.

'Oh it's all gone. No worse than what's happening anywhere else, I suppose, but my brother hasn't helped the situation.'

A few days later the lawyer emails me. I stare in horror at the screen, reading the message over and over. It's all over. Everything is gone. After years of legal dancing, there's nothing left. In a few weeks, there will be an auction to pay the lawyers' bills.

I pull the old orange van off the road at the farm boundary. A yellow billboard on the side of the road points towards the gate, 'Auction Today'.

Em leans over to push on the door handle.

'I'll get the gate.'

'No I don't want to go in. Let's leave the van here.'

'What if someone steals it? It's not wise to leave it here.'

'You're right. I'm not thinking straight. Let's park it at the cottage. I always wanted to show it to you, anyway. Here's your chance.'

We sink into two large potholes in succession on the dusty driveway.

'Bastard! Fucking bastard can't even seal the driveway.'

The cottage has clearly not been touched since I left it. A startled flock of pigeons ascends above the roof when I slam the door of the van. They have been nesting in the overgrown vines covering one side of the building. I stamp my feet on the path.

'Be careful, here, Em. Don't want to scare any snakes.'

The key rattles in the lock. With the technique that has become ingrained, I clasp the door handle and lift the door slightly, then push my weight onto it firmly. The door shuffles across the slate floor with its customary groan. My first impression is dust. Layers of thick dust cover everything, and pile against the windows. Then a smell. Damp, fuggy, humid. Rat droppings.

'If I knew I was coming back, I'd clean up, but it's not worth it now. None of this stuff is worth taking.'

The cottage is still tidy amid the long, dusty cobwebs. The rolled-up rugs lean against the wall. The moths and rats can have those, now. The ancient iron cooking pans are stacked where I left them surrounding the gargantuan open fireplace. The old chest freezer stands silently next to the sink, its cord trailing on the ground and its door leaning slightly ajar.

Em pokes her head into the next room curiously.

'It's OK, you can go in there.'

The lounge room has always been dark. We can hardly see, even in daylight. I pull the curtains away from the window, and the sun casts a dusty slant of light onto the ornate carved table and the faded club lounge set. The pianola faces the window. I point through the doorway.

'That's my room.'

The iron bed frame pitches against the wall. I threw the mattress away so the rats wouldn't nest in it. My childhood chest of drawers sits in the corner. It is a forlorn forgotten object, left alone for too long. A heavy wardrobe, the mangle washer, my book case - still filled with books, and the blankets still folded neatly on the bed.

I point to the wall behind the bed.

'See how the wall slants here? It doesn't join properly on the outside of the house and I used to lie in bed listening to the rats running along the ground there into the kitchen. There was something else as well; it slid along the wall. I wasn't sure what it was, I thought maybe a possum or something, but then I realised that it was probably a snake waiting for the rats! Oh my god, I was lying in bed only centimetres away from a snake, and I never knew...'

This place makes me feel like chuckling raucously. I run my hands along the walls, stroking them fondly.

'Look at the straw coming out from the wall. So many good times here, Em...'

My shoulders shudder and suddenly I'm sobbing. I feel awkward in front of her, but I sit on the bed and howl. She pats my shoulders and twists my hair in her hands. No-one can understand how it feels to say goodbye to my place and my childhood. It's a bitter goodbye. I sniffle heartily and wipe my hands on my trousers.

'Right, well that's it. You've seen the cottage. Goodbye, cottage.'

I push Em gently through the kitchen and pull the door hard behind us. Outside in the bright sunlight, I remove the key from my key ring and hurl it into the vines.

'I won't need that anymore.'

I walk towards the main track and gesture for Em to follow. The main house appears as we cross a slight incline. I grab her hand and pull us to a stop.

'It's stunning, isn't it? You have to stop and look at it from here.'

Even from several hundred metres away, the house is grand and imposing. I'm still proud of my family, even after everything we've done to each other. Enormous pillars support the upper storeys, and a set of circular marble steps wind to a driveway intended for carriages. Cars squat on the lawns surrounding the house. More yellow signs proclaim, 'Auction Today'.

People swarm near the entrance. Some of them nod to me. A man in a suit hands me an auction catalogue. I feel dizzy and need to lean against the dry fountain in the middle of the carriageway.

'Do you want to go inside?' Em asks, touching my elbow lightly. Of course, she has no idea what I'm going through, but I appreciate her compassion. Definitely not. I want to remember the house the way it was. I clutch the base of the fountain and shake my head vehemently.

'No, I don't think so.'

The yellow signs point towards the shed. People move in a steady stream along the path between the shed and the house. I hate all these strangers poking around. Em pats my shoulder and slings her arm around me.

Crowds of people fill the shed, sorting through tables of tagged household goods and farming equipment. All of it is familiar. The old smells hit me with an anguish like a hammer pounding my heart. I can hardly breathe, drowning in the waves of memories rising to surround me in the dusty air. Most of the people weaving among the tables are locals; lots of them politely acknowledge me. A few people remark that it is a sad day for the district.

'Is your brother here somewhere?'

'Hope not.'

I mark the catalogue with a blue biro as we move around the tables. Once we reach the end I beckon to Em.

'Let's wait outside. I don't want to see it happening, but I'll keep an ear out for the ones I want.'

Just after noon the man in the business suit announces into a megaphone that the auction will be starting shortly. The crowd gathers around the shed. The auction commences with Lot 1, an exquisite Georgian glass collection unrivalled in the State.

We sit on the grass outside, which looks like it has been recently watered. It would be the first time in years that Bill has bothered about appearances.

‘Have you ever thought about buying the farm, yourself?’

‘With what, Em?’

I realise I’m snarling.

‘Sorry that sounded harsh. Yeah, I’ve thought about it. It’s the only place I’ll ever think of as home. But its gone to rack and ruin. It would take the rest of my life to fix everything and for what? What’s the point of it all?’

‘But isn’t that the point? If it’s your place, then maybe it’s worth fighting for. I could help you! You could sell your place, I could resign from my job, we could get the fruit up and running again, restore the nursery...I know lots of people who would be willing to help, too...like my friend Alexander, he’s a permaculture expert. I’m sure my brother would help with the labour...we could get some local heritage protection orders on the buildings. I think it’s a plan.’

‘You are very sweet, Em, and that is a generous offer. How about I take a bit of time to think about it...’

The thought of starting all over again with this place is exhausting. But the idea of running the farm for the future has always interested me. If only my brother hadn’t wasted the past twenty years. I’ll never get those back.

About an hour in the auction, some family photos come up. Thankfully everyone can see that I’m there to bid on personal items, so there’s not much competition for them. When Mum’s jewellery comes up, the dealers are there against me, and I have to fight. From the corners of my eyes I see pity on the faces around me. By the time it’s over my knees are shaking so much that I can hardly walk, and my stomach is heaving.

‘Did you win?’

‘Yes. God that was awful. I can’t believe I had to compete for my own mother’s things.’

My head pounds and I curl into a ball of exhaustion on the grass. After a few minutes, my eyesight stops swimming and rationality returns.

'Right, let's get out of here. Let's go find a drink somewhere.'

We walk back towards the car. At the top of the incline, I turn to look at the house again. Then I take off at a run down the slope, like I used to do as a child. My body moves with momentum and my hair falls out of its clips, flowing like a red flag behind me.

Pam

Two seagulls dive into the still, brown river. The ship behind the barbed wire fence lies beached and rusting. I hurry towards the waterfront, anxious that I be will late to meet Em. Her support is important. I shuffle in jade capri pants. My bulk bothers me, but there are other things to worry about. My sunglasses and hat tip forward and threaten to fall off. I don't like feeling dishevelled. It took extra time to leave the house this morning. It's going to be a stinking hot day, and I'll be out in it. I begin my apology as soon as Em comes into sight at a table outside the hotel.

'I'm sorry. I had to plan my exit from the house! I'm doing tours all day so I had to get organised for being out in this weather. Oh, it's so hot...'

I feel like I'm wilting. I pull off the hat and drag hair away from my face. At least I had a chance to colour my hair last week, to cover the grey hairs that keep sprouting. They make me look like an old witch. Being a spokesperson means keeping up decent presentation.

'It's fine, don't worry, I was just sitting here people-watching, and looking at the boats on the river.'

Em is keeping cool with a glass of beer. It looks cold and refreshing. She points to the glass.

'Join me?' she asks.

I enjoy a drink.

'Yes, let's sit down and relax for a bit.'

I plant the floppy hat on the chair next to her and head for the bar. A rowdy crowd mills around. Several people nod at me as I move among them. Their faces are familiar, even if I don't know all their names. I know the barman, Matt. He would be almost thirty, now. I went to school with his parents. I remember posing for a picture when he arrived; a group of friends gathered around a sleeping baby smiling for the camera, celebratory glasses in hand. Time passes so quickly.

'Pam, good to see you. What can I get you?'

'Nice to see you, too, Matt. Just a pint of the local, thanks. So what's going on here today?'

'A wake. Did you know Col Stewart died? Liver failure.'

So, all this merry-making is life-affirming. The Stewarts were wharfies before the wharf closed. I'm not close with their family, but Col was a local figurehead. He was a leader among the workers when they protested unfair wages. He was also a biker, which explains the rows of motorbikes parked along the dusty road outside. On the way back to the table with Em, I collide with Col's son, Dave. He is a tall, barrel-chested fellow, carrying a glass of beer. Wrap-around glasses nestle in his long hair and rows of tattoos adorn his arms and neck.

'Dave, sorry to hear about your Dad.'

I touch his shoulder in sympathy. As intimidating as he appears, I know he won't mind the gesture. I'm old enough to be his mother.

'Thanks, Pam. He had a good life. Too much of the good life!'

Dave laughs and touches his glass to mine.

'To the good life!'

A blast of hot air envelopes me as I go outside. My polo top is clinging to my body uncomfortably and I tug at it to cool myself. Hardly any breeze. It's early Spring and already the temperature is soaring. My hands feel perennially sticky. The water is usually pungent, and today it mixes with frying food and cheap body sprays. I'm not looking forward to wandering about in the heat trying to convince outsiders that our community is worth saving.

The Port Historical Society organises the tours. Our name is deliberately banal, in the interests of diplomacy. I've been running tours for months now. There's always plenty of interest, mostly because people from the city are curious about the frenzy we're whipping up with the government. I'm proud of that. Down here we've always been vocal about pride. From the beginning, working people have clustered in this swampy, mosquito-rich place. Fruit growers, labourers, and ship builders. My parents and their friends worked in the boat yards and car manufacturers. Lots of my friends went to the factories after school.

The houses were built close to the industries. As a kid, I could see the ships coming and going from my bedroom window, and the smell of fishy water drifted into my dreams on airless summer nights. Housing has always been cheap; we look after our own. We welcome everyone, and it's fair to say there's a few rough diamonds here. Things have changed over the years, though. The wharf closed down, and so did lots of the factories. No jobs, more crime. Shops boarded up. Drugs, poverty, break-ins.

Today I'm meeting Em before my official duties with the tours. She popped up last week at our activist meeting. She's young and seems interested in the cause. Some quick desktop searching reveals that she is educated and works for the government. I can see her potential, and I'm keen to recruit her. I wonder if she is genuinely interested, or maybe she's just in it for profile. Maybe she's looking for a political career?

'Thanks for meeting me, Pam,' she says, tapping her glass to mine.

I'm surprised. I should be thanking her.

'You're most welcome! I'm really pleased some young people are interested in what we're trying to do here. So, what made you come along to the meeting last week?'

'I got some brochures in my letterbox a few weeks ago and it sparked my interest. I'm not sure if I should mention that I work for the government, but I'm a strategy advisor, so I'd like to think I'm fighting the good fight. I mean, the brochures are full of guff about development bringing jobs and raising land value, but I can see the other side, too. This project makes me suspicious about what we're losing. I mean, what price are we really paying for a few more apartments and cafes? People at work have called me a dreamer, but anyway, I should get off my soapbox.'

'No, feel free to say what you think! People think I'm cynical and paranoid, so you're in good company.'

'Why would they think that?'

'Well, I wasn't surprised when those brochures turned up. The government hasn't paid any attention to this area for a few years, so we've been expecting to come into the spotlight again. You probably remember about five years back all the hoo-haa with that Future Planning strategy?'

Em nods and folds her arms across her chest.

'Yeah, I shouldn't say it too loudly but I went to some of the protests. I couldn't believe the Plan all the farming land being destroyed for houses it was ridiculous. Hardly planning for the future '

I'm surprised that someone who works for the government would be so critical of it, so maybe Em isn't as squeaky clean as her professional profile suggests.

'Yes, well. So far, we've seen the first stages of it here, but there's more to come. I'm really worried this time around.'

'I don't know, Pam – maybe it's not quite time to panic yet. There have been so many plans for this area, and none of them seems to get off the ground. Every time I see these types of brochures I wonder what's driving them '

'I'm sure you know the answer to that. When the wharf closed down there was talk of building a huge shopping centre, but it never happened. Too far from the city. Then there were plans to build a satellite town, linking the Port to the North. Cost prohibitive, in the end. Next were the Future Plan ideas to convert the waterfront into a lifestyle precinct a few years back. It failed mid-way through. Things have been quiet for a bit, but this new development proposal means they're starting to warm up again. Somebody's got some serious money '

'Well, I've heard it's all the rage in Europe '

‘Yes, converting old dock sites into middle class lakeside dog-box apartment blocks. Who wants that?’

Every time I leave the house I’m bombarded with images of young upwardly-mobile professionals strolling the waterfront, lounging in coffee shops, and raising happily-ever-after families. The government boasts that this new development will bring 6000 new jobs. When the glossy brochures landed in my letterbox six weeks ago, I scanned them carefully. You have to read between the lines.

‘Em, I was born near the docks and I’ve lived in the Port my entire life. I spent years working in social services. Years ago, I even worked for the government. I know about lip service.’

‘So, you know how it goes – and now you’re an activist.’

She grins. It looks like admiration, or at least approval.

‘You know what, though – I’ve never really thought about myself as an activist. Maybe just a spokesperson? I’d like to think that I know the working people’s ways. When I read feel-good green stuff like ‘ripe for reinvestment’ and ‘vibrant future’, I feel immediately suspicious.’

‘Yes, I noticed that, too – ‘vibrant future’! Whatever that means – ’

‘Did you see in the pictures that the sun is shining and the water is sparkling? I think they just found some stock images and made pretty pictures. Anyway, I think you and I both know that when a government puts this much effort into selling a concept, it means they’re serious. It worries me, so I’ve been trying to get more people organised. We need to get a group together to protect our place. Strength in numbers. United we stand.’

I’m not sure if I’m being too overbearing, but she doesn’t seem to be put off.

‘Well, everyone is entitled to a voice’, she says.

‘I think that was our problem last time around. We were naïve. We thought that a bit of investment would give the local economy a shot in the arm. We thought it would make our lives easier – ’

‘Well, that’s a fair assumption. Survival is the name of the game.’

I can hear my voice rise a little.

‘But we sacrificed too much. Turns out no-one has our interests at heart except us. We lost important historical sites and we allowed our people to be pushed out. Last time they saw dollar signs in high-rise apartments, so the government cleared the entire harbour. They got rid of a lot of the old houses and buildings. This time around,

I'm looking for anyone who feels the same way as I do about the injustice of all of this. The people in the city might just see a stinky river, some marshy swamps and a few rusting ships and sheds, but it all matters to us. There's so little left. We need to protect it. Leading tours is just the start. I want to show people that we have history and identity. We need young people like you to know that you belong to something. If enough people join us, the government will have to listen.'

'I hadn't really thought of it as being personal '

'Well it is, Em. It's time to show them what we're made of, down here.'

Behind us, the surface of the water breaks and we glimpse the sheen of skin.

Em gasps and points excitedly.

'Yes, it's the dolphins.' I smile at her. 'They're showing us that they can still live in this shitty water.'

It's amazing that a pod of dolphins can thrive here. We try to protect them. Every week the local paper features a story about them: how many have been sighted, and whether any have died. Not long ago someone was shooting them. It's criminal. The water is so dirty but the dolphins somehow survive, like all of us who live here.

I glance at my watch, empty the last of the beer into my mouth and stand up.

'Do you want to have a quick look around at what we're working on at the moment?'

It's the same tactic I use for everyone. Less talk, more demonstration. This place always speaks to me, and to anyone else who will listen to its stories. We activists are a strident bunch, it's true. But we're also secretive. Newcomers are welcome; we need more numbers. But we're careful with who we let in, and we're careful with what we let them see.

We let the iconic buildings do the talking, and keep quiet about the sites that might attract unwanted attention. At the moment, we're not publicising the archaeology students who are frantically digging and cataloguing in a dig that we've disguised as a construction site. We tied iron sheets together with orange flags and painted 'Danger, Keep Out' on them. Even curious eyes through the fences can't see anything, except a few old washing machines that we dumped. The trenches are hung with string, but we're careful about when the work is done. We make sure that people are not coming and going, and we haven't called for community volunteers.

I lead Em towards the Mill. It's going to be a hot spot. I don't allow myself to think that it could be one of the last fiery battles that we'll fight. In the some of the government brochures, the Mill stands like a ghostly presence behind the shiny new apartment blocks. It's one of our icons. Ever since I was a kid there's been talk of demolishing it but we've always won that fight, so far. It has become a symbol of our resilience. It's an eerie presence on the waterfront: a rusting, galvanised iron monument silently observing its surroundings. It has been a factory and many other things. Only the ground level is original. Three and a half other levels have been added over the years, and outbuildings have mushroomed around the main site. It is fenced with wire too tall to climb over, but there are holes in the wire and litter covers the ground. I approach the fence that will give us the best view. An abandoned shopping trolley with three wheels rests on its fourth stub. It contains a golfing bag, salvaged and then discarded by some collector.

As kids, we all played on the wharf while the Mill swarmed with activity; in those days, it was flour-making. Only a few people have been inside in recent years. Tony is another leader among the activists, and a photographer by trade. The Mill features in many of his photos. He has captured it in varying lights, filled with zeal, like Monet for his haystacks. Tony and I are old school friends, and he married a local artist, Alison. The government allowed Tony inside the Mill a few years back because he pestered them relentlessly, but they specified no camera. Afterwards, all the activists assembled on a Sunday morning to hear about his trip 'inside'. We gathered in a reverential circle around him like disciples, our guru a short man in hemp clothing who stroked his grey-flecked beard, and occasionally patted his sagging stomach. From the outside, the Mill has three floors, but Tony discovered a half-floor hidden at the window line between second and third. On the ground floor, he saw rusting equipment and building materials covered in thick ropes of dust. He wondered why he was not allowed to bring his camera. The government told him that the site is unsafe: the Mill has been earmarked for demolition since any of us can remember. Somehow, though, it survives. In the dim light that streams through the gaps between the sheets of iron, the ceiling slopes unevenly in one corner. He embarked on a frenzy of research to find out about the unknown half-floor with no windows. The mystery appealed to his boyish sense of adventure, but no-one knows anything about it, and it's not documented anywhere. The Port is full of small secrets like that; they're everywhere if you know where to look. Staircases that seem to lead nowhere,

underground holes and tunnels, abandoned objects that just appear in the soil. If the government have their way, all of this will disappear in melancholy piles of loss. I stand next to the fence ready to give my speech. I wind my fingers through the wire, in the way that a small child might grab a friend's hand.

'From here we get the best view of the boatyards.'

I point to the dusty land in front of us where piles of corrugated iron are stacked amid ramshackle iron sheds. Earth moving machinery stands silent in the sun.

'See over there in the water?'

I motion with my index finger. Em probably knows about the boatyards, but I can't help myself once I've started; the words fall from my mouth like dirty rain in winter.

'There. See that log in the water with the blue stripe on it?'

She nods. My tongue dries involuntarily, and the familiar choking feeling constricts my throat. No matter how many tours I do, grief always surges through me. 'That marker was for ships, to tell them where to moor if they needed repairs. If a ship was hanging around that marker, it meant that something needed fixing. Whoever was working in the boatyards would keep an eye on the marker and go out there if a boat was sitting there. This yard repaired ships from all over the world.'

I point down into the water in front of us. The riverbank is slightly squelchy.

'This all used to be underwater, but now this is as far up as the water goes, as you can see over there.'

I am in tour mode, emphasising all the sites that might tug on the heartstrings and prod people into joining the fight. I point at the wharf. It is red stained almost a metre above the water line.

'That mark is where the water used to be, so those pictures of the river sparkling in the sun are just fanciful!'

She glances at me as I hear my tone become harsher than I'd like.

It stopped raining a month ago and more rain is six months away. The cement pilons of the wharf cast reflections in the water. It's not a sparkling oasis, but this river is home, and buggered if I'm going to stand by while the government sanitises it into some American dream. I take a deep breath and try to calm my voice back into laconic tour guide.

‘The family who owned the boatyards lived and worked here for a hundred years. Lots of men from around this area worked there. My Dad worked there his whole life. It used to be a huge site, visible for miles. It was one of the busiest spots on the river. Almost any time of the day or night you could hear the noise. There were only a few hours in the middle of the night when it was quiet, and sometimes not even then. If it was a big job, they would work right through. It was one of the sounds of the Port.’

‘What happened to it?’

‘The government says it’s obsolete; no-one needs boat repairs anymore because the wharf closed down. They’re pushing to demolish the boatyards, even though locals still use it. They say the site has no value. They say it’s ugly and ruins the aesthetic. I think it’s ugly in a beautiful way. Yes, of course it’s been built haphazardly over the years, it’s just bits of sheds put together. See all the different colours? That was so the boats could see it from the water. It’s funny looking, but it’s part of our place. Warts and all. They’re talking about reclaiming the land for development.’

I study her face to gauge her response. Is she really interested in the boatyards, or has she got bigger mountains to climb? Is she really on our side, or is she just looking for an angle?

I read in one of the reports that it’s not the boatyards they want gone, it’s us. The people who live in the Port! They don’t want us working people; they want the lifestylers! What an insult. Those bastards told us that their lifestyle development would protect the Port, keep it strong and alive, bring some money into the area, but they never said anything about destroying the spirit of the people. I was disgusted. I am still disgusted.

I point over the water, to the half constructed concrete towers.

‘That was where it was going to be. Twelve-storey apartment blocks, restaurants, cafes, the works. When the lifestylers stopped paying for all the heating and air conditioning, the government switched off the supply. A lot of them left, then. It was a bit uncivilised for a while. I’m not sure where they went. Back to the city, maybe. Anyway, they left their apartment blocks and the locals moved back in.’

She squints across the river, looking into the sun.

‘Are people living there?’

‘Oh yes, but in a different way. People have knocked the windows out and put their own shade up. A while back there was a move to plant trees again. It keeps the

buildings cool. The government gets uppity but those trees are doing some good. I say let them stay.'

I gesture over the river at the grain loading stacks. There is no grain being loaded now. Hundreds of shipping containers surround the grain stacks. Some are piled in storeys and others sit where they were last used. A haphazard iron and barbed wire fence encloses the site.

'You know that people live over there too?'

She nods. 'I've heard about it. But it's a ghetto, right?'

'Don't believe everything you read, Em. That's the first thing to keep in mind. It's rough. Yes, the people are squatting, but it's not their fault. They're displaced. They're welcome to it, I say.'

'It's more like resourcefulness...', she suggests, in a polite and conciliatory tone.

'Exactly. The media articles portray them as homeless people who were on the move when the weather started to change, but none of those articles mention that they are the same people who previously lived on the other side of the River, in the old Port. They were pushed out as part of the lifestyle precinct. I am triumphant. That's the side of the story that you won't hear unless you ask.'

Next to the grain stacks is the racetrack, which even people in the city know about. Maybe some of them come along. It is set amongst the sand dunes, which are continuously drifting. For decades, the government used to move the sand several times a year, but that seems to have been unofficially given up. One of the red bulldozers is still rusting quietly on the beach a few minutes' walk from where we're standing. Wire fences have been haphazardly erected to construct a large compound near the abandoned side of the waterfront. The racetrack started as a dumping ground for old cars when people stopped driving. Rusting rows formed by the waterfront; a surprisingly orderly lot, surrounded by carelessly abandoned pieces dumped on the flanks. On weekends, beginning at dusk every Friday night, men congregate at the compound bringing any type of fuel that might make the cars run. On Fridays there are always bike riders heading for the waterfront spinning past my house, wearing tins on their backs or plastic drums strapped to their bodies.

As the sun sets over the stinking water, music throbs from temporarily erected speakers powered with a generator. Men wheel the cars into the compound and fire up

the tired engines as darkness descends. Then begins the roaring that lasts all weekend: the men drive the cars up and down the sand dunes, around the compound on the tracks that have developed from wheels sinking and burrowing into sand. Most of the cars have no tyres, and some are merely engines mounted on a metal bed above rims of various sizes. New tracks appear every week, and the air becomes heavy with the smell of churned sand. The compound is barren; not even weeds have time to grow.

We walk around the river towards the bridge. As a child, I remember it opening and shutting in the middle whenever a ship passed by. It has been a long time since I heard the three bugle blasts that signalled an approaching ship. From the middle of the bridge, I grab Em's arm and point towards the wharf.

'Next to the wharf, look at the huge warehouses. They were for loading and unloading, and the row behind them was for storage. There was always so much activity. We kids used to hang around the warehouses and watch the incredible things that came and went. Now it's all gone. They're just old shells. I hear them at night, creaking in the wind.'

Or maybe they're groaning. Grieving, like me.

'One of the worst was the documents store. I'm still baffled that a government would destroy its own records. One of the big warehouses was full of old maps and records, just piles of rolled up pieces of paper that had been thrown in there over the years. No-one bothered to record what was stored there. They wanted to bulldoze it for the land. They said the warehouses were becoming unsafe, so they just went in and destroyed everything. Maybe it was too much effort to catalogue it, but they did it without telling anyone. I think a few of the uni people got wind of what was happening and got in there. From what I heard, they just picked up whatever they could carry.'

'Was anything saved?'

She looks concerned, but I hope she's not just being polite.

'I haven't seen any of it. No doubt it's safely locked in an important person's office. I'm not sure what was taken, but I know a lot of the government records are gone, and the first maps. It's incredible. Such a lack of foresight. They think we're extremists. Standing in the way of progress. Stubbornly holding on the past, do gooders...'

It is hard to believe that so much has happened in these swamps. I look at my watch.

'Oh gosh, I'd better get a move on. Some tourists will be waiting for me. Our next meeting is at Tony's house on Tuesday evening. Are you available then? We're doing an event on the 20th so Tuesday will be planning for it. Can you support us?'

'Sure...what's the address? and what time?'

I scribble the details on the back of a receipt from my handbag. Her heart seems to be in the right place, but I'm always suspicious.

Alison and Tony live in one of the cottages that has not yet been demolished. In winter, it smells mildewy from the rising damp. We've spent hundreds of hours there, plotting action plans and drinking beer from chipped glasses. Tonight, it's balmy; the brown water smells waft in the windows and under the doors, and mix with the vaguely flowery ambience of the mould. I find it comforting.

It's a bit after seven when Em knocks on the door.

'Nobody badger her, OK? Poor thing will get scared and take off.'

Everyone laughs. Tony says, 'If she's OK with you, Pam, she'll be fine with us!'

'I'm serious. Leave her alone. Not too many questions.'

I know Tony is right, even though he's just jibing. Ever since I met with Em, I've been worrying that maybe I came across a little too forcefully. Sometimes my passion gets the better of me.

'Welcome, welcome!'

Tony opens the door with a smile, and gestures Em towards the rickety kitchen table, where the leaders of the campaign gather every week. She hesitates in the doorway for a moment, sizing up the number of people around the table. Then she waves at everyone in a friendly way and smiles. Tony gestures with a glass.

'We're all just getting the creative juices flowing. Do you drink beer?'

'Yes, thanks.'

He fills her glass and places some bottles on the table.

'Help yourselves when you need a refill, everyone.'

'Cheers, everyone', Em says and raises her glass, looking around.

At the moment, the inner sanctum is me, Tony, Alison, my old school friend Annie, one of the local council reps, Michelle, and her partner Rob. Em smiles at everyone, but drops her eyes to her glass regularly. She's obviously a little

uncomfortable that everyone is staring at her. They're curious; I can see them straining not to probe for details. She's the youngest by 20 years at least, and I see relief in their faces. She brings fresh energy, and an extra pair of hands to lighten the load.

'Did you want to say a few quick words about yourself, Em?' Tony asks.

I'm not sure if that's a sly smile on his face, after I told him not to be nosy. The others listen intently, as if Em is undertaking an initiation.

'Um...Ok, well, I've been living here for about a year. I bought a house in Queens Street.'

Everyone nods; we all know Queens Street.

'I don't really know too many people around here, I basically got the house because it was what I could afford. I didn't grow up around here, but the Port has been growing on me; it's got sort of a shabby pride. I mean, there's poverty here, but it's more like a hand-me-down jumper. There's something about the struggles of this place that resonate with me. I struggle, and sometimes I feel a bit ashamed of that. But here, everything is run-down and no-one is ashamed. It's unpretentious. There's a rough around the edges approach. The community seems honest. I mean, we all buy cheap vegetables at the market, and people actually talk to each other at the train station. To be honest I haven't done much activist work in the past, but maybe I can help the cause? I work in government. I'm meant to be a strategy advisor but there's not much strategy anymore, unfortunately. Maybe it's more effective to focus on grass-roots level. It would be great to think we can make a difference somehow. Well, it's nice to be invited, anyway.'

She nails it. I see everyone looking at each other approvingly. She's an outsider, but she thinks like one of us.

'There's always something to do,' I say.

'Pam's right. Thanks for that, Em - I'm sure you'll be an asset. Welcome aboard', says Tony. 'So, tonight is a good chance to discuss our strategy for the breakfast on the 20th. Do you agree?'

He likes to lead the meetings in a business-like way, with an agenda. Everyone nods.

'Yep, good idea,' Michelle says.

'Ok, so Alison will be recording the breakfast, and we're planning to send the images to the government to let them know how many people care about this project.'

Firstly, we need a big turnout. We'll do some flyers. Pam, can you help out with a letterbox drop the weekend before? And everyone should jump on the net and spread the word.'

His thoughts tumble out of his mouth in a hurry to be heard.

'We want it to be peaceful, but it's far too late in the day to give them any ground. There's not much left to save, so it's a multi-pronged approach. We need to focus on conserving the Mill, the boatyards, the warehouses, and the sites in the Inner Harbour.'

Everyone nods. Tony grabs a spiral-bound folder from the table and waves it at Em.

'For Em's benefit, I'll just show the map.'

He flips through the book and folds out a map marked with red circles. He points to the circles and stares at Em intently.

'We've marked the sites that we can't allow to be demolished. Of course, it's all slated to go if you look at the government's version of this map, but we're not going down this time. We need to stand firm on our rights. We know that this about class and community as much as it is about money. We need to tell them that we won't lose our identity.'

'I'm not sure what you mean about identity?' Em asks.

'Don't get him started!' Annie grins at Em.

Tony glares at her, huffy.

'Do you really want to be here, Annie?' he counters.

'That's enough, Tony, you know she's just joking. Settle down, or Em will think we're a pack of old crazies...'

I put my hand on his arm to steady him.

'Well it's a serious cause; we're probably in this state because we've spent the last five years joking around.' Tony looks sulky.

'Come on, that's not fair. You know there are lots of forces at play here. We have to be measured.'

'I just think we all need to be on the same page. Things are dire. We need to be fast and strong.'

'We are, Tony, we are. Now explain to Em why we need the multi-pronged approach.'

That seems to set him back on a more rational track. Everyone collectively breaths out.

‘Fine. The government and the developers have this narrative about an aesthetic that they want - you can see by all their propaganda that they’re trying to creating some sort of exclusive waterfront village for rich people.’

He points at the pile of glossy brochures. We’ve been collecting the different varieties of pamphlets doing the rounds at the moment, and there are quite a few.

‘Obviously, sites like the boatyard and the Mill and the old warehouses represent industrial activities, which the government sees as manual and dirty and working class. For us, though, the narrative is about this community. Yes, the history of this place is about working people, but what’s wrong with that?’

‘Right, I see.’ Em nods.

‘But the thing is,’ Michelle adds, ‘they’re being very sneaky about the way they communicate all of this. I mean, it doesn’t take a fool to see that there are incompatible visions here, but the way it’s being marketed...’

Rob interrupts.

‘They’re marketing it as some sort of makeover. Like the Port is a dirty area, and by association, the people are also dirty. All the unemployment and poverty and delinquency... There’s a message that this place is socially decaying. We’re a place of problems, and we need to be sanitised and saved.’

‘Oh, wow. That’s offensive.’ Em looks shocked.

‘If you really look at it, it’s just another way of maintaining a dominant power structure,’ Alison chips in.

‘And directing the green agenda for economic gain. It’s misleading and manipulative,’ Annie adds. ‘All this green wash in their propaganda is bullshit. They say this area is grossly contaminated from all the industries, which is true. We live in a polluted environment, but to be honest it’s probably no worse than people living in the city. They claim they’re saving us all from certain death by cleaning it up, how benevolent of them...but there are no details about how the clean-up is going to be done. I’m suspicious about that. I mean, clean ups on that scale cost millions of dollars. It’s probably the reason why all the other developments have failed in the first place.’

‘Yes, Pam and I were talking about that side of it when we met the other day’, Em nods and looks at me.

I agree. 'Yes, we were talking about where the money might be coming from this time!'

Annie continues. 'That means they're probably not going to clean up. Last time they demolished the buildings first, then had all their scientific assessments done, and the cost figures came back untenable - which is why not much has progressed. We're trying to preserve our place because it's sacred to us. Yes, technically it's government land, but we're stewards...the whole community. It's our place, too.'

'But isn't anything going to be kept? I thought the brochures said that heritage preservation is a priority...' Em ventures cautiously.

'It's about context,' Alison explains in a gentle tone. 'We've already lost a lot of the layers of history, and now we're just fighting for whatever is left.'

Unfortunately, what's left is just a patchwork, so no-one can get a sense of unity. Maybe that's deliberate. Anyway, the point is that meaning comes from being part of a landscape. A few old buildings here and there and some art installations are just symbols, not...'

I don't like being interrupted, but I blurt over Alison. 'And being part of a landscape means being welcome in it! What about agency? The government doesn't seem to care where people go when we're alienated from our own homes, just as long as we're not hanging about ruining their squeaky clean image.'

When I hear myself speak I sound paranoid, but it's personal.

'I'll try not to blast you, Em, but this place has changed a lot over my lifetime and it breaks my heart. We used to be such a strong community. All of us in this room grew up here. Everyone used to know everyone. There's nowhere else we would feel at home. But the old faces, the characters, are gone. Most of the local businesses have closed down. Some of the schools have shut. The decent houses have been demolished and replaced with apartments that cost a fortune to live in. There's nowhere safe for kids to play because people are dealing drugs in the playground. No sports teams. No street lights. It has been devastating. We don't have the power to keep ourselves strong, and the government is zeroing in on us. We don't feel valued, and we know we're NOT valued.'

No-one says anything for a while. Maybe I've gone too far in putting it in such desperate terms. Suddenly the efforts of our small team seem paltry in the face of the government steam-roller.

‘Should we be telling people we’re recording the breakfast?’ Rob finally suggests, ‘I mean, for privacy...what if people don’t want to appear on a protest video?’

‘Good point, Rob,’ Tony jumps in, ‘I’ll mention it at the beginning.’

At the wharf, the atmosphere is tense but exciting. We’re all feeling a little anxious. We’ve spent so much time this week printing flyers and sending messages. I’ve spoken to everyone I could think of who might support us. It looks like it has worked. Hundreds of people have turned up.

None of the squatters are at the meeting. They’re living their lives behind iron sheet fences. They have simply taken back the Port that they feel belongs to them, and they’ve done it in their own resourceful way. It’s probably not a coincidence, though, that the government has no interest in reclaiming that site for other uses. Study after study has shown that it’s heavily contaminated from previous industries. The soil is no good, and the water doesn’t just look dirty. It’s a wonder anything survives. The Government is probably resigned to a squatters' town being the best use. At least those people are living away from everyone else.

In front of me, a man pulls a colourful flag from his backpack. Nearby, two middle-aged ladies are sitting on a picnic rug drinking coffee. They’re also unfolding a piece of cloth with sticks attached to it, some sort of banner. Tony is standing to my left. His ill-fitting baggy jeans hang away from his hips. His jumper is homemade in forest green wool. It has small holes near where his nipples might be. He is touching his beard compulsively and brandishing a microphone. The ladies hoist their banner above their heads. In red paint is scrawled, 'NO DEV’MT! It's OUR Port!' They’re waving the banner and whistling. The rest of the crowd is moving into standing positions, and people are folding up their blankets and chairs.

Someone hoots, 'Save the Port!' and the crowd cheers.

A chair launches into the air towards the edge of the crowd and everyone laughs and whistles. From the rear of the crowd I hear banging sounds. A family is beating wooden boxes with sticks. The two children are enjoying smacking the boxes with as much force as they can apply. The chant begins:

‘Save the Port! Save the Mill! Save the boatyards!’

Tony climbs onto a public bench. It's brand new, one of the first signs of the lifestyle development. It was probably designed by some young gun in a city office and looks dangerously urban, with steel bladed arm rests. Some spray-painted gravel is glued to the ground under it. Tony raises his microphone and hitches his pants onto his waist with the other hand. The crowd cheers and stops chanting.

'We're here today to send the Government a message!' Tony yells into the microphone in an animated tone, waving his arms around. More cheering. People gather in close to each other. Alison stands near him, filming the crowd and flipping strands of her purple streaked hair away from the lens.

'The Mill behind me here is one of the last original buildings left standing in the Port. The boatyards have been with us for more than a hundred years. We can't let our Port get trampled by the interests of those who don't share our values.'

The crowd whoops heartily.

'We're not going to let them take it!'

The people scream their agreement and a freckly-faced woman standing next to me, yells,

'Good on you, Tony!'

'We're filming this meeting to show the government how our community feels. We're not going to lose this place. We've set up a website and an online petition. If you'd like to be involved in the campaign, step up and leave your contact details with me.'

Em is standing with our group. I've been watching her reactions. Some people don't believe in the power of protests, but there's a big grin on her face. She doesn't have a banner, but she's pumping her fists in the air.

'Save the Mill! Save the boatyards! Save the Port!'

I squeeze her shoulder affectionately, suddenly feeling grateful that she's here.

Tony points at the old shipping machinery and containers where the squatters live.

'We want the right to live here in peace without being moved on!'

I'm not one of those people who has a special relationship with the moon, but sometimes it seems a bit mystical. Tonight, it is up early; I spotted it in the early afternoon. It's about half full, and seems to be facing away from me as if it is hiding a secret. Most nights I walk the streets in the few hours before dark. In twilight, my

vision always seems a little sharper. Tonight, I'm rushing a little on my way to Tony's: we're celebrating. Near the railway tracks, the houses are derelict. Scraps of rubbish blow against the fences and boarded-up windows. Beneath my foot, a yellow flyer printed on cheap paper catches my eye. It has one of Tony's images of the Mill on it, above the caption "SAVED!" in triumphant lettering. I pick it up. 'The Mill is an important symbol of our place. Thanks to YOUR voices, the government says no more demolition! The Mill will be restored for OUR community!' I fold the flyer and put it in my pocket.

Luke

I enter the prison to visit my brother Luke. It's eight minutes to nine on Saturday morning and the weekend stretches ahead in the familiar optimism of Monday being two whole days away. Yet I am voluntarily entering the world of people deemed too dangerous for freedom. I verify my identity at the glass security pane. The policeman sitting behind the security pane does not respond to my smile. He passes a locker key on a red plastic tag under the window and points to a wall of steel locks in the corner.

'Take off your jewellery. Leave your possessions in the locker. That key is the only thing you can take with you.'

I glance around furtively: who else is here, and why? A middle-aged man in boat shoes and chino pants sits on my left. Next to him, a tired-looking man with neatly combed white crinkle-cut hair wearing a nylon blue parka appliqued with a football club emblem. Two young women stand near the drinks machine, flaunting their ripe sexuality: one in tight bleached jeans and the other a black designer tracksuit with gold trim. A tiny Philippine lady rushes in moments before nine o'clock, two small children trailing her and a baby gathered in her arms. Visits last 20 minutes, and late arrivals lose their visit.

Security doors beep and our names are called. We step through a scanner and push on a heavy steel panel. I follow a tense, middle-aged lady along a windowless corridor, and ask her why she is here. In stilted English she replies,

‘My son...he is in trouble...depend on what the court say.’

She looks at me and shrugs her shoulders.

The waiting room seems familiar, from all the prison movies I’ve seen. Rows of harsh fluorescent tube lights compensate for the lack of windows. A bench in the middle of the room is nailed to the floor with metal seats on either side. Signs explain:

Prisoners and visitors may kiss once at the beginning and end of the visit.

Children may sit on a prisoner's lap during the visit.

No items to be passed to prisoners.

Our group stands in the waiting room. The Philippine children chase each other and the other visitors stare at the ground. The girl in the tracksuit smiles at me, and suddenly I want to cry.

More beeping doors and two guards step into the room, tattoos escaping from blue short sleeves. A line of prisoners enters and stands against the wall facing the door. They’re all acting the same way: minimal eye contact, stand against the wall, don’t offend the guards. Luke wears the same navy-blue windcheater and track pants as the other prisoners. His hair is caught back in a rubber band. I am momentarily shocked. My internal image of him is the clean-cut private-school boy smiling politely in my mother’s photographs. Absurdly, I remember my mother bringing clothes on her last visit. Another layer of her denial, or perhaps she does not realise that prisoners wear uniforms.

He nods to me and sits at the bench. He speaks so quietly that I can hardly hear him. I catch snatches of his voice among the other interchanges: the tense middle-aged woman and her son, the young women and their boyfriends. Everyone in the room looks up, stunned, when a red-haired man shouts,

'I swear they just found some dope, Dad!'

Heads bowed, prisoners and their visitors exchange news and comfort with a sense of urgency, while the guards hover wearing greasy smiles. Luke is distant and detached from me, as always. He stores his feelings inside, in a deep, private hole. His eyes meet mine from behind a deliberately constructed wall of withholding. I feel awkward. Is it rude to bring news from 'outside'? Should I be ashamed that I have friends, social events, and things I am looking forward to?

Luke explains that there are no clocks, and the lights are neutral in the windowless environment. Time is an abstract concept marked by rituals: breakfast at seven, dinner at five, lockdown at seven. Gym equipment is fixed to the walls for safety, men come to polite understandings about toilet habits in shared cells, drug deals are stingy, and there are tacit rules for avoiding confrontations. A guilty mix of relief and melancholy washes over me when the guards announce that the visit is over. Somehow, we have made it through 20 minutes without any conversation of substance. I collect my belongings from the locker, and step out into the bright Saturday sunshine and fresh air. I wonder how it has all gotten to this.

The fresh air hits him suddenly as he steps out of the pub onto the street. He is pissed, and his senses blend into an amorphous experience of kebab smells and a rowdy crowd shouting over a live band. He leans against the wall and pushes himself upright. Which way to go? He scans the darkness looking for landmarks. It's dark outside the pub, and his eyes are bad at the best of times. No street lights, anymore. It's every man for himself these days. Mum is always going on about the weather changing and danger at night. Her nagging voice whines in his brain:

'Be careful! It's dangerous at night. Don't you go anywhere by yourself...'

He pushes the voice away dismissively. He'll be fine. He's done it a thousand times before. People are feral, but he'll be good. Nice night for a walk, anyway. Still hot, even in the dark. He weaves towards the playground. It's been a good night with mates; a few relaxing pints. A wistful twinge shoots through him beneath the alcohol. Farewell drinks for the smart and sexy Ella, who he's had the hots for since high school. She's off to London for some computer job.

He dirges tunelessly. On the whole, he's feeling optimistic. He's smoking too many ciggies, and too many cones at night are no good for his brain, but he gets himself to Psychology lectures most mornings. He's eating well, keeping his weight down, feeling fit and lean. He looks down at the tight yellow t-shirt. It fits the way he likes it. Tan lines from his cycling jersey define his brown muscled biceps. All those miles on the bike are doing him good. He lurches forwards through the bark chips, grasping for the safety rail on the kiddy swings. He loses his balance reaching into his pocket for a lighter and, and rolls into the swing set clumsily. He sucks contentedly on the thatchy fibrous strands of the cigarette, waiting for his eyes to refocus.

'Have you got the time, mate?'

Three tall dudes call to him across the playground, their cheap aftershave and shiny nightclub clothes swimming into his consciousness. He peers down at his wrist to the chunky silver watch, trying to decipher the configuration of the small hand and the big hand in the darkness. When he looks up, the dudes are in front of him. Their wide, bright eyes shine at him. Suddenly he feels sober. One of the dudes has enormous hands. Luke mutters nonchalantly, stands up, and tries to elbow past them. If he can get past them he can get out into the open. If he is anything, he is a runner, can outrun anyone.

They push him backwards and he stumbles unsteadily. His black lace-up boots are heavy. His arms flail. His throat feels dry and blood surges through his legs. Their hands are on his back and he hits the ground. His mouth fills with bark, and it is the warm woody smell entering his nostrils that he focusses on when he realised his clothes are being ripped away. He hears them laughing as pain tears through his body. They joke in jovial nicknames. Their hands are warm and sticky. Something trickles between his thighs. He studies the bark chips, counting their markings, observing the shapes of preservative stain through the texture of wood.

It's cold and he is alone. His body is another entity; it floats separately from his brain. A measured voice tells him to stand up. The voice speaks calmly.

Go home. You need to go home. You need to get your pants and go home.

He pulls himself to his feet. He runs through the dark streets unsteadily. The voice glows somewhere near him, holding an orange torch of composure.

Go home. You need to go home.

In bed, he crunches his knees to his chest and collapses into a black spinning gyre.

He's not sure how he survives. He locks his room and sleeps against the sound of his parents arguing in the lounge room. Mum hassles him through the door.

'Are you there, Luke? Why aren't you answering your phone? Why aren't you going to work? Are you going to Uni?'

He sleeps, and forgets each day. He's had periods of darkness before, but nothing like this. Something strange has happened to his body: whenever he goes to the toilet, he has to poke his arse back inside. He winces with pain every time, and sometimes it bleeds. The water in the fish tank is getting brown and stinky.

He wakes up. Someone is banging on the door.

'Open up, Luke.'

It's his sister, Em. She's alright. She used to be a nerd at school, but she's mellowed a bit since she started Uni. She's hanging out with Andy, who smokes weed. Mum and Dad hate him. That gives Em some cred. She moved out when their parents started fighting a lot; she says it's a 'toxic environment'. Luke agrees, but Mum slips money under his door and leaves food around. If he can be bothered taking clothes into the laundry, they appear in neat folded piles next to his door. His parents more or less ignore him, and concentrate on their arguing. A good deal all round.

'What's the matter?', says Em, 'Mum said you're hanging out in here all the time, and you don't speak when you come out.'

'Well, it's my room. Those two are fighting all the time.'

'Do you want to come out?'

'Where?'

'It's Andy's birthday. We're having a party.'

Luke doesn't want to go to a party. He doesn't want to go anywhere or see anyone.

'Come on, it will be good to get out a bit.'

'Yeah, alright.'

He rolls over in bed and smells his dirty clothes.

'I should have a shower.'

'Have one at my place.'

He picks up his cigarettes and keys.

'Dude, what's happened to that fish tank?' Em asks.

'Died.'

Everyone sits on the balcony at Em's house and smokes weed. Em lives with two guys, friends of Andy's. Luke gingerly eases himself onto the ripped grey vinyl couch. Em's housemate Dave offers him a pipe. Dave is about 10 years older than him, a chilled-out stoner. Dave likes talking about things he's inventing, like solar powered cars.

'So how you been, man?' Dave asks, 'haven't seen you for a while.'

It doesn't sound interrogatory. Luke feels the drugs floating in his system, and looks into the trees below the balcony. Sometimes koalas camp in those trees.

'Ok.'

'Your hair's long these days,' Dave observes.

Luke used to think Dave was a loser; all that irritating mellow philosophising. Now Dave is a relaxing presence. Luke hasn't thought about his hair. He puts his hand up to touch it, and realises that it is tucked behind his ears.

'Yeah...'

It is all the explanation that Dave requires.

He knows most of the people at the party. They're Andy's friends, who have become his sister's friends. Most of the men are gathered in the shed admiring someone's new bike. Em is off somewhere, talking to one of her friends, and Luke is left on the grey couch, where he has been sitting all night. He picks at a tear in the armrest. He accepts weed whenever someone passes him a joint, and he's pretty sure he's nodded off a few times.

'You're Em's brother, right?'

Two girls are sitting on the balcony playing a card game and smoking cigarettes. One of the girls speaks to him. There is a tall brunette and a shorter blonde. They are both attractive, in a vintage-clothing kind of way.

'Want to join in?' asks the blonde one, pointing at the game.

Luke shrugs. 'Ok'.

He decides that the brunette one is more attractive, but either of them are fine.

'What's your name?' he asks the brunette.

'I'm Jasmine. This is Fiona.'

'Can I have a cigarette, please, Jasmine?'

He smiles at her.

The first time he uses the gear is with Jasmine, and her flatmate Brad. Jasmine is a regular user. That doesn't bother him, but he's curious about it. Weed is the only drug he's ever tried. It keeps him off the edge. It's Saturday night, and they're planning to go fishing from the jetty. The fish run hard for an hour or so just on dark. They hit up in Luke's car at the lookout near the jetty. It's a windy night; sand is blowing across the windscreen. Luke's hands shake with adrenaline, and he can't put the needle in his own arm. He closes his eyes and Brad does it for him.

'What if I overdose?'

Brad and Jasmine laugh.

'Don't worry, dude, it never happens!'

It floods through his body. He feels super-human. All the angst from the playground goes away. He feels like himself again, except more powerful. More energised. He feels like

a man, not a boy anymore. He can get a job again, go back to Uni. He can get his life back together. No wonder Jasmine uses this stuff all the time. She says it helps her with her weight. They stay up all night on the jetty, laughing and sinking beers. He catches six squid. Jasmine wears a mushroom-coloured coat and a purple beanie, and he is dizzy with how much he loves her.

He hits the gear hard, every few days. It lasts about seven hours or so. He gets a job cleaning offices and schools, and if he uses before he starts his shift, he can finish a three-hour job in just over an hour. He re-enrols at Uni. Jasmine is studying too. She's third year International Relations. She wants to move to Germany after Uni. She's so smart. They try to study together, but most of the time they just score and go for drives in the middle of the night. Once it wears off, they crash out on the mattress and sleep.

It's a costly habit that quickly goes from fifty bucks a pop to a hundred to get the same hit. Before he knows it, he's using almost every day, and it's all he can think about. He loves it when Mum or Grandma offer him twenty dollars for 'petrol'. He always asks for it as a loan, and he says he'll pay them back on payday. Sometimes he feels guilty and pays back his loans, but most of the time he just avoids Mum. He moves around, sometimes sleeping on Mum's couch, sometimes at Dad's, and sometimes he tries to pull himself together enough to spend time with Grandma. Most of the time he lives at Jasmine's where they can score together. No-one else understands. They live on donuts and pizzas from the shop around the corner. The gear gives him fierce cravings for ice-cream, or anything sweet. A bender can last three days. That brings on the munchies.

One of the upsides of working after hours when no-one is around, is the stuff that people just leave lying about. Almost everything has value. He becomes an expert in rifling through pockets and drawers. Sometimes there is shit that he can rip off from offices that people won't notice: bits of electronic stuff stored in cupboards. No-one will think to ask the cleaner if the office camera goes missing. Things like safety boots can also be pawned or sold, and most people keep a bit of coin next to their computer for the Coke machine. The charity boxes are a double boon: chocolate and spare change. It's every man for himself, but he tries to keep it on the low. One afternoon he walks past an electrician's van and notices that the back door is open. There is a load to choose from. He lifts a drill and keeps walking; done within three seconds. It nets him eighty bucks at the pawn shop. He tells Dad that he and Jasmine are behind on the rent and are going to lose their house. The old man forks out four hundred. He can't believe his luck; set for three days.

The gear makes him angry. He grinds his teeth constantly, and he feels sweaty all the time. He needs it, though. He can't get it off it. As soon as he starts to come down, he feels dark again. Sometimes he feels like killing himself when he thinks about the playground. He fantasises about killing those fuckers, too. He wants to slam their faces together. In the middle of telling Jasmine about it, he hears her scream,

'Stop! Stop!'

He looks down at his hand. It's purple and deformed. There's a hole in the wall.

'Look what you've done! You've broken your hand! You need to go to the hospital.'

'I don't want to go to the hospital. I'll be alright. Just bandage it up, it will get better. Don't worry...'

She cries.

'Luke, this is out of control. It's got to stop!'

Fuck that, it's what keeps him going. His hand hurts. He needs to take the pain away.

He always wears gloves when he does a job. He tries not to touch anything, but the gloves are an insurance policy. He has no idea how many he's done. Maybe four or five. Maybe more. Things are super gloomy. Jasmine wants a break from him. He's living with Dad. The dole payment goes into Dad's bank account, and he gives Luke a tenner here and there for petrol. Luke has to disguise the habit, and get money too. Dad spends a lot of time with his girlfriend, so they don't see much of each other, but Dad doesn't leave loose change around, and who knows where he's hidden the rest of his stuff. Luke feels angry enough to throttle the old man. Every time they see each other it's nasty. Dad gets on his case about his room being filthy, and why isn't he getting his act together? No-one except Jasmine knows about what happened in the playground, and it's nobody's business. They can all go fuck themselves. Sometimes he wakes up on the mattress at Dad's place next to his bag of tricks. It's an old sports bag filled with tools, like crow bars and pliers and chisels. When he sees the gloves on the floor, he realises he's been out the night before, but he has no idea where he's been or what has happened.

He needs cash, as always. It looks like an easy hit: a school with no security guards. He sits in the car watching for about half an hour or so. Schools have lights for safety so he can watch the security guards walking their circuits. Here, though, there's no one around. The office is away from the road, so no-one will see him. He parks the car on the road and jumps the child-sized wire fence. Office buildings are always easy to spot; they all look the same.

Sometimes the school bell is outside the office. This one has a disability access ramp, and several helpful signs pointing him in the right direction.

The window is at eye level so he doesn't have to do any crazy acrobatics to get inside. It's a simple job. Push or pull on the window, depending on what type, open it slightly, reach inside, and open fully. A piece of cake. Sometimes he doesn't even need tools. Tonight, he has the crow bar; it might come in handy. A clump of bamboo is growing near the window. His luck can't be better.

He slides in through the window and finds himself crouching on a desk strewn with paper work. The computer monitor is festooned with cheerful positive affirmations. He quickly moves off the desk: it's a risk to move anything out of place accidentally. The fewer things he touches, the better. He never switches lights on. The computer screens glow with low light on standby.

Cash is sometimes kept in drawers; personal stashes or petty cash tins. He never says no to cash, in whatever denomination. A quick search of the desk reveals three dollars, which he puts into his pocket. Larger amounts are usually kept in the bursar's office, and if he is unlucky, a safe somewhere. Usually not, though. Schools are remarkably unguarded targets. He searches the two remaining desks in the office. No joy. The bursar's office is locked. Dammit. He tries fiddling with the lock, but it's one of those stainless-steel jobs that is hard to open without damaging. The principal's office is open, and in the bottom drawer of the desk he finds a tin marked 'petty cash'. As he opens it, there is movement near the window. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Some men are speaking to each other, and a torch flash. Then a walkie-talkie. Cops. He hastily puts the tin back in the desk and stands behind it, hoping to conceal himself in the dark.

One voice says, 'positive on recent entry. Front window open.'

Another man's voice responds, so there are at least two of them.

He's not going to get away unless he does a runner. He has no idea how to get out of here apart from the window, so he'll have to bolt out of the office building and hope that there's an emergency exit open somewhere. He quietly closes the principal's office and sprints towards the door of the office. It opens. His heart is thumping so hard he's sure it's audible. He runs down a corridor and sees a stairwell at the end. Schools always smell the same, and there are always artworks hanging in corridors. He throws his weight down the staircase hoping for a fire exit at the bottom. There's a green striped door. He pushes it hard and meets a blast of cold night air. He has a moment to orient himself, but he can hear the cops behind him.

'Oy! There he is! Stop! Police!'

He has no intention of stopping. His baggy jeans are slowing him down. He hears a monster behind him, something big and menacing making heavy breathing sounds. He hits the ground and skids as a pain rips through his leg. A dog is on top of him, barking and growling, lunging for his thighs with enormous teeth. Without thinking he grabs the crow bar and bashes it against the dog's side. The dog leaps backwards with a howl that Luke will never forget. He has had dogs ever since he was a little kid. His grandma has had a few German Shepherds. They are beautiful, intelligent creatures. He feels awful, but he has to get away. He scrabbles in the dirt, trying to pull his pants up enough to get to his feet, and then one of the cops is there.

'Get down! On the ground!' The cop screams at him. 'Hands behind your back!'

Luke is still scrabbling in the hope of getting away. All this for three bucks.

Suddenly he has a mouthful of dirt. The cop's knee is planted in his back. He can smell the guy's sweat, and he's finding it hard to breathe.

'Get off, get off me!'

'Don't like it, eh, motherfucker!', says the cop, kicking him in the kidneys.

Luke gags. They pull him up roughly and twist his arms behind his back.

'Ow! Arggh, you're fucking hurting me, you prick!' Luke bellows.

The hard steel of the handcuffs bites into his wrist. The dog stands nearby, launching itself at him. It's on a leash but it's jumping around, all excited. It reminds him of Blackie, his grandmother's dog. Blackie is long-haired, though, and probably doesn't go for the balls like this one does. One of the cops restrains the dog while the other one grabs the crowbar from the dirt. Then he searches Luke's body for other weapons.

'I'm not holding anything!' Luke screams.

He hates anyone touching him. Sometimes it's even weird with Jasmine.

'Where's your ID?'

The cop takes his car keys.

'I don't have any.'

Why risk dropping anything in a strange place. They won't find the car until someone reports it; the keys are a generic Toyota cut.

'Name. Date of birth,' the cop demands, yelling closely near Luke's right ear.

Luke tells the truth. He's probably going down, anyway.

'I'm arresting you for break and enter, assaulting a police dog, resisting arrest, and harassing a police officer.'

'What!' Harassing a police officer? What the fuck is that?'

'You swore at us, you tried to get away, and you assaulted the dog.'

The dog seems to have recovered and is patiently waiting at the end of its leash. It probably hasn't had any dinner yet.

The cops drag Luke back towards the office. He tries not to look up at his car, which is parked within view of theirs. They push him roughly into the back seat. The dog sits behind him, panting, and growling periodically.

Thanks, Blackie, for ruining my night.

'Is there anyone you'd like to call, Luke?', the policewoman asks him at the station. He recites Jasmine's number.

'Jas, I'm in the cop shop. Cunts won't let me out. They've found six break-and-enters with fingerprints. Plus, some parking fines, and they reckon I was meant to go to court for driving without a licence...I'm going down, Jas...I'm gonna get done over again in there.'

'Can you get a lawyer?'

He tells Mum and Dad not to come to court, but they're here anyway. He can see them from where he's sitting and he feels a bit sorry for them. Mum's got no idea about courts. She looks like she's been crying. Dad is stony-faced as usual, his arms folded over his paunch. Every now and then he shakes his head at Luke with the 'I'm very disappointed' face. Ironic that the old man is scary even when Luke's sitting in front of a judge.

They've got a fancy lawyer for him. Em says they're fighting over who pays for it. Luke meets John, the lawyer, a few minutes before the court opens. John has a serious demeanour and a side part that is slicked on either side with too much wax. He is a slim, composed unit. His suit is an elegant navy pinstripe teamed with a pleasant pinkish tie, and his black shoes shine beneath creased trousers. Just the type of no-nonsense neatness that impresses his parents.

John proffers his hand. 'Luke, hello. I'm John.'

John's hands are soft, with neatly trimmed nails. John's hands are about the same size as his own. John is a suit, though. He obviously never does any hard work.

Luke finds John's narrative impressive.

'Your Honour, my client is a smart young man who was raised by a decent family. Like many young men in these uncertain times, he has simply made some poor decisions'.

It's a compelling story that makes Luke feel better about himself. The judge is an elderly man with slumping shoulders and red blotchy skin. He gazes at Luke through glassy, old-man's eyes while John is talking. Luke feels rage rising inside and sits on his hands.

Stop fucking staring, you nasty old codger. What would you know?

The old man takes an unfavourable outlook.

'Young man, I do not find your advocate's arguments convincing. Police records have uncovered a series of offences in which you have been involved. Your lack of regard for the law is flagrant.'

He rolls the word 'flagrant' out into four syllables' worth.

'You have left fines unpaid, and you have been unhelpful to police.'

He clears this throat and pauses theatrically.

'And what is worse, a police dog was injured while you were being apprehended.'

Luke holds eye contact with the judge, but he can see Dad in his peripheral vision, shaking his head.

'Given your obvious addiction to amphetamines, I consider that you would be likely to re-offend. I therefore consider that a period of six weeks' custody would be beneficial to deter you from continuing along this path. You will attend two weeks' drug rehabilitation, and commence the remainder of your sentence thereafter.'

It's a clear winter morning when the gates slide open and Luke can walk away, free. It's nine on a Saturday. The city streets are quiet. He hasn't been outside for more than half an hour in the last six weeks and the weather has gotten cold. He doesn't have a warm layer, just the shirt he was wearing to court eight weeks ago. He braces his body against the chilly wind, folds his arms across his chest and begins walking towards the train station. He's not sure where to go. He's not in the mood for either of his parents, though Mum might be more understanding. Dad will give him the usual lectures about getting his life together and 'wake-up calls'.

He knows that he has to stop using. It's not even a conscious decision. He has been clean for almost nine weeks and his mind is starting to feel clearer. He can actually think about other things. It's ironic that his brain has enough room to feel frustrated and bored. Sure, it would be really easy to get back into the old routine: get money to score, find someone to score from, get really off his face and do it all again a few days later. It's a way

of life that involves short-term problem-solving and immediate rewards. It makes the pain go away. It has made the pain go away for years. That's one of the problems, though. He is 30. When did that happen? He's always thought that he'd be married with kids by the time he was 30. He thought he would have a job he enjoyed doing, and be earning good money. Things are looking a lot different now. A voice inside his head tells him he's a fucked-up loser. It's all too late. It's all fucked. He can never do anything good with his life, and never will. When he lets that voice get too loud, he feels angry. There is so much to be angry about. Angry with those pricks who ruined his life. Maybe the door closed on him when they got him in the playground. Angry with his parents who didn't notice that there anything wrong with him. Maybe he was never meant to have the life that they had laid out for him. Maybe he never even wanted it in the first place. Being a psychologist and all that. That was their dream, not his. He doesn't know what his dreams are. He doesn't remember having any. So many of his mates at school had talked about their ambitions for the future. He had never said much, because he never thought that far ahead. He knew that he would want a good job: steady, with good money. He would want to be doing something that did some good for this world. He knew he wanted to feel good about his pay check: help people in some way. He would work hard and feel satisfied at the end of every day. He'd have a good woman and some kids. They would be happy. He's angry with Jasmine for getting him into meth. Angry with himself. He is angry, and bored. Bored with his life and bored with the routine. Bored with feeling bored. It's not for him anymore. The problem is, what is for him? As he saunters into the railway station he tries not to look in the windows of the pawn shop located near the gates. He has given those guys lots of stock. It seems like yesterday, and it seems like years ago. He buys a ticket from the vending machine with the three dollars in his pocket, and checks the departures board. Eleven minutes to wait for the next train to Dad's house. Dad is waiting for him when he gets there. He knows the old man is trying to be nice because he's cooked lunch, obviously anticipating that Luke would be turning up today. Dad does helpful things when he doesn't know what else to do. He not great with talking, but he is practical. He is always engrossed in some project. Luke opens the back gate and has to negotiate a path between stacks of wood all over the yard. The old man is obviously building something. Dad piles two plates with steaks and roasted vegetables and puts them on the cane table in the kitchen. He's even made a mushroom sauce to go with the meat. Luke doesn't feel hungry but it tastes good after the shitty food he's been eating for the last six weeks. He was surprised at how bad the food is inside. For six weeks straight it has been fried and crumbed crap, with no exercise and no fresh air. He feels sorry for the poor bastards who are stuck there.

Eating is a way of avoiding talking. The last thing he feels like doing is talking. He feels numb. The dog jumps around at the door wagging its tail at him, and Dad's ironing basket overflows on the chair next to the TV. The kitchen floor is a bit dusty like it always is, and the newspaper is folded on the shelf under the table. Everything looks the same, but he's been away, and he feels different.

As always, Dad is a man of action. He's formulated an action plan for Luke's life, and he delivers his manifesto after cracking a couple of stubbies of beer for them. He slams the glass bottle on the table in front of Luke and clears his throat in preparation for giving a speech.

'Right. That shit's over with. All that crap in the past, we're going to move on from that. If you're going to live here, you're going to get your life together.'

Luke has to stifle a smirk. In recent weeks, he has given a bit of thought to the issue of getting his life together, so it will be interesting to hear how Dad thinks that might play out.

'You're going to get some help. I've found a psychiatrist, and you're going to work through all of this. There are going to be some rules.'

There are always rules. Dad likes rules; they give him structure. As a reflex action, Luke looks up at the handwritten diet plan stuck on the fridge. It has been there for years. The underlined sections are the rules. Dad is always on some sort of diet, but he has trouble sticking to them.

'No more drugs. I don't want drugs in this house, and if I find out you've been using them, then you're out.'

Luke coughs to stifle his amusement. If it was that simple, it would have happened years ago.

'I want that room kept clean. I cleaned it while you were away and I want it kept that way. You need to start looking after yourself. That room stinks! It's full of dirty clothes. The mattress was filthy. You need a haircut. Have a shower once in a while. Get yourself looking decent.'

It's mildly satisfying to think about the types of things that Dad would have found in a zealous cleaning expedition into his room. If the old man wants to snoop around, he can't blame Luke for what he might find. Dirty clothes are the least of it, and he knows Dad is avoiding mentioning that.

'You're going to get a job. I don't want you just hanging around wasting your life. You're not going to lie on the couch all day, doing nothing.'

Luke nods at his father and tries to say as little as possible. It will appease the old man if he gives the impression that he's listening. There are more important things to worry about than whether his room is clean. He's not some kid anymore. It seems absurd that Dad is focussing on that, but his father's style is to blow off steam. The psychiatrist is a joke. Luke doesn't need a doctor to tell him things are fucked and give him some happy pills. As for getting a job, who will give him one? He has no references. He's been fired from every job he's ever had, and anyway, who wants to hire someone who has just gotten out? His stomach gurgles uncomfortably and he feels like throwing up. His whole body feels clammy and sweaty. Luke gulps down the beer and scrunches his napkin over the remains of his lunch.

'I'm not feeling well. I need to lie down.'

He gets up from the table. Maybe things will look better after a sleep.

Dad makes him spend the whole weekend washing all his dirty clothes. He doesn't have anything better to do, anyway. He keeps out of the old man's way carting clothes to the laundry and throwing the dog's squeaky toy around. At least someone is happy to see him back. Dad spends the weekend making loud hammering and sawing noises in the shed.

The job agency tells him to come into the office and meet with them, so he pulls his hair back into a rubber band and wears the only pair of jeans that seem to fit. Luke notices that he has put on weight in the few weeks since he's stopped using. In the shower, he can look down and see a paunch developing, and his chest seems a bit flabby. The agency offers him a cleaning job at a furniture factory. He's vowed never to do cleaning work again. It reminds him of too many bad times. And it's on the other side of town. He will have to catch two trains to get there. At least it will get the old man off his back. He tells them he can start tomorrow.

He's not really sure where he is, but it doesn't matter. He turns the corner. A few spots of rain hit his face as the lights along the main road orient him. These days it's never just a few spots. A few spots will become a drenching torrent within a few minutes. He can shelter under the trees over the road. He stumbles off the gutter. The lights of a car approach. The driver beeps at him. Arsehole.

He laughs.

Fuck you, wanker, I'm crossing the road.

Then his leg is wrenched away from him. His whole body is swept into the air and he seems to be floating. He lands on the windscreen and feels it flex under his weight. He looks into

the driver's eyes through the glass and sees terror as the driver flails with the steering wheel. The car slides into a tree with a heavy thud. It crumples into a compact concertina. Silence.

Peaceful Warriors

'What's happening in the garden, Alexander?', Em asks me.

We step onto the verandah. The wind chimes tinkle softly, and their baubles reflect light onto the fern fronds below. My garden is an abundant acre. I have designed and painstakingly raised it like I would have nurtured a child, if I'd had that chance. I research every species for its water requirements, optimum light position and cross-pollination potential. Gargantuan water tanks line one side of the house, and three brown hens browse and scratch among the long grass.

I lead Em on enthusiastic, rambling tours of my mulchy world; she's one of the few people who appreciates my magical adventure. We begin where the pumpkin vines are rampantly flaunting the wire boundaries of the vegetable patch.

'Look at these! We'll have pumpkins for a year.'

My bushy citrus trees are bulging with fragrant yellow and orange bombs. The apples and pears espaliered to the fence are dancing with elegant outstretched limbs. One of my new treasures is a white sapote. I break one for Em, showing her the white, gummy sap spilling onto my hands. I pluck a strawberry guava for her, and she grimaces as its unripe sourness curls her tongue. I push a ripe apricot into her hand and its sticky juice dribbles over her thumb as she bites into its soft, squashy flesh. Those apricots are golden gifts; my love for Em radiates through their sun-warmed fur. We take turns jumping to reach the branches of the fig tree, grabbing the gnarled branches for each other to grasp the bulbous purple fruit. Seedy dill and fennel are gracefully overflowing from their raised beds. Lettuces are springing up spontaneously among the fragrant wood chips. I lift some neatly out of the ground and offer them to Em. Near the house are trees in small pots that have not yet been planted. These are my infants, being strengthened under my loving parental eye.

The back door swings open and Julie limps down the stairs to the wooden table on the verandah. With difficulty, she balances the weight of a purple ceramic teapot and three green mugs against the momentum of her body's movement. Her tie-dyed headscarf conceals a bald patch.

'How has your health been, Julie?'

Em adopts a tone of polite enquiry. She's always cautious around Julie, and I can see why an outsider might not want to ask about a brain tumour.

'Good!', Julie replies enthusiastically. 'The doctor says it has stabilised. I think I've lost some of my memory, though; I keep forgetting things.'

Em glances at me. Our eyes meet and I quickly shift mine away.

'I'm going to find a bowl for these apricots.'

I go into the house, listening to their conversation floating through the laundry window.

'Has he shown you all the new things in the garden?', Julie asks Em.

'Yes. It's such a sanctuary here. I feel so relaxed. So calming.'

'I think we're on about version fifty of the garden design plan', remarks Julie. 'I stopped being interested in it all a long time ago. I've gotten to the stage where I just watch him plant things and get excited about them.'

Before her illness became so debilitating, Julie was more horticulturally gifted than me. She knows about vegetables, water, compost, soil balance, chickens, and lots

besides. She also used to cook with everything she grew. We regularly had visitors dropping in, and she would whip up exotic tea, buckwheat pancakes with fresh blueberries, zucchini muffins, and hedgehog slice. Julie's cookbooks form an impressive display in our poky galley kitchen: all the early classics of vegetarian and alternative lifestyle cooking. I try to cook in the way that way Julie used to, but my hands are not a conduit for the creative energies that she could summon simply by flipping through them. Now I do the cooking, which I enjoy, but my products are more experimental than Julie's were. My blueberry puffs become a sodden blue mess, burnt and Lilliputian. We've always believed in cooking from our garden and avoiding processed foods. We used to be a duo who believed in self-sufficiency, enjoying our projects. Now I do the projects and Julie supervises. I try not to let it show, but life these days seems to be never ending task lists and constant exhaustion.

'Are you guys going out all day?' Julie calls to me.

I grab the sunscreen and start painting myself with it.

'Not sure...we'll be out for a while...'

We say goodbye with a companionable, respectful hug. This is as much affection as we ever show each other, now. We don't talk about our relationship. It's like poking a swelling abscess.

Beyond the city the air is hot and still, the hillsides are brown with dry grass, and the trees drop grey leaves in the heat. We are in good spirits; it's a public holiday and an extra day off work. I'll struggle to fit in all the things I need to do, but hiking means a little time away from the lists running through my head constantly. It is an hours' drive to find a National Park. They used to be dotted all over, within easy reach of the city. Now it's worth spending money on petrol to see real open space, a real landscape molded by generations of leaf-fall and water and soil activity, and the possibility of untamed animals. My car is the only one in the parking area.

We weave between silent, solid eucalypts. Small dust clouds rise to accompany the crunch of dirt beneath our feet. Em's legs are sturdy and brown, from all her walking. She moves with the easy rhythm of someone who covers endless ground. Her shoes are worn, with small holes in the toes, but it doesn't seem to bother her.

'So how's work going?' she enquires.

'I don't think I could hate it any more than I do!' I reply, letting the misery flow out. 'Most of the time there's nothing to do, so I sit at my desk pretending to look busy. When there is something to do, it's the same old forms. I check the boxes, fill in as much as I can, send them off, but no-one ever takes any notice of what I've written.'

I am a planner; my job involves assessing the environmental impacts of impending developments. I sit in a cubicle surrounded by an entire department of people ostensibly doing the same thing, but we all acknowledge that it has become a meaningless, rubber-stamp way to get paid. Developments are never refused and their environmental impacts are largely ignored, mainly because it is pointless. There is not enough open space left for the government to care about. It's hard not to think that we're on a downward spiral.

'What would you do if you could do anything you wanted to?' Em counters.

This game of fantasy-idyllic-life is one of our shared favourites.

'I'd live on a farm in Tasmania. There's no land left here. 'It's the food bowl of the nation. Seems like the right place for me!'

She nods. The destruction of farming land was a major theme in the city's "Future Plan" forums five years ago. Em and I joined thousands of others to rally against land clearing. Even then it was carving the outskirts of the city into sterile, anonymous housing. Despite the protests, it happened anyway. Now the only people who have land are those who inherited it. The city stretches endlessly in all directions, but no-one uses its snaking concrete transport corridors. Venturing beyond familiar neighbourhoods is dangerous. The trains are targets for local gangs.

My heart soars when I think about Tasmania, and excitement stirs inside.

'I'd like to be part of a community permaculture farm. An eco-village, where we share the work and the produce. Doing all that work on my garden at home has shown me that it's just too much for one person, but it's really the idea of community that appeals. I want to be part of something where everyone knows each other, you know, where people share meals together and talk to each other.'

'I could see you doing that! Sharing meals with vegetarian ladies...'

She's ribbing me and I feel my face flush.

'So, why don't you?' she prods.

'Oh, it's a just a pipe dream.'

I wave my hand dismissively. I suddenly feel sad. Speaking about my ideas makes me feel alive again, but they're all just dreams. There's no way I could leave

Julie, and even if I could, where would I get the money to buy shares in land? I store my ideas inside, though. Life seems hopeless if I don't have any plans. Who knows where time might take me? An old wooden trail marker appears in front of us.

'Let's rest for a bit.'

I lean my backpack on the sign and pull a water flask out of it. My body is weary; old and heavy.

'I've calculated that I need to keep working for at least another five years at this rate,' I announce, feeling gloomy and staring down at the ground where one of my shoelaces is dangling loose. I rummage inside my backpack for my home-dried fruits.

Em stuffs the dried apricots into her mouth. 'I love this fruit, it's the best I've ever eaten!'

'Yeah it's great, but it takes so much work. I have to lay each of these pieces out on the drier by hand, and make sure I watch them so the birds don't come. It's all about money in the end.'

It's what I've been thinking, but it slips out unintentionally.

'I don't get that, Alexander...you seem so worried about money.'

'Money drives all my decision-making. I hate that about myself.'

'But you're so frugal, and from where I'm standing, your life is so full and rich.'

'You know, I got a text the other day from my friends Maggie and Martin. They are completely self-sufficient, and they're loving it! They live on their land and have cows, and when they kill a few cows they distribute the meat among a group. They were asking if I want some meat. They buy everything they need from garage sales, and they barter in the community.'

'Wow, that sounds extreme. I think I'd be a bit frightened living like that. It would make me feel vulnerable.'

'It makes me feel envious. It would feel so free. No debts, no drudgery job, just enough of everything to meet my needs.'

'But what if something breaks down and you can't fix it? What if you need to travel somewhere and you don't have the money?'

'That actually just happened! Maggie had to go to Denmark to visit her family. Well, I suppose it must have been tricky to get the money, and of course Martin couldn't go, but they managed it! She went off to Denmark! They must have been saving too. You can do that once you don't have debt anymore!'

‘Don’t get me started on debt. I hate working so much just to service debt. I’m bored. At least you’ve only got five years to go. I’ve probably got about twenty, but I try not to think about it. It’s terrifying.’

‘You’ve got the beginnings of the simple life nailed, though.’ And it’s true. Em waters her tiny crops from tanks, and she collects buckets in the shower and the sink. She digs trenches for her food scraps, and rotates the fecund soil every season. She’s a collector, too. She goes out walking and picks up things that she finds, like pieces of rope and wood. One time she got excited about finding a ceramic pot; a huge one. She rolled it home, rotating between splashes of purple, red and yellow, bumping over the cracked asphalt paths.

‘The hardest bit has been no car.’

I nod. It’s almost impossible to run one with fuels being so costly, but Julie gets a disability exemption from the government. Em catches the train to work, like most people do. It’s safe during daylight hours, if you stick to your own line. You just have to be aware of everyone who’s around you, because train carriages are enclosed spaces. She rides a bike, too, and walks a lot.

Sometimes we meet on Friday nights for a drink after work. I weave among the crowd looking for her, and it reminds me that I’m much shorter than most other men. Most of the time I don’t think about it, but sometimes in public I realise that I’m different.

She’s sitting on a stained sofa next to the fireplace in the front bar, wearing a business suit and clutching a brown handbag. A glass of white wine sits on the table nearby.

‘Hi. Wow, nice bag. Is that leather?’

‘Ha! No way! It’s ‘leather blend’’. She grins.

Real leather is scarce and very expensive, but Em always projects a professional image. Always smartly dressed, like she’s off to an interview. It wouldn’t surprise me if she found a leather bag somewhere.

I clink my whiskey glass against her wine glass. ‘Cheers!’

‘How’s your week been?’

‘Ugh. Glad it’s over. Stress, meetings, you know the drill. You?’

‘Struggling. I did a meditation retreat last weekend and it has been so hard to come back to the real world.’

I feel flushed with heat and alcohol. The leafy curlicues on the red floral wallpaper seem to beckon to me. Spirituality is a big part of my dedication to an authentic life. I try to be practical, and find more inner calm every day. Without it, well, who knows what would happen. I do silent retreats once a month, so I can get away from the outside world. Inside I feel strengthened, more solid, but it’s hard to come back. Sometimes I feel like I’m in a bubble, a trance that last for days. It feels therapeutic, though, like a pillow that I reach for when I’m exhausted. I’ve done lots of healing work, too. At the moment, I’m having weekly skeletal adjustments that align my chakras. I suspect Em is a bit sceptical, but she understands why I need to do this. We’re all searching for answers.

‘You should come along to the next one. There’s lots of free time to just be. Every afternoon I went for a walk, it was my little ritual. I found a creek and I just followed it along the fence lines. I found a big tree, a burnt out one. Every afternoon I sat in the tree stump. The sun came down through the top of the tree, like a chimney, and the whole stump warmed up. I just crossed my legs and sat there, watching everything happen around me. In the creek, there were clumps of reeds where little black ducks were living. They would shoot out of the reeds and launch themselves into the creek. I swear they were playing. They were quacking like it was some sort of game.’

She smiles at me, and the abundance of our friendship glows inside me.

‘That sounds awesome. So relaxing!’

Our glasses are empty and I go to the bar for refills. I put a bottle of wine on the table in front of her.

‘How’s Julie?’

Em is probably the only person I can speak to about my relationship. It took me a long time to trust her, but it felt good when I finally told her how unhappy I’ve been.

‘Ah it’s all shit!’

My face reddens with the anger rising inside. Julie was already unwell when we met. We were flat mates in a share house, and we bonded in a shared protest against our slovenly third housemate. We have a similar sense of humour. We still make each other laugh. Plus of course, our shared dedication to respecting the earth. She’s

always been more dedicated than me, though. For instance, she's a vegetarian but I still can't give up eating meat. She used to be so active. She loved any chance to connect with nature: trekking, horse-riding, mountain-climbing, and camping. But then she caught an exotic virus while she was backpacking overseas. She went swimming in a dirty river, and by the time she got to hospital, some of her organs had shut down. A liver transplant has kept her alive, but all the immune-suppressants have produced a legion of unpleasant reverberations. Like difficulties with walking, and a brain tumour that behaves like a volcano. It's dormant for years, then it erupts suddenly, and then it goes dormant again. She was married when she got ill, but her husband left her after the transplant.

'We've been having counselling, but I think it's a bit late for that.'

I think about Julie and I'm overwhelmed with grief, and despair, and irritation.

'Don't you think it's a good sign if she wants to talk about things?'

'Well, yes, good for her, but I don't want to talk about things. She wants to be in a proper relationship but I'm just not interested anymore. She spent the whole session bawling her eyes out, and I sat there as cool as a cucumber. I don't have anything to say.'

'Have you thought about leaving?'

'Ha! I think about leaving every bloody day. Would you believe I feel the loneliest when it's me and her in the house? We have 'discussions', and then she doesn't talk to me for days.'

'So why don't you leave?'

'It's not that easy! First, there's the money. There's no way she would agree to leave the house, so where would I go?'

'What about the farm in Tasmania?'

'What fucking farm, Em?'

She's being flippant, and it gives me the shits. It's OK for her to joke around, but no-one knows I hang on day by day, putting one foot in front of the other. Staying in the now is what keeps me going.

'Sorry. You could move into the spare room at my house?'

'Thanks, mate, but I can't leave the garden. All my effort lost. You know how much work I've put into that land.'

'You could dig everything up and take it with you.'

I look at her reproachfully and roll my eyes. Her fantasies are a bit hard to take, sometimes.

'In the counselling session Julie said I'm just waiting around for her to die!'

She looks startled and stares at me. My vision is slightly blurry from the whiskey, but I look at her and my mouth splits into a smile. This is the heart of the matter and it's uncomfortable to admit, but suddenly it's a relief to have the thought floating there in front of us.

'Well! That's a morbid way of looking at the situation.'

She jokes along but we both know Julie is right.

'Eughh...who knows how long this will go on? The tumour is stable again, so it looks like it's gone dormant, but this time I think the radiation killed some of her brain. She's losing her memory. She just sits in the front of the computer all day, playing games online. She buys stuff, too. There are always parcels arriving.'

'What's in them?'

'I don't know. What could she possibly need? She's pretty much house-bound, so maybe it's just retail therapy.'

I take a big swig of whiskey.

'I'm so tired, Em. After the counselling session, I told her I'm going out Friday nights from now on. I need some time away. Between her and the garden, it's almost another full-time job that I've got. I do all the cooking, wash the clothes, all the cleaning, all the housework, and she never acknowledges any of it. All I get is criticism for being inadequate.'

'Do you love her?'

Involuntarily I find myself running my hands through my hair. My stomach lurches nervously.

'I feel sorry for her. It would be awful if I left, because it happened to her before. Her husband left her. I'd be the second asshole who left because he couldn't handle the illness. I should just man up. I've made my bed, and now I have to lie in it.'

'How was it at the beginning between you two? When there was a spark?'

'There never was a spark. Even when we bought a house together it was meant to be just friends sharing a house.'

'What? So how did you end up in the same bed?'

'I felt sorry for her.'

A pain fills my chest cavity. I imagine laying Scrabble tiles for the word 'pathos'. My situation is so sad it's pathetic. I feel about an inch tall when I admit that I've confused love with pity, and I squirm with shame because I know that Julie mistakes me for an ally.

'Personal question, but what about sex?'

'Its been so long that I've forgotten what it is! I wouldn't know what to do.'

'I'm sure you'd remember if you had the chance!'

'Who'd look at me?'

'What do you mean!'

'I'm past all that. I'm an oldie.'

I'm forty-four, which doesn't sound old, but I feel a hundred. Most of the time it's not so much about age, but more about feeling different from other people. Not 'normal', whatever that means. Sometimes we theorise that there is a mysterious 'normal' signal that people emit, which Em and I do not. Most of the time we gloat about our abnormality, it's what makes us interesting. But on occasions when we feel vulnerable, being 'abnormal' is a liability. It means being disconnected from the community of 'normal' people, and that means loneliness.

I stare down at the table.

'I just feel so alone. I spend all day doing a job that I hate, and no-one talks to me at work. They all go off for drinks and lunches but no-one asks me. I'm not part of their group. Then when I get home there's an angry person waiting to unleash her fury on me, and more work to do. Sometimes I study, but most nights I can't be bothered doing anything. I just sit down on the lounge and watch mindless television until I fall asleep. I really wish I could DO something, but I haven't got the energy.'

'What would you want to do?'

'Maybe I'd feel better if I had more friends, but where am I going to meet people.'

'But you've got loads of friends! How many times have I seen your house full of people? What about all the vegetarian barbecues?'

'They're all Julie's friends. I wish I could find a new job, too, but it's too late for a career change.'

'What! You're forty-four. You could potentially work for another twenty years.'

'Yes, but by the time I get another qualification and work my way up some bullshit corporate ladder, who would want to employ me.'

'What about escaping? Just running away?'

'Where would I go, Em? Julie will never move. She thinks I'm a dreamer full of crap. I don't think I'll ever be able to do anything about it. I'm stuck and I just have to put up with it.'

I push my chair back from the table and stand up.

'I should get going.'

We stumble out into the cold winter air, my legs buckling with the realisation that I am very drunk. We sway toward the train station, leaning on each other for balance. On her platform, we hug fiercely and hold on until we both need to breathe in. I let her go and turn to walk to my own platform. She raises her hand to wave goodbye when I look back. Her eyes are shining. I pull my phone out of my pocket when I reach my platform. I glance around at the other passengers, assessing any possible dangers. A burly security guard standing nearby meets my glazed eyes and nods. The train headlights approach when I look up from composing a text to Em, telling her how much she is loved.

All morning my stomach has been turning and leaping in excitement. It has been months. I'm so looking forward to showing Em my new adventure. I can't wait to see the pride on her face, mirroring the pride in myself that makes me feel like singing.

The train doors beep as I see her lifting her bike onto the grimy grey platform. She's never caught a train out this far before. I see her quickly appraising the people loping in chairs and standing in small groups waiting for the next express service to the city. She looks around for me and I wave.

'Hello!'

I stretch my arms out to hug her, beaming at her in the bright, hot mid-afternoon.

'Wow! Look at you. I think this the healthiest I've ever seen you. Your skin is so brown.'

I take off my helmet, eager to show her the layer of grey that has suddenly been released from my scalp.

'Your hair! What's happened?'

'Isn't it great? I love it! Age and wisdom and all that.'

I point to my feet.

'Look at my sandals! They're made from rice bags.'

I show her where the '10kg' mark curls around the toes on my right foot.

'That's cool! Nice work!'

I gesture towards a curling dusty trail that edges along the cracked footpath.

'This way, Em. It's about 15 minutes from here.'

The urban trails are helpful signs from riders to each other. I've become attuned to looking for them. They are the best way to avoid risk. There are far fewer cars on the roads, but they are big, tinted luxury vehicles that move at unchecked speeds. This trail is well used and has been cleared of the prickles that spring from the local grasses. It forms a slight trench, wide enough for foot traffic.

'No rubbish around,' Em remarks.

I know she admires the ingenuity and opportunism of fossickers. A few small trees grow haphazardly, but it has been so long since any rain that they are struggling: brown and peeling dry bark.

'Don't take this the wrong way, Alexander, but your arms are looking very sinewy...and your calf muscles are definitely more defined.'

I giggle, squirming with delight at the compliments.

The trail meets a gate that used to be a reserve. An old National Parks plaque is affixed to it. Two bullet holes pockmark the government emblem. The reserve is overgrown with weeds, and various graffiti tags are clumsily painted on the rocky ground in homemade paint. Even though it is degraded, I feel comforted by the trees and the smooth, fat rocks in the dry creek bed.

I feel excitement rising inside as we catch the first view of the village.

'Look! There it is!'

I point to where a bank of green contrasts with the baked yellow-brown of the surrounding landscape. We pedal along the fence line, and I inhale the sweetness of its robust fresh timber palings.

'The fence is so high,' Em observes. 'I thought it would be white pickets or something. This looks like a compound.'

I know she's joking, but I feel slightly crushed.

The front gate faces away from the road. Dead leaves crunch under our tyres as we approach, and the two young men on the gate look up. One sits on a large rock near the front gate, and the other reclines in a wooden fold-up chair, holding a

drawing charcoal in his hand and resting sketch-book on his lap. I wave and call out to them.

‘Hi, guys!’

They relax when they recognise me.

‘Hey, Alexander...’

The man sitting on the rock looks at Em, then smiles and pushes his straggling hair behind his ears. His eyes are clear. His skin is tanned-brown and his bare feet are dirty. A small pile of dust at his feet shows that he has been drawing patterns in the soil. I glance over at her and she is staring at him. They grin at each other and her eyes drop, taking in the solid, rounded abdomen visible through his white shirt, and the arms that obviously labour with physical activity. The other man looks up from his drawing. His gaze is slightly suspicious.

‘Did you get the OK for a visitor, Alexander?’

His tone is officious and my heart races nervously.

‘Yes, it’s all good.’

‘Great, no worries, then.’

The one on the rock stands up and approaches the gate.

‘I’ll get the gate for you guys.’

He presses some buttons on the communications unit located next to the gate and settles back onto his rock. His feet slide into the dirt, and it runs between his toes. He seems to be doing nothing other than playing with the soil. The gate opens as we pass him, and he winks at Em. The man in the fold-up chair resumes drawing; his tongue protrudes slightly as he concentrates on the image appearing under his hand.

I am buzzing with excitement as we wheel our bikes inside the village. The two men wave and close the gate behind us. I wave back at them.

‘Thanks, guys!’

Once we’re inside the gate, Em says, ‘are you wearing some kind of uniform? You’ve got the same shirt on as those guys.’

‘No, it’s not a uniform, just comfortable.’

I grab her arm enthusiastically.

‘Follow me! Let’s go to my house first!’

She scans around her.

‘How far does this place go?’

‘Pretty much as far as you can see, but it’s not as big as it looks. See the woodland?’ I point to a forest in the distance. ‘That’s the boundary. I’ll show you everything!’

We turn onto the wide path, wheeling our bikes slowly. On our right is a large building with floor to ceiling glass windows and geometric angles in its roof. She points to it.

‘What’s that?’

‘That’s the community centre. It’s where we get together for meals.’

In front of the community centre is a garden area filled with long wooden tables. A few people sit at the tables, and others are scattered around the garden lying on the ground or sitting in small groups. Several women are painting or sketching. They all wave or call a greeting to me.

‘Who are they?’

‘Other people who live here. I’m getting to know everyone by sight, but I don’t really know too many names, just yet. But everyone seems friendly enough.’

‘Are they artists?’

‘Some of them are. This is the art centre. Art therapy is good for the soul. There are classes, where we can all join in and make mandalas. We have community arts projects, so we can teach and learn from each other...’

‘Do you have to?’

She smirks.

‘That’s not very nice, Em.’

‘Sorry. Whatever floats your boat. I just never picked you for a mandala maker...’

I feel hurt. She puts her arm around me in a hug and looks me directly in the eye.

‘I’m teasing, don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll be great. You’ll love it.’

‘The thing is, you don’t have to be any good...it’s just about participation...enriching each other’s lives. I think it’s amazing.’

In the centre of the garden is an enormous stone oven stained with smoke stains from constant use.

‘What’s that?’

She sounds concerned, and I shoot her a quizzical look.

‘It’s an oven. We make pizza. What did you think it was?’

One main boardwalk street traverses the village, with smaller paths running off it in all directions. The village layout is not linear, but there are clear lines of sight between the buildings. The paths are lined with healthy shrubs. A dark pool of soil at the base of the trees shows that they have recently been watered, and each wears a tag identifying its species and age.

My house is near the end of the main street. There are no fences around any of the houses, but the boundary of each is delineated by a small garden and a path. My house is one of the smallest, but like the others, it’s made from recycled building materials: timber and glass with a sloping roof, rainwater tanks, solar cells, and shade cloths. I’ve already planted a verdant vegetable garden at the front, and some juvenile fruit trees.

‘You’re so industrious. Where did you get the plants from?’

She’s curious, because seedlings for edible plants are no longer freely available.

‘We have a seed bank for most of them, but everyone has their contacts. It’s not too hard to get new varieties if you want them.’

We park the bikes on the verandah. We leave our doors unlocked here. I step into the open living space. My house is compact. I think of it more like a den than a house. It’s a far better use of space than my old place. This is all the space I need. I love how the light shines through the floor to ceiling windows, which look out to the woodland. My bed is behind the rice-paper screen lattice in the corner, and the bathroom is on the other side of the wooden sliding door. A small kitchen area faces the front of the house. I’ve arranged some new cloth chairs to look out onto the garden. I only took a few books from the old place: just my gardening manuals and bird watching texts. Mine is a clean, tranquil space, and in it, I feel ordered. In the centre of the room is my newest treasure: a dazzling brightly coloured rug. Being here, I realise that so much of the old house was filled with stuff. Too much stuff. Unnecessary stuff. I gave most of it to charity. It was liberating. Here, I’ve made an agreement with myself that it’s minimalist - only the things I really need.

‘Take a seat,’ I gesture to Em.

She sits in one of the cloth chairs. I pour coffee beans into a grinder and place two cups on the bench.

‘Coffee!’

‘Yes, we grow it here. How ‘bout that?’ I know that she will appreciate the coffee. It has become valuable. It’s difficult to grow locally and needs space. Imported varieties are riotously expensive. I tried to give it up when I moved here, intending to be clear-headed. Just dandelion tea. The first week was filled with hideous hallucinations and wall-climbing headaches, but it became less difficult after that. I still crave the rich black liquid, though, so I give myself a small treat of one cup each day.

‘I’ll give you some to take home if you like...’ I offer.

She grins and thrusts her fist in the air for victory.

There is also fresh milk, from a local goat. I’ve always been allergic to cows’ milk, among my host of other dietary intolerances. Goats’ milk is a good compromise. I don’t need much of it, and there is plenty to share. Her name is Henry, even though she’s clearly female. She’s a spirited creature who escapes from her pen by climbing the water tank and back flipping over the side. People here react benevolently, half-heartedly rounding her up when she pops up in someone’s garden.

‘Wow, so here you are.’

‘It’s paradise, I can’t believe how happy I am. It’s everything I ever dreamed about. No noise, no traffic, no pollution, and my house doesn’t make me feel guilty about living. I can breathe again. Everything is balanced, and there’s so much to share!’

‘Is this an invite-only gig?’

‘Not really, but you’re expected to bring useful skills, and be willing to lend a hand. Those guys on the gate - that’s a roster, so I guess I’ll get my turn. And watering the plants. And cooking on Wednesdays and Saturdays. I love it. We’re all making the wheel turn in the right way.’

‘I’m assuming your skills are the gardening side of things?’

I feel proud that she recognises it.

Yes! I do permaculture design, it’s so easy, I can’t believe I make a living from it.’

‘You pay each other?’

‘Well, it’s more like exchange. I help everyone with their gardens and in return I get other things I might need. The first thing I earned was this rug.’

I stroke it proudly. The coffee floods my brain, and the turquoise and orange colours of the rug swirl in front of my eyes.

‘It's hand-stitched. One of the artists in the village has been collecting materials for years, and she made it up for me. Isn't it amazing?’

Em nods.

‘Plus, I do singing lessons, too. I just love the community here. It's about harnessing the collective intelligence and supporting each other. We share all our resources, our space, and all our skills and knowledge. Plus, I've been elected to the Community Corporation, which manages the village.’

‘Who elected you?’

‘It's all democratic. Everyone votes, but you don't have to vote if you don't want to.’

‘Hmm. No offence, but it sounds kinda like a commune.’

‘You keep saying things like that. Is it such a bad thing, Em? I just finally feel like I have a purpose, here.’

I feel so disappointed. Why doesn't she see that I'm happy? Why doesn't she approve?

‘But do you think it's the answer?’

I know she's referring to the uncertainty everywhere, outside the village. I sigh audibly. It's overwhelming, and I struggle to think of a response. ‘I don't think there is just one answer. It's an answer. It's something I can do. I can take action, and that makes me feel like I'm living a meaningful life. That's what matters to me. I know I'm making a difference, but I guess a lot of people wouldn't get involved in this type of project. I mean, would you?’

She shakes her head vehemently.

‘No. It's living in each other's pockets. Sharing things with each other is cool, but being rostered for tasks and having to ‘participate’ because it's ‘enriching’, that reminds me of a school camp.’

‘But that's what I love about it! I'm part of something that I believe in. I belong somewhere.’

‘I don't want this to sound mean, Alexander, but don't you think that a small group of people fencing off their little world and ignoring everything going on outside sounds like sticking your head in the sand?’

‘No! Not at all. The idea is that we're thinking global and acting local. We're doing something about our own patch. That's got to count for something. Every small group of people who band together to respect the earth becomes part of a bigger social

transformation. You know, 'from little things, big things grow'. 'Be the change you want to see'.

'You know I'm all for looking after your patch and swimming against the tide of mediocrity, but what about individual choice? It strikes me that everyone here has to look the same, and do the same things...'

'That IS choice! We're choosing to be part of a movement. It's technology based on social justice.'

She raises her eyebrows and looks irritated. I don't want conflict between us. I deliberately speak more softly.

'The way I see it is that no-one is an island...by themselves people are quite powerless.'

She shrugs. 'Fair call. I'm not sure I agree that individuals are powerless, but anyway...'

'Well, it's not for everyone.'

I smile at her, trying to establish equilibrium, but she looks uncomfortable.

'Are you still eating meat?'

'There's no meat allowed in the village. We recognise that vegetarianism is the way it has to be. It's inefficient to grow crops for other animals to eat, just so that we can eat them. I've cut down, but I've gone outside for a steak a few times.'

It makes me feel guilty, but every now and then a piece of meat seems to suit my body.

'Let's go for a wander. I want to show you everything. Bring your coffee.'

I pull the front door open and pluck my sunhat from the wooden peg next to the door. It's another hand-woven item; it reminds me of an exotic basket. I grab her hand and tow her along the path, trying to get her to feel the same excitement and hope as I feel. A dirt trail leads towards the forest, which marks the boundary of the village.

I point proudly.

'Here we have the woodland.'

It is dense with trees of all sizes, and smells alive: a mix of living and dead vegetation. I breathe in deeply, and it's like filling my lungs with life elixir.

'Do you smell that?'

Cracking sounds emanate from the undergrowth, and she's genuinely thrilled.

'What lives in there?'

‘Yes, exciting, isn't it? I hear a lot of noises at night, but at the moment we're just leaving them be to establish themselves. Then we might investigate what they are. I've seen a few small things, though. Bush rats, a couple of lizards. Lots of bugs. That's encouraging, I think.’

‘Yeah, probably just rats.’

There is just one man at the front gate now, a different one. He's older, has long grey hair and wears a white shirt, but he carries a stick in one hand and a wooden drum in the other. He looks up momentarily when he sees us, then drops his eyes away.

I ride with Em back to the train station. We guide our bikes along the trail, and neither of us says much. I'm feeling tired; it's been a long day.

‘Thanks so much for coming, Em.’

I grasp her shoulder and squeeze it.

‘Thanks for inviting me! It's great to see you happy, Alexander. Take care of yourself. Come see me soon.’

I smile and wave to her through the train window, but I'm frightened. It's a fork in the road. Is it the end of the road?

Acts of God

How's my luck? News reports are talking about a cyclone moving towards the mainland. It will probably turn out to be nothing, but of all the weeks! Work is sending a few of us up the coast for a junket. I'm meant to be checking out some software packages that the other worksites are using, and reporting back to the boss. Free food for a few days, nice hotel, the usual perks. But this time, there's good company, too. Em is travelling with us.

We're seeing each other on the low. No-one from the office knows about it. She doesn't usually move in the same circles with us IT crew, but there's a conference for her strategy geeks happening this week so we're all travelling together. I start keeping an eye on the weather. I don't want to be caught up in the middle of it. Our flights out are Thursday morning, and we're booked to fly back Friday night. By

Tuesday it looks to be ramping up, and on Wednesday they reckon it will hit Thursday night. We'll see.

The atmosphere is tense at the airport on Thursday morning. Planes are still flying, but people are crowding around the tv screens at the departure gate. The news updates are saying that it's gonna be the biggest cyclone in the country's history. I look over at Em. She's leaning her weight on one leg in her pointy office shoes, and her arms are crossed across her chest in her business suit. She's a sharp dresser, always looks like the real deal. She's flicking her eyes between the tv screens and messaging someone on her phone.

'Got anyone in the cyclone zone?' I ask her.

'An old school mate lives on a mango farm up there. I've been chatting to her this morning online. She'll be right, though. They're evacuating as soon as they get the word to go. You?'

'Yeah, most of my family - they're spread out all over the region. I'm starting to get worried.'

'Ah, I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. The news always makes it out to be worse than it is.'

On the plane there's a low nervous hum of chatter, and the air seems still and stagnant. Maybe it's anticipation. By the afternoon it's clear we're all going to be stuck here for who knows how long. When we land, the airport is in chaos, people rushing about all over the place. The boards are showing delays and flights cancelled. Getting a taxi out is a nightmare - the ranks are full of business people making hasty arrangements on their phones.

Our hotel is on the esplanade next to the casino. It's the classy sort of place that we get for work trips. I don't mind being stuck here for a few days with Em, if it comes to that. My room is impressive; a king-sized bed and a wall-mounted flat screen. I kick off my shoes next to the bed and look around for the mini-bar. I text her when I've set myself up with a scotch.

'Gonna watch the cyclone on tv. Wanna join me?'

She knocks on the door a few minutes later.

'Nice room. Mine's pretty much the same, except I've got a view of the casino.'

She has brought the contents of her mini bar in her handbag, and she arranges all the bottles on the sink. She pours herself gin with soda and I grab another scotch. We

sprawl on the bed, and I consult the room service menu. I stroke her back, and she flinches just a little. She points at the tv.

‘Any word from your family?’

‘Yeah, there was a message from my cousin when I got off the plane. They’re alright for now, but man, I’m worried, Em. All the towns where they live are right in the firing line. I feel so powerless, just sitting here waiting for it all to happen.’

She nods. She doesn’t say much most of the time, anyway. For a person whose job is writing, she’s not very expressive. I’m always the one who initiates conversation on the chat program at work. She’s in an office on one side of the floor, and I’m in an office on the other side. I’ve done the office romance thing a thousand times and it’s a bit of fun. A good distraction from work. Em is a bit different, though. It’s hard to know if she’s into it, because she acts like she’s not. She says it’s cos she doesn’t want the boss to find out, but she’s hot and cold. Maybe she’s just playing cool. Her phone pings and she reads the message.

‘Oh that’s eerie. It’s my friend, Monica, on the mango farm. She’s says they’ve taped up the windows, and they’ve lost electricity. They’re going to a safe space, whatever that means.’

The same footage keeps scrolling on the news channel, though; there’s no live update. At a media conference held a few hours earlier, the Premier is wearing a pastel pink shirt and looking sombre amid the flashing cameras.

‘Don't worry about packing bags. Just grab your loved ones and get out.’

‘She’s doing alright,’ says Em. ‘For someone who’s only been in that job a few months, having to face a national disaster...’

I feel a sudden lump in my throat. The Premier looks genuinely concerned, even though by now she’s no doubt holed-up somewhere safe.

‘All the evidence continues to indicate that this is the biggest cyclone that has ever hit land, and our people are facing a terrifying next 24 hours. Please be safe.’

The media is having a field day, and it’s not comforting. My head is pounding. It’s been a long day and I remember that I haven’t eaten anything since breakfast this morning. I pick up the room service menu again and my stomach knots at the thought of food. I slide off the bed and try walking around the room. I’m feeling light-headed.

‘Are you OK?’

‘I’m struggling, Em. Why won’t they give us an update on what’s going on? It just makes me focus on the worst possibilities ’

It all started a couple of months ago when we started chatting at a staff function. I think I said something about how the catering company always serves the same sandwiches, and she laughed. That was the first time I’d seen her smile. Before that I hadn’t thought about her much; just another one of the cold, stuck-up bitches in the office. I did wonder why she wears suits, though, when there’s no dress code. Maybe it’s cos she works in strategy. Most of us IT crew wear jeans and the free polo shirts that the software companies give us. They’re synthetic, but it saves money on work clothes. I’d also noticed that she doesn’t wear much jewellery, unlike most chicks. I used to be a team leader in a jewellery store, so I notice when people don’t wear jewellery. My wedding band is the thickest one I could find, and I usually wear a pirate hoop earring.

I stand next to her at Friday night drinks.

‘Well this a surprise,’ she says, ‘I thought everyone with families and kids gets to knock off early on Fridays.’

So, she’s noticed me. Well, noticed that I don’t usually go to office drinks, anyway. The rounds keep flowing and it’s a late, drunken night by the time I jump on the last train home.

‘Are you Ok to get home?’ I ask her, picking up my backpack.

She’s not as drunk as I thought she might be. Her voice is steady.
Oh yes, no need to worry about me.’

We both arrive slightly early for the Christmas function. I sit next to her so we can chat, and order beers while we’re waiting for the others to arrive. It’s another long night of too much eating and drinking, but I watch as she poses as the entertainer in the middle of the table. At work she’s quiet and serious, but it seems that a few drinks turns her into a performer. She’s more fun this way. After dinner, we find ourselves walking in the same direction. She turns into the polite daytime colleague again.

‘Are you having some holidays over Christmas?’

‘Yeah. It’s gonna be interesting this year...I’ve just split up with my wife. It’s been two weeks since I took the ring off. Look, the tan line is almost gone.’

After all these years, and only two weeks to rub it all out. I touch my hand where the ring used to be.

‘I’m living in a caravan parked on my sister’s front lawn. I’ve spent the last two weeks with Jim Beam.’

She instantly looks sympathetic.

‘Oh, that’s awful. I’m so sorry to hear it. And two weeks before Christmas. What a terrible thing to happen.’

In her eyes I see grief: she has been through sadness. She pats my arm and her tone is compassionate.

‘Take care of yourself, Josh.’

The tv channels are flipping between journalists stationed in different towns. The footage comes and goes because the connections keep dropping out. On the net, people are starting to upload fuzzy, out-of-focus videos from mobile phones. Trees bending, rain in biblical proportions, and wind blowing outdoor furniture around. Look at this,’ Em holds up her phone.

It’s a cyclone fan-site. An American drawl provides voice-over commentary on the meteorological pictures with a laser pointer.

‘Now these are classic troughs... You can’t get a much better cyclone than this one. It’s a bit sloppy on one side, so that will affect its impact...but here we see a series of infra-red images from the last 24 hours, showing that this storm has a well-developed eye. This will add to its intensity, as will the favourable upper level environment. It has become a better organised cyclone.’

The laser pointer moves over a map of the cyclone region.

‘These towns should consider themselves under the gun at this point in time.’

I feel disgusted. The voice-over sounds excited.

‘I can’t believe people get off on disaster.’

We meet in town on a hot afternoon during the Christmas break. Since the work dinner, I’ve found myself thinking about her, so I flip her a few messages. I ask her how her holidays are going, and tell her about the few things I’ve been up to. Just before new year, she replies with a suggestion of an afternoon beer in the city. I’ll have to catch the train because my ex, Kristy, got the car. She said she needs it to run the kids around.

Em is sitting outside the pub sipping a beer. The pavement is swimming in haze with the heat. My shorts are clinging to my legs uncomfortably, and I'm not confident about how I look. My t-shirt hangs over my gut, and I can feel sweat stains sweeping outwards in waves from the armpit seams. It could be my imagination, but it also feels like I've got breasts; the shirt is hugging me too tightly.

'Jesus it's hot!' I immediately feel like an idiot for stating the obvious, but it seems to break the ice because she smiles. She looks a bit nervous; she's shredding a paper coaster between her fingers. Some of the shreds are floating in a pool of spilt beer on the table. I notice that she has blue eyes. Not as blue as mine. I point at her glass, which is almost empty.

'Refill?'

She nods. She's looking at my feet. Guys' feet are ugly. Seems unfair that we wear sandals in the summer for all the world to see them. Chicks' feet on the other hand... I push on the mint-green swinging door to the front bar. By the time I get back with fresh coasters and two pint glasses, she has opened the wooden box that I brought with me. It's a chess set. She mentioned one time that she likes chess, and so do I. The woody-felt scent of the jumbled pieces mixes with the smell of beer. I'm looking forward to getting drunk with a new friend.

The pieces shuffle back and forth across the board and she wins the game. After the first round, I go to the bar for a jug of beer. It's cheaper than pints. She stands up during the third game and gestures towards the ladies'. Her eyes are glazed and she stumbles a little on cute pink dainty heels.

'I love those shoes!' I say, when she wobbles back to the table.

The pub gets busier with the later afternoon crowd. People are glancing over their beers at the chess set. My head rocks pleasantly with alcohol, and I tell Em about Kristy. She's always been jealous; she would never have let me meet a woman in town for a beer. In fact, I had a few affairs just because I was so bored and frustrated with her possessive insecurities.

'I'll never get into another serious relationship,' I say.

'Understandable that you would say that now, but maybe a bit further down the track...!', she ventures cautiously.

I swing my head vehemently.

'No. Definitely not. Why bother? I just don't think people are made to be monogamous. We're just not built to be with one person for life.'

'Right then. So just temporary transactions?'

'Seems that way, so far. How about you? Met your knight in shining armour yet?'

She looks at me, alarmed, so I wink to let her know I'm joking.

'Nah, not yet. He must have gotten lost on the way. Stability, belonging, connectedness, it all sounds good. Maybe I just haven't found it yet, or maybe it is just a fairy tale. Did you have other relationships before you met your wife?'

'Yeah, I was engaged when I met Kristy. I'd already decided I was gonna leave this other girl, and then she fell pregnant. It was bad timing to leave, but Kristy and I knew there was something serious happening between us.'

'What about the baby?'

'He's 14 now. I pay child support for him every fortnight but I've never met him.'

She raises her eyebrows.

'No hard feelings, though! Kristy already had two kids, and we had Taylah pretty quickly so that they could all grow up together.'

I pull out my wallet and show her the photo. Taylah's cheeky smile always cheers me up. The photo is a few months old, and every time I see her she seems to be changing so fast. Like me, she's blond. She's got more freckles, though, so she got her mum's pale skin. She also seems to have gotten my chubby tendencies. Still, at this age, who knows if it's puppy fat. Not that it worries me; Taylah would be the apple of my eye whatever she looked like. I do worry about her growing up with Kristy. That woman is so insecure about her body. It would break my heart if she told Taylah that she's anything but perfect.

'This is my little angel girl. Gorgeous, hey...'

Em nods at me.

'She's a cutie. She'll be a heartbreaker with the boys in a few years.'

'Not if I've got anything to do with it.'

'So, did you grow up here? Where did you go to school?'

'All over the place. My old man was army, so we moved around. My folks split up when I was 13. Dad chucked me out when I was 14, 'cos I was seeing someone who was 36.'

‘Wow, that’s an age gap!’

‘It sort-of worked for a while. I moved in with her for a few months, then it ended. I just moved onto the next thing, you know...’

‘Have you ever been single?’

‘Nah, not really. A few months, max. Lots of fish in the sea, like they say. Now I’ve been telling you all this stuff, but what about you? What’s your story?’

She looks uncomfortable and moves about in her seat.

‘It’s not very exciting, like your life. Short version is that I’ve always lived here. I went straight from school to Uni, started working after Uni, and here I am.’

‘No husband, then? That’s why you don’t wear a ring.’

She looks down at her hands.

‘Nope.’

‘Kids?’

‘Nah, not for me.’

‘Why not? You’d be a good mum.’

How do you know that?’

‘Well, that’s what most chicks say till they meet the right one. I reckon you just haven’t met the right bloke yet.’

I grin at her and she stares coldly at me. Mental note not to get on this chick’s bad side.

‘So... where do you live? Are you sharing with mates?’

‘No, I’ve got my own place. It’s nice. Big gum trees in the garden...I can watch the possums jumping around in the...’

‘We had those little bastards once. My old man used to trap them. Have you ever heard them fight with each other? It sounds like demons hissing or something! But the main thing is, you don’t want to get ‘em in the roof ‘cos they pee up there and it can fuck up your wiring...so, rental place, then?’

‘No, unfortunately. I’ve got a massive mortgage. I feel like a lion in a cage, just pacing aimlessly every fortnight. It’s claustrophobic.’

I stare at her. She’s kind of weird. I’ve never heard anyone talk like that.

‘Yeah, but you have to have a house. That’s just what you do. That’s why we all go to work.’

‘There’s got to be more to life than that. I hate my job...I feel like I’m swimming in a slimy pool of debt.’

'That's heavy. What kind of job would you want?'

'I don't know. I just sort of ended up where I am, but it's not fulfilling at all.'

'Work's not meant to be fulfilling, Em, it's just what you do to pay the bills.'

'But for what? What's it all for?'

'See, when you have kids you don't have time to think about all this stuff. Too busy worrying about putting petrol in the car and food on the table.'

'Do you ever feel like you're drowning? Like it's never going to end?'

'You realise it's only money after a while. What matters is family. When you make your kids smile, that's what matters.'

Must be the piss, but she wins four games in a row. In the fourth game, I'm so drunk that the pieces seem to move by themselves. It's dark and I'm hungry.

'Do you want to get some food?'

We stumble towards the pizza bar across the street; it's calling us with rich greasy smells. By the time we've finished eating it's after midnight and the trains have stopped running. She offers to drive me home. I laugh.

'As if you're able to drive!'

'Well how are you going to get home?'

I live a long way out from the city. My sister's place is on one of the new housing estates. She was sucked in by the marketing. It was the one where that famous tennis player is all kitted up in his gear pointing his racquet at a display home.

'A new home with no deposit! It's true! Have your own slice of paradise right here! Rent money is dead money!'

When I saw those ads, I was almost sucked in too. No deposit! That's an offer. Kristy and I went for a drive to look at them when they were being built, but they weren't even proper streets. They're miles from the train station, and driving to the city would be like having an extra mortgage. In the end, we decided that they're too far out. Still, my sister got a good deal - she does a bit of part-time as a receptionist locally, so it doesn't matter to her.

'I could drive your car,' I suggest to Em, 'as long as you're sure it's OK to give me a lift.'

'Of course! How else would you get home? I mean, how much would it cost to catch a cab?'

'I don't know,' I shrug, 'maybe a hundred dollars?'

'That's crazy. Let's take my car. Are you sure you're OK to drive? I'm still pretty pissed. I probably couldn't drive home now anyway.'

I laugh at her and hold my hand out for the keys.

It takes an hour on the main highway to get to my sister's house. We divert through a shopping mall car park when we see blue and red flashing lights ahead. I pull into the driveway next to the bulky white caravan. It's an ugly beast, but I'm grateful for it at the moment. My sister's kids have chucked all their toys around in the front yard. I don't know why she lets them get away with that. Her hubby's big eight cylinder is in the carport. Costs a fortune to run but it's a machine. My sister has stuck one of those 'baby on board' signs in the back window, and some of those stick-figure family stickers. The air conditioner on the side of the house is heaving. It's so bloody hot the palm tree is dropping its branches. The carport roof is covered in strings of its orange seeds.

I climb the stairs to the caravan and push the door open.

'Phew, it's hot in here. Let me just put the fan on.'

I reach out of the window and connect the fan up to the extension cord that's running from the house. I hold a hand out for Em to enter the caravan.

'Careful getting up those stairs in your state!'

I laugh, but I hope she doesn't break her ankle.

She doesn't take my hand. She steadies herself against the door instead.

She points at the tiny plastic Christmas tree draped in green tinsel that's leaning over the tv screen.

'Nice.'

'Yeah, I decorated it with Taylah last weekend.'

Custody was the first thing I sorted out with Kristy. She's fine for Taylah to visit me here every second weekend till I can get something more permanent sorted.

Em sits on the table that converts into a bed and stares around at the compact stove, kettle and mini-fridge. My sister has hung some embarrassing white lacy curtains over the small window.

'How is it going living in a caravan?'

'Ah, it pretty much sucks! Nah, it's OK for the time being. My sister's kids are always hanging around, hassling me to go play with them. Or fix their computers. Keeps my mind off things. My sister is pretty cool. She doesn't charge me much rent

to be here, and I get dinner every night, even if it is just fried stuff. I thought I would lose weight once I moved away from Kristy but here has been just as bad.'

'Do you want to lose weight?' she asks delicately.

'Look at me!' I grasp my shirt and tug it away from my body. 'I know I'm huge!'

'Do you play sports?'

'Nah, not since I was at school. Even then I never joined any teams or anything because we were always moving around.'

'Do you go for walks or bike rides...or, er...whatever...'

She trails off. She's trying not to be nosy, I can tell.

'No, it's dangerous to walk around here. I just figure I'll start eating better once I get my own place.'

I switch the telly on and some models in a video clip gyrate provocatively to a repetitive dance beat. Through the drunkenness that is starting to fade, the models look slightly ridiculous.

'Do you want a drink?' I ask. 'You know you could sleep on the fold out bed if you want to.'

She thinks about it for a second, then shakes her head.

'Nah, thanks but I reckon I'll get moving.'

'Do you know how to get back to the city?'

'No idea.'

I laugh and draw a map for her in red rollerball pen on the back of a shopping list. I'm pretty sure she'll be OK. There's a few ways back to the main road; she'll find it by trial and error. She backs out of the driveway and I wave to her. After she's gone I unfold the table into the bed and switch the telly back on. I flip between the music videos and a golf tournament and infomercials. It takes a few minutes to get my courage up, but I ping her a message.

'I really wanted to hit on you tonight but I thought it might be uncool.'

Tears roll into the glass in my hand and mix with the dregs of the mini-bar Scotch.

'Josh, it's OK, don't worry.'

'I'm really worried, Em...'

I'm a nervous wreck. It's been an hour since I've heard from anyone. My phone pings.

‘It’s my cousin. He’s still in his house and he’s shitting himself with the wind howling outside.’

‘He’ll be OK. If he’s in a safe place he’ll be fine. The worst of it will be over soon.’

People carry mattresses across the screen amidst footage of palm trees swaying violently. A woman in a fluorescent yellow singlet speaks into the camera. ‘I’m just afraid for me kids. They reckon the water’s gunna go up over the roofs.’ Another woman holding a small dog removes the cigarette from her mouth to say,

‘I’ve got a real bad feeling about this one. It just gives ya goosebumps.’

‘I know the media operates on drama, but it’s so hard not to worry when you’ve got family involved.’

I’m sniffing into my hands and I don’t care if she sees me crying. They say women love vulnerability, anyway.

I make sure that I run into her work on our first day back after the holidays. She looks stunned when I appear next to her at the photocopier, but she stares me in the eye for a good few seconds. I’m not sure if she’s weird about the other night, but there’s definitely an undercurrent between us. I message her after dinner most nights when I’m sitting on the couch flipping between channels. It’s fun. I know I’m getting interested in her. In some ways, she’s different from all the other women I’ve known. She’s a deep thinker, always takes everything so seriously. Too seriously, maybe. Doesn’t talk crap. It’s like she’s from a different world. But then sometimes she’s just a normal chick playing hard to get: bitchy, like she’s irritated with me. All chicks do that. Then sometimes she gets a bit flirty and answers questions with questions. She never shares too much detail about herself, though - a bit secretive. Holds back. Well that’s OK, it’s early days. Hey, I’ve just come out of something heavy. Don’t want to get too emotionally invested just yet. Just let her know I’m attentive.

A few nights later she starts pinging me with messages.

‘I’m so depressed at work.’

‘Have a drink.’

I’m drowning my sorrows with vodka. I’m so tired of being trapped. Being frugal never makes any difference. I hate this job.’

‘Can you resign? Just leave?’

‘How bout we flee our misery and escape to a tropical island?’

‘You know I’m in!’

She invites me to her place on Saturday night. She’s looking after a friend’s house, and there’s a swimming pool and a billiard table. We drink a carton of beer between us. I suspect we both know what will happen, but somehow it doesn’t matter. Just fun between friends. But I’m still not sure if she’s into me. Maybe it’s my weight. I finally got the courage to weigh myself in my sister’s bathroom and I’m a long way over what I’ve ever been before. My gut sticks out so far, I can’t even see my own cock. Maybe I’m just nervous with a new person. You know, when they see your body for the first time? The next day she drives me home in the mid-afternoon heat. I would have stayed the day, but she said she has stuff to do.

On the telly they’re saying it’s Category 5 now, winds over 300 k, and the whole thing is 500 ks wide. My Dad calls me.

‘Dad, are you OK?’

His voice sounds small and distant, and I can hear thumping outside.

‘I’ve never seen anything like this, Josh! After 30 years of cyclone seasons, my word. It’s enough to scare you shitless!’

‘Are you alright? Where are you?’

‘I’m sitting in the bathtub with the dog. We’ve got plenty of cushions, I’ve got a mattress over me, few bottles of Jacks here, we’ll be fine. Anyway, I’m just calling to say g’day before we get cut off. They reckon it’s about another hour or so before it really hits. I don’t know when we’ll have batteries up and running again. Look, I’d better call your sister so I won’t keep you...’

‘Dad! Don’t go, have you got...’

The line clicks off and I break into sobs.

‘Is he OK?’ Em asks.

‘How do you say goodbye on a call like that, knowing what’s coming?’

I wipe my nose on my sleeve.

‘Fuck, that’s hard. He’s got the dog with him in the bath.’

We begin to see each other, though she never calls me her boyfriend or anything. She says she doesn’t want anyone from work to know, so we meet up in the car park a few streets from the office. She holds my hand when we walk to the market for lunch. We drink rounds of beer with our laksa and get back to the office in a bit of

a daze. She kisses me leaning against a cement pole in the car park, and both of us are on the lookout for our bosses strolling by. We roll on the grass in the square and in the late afternoon sun by the river. She's still hot and cold, though. I ask her if she wants to catch up during the week a few times, but she says she's busy. We still chat all day at work on email, anyway. I tell her about my DJ gigs: people love a Top 40 mix at their parties. I send her pictures of my new car: a big, blue eight-cylinder, with a sports fascia and alloy wheels. Turns out Kirsty taking off with the old bomb was a win! I show her the online listing for my new place - it's a brand-new rental, near my sister. I tell her about the new stuff I'm buying for the house. Taylah visits, so I send Em the pictures of her cooking dinner and watching movies on the new couch. This weekend is a big few days of car racing. I'm gonna order some pizzas and watch all the racing I can handle, with no wife nagging me and no kids making noise and mess everywhere.

I have to get up and walk around the room to calm down. I try to open a window but apparently the rooms are climate controlled. I turn the air con up. I feel like I'm boiling.

'Dude, you're freaking out. Relax. Everyone's going to be fine.'

She's sitting on the bed playing games on her phone.

'Yeah, you're right, I should pull myself together. But I could hear the fear in my Dad's voice...'

'Worrying isn't going to do any good. Your Dad said he's fine. It will be all over in a few hours.'

There's still no new footage on the telly. The news stations are looping images from previous hours: a troop of soldiers loading out of a van, and police wandering across the screen, looking for residents to hurry along. I chew my fingernails and tap my feet on the bed. Breaking news. An announcer in a bright red suit and teased hair heralds that 'the Monster is at the door'. It's due to hit land any moment. The screen shows an orange blur streaking across a meteorological map. The announcer's voice-over says, 'it is now too late to evacuate. Avoid moving outside. If you are in a car or other vehicle, take cover now.'

I suddenly realise that I'm starving.

'Em, are you hungry?'

She doesn't answer. I look across the bed and she's crashed out.

The tension temporarily eases. I feel calmer, but sort of patient in a resigned way. The build-up is over. I've just gotta wait out the uncertainty. I eat the nuts from the mini-bar and I'm still hungry. The news channels start talking about international events. I'm furious. How can they think about anything else? I lie down. I've got a pounding headache.

When I wake up, Em is sitting up flicking between the news updates and music videos.

'Josh, do you think this is caused by humans?'

'What?'

'The cyclone.'

'Nah, we've always had cyclones. My Dad has lived up there for 30 years with them.'

'What about all the scientific evidence? For years they've been predicting this - more extreme events, more damage...'

'What evidence? There's plenty of scientists who say there's nothing to get excited about.'

'Don't you think it's just a bit weird that this is the worst cyclone we've ever had?'

'Weather just goes through natural cycles. You can't change it. Nature I mean. We've always had cyclones. The media just likes to hype things up. It's good for ratings.'

'What about the storms in Vanuatu, the tsunamis, the earthquakes, the flooding?'

'I dunno, Em. That stuff's got nothing to do with me. Maybe we're all fucked anyway? The way I think about life is that we're here for a good time, not a long time.'

'Are you serious? Don't you think about it coming to an end? All the recklessness? Don't you think about what kind of world Taylah will grow up in?'

'I dunno. Kids are smart, they'll sort it out. She'll be right.'

'But who's responsible?'

For what? All that stuff is hippy propaganda. Save the earth and all that. It's the same scare-mongering that the greenies have been up to for decades. If the government starts taking it seriously then maybe I'll listen, but it doesn't look like everyone else is turning into an earth mother.'

'Maybe that's the problem, though. Someone has to take the lead.'

I wonder if she wants me to take the lead.

‘Do you want to come over Saturday night? Can I cook you dinner, at the new bachelor pad?’

Her eyes are red from lack of sleep and flecks of mascara have dropped onto her cheeks. She nods.

‘Sure, why not.’

Another scorching day. Intense heat blasts me when I open the white-painted chipboard door.

‘Hello, you made it!’

‘Your house isn’t listed - this whole area says paddocks on my map. I got lost and ended up on the northern highway.’

She sounds irritated; her voice is whiny.

‘Ha! That’s classic...the highway is miles away! Still, no worries, you got here.’

She hands me a Thai cookbook.

‘Happy housewarming.’

‘Oh, thanks, Em. I’ll have to find a spot for it. Don’t really have any other books here. Come in, it’s cool. I’ve had the air-con pumping all day.’

I gesture for her to follow me down the hallway to the kitchen.

‘What do you think? Nice place, eh!’

‘It looks like a display home.’

Her tone sounds funny and I have to look at her to check that she’s not joking around.

‘What are the lights over there?’

‘That’s for my DJ gigs. I hooked up the sound system to the screen so I can use it as a tv. It’s like a party in my lounge room!’

‘And this is the fancy new couch?’

‘Yeah - all the furniture matches cos I got it as a package deal. Finally, I can have whatever colour I want, no floral cushions and girly shit everywhere. Oh sorry, you’re a girl. Anyway, my sister says I should get some art or something. Make it look more homey, but I reckon it’s alright to start with.’

‘It does look like a bachelor pad.’

I wink at her.

‘Do you want to see the playroom?’

The two bedrooms face each other across the hallway. It's a small hallway and we jostle awkwardly for space on the tiled floor. She stands in the doorway to the second bedroom.

'Is this Taylah's room?'

'Yeah, I bought her that new bed and the bedside table. She wants all the furniture in white so she can do bright colours with the bedspread.'

She points through the window.

'Is that your fence line?'

'Yeah, that's the neighbour's bathroom. See all their ornaments on the window sill?'

'Far out, wouldn't want to have a loud conversation, everyone in the neighbourhood would hear it.'

It's not that bad, Em.'

I pull her into my room to show her the enormous bed with its new chocolate brown suede headboard and my new coffee-coloured sheets.

'Everything matches. Rad, huh?'

'For sure...um, it's kind of dark in here...'

She walks over to the window and tries to lift the venetian shades.

'Oh, I don't really open that window. It faces the street so I don't want everybody to see in.'

She peers out through the window. Not much to see out there: I've got a two-metre strip of lawn that is a bugger to keep alive. It's right in the sun. A few people are out in the street, washing their cars or squirting water on their lawns.

'It's like a Lego village.'

I feel proud. Lego villages are very orderly, and they're fun places for kids to play.

'Yeah I know, everything is so brand new and neat and tidy. It's wicked. Would you like a drink? I've got some RTDs with whiskey and cola.'

'Sure. That will be something new!'

'Take a seat on the couch and I'll check how the dinner's going. It's the first time I've used the oven but it should be OK...'

The roasted chicken and vegetables go down a treat. She eats everything on her plate.

'This is probably the most nutritious thing I've eaten in months!'

‘Seriously? What do you normally eat?’

‘Snacks, mainly. Ice cream...’

‘What! You never cook?’

‘Nah, not really. Cooking for yourself is a bit of a chore.’

‘I love cooking. It’s relaxing. So how come you look so fit and healthy?’

‘I dunno, running and swimming. Don’t want to get too flabby.’

I flip through the channels and find some car racing.

‘I reckon you’ll like this, Em. It’s a replay but so far this one’s been the best race of the season.’

I sit close to her on the couch and pat her hair while I explain the teams and the drivers to her.

It’s another long, drunken evening. For someone so small she drinks a lot. She ends up spilling a can of Beam and coke on the couch, and tiramisu cake all over her dress. I push her into the shower cubicle, hoping it will sober her up. I throw the dress into the washing machine and watch repeats of ‘Happy Days’ on tv while the load finishes.

The next morning, she goes out to her car and I hear her throwing up into the patch of lawn behind the rubbish bins. She looks pale and ill when she comes inside.

‘Are you Ok?’

‘Yeah, a bit woozy after all that whiskey.’

‘You had quite a few, I reckon!’

I point at the pile of empty cans on the kitchen bench. She looks over and grimaces.

‘Eugh.’

‘Did you want to stay? I was just planning to have a quiet day, you know, just chill, watch some tv...’

‘Er...nah, I’d better get going. I said I’d meet a friend this arvo.’

A few days later, we meet in the cafe next door to the office. I get there early and grab a table behind a fake palm tree. When I see her at the door I grin and wave her over.

‘Hey, I got you a coffee.’

‘Oh, thanks.’ She sips on it.

I take a mouthful of my own cappuccino and launch into the speech I’ve been preparing.

'You know, Em, I've been thinking. I don't want to pre-empt things. I mean, I don't want to use the word 'love' or anything, but I can see things between us going somewhere. I'd like to explore that.'

She looks startled.

'What?'

'Well, how are you feeling? I mean, no pressure of course, but...'

'But you've just ended your marriage. You told me not long ago that you don't want a relationship. You said you don't even believe in monogamy!'

'Yeah, well you've opened my eyes to all sorts of new opportunities. I've realised I need to get out more. There's so much to be done. We could do it together. We could have so much fun. I really want you to meet Taylah. I think you two would like each other. She's full of life, like you.'

'Um, well I really hadn't thought that far, to be honest. I mean...'

'Yeah, sorry, you're right, I should give you some time to think about it.'

She stares down into the coffee and grips it with both hands.

'So how are your family going?' she asks in a polite tone.

My family are safe. The cyclone turned course at the last minute. Most of the damage they predicted didn't happen.

'Good, everyone's good. I mean, there was some damage, but everyone got through it. We Skyped them all from my sister's place a few days ago. It was great to see them. I got all teary. I still do, when I think about it.'

The Creators

I amble in the summer twilight, the endless familiar heatwave enveloping me in its throbbing roast. Sweat dribbles down my neck. I feel as if I am sinking into the street, becoming one with the cracked, melting asphalt, and wilting with the weeds that straggle up through unattended footpaths. I have walked these streets thousands of times since my childhood, ridden bikes and skateboards, carried tennis racquets and soccer balls. Slipped on fallen peppercorn fruits, snatched figs and feijoas and oranges lolling over garden fences, and waged fuschia-stained lillypilly wars. Held kiddy street stalls. The same linear streets are still here, and the same childhood shortcuts are accessible. The gardens are gone, though. No more agapanthus and cooling cooch grass. Just the clear, rhythmic pounding of my blood in an overheated body, and the uneasiness of the hole calling to be filled.

My stomach feels bloated and uncomfortable, the legacy of last night's sugar binge. During the binges, I feel alive; my body surges with energy and optimism. I am bold, reckless and carefree, even when my heart races uncomfortably and my body sweats, and when sleep eludes me. It is my more-or-less secret. I admit bingeing, but I never explain why. Not that anyone wants reasons. Men seem disgusted, and women are compassionate for the unspoken sufferings of sisterhood.

There is a hole inside me and sometimes its darkness stretches so far that it needs to be urgently filled. It is a bleak vortex, with frightening voices of confusion, despair, instability, and loneliness. Does anyone else hear those voices?

When I feed it sugar, the gaping chasm closes for a few hours. Coming down, I am still alone, still afraid. Still on the journey with no destination. I know that I now walk with the shame of the sugar addict: my spine curves slightly to accommodate the soft sag around my middle. I watch the rise and fall of my stomach flab on a daily basis and feel accordingly disheartened or powerful.

I wonder what could fill that hole. I am alone. A partner? Sometimes I yearn for another person: an ally and a friend through all weather. Couples seem so comforted and exclusive of the outside world. Nothing can disturb that: not fires, floods, heatwaves, water rations or wanderers. Safe in their paradigm, the world cannot not touch them. Inside me, the gyre groans and whirs ominously. Impermanence pops up in my brain like a floating vegetable in a pot of soup. The temporary-ness of all our lives. With the clock so close to midnight, I worry that our efforts are in vain.

Sometimes my dedication to my principles seems hollow, unwise, and freakish. The lone warrior is a miserable and confused little girl. But why yearn, when he may never appear? Waiting for a prince to the rescue is like waiting for pigs to fly. There is a comfortable routine in just looking after myself. Most of the time I am grateful for the simplicity. My own plans and thoughts are what matter, and loneliness is an occasional dull chime of being imperfect and therefore unworthy of love.

Inside me a story is growing, but it's not marriage and children. The equation would be simple if my responsibility was merely to create more humans. Every generation knows uncertainty, but bringing more people into this greenhouse seems unhelpful. Does anyone else hear the clock ticking uneasily? A clock that could stop at any moment? Reproducing is a coping response; it provides normality. But there is more to survival than numbers. I know that children are not my contribution. I follow the road of exploration, without knowing where I am going. I walk, I worry, I absorb information, and keep myself busy. Yet there is something missing. Or is that just a tale that little girls are told?

Things are going from bad to worse, but the veneer of normality is stretched. The newspapers talk about a 'short term down turn', but everyone at the office is gloomy. New lists of companies closing down appear every day. We all know that the economy is collapsing, because no-one has confronted the bigger picture. Within government, there are voluntary separation packages and then, forced redundancies. I think about taking a redundancy, but redundant is not how I feel. I still believe in responsibility. I thirst to make a difference. I'm just not sure how.

The northern parts of the city are feeling it worst. They were the manufacturing and construction zones, and now they are centres of despair and decline. Abandoned buildings where people scavenge for materials to sell. Public

transport that doesn't run anymore. At work, we prepare briefings on water shortages and cost of living. We know it's serious when the numbers start rolling in: ten per cent of houses have their electricity cut off and five per cent can't pay their water bills. Those figures rise steadily. Politicians play out blame dramas in the media: the government is too parochial, and the unions are bullies. Behind the ponce and bravado, the grimness that I saw in Europe is creeping in around me. It's a sense of scarcity, where every person looks after themselves when we should be looking after each other. If I didn't care, I wouldn't worry. I could go to work, collect my paycheque, and centre my life around my own happiness.

The heat squats interminably over the city like a smothering toad. People sleep on the beach for the relief of sea breezes. For fifteen nights, I lie in my lounge room under the whirring, groaning air conditioner, while the brick house around me pulsates under swaddles of shade cloth and fabric pegged to the windows.

Across the city, workers in air-conditioned offices watch the temperature rise steadily each morning through updates from the weather bureau. Our city is the hottest city in the world. Going outside means feeling faint and dizzy within minutes. The humidity rises too. In the office, we complain. Hot and sultry! In the stickiness, suited men part with their jackets and change from poly-cotton armoured warriors into workers. I walk through the city, moving from shady patch to shadow under the trees, but my face burns pink and puffy, and sweat dribbles through my skirt down my legs.

On the sixteenth day is a gentle spray of rain, and workers gaze upwards between the blueish-grey buildings in relief. Steadily the showers become soaking rain, and the drenching refreshes me as I walk from the city. Standing in my kitchen I watch the brown burnt leaves uncurl. Pigeons move and call after days of sitting statue-like under the fruit trees. After days of panting and pacing uncomfortably, the dog stares forlornly out of the window knowing that there will be no walk tonight in a storm. Rain thunders through the roof overnight. A small pond appears on the kitchen floor, but it is the wrong colour for dog wee. My yard is underwater when I look out of the window in the morning. I walk the dog over sandbags,

around piles of dirt and leaves, and pass the men fixing the sewers. Near the train station I step in a pond as the water rises and rises.

The idea of legacy may be grandiose, but what endures, despite the weather? I don't have a legacy of land, but I know why it's the lynchpin for Jem. Her life on the farm is layers of meaning and memories. And I admire Pam for her love of the Port. I don't feel the same connection to it as she does, but it is the pull of a place on a person. Parts of the heart flake off like goal leaf paint in the places we go, and gently rest there forever. Or do parts of the world flake off and lodge in our hearts? In literal terms, no person is an island.

I glance discretely sideways, hoping that he won't catch me looking. His face is hidden behind brown-tinted aviator glasses and his body under a purple-striped shirt. His stomach bulges slightly and I am relieved; there is something mundane about this lofty presence. My heart constricts when I think about his shy downward gaze.

Dogs are pack animals, but she chooses our route. She follows familiar blocks for a while, conducting a circuit of inspection. Then she meanders according to whim, and cats. She remembers where to find acrobatic escapees and furious furry hissers. We walk in the last magical hour of daylight when I breathe in the woody smell of dry eucalypts and she lurches with excitement. She's out in the world, and she's a local celebrity.

'That's a skinny dog. Skinny legs.'

'There's that girl with the big dog.'

People stop to admire her, tell me their dog stories, and stroke her bony frame. She stands mute and motionless. It is years since she raced, and she is still not really a dog. No licking or pawing or cuddly displays of affection. She stands to receive attention, but is gently impatient to progress her search. She is thinking of the cat house with the overgrown garden, where furniture piles spill into the front yard and the kittens bounce and play.

Her place and mine is west of the city. It is flat ground, working people's suburbs, punctuated by pockets of poverty and splashes of wealth. Shrunken elderly European people

wander in twilight, like I do. A woman kicks a fallen branch away from her walking frame while her husband grins at the greyhound.

‘Very fast dog.’

Other elderly people zip by me on motor scooters in a rush of passing air. They cross the railway line neatly and approach curbs like motor cyclists, football flags streaming from their rear baskets. It’s a patriotic place, here. The team captain opened the local hardware store. Slogans and stickers and scarves on letterboxes are calls of local pride.

I wave to the people watering parched and curling fruit trees. Their hoses dangle over dry and dusty soil as they sip from mid-week glasses of wine. A drunk man slurs a greeting from a sticky brown chair on his verandah. He is a slouching sentry in a farm of empty bottles.

My thirsty girl swills deeply from an ice-cream container under the fig trees in a front yard, while I listen to old people’s voices in the house, conversing in Italian.

‘Good evening, miss’, a fragile man in fragile clothing shuffles towards me.

‘I was walking to the bank, and I only had 10 cents in there. Do you have any change on you?’

I have only doggy bags, for her prolific, messy squattings.

I look up from ginger- infused vegetables and his eyes meet mine for an instant. In a terrifying explosion of recognition, I am looking at a pair of eyes identical to my own. Like mine, his eyes are smudged brown around the pupil, their irises misty green-blue. Looking into the same eyes in a noisy Thai restaurant. We both reel. I wonder if my shock is visible. His is subtle but detectable. My body jolts in despair. The stakes are so high. If I lose this game, who knows how far I will fall?

He muses, staring into the burgundy pottery tea cup nursed in his freckled fingers.

‘What I do has no role in this world,’ he observes.

What do you mean?’

‘This world is about survival. It’s not about art.’

I have only heard about those people before: the creative people who are driven by some sort of internal zeal to compulsively create. He is a prolific artist, whose haunting apocalyptic images speak to me of a concern with the future.

‘Would that stop you doing what you do?’

‘No, of course not. What I do is who I am. It's my soul. If I can't create, I feel empty.’

‘Do you think of your work as your legacy?’

‘Maybe. I hadn't really thought of it that way. All I know is that it's my way of talking about the world. I guess if my work inspires anyone else to create, that's a good thing. Do you have a legacy?’

‘I'm not sure yet. I think more about the idea of contribution. I think that we have a responsibility to improve our surroundings. Make stronger networks, maybe. Contributing my voice to a dialogue. I've started thinking that maybe I'm part of the scenery. I mean, one connection among many. A link in the chain. If I think about what matters, it's friends. I'm good at nurturing relationships, if that makes any sense. Helping others get stronger. Cultural survival. Thinking global, acting local, in a small way. I know that the air I want to breathe is about higher aims. I know that we can accomplish something higher than reproduction.’

He smiles. I so desperately want him to approve of me. His gentle shyness makes my heart literally ache for a connection with him. I so desperately want to be as good as him. After an eternity, I have opened my heart.

She knows where the other dogs live, too. The border collie in Regent Street sleeps on its side until we approach. Then it rolls into life, bellowing indignantly as it barrels towards the gate. My gentle skinny-legs ignores the ferocious tribe of chihuahuas in the fibro house in Starr Street, and sidesteps the German Shepherd who parades its yard in Railway Terrace, heaving against the iron fence. She jerks and bounds on the green webbed leash when we pass the shrill fox terriers on Tilbury Street. What do they say to her?

Houses change when they change hands. My parents' old place. I wonder if they planted those voluptuous apricot roses? The dinky wire mesh fence doesn't seem like Mum, but the earthy paintwork could be Dad's choice of tones. Sometimes I pass that house without thinking that it was once my home. It didn't have a second storey extension or a name plaque, back then.

We wander the cemetery rows because it's time off the leash. She pees near the graves and sniffs the fresh flowers. It's an archive of names changing through eras, families, and longer life spans. Dad says the shop was a cinema. Kids walked miles there on Saturday afternoons. They kicked balls in that park, too, where eucalypts tower over red and yellow

play equipment. The racecourse is a supermarket now. The train station has been relocated for commuters in stylish modern townhouses. They have potted yucca plants, not gardens.

We cross the streets of crumbling old stone houses with frangipani flowers and bushy scented citrus trees. These houses have stood a hundred years or more. Some have back-enders, and some are shop-fronts, where faded paint withdraws into the past as illegible shapes on old brick walls. Small lane ways and crooks cross the grid, but the streets are mainly long and wide until they narrow, nearer to the Port. It's still a suburb of roses climbing fence lines, though newly planted natives are spreading across my childhood. It's harder to remember swinging on Hills Hoists and staring into concrete fishponds.

The migration homes have neat front lawns and bulbous chrysanthemums. Veggie patches are staked and weeded and watered, and fruit trees wear billowing plastic bags. Some of these old blocks are split in two and sold as 'opportunity knocks'. Some of the houses are demolished and replaced off the plan. Dolphin statues replace veggie patches, but garden gnomes creep home. In the darkness they look like cats, and her eyes bulge excitedly until she sniffs their inert, crouched forms. Here I feel safe with my blue greyhound, moving toward home in darkness when magpies hop and warble in the playground. Home is the sense of connection. I am a wheel in a cog. I am a friend and ally.

Each individual has a responsibility for the entire biosphere and is required to engage in creative and cooperative activities. (Ian McHarg)

