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Griffith died in 1920 and is now best remembered in his namesakes: an electorate, a society, a suburb and a university. Ninety-six years after he first proposed establishing a university in Brisbane, Griffith University, the city’s second, was created. His commitment to public debate and ideas, his delight in words and art, and his attachment to active citizenship are recognised by the publication that bears his name.

Like Sir Samuel Griffith, Griffith REVIEW is iconoclastic and non-partisan, with a sceptical eye and a pragmatically reforming heart and a commitment to public discussion. Personal, political and unpredictable, it is Australia’s best conversation.
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INTRODUCTION

Life in a time of disasters

Counting the toll

Julianne Schultz

IN the lead-up to Christmas 2011 the usual mix of tension and excitement was underpinned by a new level of anxiety. This century the festive, holiday season has gained a new moniker in many parts of Australia: the disaster season. The geographic diversity of the island continent means that nature’s extremes take different forms, depending on latitude, longitude and patterns of settlement – fires for some, floods and cyclones for others, elsewhere earthquakes and storm surges or the lingering, prodding fingers of drought.

The summer of 2011–12 announced its arrival in a fiery fury in the Margaret River region of Western Australia. Dozens of homes collapsed into ash under the wind-driven force of flame and, as if to underline nature’s great levelling, even one of the oldest and best-tended mansions in the region, a house that had withstood a century and a half of extreme weather, was destroyed.

On the other side of the continent Queenslanders scarcely needed the Bureau of Meteorology to tell them that another wet summer loomed. The blue skies of travel ads were again crowded with heavy clouds; the blessing of some of the coolest days on record tempered the early summer heat. For the state’s many residents who depend on tourism the old slogan, ‘Beautiful one day, perfect the next’, and the rainy day money-back guarantee – which had once turned the ravages of drought into a marketing advantage – mocked cruelly.

At countless Christmas parties conversations about the legacy of the floods were impossible to avoid. Huge billboards entreated drivers of even the most robust four-wheel drives not to use flooded roads; high-rotation radio announcements reminded listeners to update their insurance, prepare their property and evacuation plans, keep provisions and a battery-powered radio (trannie) close to hand.

For the one in four Australians glued to their smartphones a government-created DisasterWatch app provided a ready reckoner of the range of catastrophe stalking the countryside at any minute – and a quick action guide for people and pets in the event of cyclone, earthquake, flood, lightning, storm or tsunami (not fire).
MANAGING DISASTERS HAS taken on a new political urgency here, as in many other countries. The apparent increase in the frequency and severity of random acts of nature, and the immediate and vicarious experience of them through wall-to-wall coverage, has changed the implicit contract between elected officials and the public. The Bush administration’s inept handling of Hurricane Katrina has become a talisman of sorts – in the age of instant communication few leaders, in developed or developing countries, would willingly risk similar opprobrium.

This is not a modern phenomenon; regimes have often collapsed as a result of catastrophic acts of nature, but the pace is now quicker, the urgency greater and the level of expectation – of what can and will be done – higher. It was hard not to feel sorry for the short-lived Japanese Prime Minister, despite his light-blue emergency overalls, failing to show the leadership that country desperately needed in the shocking aftermath of the tsunami, or to be impressed by the New Zealand Prime Minister and Christchurch Mayor as they spoke with calm assurance and compassion to bring some sense of order to earthquake-ravaged Christchurch, or by the Queensland Premier’s compassionate and resolute evocation of the intrepid spirit of Queenslanders.

Then, in August 2011, in what seemed from afar like American over-reaction, much of the United States stopped: metropolises were evacuated as Hurricane Irene taunted the Atlantic Coast. Intrepid reporters and camera operators ventured out, shouting somewhat pathetically into their microphones as water lapped seawalls of the seven emergency-declared states – while those less in awe of nature’s thrall held hurricane parties behind gaffer-taped windows and sandbagged doors.

For a few days much of the world was transfixed. A disaster foretold and broadcast live on television closes the gap between the vicarious fear Hollywood has taught us to enjoy and real threat and suffering, especially with a telegenic president taking control, pointing at maps and looking authoritative in an appropriately windblown way. The subsequent loss and damage was considerable, but on the scale of global disasters so far this century it is unlikely that Hurricane Irene will make the top ten.

IT IS WIDELY predicted that as the world becomes more populous and the effects of climate change become more manifest, natural disasters will increase in frequency and severity. The implications for domestic, regional and global political leadership will become clearer in coming years. The global architecture to cope and manage, to help put places and communities back together again, is far from resolved and this is likely to be one of the big projects of the next few decades.

Quite rightly, managing a disaster response is never easy. Finding the balance – between quickly getting things back to normal and ensuring that the lessons are learnt that will mean the next event is not as catastrophic – is costly and challenging.
Fixing the manmade environment, getting things back to normal, is crucial but just the first step. The desire to quickly remove debris and begin to rebuild is an essential part of the recovery process, yet the expectation needs to be tempered by consultation that ensures history is not repeated, and the knowledge that the human impact will linger long after the last bit of rubbish has been removed.

Random acts of nature and man occur chaotically, with unintended and unpredictable consequences unravelling the cloak of certainty. In the midst of such events no one has perfect knowledge; even those at the control centre are responding to information as it becomes available and predictions that are only as good as the information fed into the current modelling. Intuition, judgement and experience also matter. This is why contemporaneous inquiries that seek to recreate events and sequences across widely dispersed areas are such important tools of understanding and learning – they help explain what happened and suggest steps that may obviate the worst in future.

In frustration and anger, some may hope that these investigations will shine a laser light on the guilty person, who can be named and blamed. That is rare. Blame may provide some comfort, but is rarely simply ascribed. It also suggests a degree of hubris out of kilter with the scale of the disasters that are already characterising this century. People and institutions can do things better, can learn lessons, can work out how to better respond and predict; but the balance between people and nature is not equally weighted and, despite our conceits, is unlikely to ever be so.

Still, one way or another most of us survive. As the central character in Julian Barnes’s Booker-winning novel, The Sense of an Ending (Jonathan Cape, 2011), notes: ‘I survived. “He survived to tell the tale” – that’s what people say, don’t they? History isn’t the lies of the victors as I once glibly assured Old Joe Hunt; I know that now. It’s more the memories of the survivors, most of whom are neither victorious nor defeated.’

As Griffith REVIEW enters its tenth year, this edition is a tribute to those who have survived random and catastrophic acts of man and nature – and those who through no fault of their own succumbed, and need to be remembered.

9 December 2011

A Bushfire category was added to the Action Guide on the DisasterWatch app after this essay was written.
Flooding plains, bursting rivers, human suffering
The 2010–11 Queensland floods
Matthew Condon

IN a skyscraper on Ann Street, Brisbane, behind the sandstone City Hall clock tower, and a stone’s throw from a nub of granite at North Quay commemorating the founding of the capital by Surveyor-General John Oxley (who came ‘in search of water’), are the offices of the Bureau of Meteorology, Queensland division. The division has under its umbrella the Brisbane Regional Forecast Centre, the Queensland Flood Warning Centre and the Queensland Tropical Cyclone Warning Centre. In all, it keeps busy about 150 staff.

Spreading out from that meteorological epicentre in Ann Street is a vast interconnected web of radars, automatic weather stations, river height stations, field observers, storm spotters and satellites that keep a constant eye on weather movements across the state. Paramount on that massive grid – on alert for changes in sea temperatures, wind movements, precipitation, flash floods – are fourteen Weather Watch radars. And chief among those is the Doppler radar at Mount Stapylton, about 40 kilometres south of the city, near Beenleigh. The mountain was named after the surveyor Granville Stapylton, murdered by local Aborigines in 1840. The Doppler now perches atop it, not unlike a giant white teed golf ball surrounded by bush.

The Doppler radar can detect low-level wind and precipitation to a radius of about 150 kilometres: it takes in Brisbane city and even Toowoomba, 127 kilometres west of Brisbane, up on the Great Dividing Range. Another radar in Gympie, north of the capital, also has Doppler capabilities. A third is located in Marburg, sixty kilometres west of the city. All three gaze vigilantly over the greater Brisbane area, and the information gathered feeds into the Regional Forecast Centre and Flood Warning Centre databases.

In June 2010 the bureau’s multitudinous feelers began sensing the advent of an unusually volatile La Niña effect. La Niña and its partner, El Niño, are major seesaw
shifts in weather patterns across the Pacific Ocean in one- to three-year cycles. With a La Niña over northern Australia you could historically expect low pressures, warm oceans, increased cloudiness, and a high likelihood of rains and tropical cyclones. Combined with northern Australia’s annual monsoon season – and depending on the longevity of that season – a La Niña requires a very close eye, especially with summer approaching. And after years of drought in Queensland, local meteorologists were keenly observing anything that suggested significant rain.

The bureau issued a warning that a La Niña was likely by the end of the year. Then, almost to order, it began raining across Queensland. And it kept raining. By October everyone in that bureau on Ann Street, and officers out in the field, and all the weather watchers and storm chasers and amateur meteorologists and farmers attuned to working with weather, knew that something wicked was on its way.

It’s a ten-minute walk from the Bureau of Meteorology offices, down George Street heading south, past the law courts and legal cafés and city library and Treasury Casino and the park presided over by a stern Queen Victoria, to the Executive Building that houses the Queensland Premier’s Department and numerous other government offices. On 18 October 2010 a small, historic moment took place behind its closed doors. James Davidson, regional director, Bureau of Meteorology, Queensland, briefed the state cabinet. Nobody could recall someone from the bureau ever being called to address cabinet.

Two weeks earlier, on 4 October, the bureau had issued an alert across the state of an impending active summer – weather talk for storms, cyclones and possibly flooding. It held briefings with disaster management authorities. Five days later, on 9 October, dam levels hit, then surpassed, 100 per cent for the first time in years.

As a result, the first flood of the wet season was officially declared. Up to 1600 cubic metres per second of water was released from Wivenhoe Dam, up in the Brisbane Valley, and by the day of Davidson’s rendezvous with cabinet the dam was brought back to full, or 100 per cent, capacity. The scientific data collated since the detection of the La Niña months earlier, and the release actions being performed at Wivenhoe, were strong enough indicators to warrant this unprecedented briefing to the Premier and cabinet.

At the meeting James Davidson warned that Queensland could certainly expect a La Niña event, and he briefed those present on projected rainfall for December 2010 and January 2011. The bureau predicted that January would exceed median rainfall, but no specifics could be given on where cyclones might cross the coast or which rivers might flood.

Present that day was Stephen Robertson, the Minister for Natural Resources. Robertson – bespectacled, flinty and the bearer of an often monotone, measured public servant’s voice – had entered the ministry in his late thirties, in 1999, and was given the traditional career make-or-break portfolio of health in 2005. Accused of
bungle and mismanagement, he was presented with Natural Resources after the
election in 2009 as the government – still haunted by the seemingly unending
Millennium Drought, as people called it – raced to install a South-East Queensland
water grid: a network of two-way pipes and treatment plants that enabled drinking
water to be moved, when needed, around the region. Two years earlier the
government had begun the wholesale reform of South-East Queensland’s urban
water supply industry, and the grid was the centrepiece, along with the
establishment of the Queensland Water Commission.

By October 2010, when Davidson addressed cabinet, Robertson had already
suffered public criticism for the government’s spending and waste over the water
grid. A month after Robertson took control of his new portfolio, the controversial $1
billion Tugun desalination plant on the Gold Coast had officially opened. Within
weeks it was temporarily shut down with technical difficulties. Further faults closed
it for three months in 2010. The public dubbed it a white elephant. (On 5 December
2010 Robertson put the plant on ‘stand-by’, to be reactivated only when the region’s
water supply dropped to 60 per cent or lower.) Now he was being told that enough
water might be on its way to render the drought-proof grid irrelevant.

Shortly after James Davidson’s briefing, Stephen Robertson met with his director-
general, John Bradley, to discuss what measures had been put in place for the
forthcoming wet season. Because of the rains since June, the city’s primary dams –
Wivenhoe, North Pine and Somerset – were full. Robertson contacted various water
grid managers about lowering the giant Wivenhoe to 95 per cent. There was advice
that dropping levels to 95 per cent was possible, but nothing was formally signed off.

Releasing water from Wivenhoe so soon after the so-called Millennium Drought
was a perverse idea. Years and billions of dollars had been spent to secure water.
Now the same bureaucrats might have to let precious water go, to mitigate potential
flooding. The government’s mindset was to protect water, to store it, hold on to it.
How could anyone contemplate throwing it away?

On 25 October Robertson queried water grid officials: ‘I seek your urgent advice
whether this water security provides an opportunity for release the volumes stored
in dams as a means of reducing severity, frequency and duration of flooding in
downstream areas.’ As Robertson issued his memo, the Bureau of Meteorology
detected strong bursts of the Madden-Julian Oscillation. This reflects patterns of
atmospheric circulation and convection. As it rises it manifests in thunderstorm
activity. The MJO was enhancing the monsoons in North Queensland, and was
stronger than anyone had seen since the 1980s.

September had already been the wettest on record. Catchments were soaked.
And the bureau was predicting more heavy rainfall through to the end of the year,
and beyond. The worst-case scenario for the bureau and the government was an
aggressive La Niña, a lively MJO, and record rainfalls and soaked catchments
unable to absorb any more water all combining at the height of summer. By October a few Queenslanders may have begun to see the ghosts of 1974 – the last great inundation to hit Brisbane. And statisticians, after record rainfall, were also peering gingerly back to data from the great floods of 1893, which swept people and houses and bridges and boats and innumerable tonnes of debris out into Moreton Bay.

Through October and most of November Minister Robertson was satisfied that Wivenhoe was being managed in accordance with the Manual of Operational Procedures for Flood Mitigation – the bible for managing dams in a crisis. In late November, however, the worst aspects of La Niña and the monsoonal rains began to intersect, and Queensland started to go under water.

Through most of December 2010 Queenslanders watched on the evening news the flooding of far-flung parts of the state – out west, up north; a highway cut here, a bridge submerged there – the reports sandwiched between other topical stories and Christmas advertisements. The majority of viewers couldn’t understand what they were looking at. These weren’t isolated events. This was a brutal, systemic pattern of weather that would ultimately devastate four-fifths of Queensland, an area the size of France and Germany. What they saw on the news were pieces in a jigsaw: the disaster had no logical narrative structure. Who could have foreseen that intense rain in June in North Queensland – the same distance from Brisbane as is Melbourne – would lead to a dramatic finale in the capital city, six months later?

On 28 November rain began to fall heavily between Mackay and Emerald in Central Queensland. The Capricorn Highway was cut between Mackay and Rockhampton on 3 December. Between 4 and 10 December that water, hitting a saturated landscape, inundated the Balonne River at St George and Theodore’s Dawson River. Both rivers had major flood peaks. The Balonne exceeded its major flood peak for a second time on 16 December.

Between 13 and 20 December the Fitzroy River at Rockhampton remained above its minor flood level. Five days before Christmas flood warnings were current for the Balonne, Moonie, Barcoo, Don, Bremer, Condamine, Paroo and Warrego rivers. The same applied to the Burnett catchment, the Fitzroy River Basin, the Mary River, Cooper Creek, Laidley and Warrill creeks, and the Brisbane River above Wivenhoe Dam. Residents were choosing to evacuate the towns of St George and Theodore.

Stephen Robertson was under pressure to make a decision about lowering levels in Wivenhoe, should the inundation across the state continue, and make its way down to the state’s south-eastern conurbation and its 2.2 million residents. On 13 December he was given a tour of the state’s emergency management facilities. Experts offered some preliminary advice on lowering water levels in Wivenhoe Dam. It was possible, they said, but it was at the minister’s discretion. Because of the unceasing rainfall Robertson ‘parked’ or put aside the matter. What would be the point of reducing levels by just five per cent in the middle of a record-shattering inundation?
At 5.30 am on Christmas Day the category 1 tropical cyclone Tasha crossed the coast between Babinda and Gordonvale in North Queensland. On 27 December twenty people were evacuated from Chinchilla. Between Christmas and the New Year others were forced out of Warwick, Dalby, Rockhampton, Jericho, Alpha and Mundubbera.

By now the pieces of the puzzle were starting to connect. Hundreds of regional centres, towns and hamlets had been affected. Thousands of people and stock animals were on the move. The threads of the state’s northern and western road network had been pulled apart. It was as if the state had been tipped up at Cape York, and all that rainwater from the previous six months was rushing down to the New South Wales border.

At about 1.50 pm on Monday, 10 January 2011 Barbara Gosley, an occupational officer in her mid-sixties, was at work in the Toowoomba Hospital, on Pechey Street, when she glanced out the window to check if there was any sign of flooding in the Garden City, perched 680 metres above sea level on the lip of the Great Dividing Range. It had been raining heavily earlier in the day. She saw water gathering at the intersection of James Street and Pechey, but cars were still pushing through it. Two large ponds in a park adjoining the hospital had filled and were overflowing.

After five minutes her attention moved south towards Long Street, where she watched a red wall of muddy, debris-filled water flood a small park within minutes, tearing down fences and trees on its way. Alarmed, she went up to the level-six corridor at the top of the hospital, and couldn’t believe her eyes. Everything was flooded. The wall of water was heading straight for the main shopping centre.

Between 9 and 9.30 that morning the Mount Stapylton Doppler radar had picked up two intense thunderstorms crossing the Queensland coast: one near Redcliffe, twenty-eight kilometres north-northeast of Brisbane, and the other at Maroochydore, a hundred kilometres north of Brisbane on the Sunshine Coast. (Five days earlier the Bureau of Meteorology had warned the State Disaster Management Group, Premier Anna Bligh and cabinet that a serious weather event was evolving over South-East Queensland.)

For the next two hours the Redcliffe storm headed west and the Maroochydore storm travelled south-west. Around 11 they collided, forming a single, intense storm cell. The cell continued south-west at 30 kilometres an hour, dumping intense rainfall over the Upper Brisbane River Valley. It was heading straight for the Toowoomba Range. As it passed over rising terrain, high-humidity air was forced upward, further intensifying the rainfall. The water hit both sides of the range and entered the already soaked upper tributaries of Lockyer Creek, and the catchments of Gowrie and Oakey creeks. Because of the saturation and the steep terrain, huge volumes of water were on the move within minutes of hitting earth and heading down into the Lockyer basin below the range, towards the little towns and hamlets of Grantham, Postmans Ridge, Murphys Creek and Withcott.
But first there was Toowoomba. Since late November the city had absorbed more than 550 millimetres of rain, but with the super-cell storm its old drainage systems – Gowrie Creek and its tributaries East Creek, West Creek and Black Gully – succumbed to flash flooding. The water that ripped through Toowoomba on 10 January was later described by Queensland Police Commissioner Bob Atkinson as an ‘inland instant tsunami’.

Local meatworker Bob Spark was driving into town that morning with his friend John Wheeler. They arrived at the Grand Central Shopping Centre at around 11. It was raining only lightly. The two had lunch, then left by the centre’s Margaret Street exit around 12.15 pm. Spark noted that the rain was heavier. He and Wheeler started walking the few hundred metres across the railway line to another shopping centre. The water was knee-deep and running swiftly.

At about 12.45 the pair went outside again and took shelter with friends at the bus stop opposite Grand Central. The water had risen to waist height and Spark watched incredulously as cars and debris were washed down nearby Dent Street. Thinking they had seen someone trapped in a car, the two men waded towards the vehicle and were trapped in the rapidly flowing water.

Spark latched onto a tree. The water was now at chest height. Wheeler swam back to the shelter but Spark held tight for more than forty-five minutes. As rescuers made their way towards him, spectators screamed at him to watch out. A van was floating straight for him. Spark thought he was going to be killed, but the van glanced off the tree and continued rushing north towards Margaret Street.

At around 1.45 Acting Inspector Douglas McDonald, aware of the uncharacteristically heavy rain outside, went out the front of the Southern Regional police office in nearby Neil Street and saw torrents of water rushing down towards Margaret Street. He returned to his office, dialled Toowoomba Police Communications, and heard a lot of radio chatter. He gathered two officers and they headed out in an unmarked four-wheel drive to see where they could help.

Soon after, Police Communications issued an urgent request for police to go to the intersection of James and Kitchener streets, where people were believed to be trapped in floodwaters. They arrived five minutes later, parked their vehicle on a traffic island and proceeded on foot. It was about 2.15.

They saw two males clinging to a traffic sign fifteen metres away. Further down the intersection a group of males was holding on to a set of traffic lights. Not far away a woman was trapped on the roof of her flooded car. She was holding a rope tied to a nearby semi-trailer. On the eastern side of Kitchener Street and thirty metres down from the intersection, police observed a man (who they later learned was Christopher Skehan) gripping a light pole. The water was washing over his back.
Meanwhile, Constable Jarrad Bruce, on the scene with McDonald, was told by eyewitnesses that an adult and child may have been swept from the intersection into East Creek. Several vehicles were stationary in the flood-water. The water was running so quickly it was impossible to effect any rescues. McDonald ordered Bruce to get some police downstream of the intersection to try to locate any people who’d been carried away. A female witness then said she had seen two people briefly clinging to the low branches of a tree before the water took them.

Christopher Skehan clung on to the light pole, even though the water was continuing to rise. As police investigated ways to secure his safety, the water began to lose intensity and recede. The males trapped at the traffic lights were rescued. One was Blake Rice, aged eleven. Soon after, Queensland Fire and Rescue Service officers brought Skehan to safety. He and Rice confirmed that two people had been swept away: a middle-aged woman, Donna Rice, Blake’s mother; and his brother Jordan, thirteen.

Just prior to the chaotic scene McDonald and Bruce witnessed, Senior Constable Jason Wheeler was on duty in the radio room of the Toowoomba Police Communications Centre. Despite serving in the force for nineteen years, he had never received official training as a call taker in the radio room. He’d been assigned to radio communications for the previous three weeks, and had clocked on for the day at around 1.10 pm. The centre was barraged with calls.

At 1.50 Wheeler took an emergency call.

‘Police emergency, what’s your location?’ he asked.

‘Ah, corner of James and Kitchener Street,’ the caller, a woman, replied.

‘Yeah, water over the road?’

‘Yeah,’ the woman said, ‘I’m stuck and the water’s just about ready to come up the door.’

‘Yep, you stuck are ya?’
‘Yeah, very.’
‘Yeah, why’d you drive through flooded waters?’
‘Because it wasn’t flooded when we were coming across.’
‘So you’re saying in the space of one second all the water come up?’
‘Oh well. It wasn’t this bad then.’
‘Yeah, well what’s your name?’
‘Donna Rice.’
‘Who?’
‘Rice. R. I. C. E.’
‘R. I. C. H. E.’
‘R. I. C. E.’
‘All right, what’s your first name?’
‘Donna.’
‘What’s your phone number there?’
‘Um, oh, wouldn’t have a clue. Just on a mobile.’
‘Righto, could be a while before we get police there, okay?’
‘Ah, if you could just ring a tow truck for me.’
‘Well, you can ring a tow truck, we’ve got [a] million phone calls coming through at the moment.’
‘Well, I haven’t even got credit to get ’em.’
‘Well…what sort of car you in?’
‘Um, Mercedes Benz.’
‘Well, you shouldn’t have driven through in the first place. All right.’
‘Yeah, I know. There’s about ten of us…’
‘Yeah, no, it doesn’t matter, it’s a flooded road. Bye.’
‘Bye.’

Senior Constable Wheeler did not detect any panic in Donna Rice’s voice. He designated the job a level 3, or relatively low in priority. Seven minutes later Queensland Fire and Rescue took an emergency call from Rice’s son Jordan.

‘…What’s the location of your emergency?’
‘Fire Brigade! Fire Brigade!’
‘This is the Fire Brigade. Where are you?’
‘Oi, where are we?’ Jordan asked someone else.
‘Can you calm down and tell me where you are?’
‘No! We’re strand…we’re stranded! Hurry up!’
‘Where are you? If you can’t tell me I can’t help you!’
‘Kitchener and James.’
‘And what’s the problem there?’
‘Hey?’
‘Are you in a vehicle?’ There was loud shouting in the background. ‘Tell the woman beside you to stop yelling.’
‘No! We’re stranded! Kitchener and James.’

‘Are you in a vehicle or what are you in? What are you in? A vehicle?’

‘Mercedes,’ Jordan said. ‘We’re nearly drowning. Hurry up please!’

In the background Donna Rice said, ‘Oh fuck, it’s coming…’

‘All right. I’ll send a crew up straight away to you.’

‘Will you hurry up!’

Jordan shouted to the others with him to get on the roof of the car.

Christopher Skehan, the owner of a local audio-visual installation company in Ruthven Street, was at his office and at 2 pm was about to go on a job to St Joseph’s school on James Street. He noted that the rain was sheeting down, and he checked the Bureau of Meteorology’s online radar images. On the chart he saw a large patch of red and yellow over Toowoomba. He told a staff member to close the roller door so no rain would get in, then headed out in his ute.

As he hit Kitchener Street the rain had all but submerged the left lane. A huge volume of water was heading towards him and rising. Three cars in front had stalled; their hazard lights flashed in the rain. Skehan stopped his car, took off his boots and approached the stalled vehicles. One was a four-wheel drive. In another he saw an elderly lady, frozen and starting to panic. Water was starting to enter her vehicle. He tried to push the car out but realised, despite the din of the rushing storm water, that her engine was still running. She managed to reverse the vehicle out.

Skehan looked back towards the intersection and noticed another car – a Mercedes sedan – with water at bonnet level. He could not see any occupants but he saw another man, with a rope tied around him and attached to traffic lights, trying to get to the car. As the man approached he was knocked from his feet by the water, but the rope held fast.

Skehan waded to the scene and pulled the man in by the rope. He looked over to the Mercedes again, and saw a woman and a child inside. (They would later be identified as Donna and Jordan Rice.) The woman appeared to be yelling on her mobile phone. Although the driver’s window was down he couldn’t hear what she was saying over the roar of the water.

The man Skehan had rescued identified himself as Warren. ‘Give me the rope,’ Skehan said to him. ‘I’ll have a go.’ He tied the rope around his waist and entered the water. The current was so strong it struck hard at his legs. It was rising above his knees. As he got closer to the Mercedes the rear driver’s side door opened and Skehan grabbed it. He removed the rope and tied it around the hinge of the door, then shouted back at Warren and others at the traffic lights to tie their end of the rope to a post, which they did.
By now, Donna Rice had opened the driver’s door and was standing on the ledge. Skehan noticed the boy in the back do the same on the rear door ledge. In the howling rain he heard Rice say, ‘Take Blake first!’

A younger boy that Skehan hadn’t noticed came to the driver’s door, and Skehan put the child on his back and started moving along the rope, back to the traffic lights. The current seemed even stronger and deeper than moments before. He managed to deliver Blake Rice safely to Warren and the traffic island.

Skehan was starting to tire. Still, he headed back towards the Mercedes and was twice knocked from his feet, just managing to hold on to the rope. By the time he got to the car Jordan Rice had clambered onto the roof. He almost jumped on Skehan, shouting ‘Take me!’ Skehan told the teenager he couldn’t carry him – he had only just made it to the car on his own.

Skehan wasn’t sure what to do. Donna Rice said she’d like to try and shimmy along the rope to safety but Skehan said the conditions were far too dangerous. Suddenly, the Mercedes started to move with the current. It stopped, then lurched forward again. Skehan felt the rope tighten and snap. All three clung to the car as it drifted towards a signpost. Skehan yelled for them to grab the post. Jordan and Skehan lunged for it but the car knocked the sign down.

The car rocked, then Jordan slid off the roof. Donna went in too. Mother and son were thrashing about in the treacherous water behind the vehicle. Donna managed to grab hold of Jordan. Skehan was still with the Mercedes as it careened towards East Creek. Miraculously, he tested the water outside the car and could feel grass below. He left the vehicle and staggered towards the light pole from which, later, he would be rescued.

He looked down the stream, and saw Jordan and Donna also find their feet and head for the next light pole down. They made it, and put their arms around the pole. Straight away, Donna lost her grip and was swept downstream. Skehan could see her head approach the low-hanging branches of a tree, then she went under and disappeared. Immediately after, Jordan lost his grip and was taken in the direction of his mother. He too vanished.

Skehan clung to the pole for almost forty minutes before he was rescued. He was checked by an ambulance officer, got back into his ute and went back to his office. Only later, through the media, did he realise the mother and child he had tried to save were Donna and Jordan Rice.

Down the range, in the Lockyer basin, Armageddon was about to arrive.

In August 1825 Major Edmund Lockyer, soldier and explorer, was commissioned to examine the upper reaches of the Brisbane River. He arrived at the Moreton Bay colony from Sydney the next month, and headed upriver in a small boat. By coincidence, while he was studying the valley that would later bear his name, and
become known as Australia’s ‘Salad Bowl’ for its variety and quality of produce, there was a major inundation.

As JJ Knight recorded in The Queenslander: ‘For a day or two previous heavy rain had fallen, but on the day in question it had cleared up. In the early morning Lockyer had noticed that the water level had risen 1 ft. within an hour, and its discoloured appearances indicated that a flood was coming down.’ Lockyer himself wrote: ‘the rapidity of the current increased every hour, and the river had risen upwards of 8 ft. by 11 o’clock…on our way we had many proofs of a small flood; a large one must be terrific.’

On the afternoon of 10 January 2011 nobody was thinking about history. That morning Peter Souter, the owner of a fifty-acre recreational ground – Murphys Creek Escape, on the banks of Murphys Creek – stayed indoors with his wife, Lisa, and daughter Holly. It was too wet outside to do anything. Besides, they didn’t have a single guest on the grounds. At 1 pm Souter noticed that the rainfall had become exceptionally heavy, and the creek was beginning to cover the lower campground. Almost fifty minutes later he glanced out the window of the office and saw what appeared to be a wave of water break in the distance. He went outside to investigate.

The creek was a torrent, ripping out trees and rising before his eyes. He and Lisa decided to evacuate. As she gathered some clothes for the family Souter continued to watch the water, and estimated the creek rose about ten metres in ten minutes. He saw fridges, washing machines and water tanks carried along in floodwaters. (A local police officer would later clock a shipping container being hurled along at 78 kilometres an hour. The waters would be powerful enough to move a 22-tonne boulder near the Lockyer Siding Bridge.)

Over at the Murphys Creek Tavern, manager Susan Haughey was so astonished by the morning’s downpour that she was photographing the building’s downpipes and water tanks. She noticed the creek water creeping towards the hotel, and saw a rainwater tank float past.

The only emergency service in the village was the Rural Fire Brigade. Its shed and equipment were hit by the rising floodwaters, the vehicles and equipment rendered useless. At about 4 pm a Queensland Fire and Rescue Squad pulled up at the pub with local Catherine Schefe. She’d been rescued from Murphys Creek but other members of her family were missing. Staff wrapped her in blankets. By 5.30 pm the tavern had become a makeshift evacuation centre, as about thirty more local residents arrived to take shelter. That figure doubled in the next hour and a half. People were missing. And night was falling.

Earlier that morning Sarah Norman was at home in her cottage, on the southern side of a small spring-fed creek nearest to Murphys Creek, with her two children, Israel and Vera. Her husband, Jethro, was at work in Toowoomba. The cottage was
on her parents’ ten-acre property. Steven and Sandra Matthews’ home was over on the northern side of the little creek, which was never more than a metre wide and knee-deep. Kirsp Bridge crossed it. Because of the relentless rain, and some minor prior property damage, Steven had the week before erected a sleeper wall – two sleepers and some metal pickets – about twenty metres long, to divert any future water away from the house and back into the creek. He dug trenches as a precautionary measure.

In the morning Sarah got a call from her brother Sam, who lived over in the house with their parents. (Her sister, Victoria, also lived in the big house.) Sam checked she was okay. He said water had come up to the back veranda, and Sarah heard her mother say, in the background, that water was coming into the house.

Sarah tried to call her husband in Toowoomba, but couldn’t make contact. She then rang a family friend, Johnny Fowkes, and asked if he could get down to the house and help her mother. After she got off the phone she heard loud noises outside, and went to investigate. Her parents’ sheds were being pushed over by a wall of water. Gum trees were torn down and swept away. She had never seen anything like it. To her horror, she saw her parents’ house was submerged to less than a metre below the roof gutter. The house had been inundated in less than twenty minutes.

She called the police, then rushed outside and scrambled up to Murphys Creek Road. By chance she noticed two men; she waved for help and they came over. The party returned to where they could see the Matthews dwelling and observed Sam desperately holding on to a post at the front of the house. He was gesturing to Sarah, trying to send her a message. He wrote ‘Mum’ and ‘Dad’ in the air with his hand. He made a sweeping gesture towards the water. Her parents had been lost in the torrent. Sam then made a V gesture and pointed to the roof. Victoria was safe in the rafters.

Sarah ran back to the cottage and again called the police. She checked on her children. Just an hour later the floodwaters subsided enough for Sam and Victoria to leave the house. Jethro arrived soon after with Fowkes, and they began a search for Steven and Sandra. Later that afternoon, Jethro returned to the cottage and told her that her parents’ bodies had been found downstream.

Across the valley at Grantham, Marty Warburton headed into town to check on the service station he owned, Marnell Fuels (a combination of his first name and that of his wife, Janelle), after it had suffered minor flood damage the night before. It was about 8 am, and looking at the incessant rain he said to himself: what’s the point in cleaning up if the rain isn’t going to stop? We’ll see what the afternoon brings.

At about 10 am Marty decided to go for a walk around Grantham and check the creeks. They weren’t ‘over’, but they were close. Come noon he went to the Grantham pub for lunch, then wandered down to the town’s main bridge. Debris had backed up against the culverts. Shortly after, he got a call from his mate Tim Pickering.
Water was lapping the bridge at the park on the Warrego Highway near Helidon, Tim reported. It had nearly reached the Helidon pub. That’s physically impossible, Marty thought. Helidon is so high up on the riverbank. Tim said a wall of water was on its way to Grantham, and the town was going to go under ‘big time’.

Marty ran back to the service station to save stock. The water was waist-deep. He saw shipping containers floating down Anzac Avenue. Pumpkins. Hay bales. He waded into his office to grab personal belongings and the next minute everything went black, ‘as if the sun had just disappeared’. As Tim had predicted, a wall of water had struck Grantham. Marty tried to get out of the shop but the water was too strong. He dived underwater and swam but the current smashed him against the door. He grabbed on to a roof beam and found an air pocket between the water and the roof of the shop. Ultimately, he got onto the roof.

Marty couldn’t believe the sea of water around him. It was filled with debris. Cars and fridges rushed by, and he saw two bodies. One had grey hair and was being thrown about by the water. He tried to grab the body but it passed too quickly.

Another came past. The face was disfigured. Marty couldn’t retrieve that one either. He knew then that anyone else who passed would probably be dead, so he climbed to the highest part of the shop roof. A white car sailed by with a young man and woman clinging to the roof. ‘Help us! Help us!’ they shouted at him. He watched the car, and its passengers, disappear into the water.

Minutes later another vehicle rushed past Marnell Fuels. A clean-shaven man in his late thirties, dressed in nice slacks and a dress shirt, was kneeling on his hands and knees on the roof of the car. He looked to Marty Warburton with large brown eyes. ‘Help! Help! Help!’ he yelled.

Marty was in shock. He saw the fear in the man’s eyes, and heard it in his voice. The car, and the man, disappeared in the same spot as the previous car. Sitting on his perch Marty saw an entire wooden house float across the road. It travelled into a neighbouring paddock, then snagged on something and stopped. He could hear people inside screaming. News helicopters appeared in the sky and he frantically waved his jacket. The choppers disappeared.

It was getting dark. Marty lay down on the roof. He flicked his lighter now and again, so people might see him. He may have fallen asleep. He’d lost all sense of time. Then it started raining again, and there was lightning, and he had to get down. He grabbed a gutter. It gave way, and he plunged into the water. The next minute he was being dragged into a house a few doors down by its occupants. Drenched and exhausted, he lit a cigarette. Soon after, the State Emergency Service’s Swift Water Rescue Team arrived and Marty ended up at the Grantham School with dozens of other survivors.
Kathleen Mahon, who had lived in Grantham her entire life, got up early on the morning of 10 January with her son Brad to check the floodwaters. She remembered her father, Wendell, telling her when she was young that if water ever broke from the western side of the then family farmhouse, near the dairy shed, she should head for the railway line – the highest point in town. He would recall the great flood of 1893, and how when Grantham went under the only points visible were School Hill and Cargills Hill.

In the weeks leading up to January she had seen six birds dying on the ground ‘at the same time’ in the backyard of her almost two-acre property. The wet weather, she suspected, had affected the birds’ nest, and the chicks had tumbled out. She had never seen that before in all her years on the land.

Everything seemed okay that Monday, so Kathleen did the washing. At 12.30 pm her daughters Jess and Andrea, and Andrea’s two sons, arrived for lunch. They had heard about the storm in Toowoomba. With the water rising in Grantham, Kathleen and her husband, John, went to check on her elderly mother, Betty. They got a call from another daughter, Rachelle. ‘Mum, I’ve just seen a warning on TV about a wall of water in Toowoomba.’ Rachelle said she thought the water was heading for Grantham.

Kathleen didn’t pay much attention. ‘Mum!’ Rachelle shouted. ‘Can you please listen to me? Get as high as you can.’

Then Kathleen’s nephew Michael rang. ‘Aunty,’ he said, ‘I’m at the bridge at Helidon. It’s higher than anyone’s ever seen. Can you get grandma and get to higher ground?’

Betty refused to leave. She wanted to stay put with her dogs. Kathleen went home with her family. The phone rang. Friends were warning them – a wall of water was coming. They got some blow-up swimming rings and an inflatable boat from the pool area for the children. Soon after, they saw water rushing across the farm towards them in one direction, and from the west near the highway in another. Within seconds the water was up to their knees.

Then they were deluged. They put the children up on the kitchen bench. The water rushed down the hallway. Doors broke in half. Glass smashed. The lounge chairs in two rooms lifted and went spinning in circles, as if the water was boiling. A heavy dining table did the same.

Kathleen and the other adults stood on chairs. The water was up to their chests. Rachelle rang. Kathleen told her to tell the rest of the family that they loved them, and that they would try and get on the roof. The group said the Lord’s Prayer. They thought they were going to die, and they said goodbye to each other.

They put the little boys into the inflatable boat. Large glass doors leading to the pool exploded open and the contents of the house started floating out. They had to
get on the patio roof. Jess clambered up; then they passed the boys to her. Then Andrea climbed up. Kathleen followed, but John struggled on the guttering.

A chopper appeared overhead. The crew plucked one boy, then the other off the roof, and Andrea soon after. Then Jess and Kathleen were winched to safety. ‘What about Dad?’ Jess yelled. ‘Dad’s left back down on the gutter!’

One of the rescuers motioned to John that they would return. Kathleen, her daughters and grandchildren were taken to high ground on a nearby property. Another rescue chopper followed. It released more survivors. Kathleen recognised Matthew and Stacey Keep. Stacey was six months pregnant. Matthew approached her. He said they had lost their little girl Jessica.

An hour later John was brought in, safe and sound. Many of the survivors took shelter at the Grantham State School. School Hill: one of the highest points in town in the event of flood, as Kathleen’s father had warned all those years ago.

When the waters went down, and the rain stopped, Grantham had been scrubbed off the map.

After the epic flood of 1974 the state government decided to build the mighty Wivenhoe Dam. It would supplement the Somerset Dam, officially opened in 1959, and the North Pine Dam as Brisbane’s major water supply. It would also help protect the city from future floods. All three are owned by the Queensland Bulk Water Supply Authority, which trades as Seqwater.

Wivenhoe – an earth and rock-fill dam with a gated concrete spillway – was completed in 1984. As imposing as it was, if the dam was to ever fill to the point where water spilled over the top, the walls could collapse. Both Somerset and Wivenhoe are made up of two parts. The lower part – from the bed of the lake up to an imaginary line that denotes the full supply level – is for drinking water. The upper is the space between the imaginary line and the top of the dam wall. This is available to hold floodwaters if and when they come.

When the drinking level is full, the dam is said to be at 100 per cent capacity, or at full supply level. It can also be expressed in height in metres using the Australian Height Datum, roughly the same as metres above sea level. In January, Wivenhoe was sixty-seven metres AHD. That’s a drinking water volume of 1,165,238 megalitres, or 580,000 Olympic swimming pools. The Wivenhoe flood mitigation space has a volume of 1,420,000 megalitres, or 710,000 Olympic swimming pools.

During 2010, and the Millennium Drought, a review of the full supply level at Wivenhoe was begun, to examine whether to raise the full supply level above sixty-seven metres, to increase the dam’s drinking water capacity. If water levels ever rose to eighty metres, it was expected the dam would collapse.
A major upgrade of Wivenhoe was completed in 2005 to protect it from floodwaters. A second spillway was built. It houses three fuse plugs for the emergency release of water. The fuse plugs erode when the water gets to a certain level: the height when the dam is at risk. The erosion leaves a hole through which the water can pass. They are designed to trigger without any human intervention. The first fuse plug at Wivenhoe triggers at 75.5 metres AHD.

The dams are operated in accordance with legislation, regulations, water plans and rules set by the Queensland Department of Environment and Resource Management. Outside of a flood, the dam level should be set for as long as possible at 100 per cent capacity, and never over 100 per cent. Between 2000 and 2010 the water level was well below 100 per cent for each dam.

During periods such as this, water can only be released to provide water to treatment plants for drinking purposes, and for environmental reasons, such as maintenance of flow to protect flora and fauna. When rain falls in the catchments and the water levels rise, the rules change.

When the lake level breaches 100 per cent a flood event is declared. Seqwater is required to open the gates and bring the water back to 100 per cent. During the rainy season of 2010–11 Seqwater was forced frequently to open and close the gates.

During flood events, when the level surpasses 100 per cent or full supply, the operation of the dams is handed over from Seqwater to the Flood Operations Centre. It is manned by four engineers. The FOC must operate the dams in accordance with the Manual of Operational Procedures for Flood Mitigation.

With Wivenhoe, there are four strategies for operation – W1 through W4 – and engineers move through these strategies as the water level rises. W1 is concerned with minimising disruption to downstream rural life. W2 and W3 look at the protection of urban areas from inundation. And W4 is focused on the structural safety of the dam. The manual guides engineers in relation to how far to open the gates, but they have the room to adopt strategies depending on the conditions at hand. A level of seventy-four metres triggers the W4 strategy. When a decision is made the FOC directs the dam operators by email or fax. During a flood the FOC is staffed twenty-four hours a day, with at least one experienced engineer leading the team for the course of the event.

At 5.32 pm on 10 January, as the wall of water passed through Grantham, the Bureau of Meteorology emailed Brisbane flood engineers about a flash flood in the Lockyer catchment. It was estimated that the rain in Lockyer was around six hundred megalitres. Modelling was done, and there was concern that the fuse plugs could be blown – an outcome that would be catastrophic. Water had to be systematically released from Wivenhoe to stabilise the fluctuating levels.
By 8 am on Tuesday, 11 January engineers released 2753 cubic metres per second (CUMECs) of water. At 6 pm the dam level stood at 74.92 metres and was predicted to hit 75.5 metres even with the huge releases underway. By 7 pm the release figure was increased to 7464 CUMECs. It remained at about 7000 CUMECs until 11 pm. An unheard of release of 10,000 CUMECs was discussed.

Had the emergency releases contributed to the flooding of areas of Brisbane? Should Wivenhoe’s levels have been drawn down earlier to absorb the coming floodwaters?

Brisbane city’s flood gauge exceeded its major flood level on Wednesday, 12 January. At three o’clock that morning it read 4.46 metres – its highest reading since 1974. Electricity was shut off across the CBD.

That Wednesday was sunny, clear and humid. Spectators gathered on the banks of the river and took photographs. With the CBD shut down, the only sound was the eerie hissing of the river. Everything reeked of wet soil. The city’s ferry terminals disappeared. Trees, furniture, velvet cushions, unmanned boats and even a mannequin sailed past the Gallery of Modern Art and the State Library of Queensland, under the Story Bridge and out into Moreton Bay.

During the flood peak 14,100 Brisbane properties were affected. More than twelve hundred were inundated. More than 1870 businesses were affected and 557 inundated. Had Wivenhoe, the great saviour put in place after the 1974 floods, helped or hindered?

In its interim report the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry recommended that if the Bureau of Meteorology made a seasonal forecast similar to that for 2010–11, the Queensland Government should temporarily reduce the full supply of Wivenhoe Dam to 75 per cent, with a concomitant adjustment to the trigger levels for the strategies in the Wivenhoe manual.

It also recommended that Seqwater review the Wivenhoe manual, have the draft manual assessed by independent expert peer reviewers, consider the expert peer reviews, and submit the draft manual to the Department of Environment and Resource Management for approval. It similarly recommended a complete long-term review of the Wivenhoe manual, and a review of hydrology modelling for Wivenhoe and flood events.

After the floods, engineer case studies predicted that without the Wivenhoe, the 2011 level at the city gauge would have reached seven metres. The 1974 flood came in at 5.54 metres. It was 8.36 metres in 1893.

Thirty-five people lost their lives in the Queensland floods of 2010–11. Three people are still missing. The disaster affected two and a half million people. The Queensland Reconstruction Authority estimates the flooding events will cost in excess of $5 billion.
Across the state the scars are still visible. Some inundated homes across Queensland remain abandoned. In Brisbane children’s playgrounds are still caged off, awaiting rebuilding.

The Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry, headed by Commissioner Justice Cate Holmes, held its first full day of hearings in Brisbane on 11 April 2011. After fifty-eight days of hearings, five thousand pages of transcripts, more than seven hundred submission and three hundred witnesses, the inquiry shut down on Remembrance Day, 11 November, at 12:54 pm. ‘I think that’s all,’ Commissioner Holmes concluded. ‘Would you close the hearing, please.’

The commission’s final report will be delivered on 24 February 2012.

24 November 2011

This report was compiled using the Queensland Floods Commission of Inquiry’s online transcripts, witness statements and contemporaneous newspaper articles.

Matthew Condon is the editor of QWeekend magazine. He is the author, most recently, of Brisbane (NewSouth Books, 2010) and the editor of Fear, Faith & Hope: Remembering the long, wet summer of 2010-11 (UQP, 2011). His essay ‘The flood’ appeared in Griffith REVIEW 32.
Walking underwater
Salvage along the Plimsoll line
Ashley Hay

THEY were there for months, small shapes embedded in the mud at first, and then, as the mud was washed away, small shapes embedded in the grass. A few plastic toys; the shiny white squares of slide frames – some full, most empty; triangular shards of broken crockery with pretty patterns in blues, greens, yellows. Pressed into the verge like a crazy mosaic, they transformed our corner into an archaeological site. They were all that was left of the piles and piles of muddy detritus stripped from inside this house, every possession, every belonging of the woman who had lived there, who had come back, seen its inundated state, and walked away from it all. After seven months of walking past them, over them, around them, I bent down and picked out four of the prettiest fragments of the china. I brought them home and carefully washed every speck and grain of dirt from their surfaces. I studied them; I traced their colours and their patterns. And I put them on my windowsill, like a tiny memorial. I wasn’t sure what else to do, but it seemed important to do this.

The totems left in the wake of Brisbane’s 2011 flood are many and various – although none is yet as official as the wooden arrows installed across the city after those great big floods in 1974.

In some places they’ve been drawn with texta onto the eaves of a house, the side of a parking meter. Their format is almost always the same: ‘2011 flood was here,’ and an arrow to a wobbly line drawn across a few centimetres. In others, they’re the line of dusty mud still visible across windows and doors, fences and walls. When our suburb’s shops reopened, in late May, their new glass doors were decorated with a blue line and a transfer that read ‘Flood Waters Peaked Here January 13, 2011.’

For weeks it took my breath away to walk through this sentence that reached somewhere near the middle of me – around the height that messy, muddy water would have reached. And then one day, the words were gone, the letters peeled away, the glass doors bare. Which was as shocking, as breathtaking, as the marker had been in the first place.
But there are other remnants here and there – tomato plants have sprung up along footpaths and in people’s usually manicured lawns; coriander is thriving among our park’s prickly couch; a line of self-sown lettuces comes marching across the yard of a house I walk past, on through the gate and across the median strip to the gutter.

ON THE OTHER side of town, in a park that’s still closed, the standard Brisbane grass is now intertwined with other species thought to have washed all the way down from the Lockyer Valley. Their different textures tuft and clump, changing the topography of the usually smooth surface. The park’s play area is still closed; it bore traces of human remains. More than eight months after all that water came and went, this space is still being sifted for some last missing piece of the flood’s story.

So many houses still empty; so many people gone. ‘No, no one’s come back to that place yet,’ an elderly man says of his neighbours who we used to see in the park. ‘Still working out what to do – fix it, raise it, sell it. They don’t know which way to jump.’

‘Fifty years I’ve watched that river go past my kitchen window,’ his friend says. ‘Every so often it asks to come in.’

‘I ended up in hospital, you know,’ a neighbour from across the way says, ‘and they told me I’d been stressed – me!’

The sort of stoic woman who’d stare down any hardship.

‘And then I thought about it, and I thought, well, I suppose it was stressful watching that water come across the park and up the street. I suppose it was stressful watching it rise. I suppose it was stressful not knowing where it would stop – if your house would be dry, or ours.’

The bad stories begin to leach out, eddying in the current of goodness, of generosity, of unlooked-for kindnesses. Party-makers who arrived along the encroaching waterline, cheering and calling through one, two, three o’clock in the morning while residents, exhausted by the moving, by the waiting, by the wondering what would happen next, tried to sleep above in their stripped-out houses. People who loaded their possessions into trucks they thought had come through the agency of friends of friends – only to have them drive off and never be seen again.

WE DROVE OUT to Wivenhoe around Easter, as if the dam and its great lake might offer some account of itself as the year’s dry days stretched on. It was a wide, smooth lozenge of water, all calm, all quiet, although its edges still looked crushed and damaged by the rush of inundation, and the land beneath the spillway was gouged and riven. But the body of the water itself was back to normal: that great big quantifiable reservoir that had been held in balance against the unknown reservoir of the skies, the unknown of how much water would fall, and for how long, and
where. By Easter it accommodated nothing more disruptive than waterbirds who pierced its silver surface, clouds reflected in its sheen.

Now, in mid-spring 2011, the Bureau of Meteorology says predictions of another La Niña year are firming, although it won’t be as strong as last year’s, they stress. Brisbane is getting those short, sharp showers that dump out of nowhere, and are gone, bookended by too-blue skies before and after. And this spring, so far, there are no floods, but Queensland is burning, with more than fifty fires alight across the state’s vast reach.

Now, when the rains fall, the act of listening to the cacophony on a tin roof has been drained of its comfort, its sense of dry, close safety. The sound brings a queasy feeling that swells and roils – *How much water? Falling where? And for how long?* Waking up from Brisbane’s first night of heavy rain, at the end of winter, people muttered about broken sleep and bad dreams.

The memory of the flood settles over the city, heavy and deep. Walking the streets I am underwater at this bus stop, underwater as I go through these traffic lights, underwater as I climb my back stairs.

As spring comes I swing on the swings in the park behind our place and I know I am swinging through that thick, murky water, no matter how high I can push my feet. This was under water; this was under water: the mantra of moving along the river’s edge and through all the busyness we’ve built across its floodplains. But I try to swing higher, pulling my legs back and pushing them out fast. I try to push up and up and up again, to emerge from the dense liquid of impressions – the sights, the sounds, the smells and tastes, the dripping freight of memory.

I swing down as the last of the life-scrap and leftovers dislodge from among the grass on our verge. I swing up as the alien march of new turf and salad vegetables is slowly excised from our safely suburban lawns. I swing down as grey clouds gather; I swing up as the last of our neighbours comes home.

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Ashley Hay’s first novel, *The Body in the Clouds* (Allen & Unwin, 2010), was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, a New South Wales Premier’s Literary Award and a Western Australian Premier’s Book Award, and has been longlisted for the 2012 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Awards. Her writing has appeared recently in *Australian Geographic*, *The Australian* and *The Guardian*, and previously in *Griffith REVIEW* editions 21, 30 and 34.
The path to resilience

More haste, less speed

Mara Bún

GREENSBURG, Kansas, in America’s agricultural heartland, is by no means a greenie enclave. It’s tornado country. On 4 May 2007 an EF5 rated tornado – equivalent to a category 5 cyclone – tore through the area, levelling 95 per cent of the town and killing eleven of its fourteen hundred residents. The sidewalks and sewers were the only thing left behind.

What happened next was unexpected. Greensburg decided to rebuild itself green. Soon after the storm hit, Public Square Communities, a Kansas-based organisation that helps towns build social capital through ‘positive conversations’ about the future, quietly assisted in a process that pulled together the town’s disparate groups to map a vision for recovery. A dream emerged: to become America’s most sustainable and tornado-resilient town, deploying the most advanced clean technologies and encouraging like-minded people to join the effort.

The preface to the Greensburg recovery plan describes an intensive twelve-week process involving discussions between long-term recovery planning teams; local, state and federal officials; business owners, civic groups and citizens. The result: ‘A community spirit and resolve to build back better, safer, and in a more sustainable manner… Unlike a traditional planning document that presents general guidance to a community, the Long-Term Community Recovery Plan is an action-oriented menu of key projects intended to be used for making critical funding and resource allocation decisions.’

Greensburg established a Sustainable Development Resource Office, to develop sustainable building programs and certification processes that ensured public facilities were of the highest standard, powered by renewable energy, with household energy alternatives devised to ensure affordability in an area that has bitter winters and hot summers.

Four years on, the town is the subject of a documentary series produced by Leonardo DiCaprio, and many homes are emerging that meet the coveted highest
green international building standard, LEED Platinum. Greensburg now has the Midwest’s most environmentally high-performing hospital and city hall, water-efficient streetscapes and a geothermal-powered urban centre. Every LEED Platinum-certified project in Kansas is located in Greensburg.¹

John Deere Renewable Energy built and maintains the town’s wind farm, with funding from the US Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The wind farm supplies all the town’s power needs and sells the substantial excess back to the grid.² A review found that ‘the rebuilding effort did not focus on the environmental benefits of green buildings, but rather on the goals of creating a more resilient, more efficient community.’³ Resilience – of property, commerce and community – is at the heart of Greensburg’s recovery.

Climate scientists predict that Australia is on the frontline for climate change effects, both gradual and severe, given the continent’s hot, dry and flood-prone terrain, combined with its exposure to cyclones fuelled by heating oceans.

Victoria’s Black Saturday bushfires, cyclones Larry and Yasi, and the 2011 floods down the nation’s eastern side are unlikely to be once-in-a-century occurrences, despite frequent references to this assessment. Queensland’s new disaster-resilience portal, hardenup.org, is powered by a database of three thousand severe weather events since the 1850s. Senior Bureau of Meteorology forecasters look back and conclude that the twentieth century was a relatively quiet weather period, compared with the 1800s. This century appears to be reversing the cycle. More intense, if not more frequent, future severe weather events would hit larger populations, who have demanded more expensive and complex urban infrastructure than existed decades ago – increasing the potential cost of impact.

The climate change debate in Australia has focused on mitigation and the need to transform the energy mix, but because more than four-fifths of the population lives close to the coast or the bush additional measures are needed to adapt to emerging climate risks. Even if all greenhouse emissions stopped today, a two-degree Celsius increase in temperature is likely in coming decades. According to recent International Energy Agency emissions data the future is trending towards being four degrees hotter.

If the adaptive technologies and practises employed are carbon intensive, the global warming cycle will be refuelled. To build back the same community and business infrastructure as existed before runs the risk of losing assets during the next major event, and the next one. As the US disaster-management agency, FEMA, put it on Earth Day 2011: ‘The growing emphasis on creating sustainable communities, whether through innovative green building practices or reducing the materials and energy footprints, creates opportunities to build safer and greener, both before and after disasters. By building green and taking steps to protect your property at the same time, you not only help protect the environment but also protect your property against the forces of nature.’⁴
The Insurance Council of Australia calculated that by September 2011 Australians had lodged 826,329 claims worth $3.81 billion from the year’s natural disasters. The Queensland Treasurer’s estimate of overall damages exceeds $6.8 billion—half of which was attributed to damaged road infrastructure. According to the Bureau of Transport Economics’ last major assessment, natural disasters cost Australia more than $37.8 billion between 1967 and 1999, in 1999 prices.

By late last year the federal government had through the Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements funded 453,000 claims and grants totalling $784 million for events in Queensland. Given the amounts of money involved and the stated objective of all levels of government to mitigate greenhouse gas, it is worth asking why sustainability is not the centrepiece of Australian disaster recovery. Post-disaster renewal can advance sustainability and community resilience – and early signs of this are already emerging.

The momentum following a disaster tends towards fast, low-cost or ‘value for money’ recovery. Governments are judged by the speed of returning to business as usual. Short-term political and media cycles fuel this tendency, and reinforce the message that a quick recovery best addresses the needs of disaster victims. All three factors were present in the distressing aftermath of the Black Saturday fires.

Victorian Premier John Brumby suffered personally and politically from perceptions of a recovery slowed by bureaucracy. Two years after the catastrophic fires planning permits had been issued for just 731 homes of the two thousand lost. ‘Recovery a painfully slow path’, ‘Bushfire rebuilding a failure’, ‘Black Saturday recovery a slow burner’ and ‘Victoria’s budget will conform [sic] slow recovery from crisis’, the headlines read.

The frustration of business leaders wishing to support Black Saturday communities early on was understandable. Yet the slow response may have been due more to a lack of community consensus than to red tape – as well as the failure to provide incentives to rebuild the rental housing essential for lower-income residents. Unlike the Greensburg experience, support for meaningful community conversations to guide integrated recovery planning was lacking. There was not enough time to inspire a collective vision. Centralised recovery funding combined with red-tape-ridden grant programs to disempower locals. Some bushfire-affected communities started their own conversations but elsewhere communities were fragmented, and the media could exploit tensions for stories.

The impression of sluggish progress and meddling bureaucracy was quickly politicised, and Brumby conceded electoral defeat a few months short of the two-year anniversary of the firestorm.

It is understandable then that when establishing the Queensland Reconstruction Authority (QRA) Premier Anna Bligh stressed, ‘The authority would have the
powers to cut through red tape and would be required to report publicly on its progress… We want to be standing here in twelve months’ time being able to say that the reconstruction task is proceeding as fast as humanly possible, not stuck in someone’s in tray waiting for an approval.’

Six months after Cyclone Yasi, media pressure mounted and unhappy residents struggling to regain a foothold were ready to lash out: ‘It’s all good that the government has talked about speeding up the recovery but doing something two years later is not good enough,’ Nathan Mood, owner of the Mission Beach Dunk Island Water Taxi service, told the Cairns Post.9

To counteract any impression of slow progress, the recovery-speed message has been ubiquitous. Students from all ninety-three of the state’s affected schools were back in class by early March 2011, and by August 92 per cent of the state’s devastated road network had been reopened.

The Cyclone Larry recovery, on the other hand, was developed in sheds and farm halls, using an intensive community-engagement process involving local leaders, civil servants, NGOs, politicians, citizens; everyone – except the media – had a say. Instead of a command-and-control response, ‘circles of learning’ opened a range of emotions, and helped public servants to serve their communities. Democracy came alive for Jim Varghese, then the head of the Queensland Department of Infrastructure, who enabled this process to produce energy, passion and good results.

In the Larry recovery circles of learning were used to build legitimacy and support through purposeful, shared dialogue, and by bringing together perspectives of public value, sharing information, building a common identity and giving voice to the public. In this way, a community-centred understanding of what was required from government evolved on the ground. Describing what it took to build this dialogue, Jim Varghese cites The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual: ‘To have a conversation, you have to be comfortable being human – acknowledging you don’t have all the answers, being eager to learn from someone else and to build new ideas together.’

Cyclone Larry left behind flattened banana fields and sugarcane plantations. Half of Innisfail’s homes were damaged, and one in three lost their roofs. Wildlife sites were destroyed and people’s lives were shattered, placing great stress on many communities. Government responded in line with community concerns that emerged from the on-the-ground dialogue. In response to people’s desire to maintain proper local employment in areas with devastated crops, for example, an employment package was announced, covering wage subsidies and workforce retention in the region.

The lesson from the Larry style of disaster recovery – recovery through dialogue – is that empowered communities are capable of self-organising to influence
appropriate government responses to their concerns. Unfortunately for the thousands of Queenslanders whose personal challenges fell outside the remit of the official 2011 government response, the opportunity for dialogue was missed.

The recent recovery is more focused on efficiency. The Reconstruction Authority’s Value for Money Strategy is designed to keep costs under control. This emphasis on tightly managed taxpayer funds will go down well with a media alert to budget blowouts.

Signs of renewal are emerging in the flood recovery, despite the tight remit of the official government response. The QRA’s decisive support for Grantham’s innovative land swap, enabling residents to build on safer, higher ground, and its resilience guidelines, will support residents to ‘build back better’ – though enormous practical challenges remain, including the grim reality that debris remains embedded in trees and creeks, evoking painful memories, and some Grantham residents cannot afford to move to higher ground. Over the coming months and years community, business and research organisations can support Grantham community deliberation on new models of sustainable, high-resilience renewal. Residential developments that showcase the potential for innovative renewal and longer-term utility bills may yet emerge in Yasi-hit areas.

Despite some innovation and some tangible progress on schools, roads and property-resilience guidelines, and flood maps to raise local hazard awareness, Queensland’s race to swift, red-tape-free recovery may be less than ideal. Greensburg Mayor Bob Dixson advises others responding to disaster to slow down before acting: ‘I lost just about everything in the tornado too, so I understand just wanting to get it cleaned up and get on with it. But I just caution everybody in a disaster – don’t make those life decisions rapidly. You’re not going to get something built back in a few weeks anyway.’

Spending slowly, according to a shared vision, and spending a little more upfront to save more later – the energy-efficiency objective underpinning climate policy for all sides of Australian politics – makes sense when you have to rebuild homes and infrastructure. But the message is at odds with the objective of avoiding extra costs to achieve fast, short-term delivery results, and the punishing, and politically potent, reality of the suffering endured by those who have lost so much.

In Greensburg the return-on-investment message about energy efficiency has been heard. Wylan Fleener, the fourth-generation owner of Fleener Furniture and Flooring, is but one example. According to an entrepreneurial-success magazine covering his story,10 To his sceptical neighbours – and there were more than a few – Fleener admitted sustainable building materials added 5 per cent to his costs. And then he’d tell them how much he was saving on heating and cooling.’

In the centre of the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, meanwhile, an eco precinct is emerging with support from Global Green USA (the American affiliate of Green
Cross Australia), Habitat for Humanity, Brad Pitt’s Make It Right Foundation, and dozens of church, business and local community groups. At its heart is the Holy Cross Project, an iconic sustainable village starting with five LEED Platinum-certified homes, supported by the Home Depot Foundation (the US equivalent of Bunnings). The project will include a Community Development and Climate Action Center, and approvals are being sought for an eighteen-unit multi-family building, providing the first low-income rental apartment housing in New Orleans built since Hurricane Katrina.

Holy Cross homes are designed for maximum hurricane resilience and, according to Global Green USA’s chief executive, Matt Peterson, ‘The first homeowner’s energy bills have never exceeded $30 a month,’ despite New Orleans’ sweltering summer. For Ninth Ward residents on low incomes, lower-cost energy makes a big difference to everyday life.

Soon after Black Saturday the small Victorian town of Flowerdale invited the CSIRO’s Sustainable Ecosystems team and the community planner Nigel Bell, from Eco Design Architects, to community meetings ‘looking at how the community can drive towards a safer and more sustainable future as Flowerdale recovers’. Building on this theme Green Cross Australia and its partners, the Alternative Technology Association and the Green Building Council of Australia, have offered communities affected by Black Saturday an online portal that assists people to make environmentally resilient rebuilding choices. The website, builditbackgreen.org, is funded by Sustainability Victoria and has been used by ten thousand bushfire-exposed and bushfire-affected people. It features a green building guide covering more than five hundred environmentally responsible and bushfire-safe products and services. The Australian Conservation Foundation is taking an interest, and in March 2011 it seemed that there might be similar momentum building in Brisbane, when more than a hundred corporate and community partners joined government representatives at a workshop to catalyse ideas for a sustainable flood recovery.

Within months, though, this momentum – the wish to future-proof the state and create environmentally resilient, exemplary, cost-effective long-term projects – was overcome by an urgent desire to replace like with like as soon as humanly possible. We still have a long way to go.

Making the most of the opportunity a disaster regrettably affords can produce long-term benefits that go well beyond physical reconstruction. According to Beth Galante, the director of Global Green USA’s New Orleans office, the city ‘had a very poorly performing education system when compared to other parts of the US or other developed nations. The storm destroyed the school system overnight. The rebirth has been awesome. We now have a decentralised, entrepreneurial school system with all kinds of new models emerging (some private, some traditional public, some supported by universities). Student test scores have improved every year after Katrina.'
‘Sustainability has been a big factor in this equation. Global Green USA has led a green-school infrastructure project – funded by the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund – that delivered six new LEED-accredited schools, and now green schools are embedded in the system. By legislation, all new schools and school renovations in New Orleans must reach at least LEED Silver standard. That’s a nation-leading accomplishment.’

Glimpses of school system renewal appeared in the Black Saturday recovery. ‘People say, Why didn’t you build it two weeks after the fire?’ Premier Brumby reflected, defending delays in rebuilding schools in Marysville and Strathewen. ‘The reason we didn’t do that is because we wanted to talk to the local community, to consult with the local community to make sure that the facility that we put back in...was a better facility than the one that was there before.’ Kinglake residents applaud the more sustainable and multi-purpose school that emerged in recovery.

After the January 2011 floods Queensland students were back in class in record time, and this was good for morale. ‘There has been a terrific effort to get our schools back in shape so quickly after the floods, because it’s critical kids have a sense of normality and routine after the trauma they have experienced through this disaster,’ Premier Bligh said, some weeks after the flood.

Haste has a price. Milton State School, which has been affected by floods in 2011, 2010 and 2008, has two classroom blocks located in an area where water builds whenever it rains heavily for twenty minutes. The new classrooms were not elevated because it would have delayed the primary objective of getting the children back to school quickly.

The $60 million new investment in multi-purpose cyclone shelters – which will sit alongside schools – funded by the Abu Dhabi and Queensland governments could have been designed through a deliberative process that enabled the community to come together around environmental resilience and community development aims. But that would have slowed down building the shelters, so in the pressing political climate the process was assigned to the Department of Public Works and is on track for delivery in 2012. As a result the shelters are unlikely to win any design awards or set new benchmarks for community engagement, environmental performance or property resilience. An opportunity to creatively tailor each shelter’s design and functionality to local community needs has been missed.

Engineering services and infrastructure companies are champing at the bit to develop prototypes for new forms of transport and built infrastructure that are more resilient, create meaningful and connected places, and deliver strong sustainability outcomes. This combination will enhance the resilience of the built environment and ecosystem in the event of more natural disasters. However, at this stage, no exemplary sustainable infrastructure projects have materialised in Queensland. One
promising sign is that sub-standard Queensland roads are at least being rebuilt to the national standard in this recovery – no mean feat, given the scale of the affected road network. Sadly, the national standard may not set a high enough benchmark for hazard-prone areas. The standard also fails to address the important urban or ‘place-making’ contributions made by large infrastructure, and falls short in preserving ecosystem services.

Making resilience and sustainability a central priority demands a fundamentally different approach. This needs to start with new models of post-disaster community deliberation, with timescales that suit the scope of each recovery. Whereas Black Saturday hit a relatively small area very hard, the Queensland floods and Cyclone Yasi covered three-quarters of that huge state. Getting the fit right between local consultation and effective processes that minimise red tape is a challenge not well suited to the immediacy demanded by political and news cycles. Expanding the scope of integrated recovery support to address the needs of the tens of thousands of Australians whose homes, businesses, schools and communities are significantly affected – though not destroyed – by large-scale natural disasters can and should be considered. Residential recovery offers an opportunity to retrofit for resilience and environmental performance, and reduce ongoing household costs.

Broadening the existing ‘betterment’ aspects of Natural Disaster Relief and Recovery Arrangements would ensure that good money is not sent after bad as the recoveries from repeated natural disasters pile on top of each other. Currently, additional spending can be justified if a designated piece of critical public infrastructure is restored to a more disaster-resilient standard than it was previously. This could be extended to support community development aims, including sustainability and public safety – in this way multiple policy objectives could be addressed beyond immediate humanitarian relief, recognising that marginal additional funding and deliberation is required.

In January 2010 the US Institute for Sustainable Development convened an expert group funded by the Rockefeller Institute, in co-operation with the US Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Homeland Security. The group found that ‘after a disaster, the focus of the federal government is on immediate response and rebuilding, not on assisting communities with sustainable long-term recovery… The emphasis on the speed, rather than quality, of recovery impedes the ability to integrate hazard-mitigation measures into rebuilding processes.’ Solutions proposed mirror the thrust of this reflection, to institutionalise processes that build community support around a common vision, allow communities to capitalise on opportunities that disasters present to rebuild better and minimise the impact of future disasters, and integrate climate adaptation and mitigation to ensure that new renewable energy systems can withstand climate change.
There is also a need to learn from what is happening elsewhere. As the US Midwest Tornado Alley and hurricane-affected Gulf Coast have shown, communities hit by natural disasters can be encouraged to share innovative recovery stories and to visualise what may be possible if environmental resilience is advanced. The desire to build back quickly is tempting, but supporting communities while they take the time to imagine a more compelling alternative can make all the difference.

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1 See: http://www.mlandman.com/gbuildinginfo/leedplatinum.shtml#KS
3 Comments taken from Rockefeller funded review of ‘Sustainable development and long-term disaster recovery’ undertaken by the Institute for Sustainable Communities, released January 2010. http://www.iscvt.org/resources/documents/isc_report_to HUD.pdf
9 See: www.cairns.com.au
Suddenly the place is overrun with Europeans.
Suddenly there is a Maori in your backyard.
Suddenly you need to shit but can’t and need to hold on because suddenly where and what you grew up believing would always be there is no longer.
Suddenly you are eyeing the soft ground beneath the neighbour’s peach tree.
Suddenly new phrases are heard – ‘Keep away from the trees!’ – invented in Cashel Street the moment the ground rolled back like carpet.
Unbelievable.
Suddenly all that is found wanting – it was made for settled times.
Suddenly there is a Maori in your hallway.
Suddenly a pakeha is on your beach.
What the?
You still need to shit.
Suddenly you think, what if and where is that someone? And why this, here and now, and why today of all days, and is there not an alternative to a headshake? And repeating, endlessly – ‘Unbelievable. It’s unbelievable.’
Because suddenly the world is fluid, the old order of stability the bricks and
the mortar the roads the old pleasing lines are out of whack and quite
suddenly like never before everything is flushed up so the finished order is
broken and the ingredients are proud displays like the thing the cat brought
in spat up fetid and slimy with old life and stink and suddenly this is your
life and there it is, spilled dehocked besmocked and fucked squally and
dripping. Suddenly your world is a flopped cake and the old language of
fucking hell bloody hell what the where is and what are the thin squeals of
a grasshopper in the eye of a storm.
Suddenly the boundary fence is no longer.
What was is now rubble and there is a woman squatting beneath your
peach tree.

II

Then, after
A clothesline on a wind lean, half-mast, the flop of sheets slurring in the
thick grey soup.
Windows that won’t shut, the fuckers.
Doors and jamb at odds like the fallout of a long-forgotten quarrel.
The forlorn sight of a curtain sucked out a broken city hotel window.
After is the sound of shovels scratching away on the bitumen,
and the noise of demolition and of trucks carrying the rubble away from
the city, through the tunnel to Lyttelton Harbour, where the crater hills of
an ancient volcano glimmer with memory of sailing ships at anchor and
long lines of settlers zigzagging up the Port Hills, white ants in bonnets and
top hats shouldering pickaxes and shovels, loaded up with English seed
and pastoral memory to slap over the swamplands and waterways; there
are churches to be built, gardens to plan, parks to measure out from oak to oak, now all that is broken up, a pile of rubble falling through the harbour waters to rest against the old tug and claw marks on the sea bed made by anchor and chain of sailing ships.

After was a headshake, eyes bright or as dead as smoke.

After you couldn’t raise your voice to shout at the kids.

After there was a tender regard and a brave smile here and there and after that came the moment of rot sitting in your slippered feet in grey silt staring at the pointless television.

After was the starlight crashing through the hole of the bedroom ceiling.

After were the grim investigations and grim vigil and grim talk of those who Fate had done no favour. After came the long summation, a shirt hanging out the trouser end.

After saw traffic head out of the broken city in numbers that made the Alps faint with apprehension.

After came the disorienting effects of driving through a city without familiar landmarks.

After a writer to the newspaper thought ‘a remnant of the Press Building should be left to reference the past’, the ancient forests howled with glee.

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The language of catastrophe

Forgetting, blaming and bursting into colour

Tom Griffiths

THERE are enough Black days in modern Australian history to fill up a week several times over – Black Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays – and a Red Tuesday too, plus the grim irony of an Ash Wednesday. Yet we keep being taken unawares. There is something personal about fire, something frighteningly irrational and ultimately beyond our comprehension. It roars out of the bush and out of our nightmares. It makes its victims feel hunted down and its survivors toyed with. Why did the fire destroy the house next door and leave mine unscathed? As one bushfire survivor confessed: ‘I felt as if the fire knew me.’ A book about the 2003 Canberra fires takes as its title a child’s question: How did the fire know we lived here? The great international fire historian Stephen Pyne keeps telling us that fire isn’t listening to the rhetoric, the research, or the parliamentary resolutions. It doesn’t feel our pain. It doesn’t care. It just is.’ Why does he need to reassure us of this?

The Black Saturday fires in Victoria, according to the fire ecologist Kevin Tolhurst, released energy equivalent to fifteen hundred times that of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima. Of the 173 people killed on Black Saturday, two-thirds died in their own homes. Of those, a quarter died sheltering in the bath. There were relatively few injuries: the annihilation was total, and the day after brought an awful stillness and silence. The wind change was a killer, but if it had not arrived when it did the Kilmore East fire might have swept into the thickly vegetated suburbs of Melbourne’s north-east.

Managers and scholars of bushfire have observed that our society experiences a heightened awareness of the danger of fire after a tragic event such as Black Saturday, but as the years pass complacency sets in and the memory of the horror dims. Yet there is another psychological pattern that is more troubling and that we can observe at work in the months immediately after a great fire. The forgetting of the recurrent power of nature is immediately and insidiously embedded in the ways we describe and respond to disaster. Our sympathy for the victims of bushfire, the
surge of public financial support and the political imperative to rebuild as swiftly as possible conspire to constrain cultural adaptation. Such sacrifice of life cries out for meaning, and for a kind of unbending resolution in the face of nature. There is often an emotional need, as people return and rebuild, to deny the ‘naturalness’ and therefore the inevitable recurrence of the event. Black Saturday, we quickly reassured ourselves, was ‘unique’, ‘unprecedented’, ‘unnatural’ – and it was a ‘disaster’. We must never let it happen again! Culture can – and will – triumph over nature.

There is an irresistible tendency to use language that describes bushfire almost wholly in terms of tragedy and destruction. Not only do we talk in crisis language: we also use military metaphors and comparisons – partly because, in the face of an awesome natural force, they offer some comforting human agency. We refer to the authorities hunkered down in the Melbourne ‘war room’. We revere the heroism of the firefighters and compare them to Anzacs, linking the domestic fire front to the nation’s grand narratives of overseas war. At the national memorial service to the victims of Black Saturday Prime Minister Kevin Rudd spoke of ‘a new army of heroes where the yellow helmet evokes the same reverence as the slouch hat of old’. We describe forests as destroyed, even if they are highly evolved to burn. We yearn to send out better technology to suppress the fire front. We bomb the flames with water. We talk of hitting the fires hard and hitting them fast. Arsonists are ‘terrorists’. The fires are ‘a threat to national security’.

But the military metaphors, however apt and enabling, make us believe that we can beat fire, somehow. They define heroism as staying and fighting. Leaving early, in such a culture, might be seen to be cowardly. At the memorial service many speakers, in honouring the dead and their heroism, were also unwittingly cornering another generation. ‘Courage,’ Kevin Rudd declared, ‘is a firefighter standing before the gates of hell unflinching, unyielding with eyes of steel saying, “Here I stand, I can do no other.”’ Yet one of the triumphs of the Black Saturday tragedy was that not a single firefighter died on the day. In the face of that horror fire officers knew when to retreat. It must have been a shocking decision to make but it was the right one, or the death toll would have been much higher. We all have to learn better when to retreat – and we have to find a word other than ‘retreat’.

TASMANIA’S TERRIBLE DAY was a Black Tuesday. It was another 7 February fire, but in 1967. On that day a ‘fire hurricane’, as survivors called it, stormed through the bushland of south-eastern Tasmania and invaded Hobart’s suburbs, coming within two kilometres of the CBD. It caused what was then the largest loss of life and property on any single day in the history of settler Australia.

There had been good rains in the winter and spring of 1966, producing a profusion of growth in the forests and grasslands, and the rains were followed by very dry conditions in the late spring and summer. Drought was settling with a
vengeance on southern Australia; the bush became brittle and parched. There was not a drop of rain in the first week of February 1967. On 3 February a high-pressure system moved across the state and off the eastern coast, and the northerly winds freshened. In country areas fires continued to be lit – ‘burning off’ was a rural ritual. It was done casually, to bring on a green pick, or for clearing. Sometimes people, when seeing smoke on the horizon, would throw a match over their back fence, because a newly burnt home paddock was like a safety blanket. It was common before February 1967 to see spirals of smoke rising from the foothills of Hobart’s mountainous skyline, and ‘no one worried about them too much.’ Temperatures continued to climb and the winds strengthened.

On the morning of the 7th, the Hobart *Mercury*’s headline declared: ‘Bush Fires Menacing State: Danger Today Could Be Critical’. By the time children were making their way to the first day of the school year it was already hot. As the fire scientist Phil Cheney told Moira Fahy in her film *Black Tuesday* (Bushfire CRC, 2005), the eighty-eight fires that had been burning for some time – the overwhelming majority of them deliberately lit – began to move about 10.30 am, and new ones sprang to life. From Hamilton and Bothwell in the midlands to the Channel in the south, 110 separate fires were licked into ferocity by the northerlies and many surged together by 3 pm. One fire suddenly penetrated Hobart’s north and west. Communication was cut to northern Tasmania and mainland Australia, and three out of four local radio stations were put off the air. A Japanese fishing trawler approaching the port of Hobart that afternoon turned around in the Derwent estuary and headed for Melbourne instead, and the captain later reported that the whole coastline was aflame and he despaired of finding life and order remaining. Premier Eric Reece was in Sydney that day, representing Tasmania in an inter-parliamentary bowls tournament. While he was away, in five hours more than half a million acres and thirteen hundred homes were burnt, and sixty-two people died.

Fires of such scale and ferocity generate inquiries, and this was the case in Tasmania in 1967. One of the most useful responses came from the work of RL Wettenhall, a reader in political science at the University of Tasmania, who began researching and writing a detailed study of Black Tuesday, which was published in 1975 and called *Bushfire Disaster: An Australian Community in Crisis*. I have drawn some of my account of the fire from his book. Wettenhall positioned his academic inquiry in the field of ‘disaster studies’, looking at overseas theories and examples, and then turning in detail to Australia and ultimately to his own backyard. And also to his front yard, for on 7 February he and his wife had evacuated their children and then fought side by side, successfully, to save their home. ‘Such warnings as we received in Hobart…were still not for us, not for city dwellers at least, though we conceded that a few in isolated country townships might well be endangered,’ he wrote. ‘How surprised I was, and how ill-prepared, to find myself fighting fire that afternoon…in my own suburban front garden and backyard.’
Wettenhall, as a political scientist, was interested in the way his society had responded to the crisis, how its political and fire-fighting institutions had stood up to the test. ‘Very few of us in fact saw a fire brigade that day,’ he recalled. ‘Hobart was grossly ill-prepared.’

Drawing on the international scholarly literature of disaster, Wettenhall argued that the most significant thing about disaster is not the suffering or loss, nor our capacity to recover from adversity, but rather the ‘extraordinary optimism, common to most people, that we ourselves will not be stricken; or that, if indeed disaster should strike, it will not recur’. The other insight that illuminated his case study of disaster was drawn from the American social scientist Kenneth Boulding, who observed that humans have always tended to regard disaster control as ‘a problem in engineering rather than in sociology’. So Wettenhall noted of Tasmania: ‘Though officialdom had taken some pains to analyse certain material elements in these [disaster] experiences and had thereby effected improvements in, for example, firefighting and flood-protection techniques and resources, the broader social issues had received scant attention.’

These, then, were the two insights that shaped Wettenhall’s study: that people, through optimism and forgetfulness, generally fail to believe that disaster will recur, and that understanding the social origins and impact of disaster nearly always comes second to addressing its material or physical dimensions.

The history of bushfire is full of shocking recurrence – and of recurrent shock. The litany of Black days alone tells us that. Hobart had already experienced its very own Black Friday, as it was indeed called: Friday, 31 December 1897, in which similar areas to those ravaged by the 1967 fire burned, but in an era when the mountain valleys and slopes were less populated. Six people died, and dozens of houses and other buildings were destroyed. After one of fire’s regular visits to the slopes of Mount Wellington, in March 1940 an old resident was reported in The Mercury as saying that fire had occurred in the same way twenty-five years before and twenty-five years before that, and in ‘twenty-five years hence the same thing would happen again’. As Wettenhall noted, ‘He was two years out in his prediction.’ Fire, like flood, tends to revisit the same places. Vegetation, topography and climate conspire to invite it back, no matter what humans do.

But humans intersect with the physical and biological chemistries of fire in fundamental ways, and thus history combines with physics and ecology to produce a powerful natural-cultural amalgam. Hobart’s Black Tuesday of 1967 had old and new cultural elements. It was a turning point, because it was perhaps the last fire of a kind that was typical of settler Australia and the first fire of a new type that has proliferated since. It was an old fire in the sense that it was deliberately lit – not maliciously, by arsonists, but carelessly, by rural settlers. In those days it was called ‘burning off’; these days we would call it criminal negligence. Most of the fires running that hot February morning had been lit and allowed to stay alight by
farmers and graziers. This was the same scenario that had led to Victoria’s Black Friday fires of 1939, which burned 1.4 million hectares and killed seventy-one people. Judge Leonard Stretton’s shocking finding in his subsequent Royal Commission in 1939 was, ‘These fires were lit by the hand of man.’

On Black Tuesday, because of these traditions of rural burning, fire had roared into Hobart’s suburbs. The bush had come to town. But the town had also come to the bush. This was the way in which Hobart’s Black Tuesday was a new kind of fire in Australian history. It was the first big Australian fire to invade the expanding suburbs of a city. As Wettenhall put it, ‘no other Australian disaster had ever knocked so hard at the doors of an administrative capital – indeed, virtually put it out of action for a time.’ The city had penetrated the bush, insinuating its suburbs among the gums. Tasmania’s black day anticipated other dramatic fires of this growing urban interface with the bush: Ash Wednesday 1983, Sydney 1994, Canberra 2003 and Black Saturday 2009.

ROGER WETTENHALL’S IMPORTANT book set out to make sense of how he came to be fighting a fire hurricane in his suburban yard, and it was also an attempt to generate an Australian sociology of disaster. What kinds of writing and reflection have the 2009 fires so far produced?

It is three winters now since the Black Saturday bushfire brought its terror. In the last year soaking rains have inspired grass and forest growth that is both heartening and frightening. New houses have sprouted like lignotubers where their predecessors were gutted. Other homes – razed, flattened and cleared – are haunting absences. The Royal Commission, which cranked through 155 days of evidence, has finished and reported, and already its recommendations have dust on them. After the last summer of disasters – floods, cyclones and earthquakes – bushfire survivors are sharing their experience with new victims of nature’s wilfulness. And from the ashes, from the regrowth and renewal, from the pain and the horror, there now comes some wisdom.

The most enduring wisdom forged by the Black Friday 1939 fire came in the form of Judge Leonard Stretton’s Royal Commission Report. It was also the greatest literary legacy of that fire. There were no other published words about Black Friday that compared with the biblical power of Stretton’s report. He described ‘balls of crackling fire’ that ‘leaped from mountain peak to mountain peak’: ‘for mile upon mile the former forest monarchs were laid in confusion, burnt, torn from the earth, and piled one upon another as matches strewn by a giant hand.’ Of the innocence of Australians living and working deep in the bush in high summer, he declared: ‘They had not lived long enough.’

Judge Stretton’s report was celebrated not only as a political statement but also as literature. For many years it was a prescribed text in Victorian Matriculation English,
and politicians and fire managers consulted it. In 2002–03, as the Alps burned, Victorian Premier Steve Bracks borrowed Stretton’s 1939 report from the Parliamentary Library for his weekend reading. Bruce Esplin, head of the Victorian bushfire inquiry of 2003, said he could feel Judge Stretton looking over his shoulder. Stretton’s words still resonate with poetic and political power: he was fearless.

Justice Bernard Teague’s Royal Commission Report into the most recent Black Saturday fires is earnest and thorough but too careful and comprehensive to make memorable literature. It is becoming clear that Black Saturday is shaping a different and more diverse literary legacy. Black Friday 1939, followed so quickly by years of world war, did not generate any notable books, although it did induce lifelong trauma, become embedded in folklore and language, and seed political and bureaucratic reform. But Black Saturday 2009 is quickly germinating a forest of impressive writing; perceptive essays by John van Tiggelen, Robert Manne, Robert Hillman; Danielle Clode’s A Future in Flames, Roger Franklin’s Inferno, Peter Stanley’s forthcoming Black Saturday at Steels Creek. And Adrian Hyland’s Kinglake-350 and Karen Kissane’s Worst of Days, two impressive books that focus on the Kilmore East fire and together offer a powerful portrait of how a disaster unfolds – and of its political and emotional aftermath.

Adrian Hyland’s Kinglake-350 (Text Publishing, 2011) takes us into the world of the Kinglake Ranges as they are about to be consumed by the fire that is storming unheralded towards them. The story’s main character is Acting Sergeant Roger Wood of the Kinglake Police, and his call sign is Kinglake-350. We follow him from dawn on 7 February; learn what he is doing, thinking and fearing; and feel the drama of Black Saturday explode around him. Through him we meet the people of Kinglake, and gain a visceral sense of the caprice and violence of a firestorm in the ash range. Adrian Hyland knows these people because he lives with them. This is superb non-fiction writing: dramatic, full of tension, deeply researched, true.

Karen Kissane’s Worst of Days (Hachette, 2010), published before the Royal Commission into Black Saturday’s final report, has its foundation in her work as the Melbourne Age’s chief reporter on the commission. Like Hyland, Kissane structured her compelling narrative around selected individuals, but her book is also a piece of sustained investigative journalism. Daily immersion in the hearings and evidence of the Royal Commission is transmuted into history and literature with perspective and punch. She seems determined to find a voice that is stronger and tougher than the ‘disapproving puzzlement’ and ‘neutral, non-condemnatory tones’ of the commission’s interim report. As Kissane puts it, ‘the commission’s [interim] report reflected the evidence before it, in which so many emergency workers and bureaucrats using phrases right out of Sir Humphrey Appleby’s mouth had smoothly declined to take responsibility for any failures: it was not their job, or they were working at a higher level, or their underlings should have told them if there was a problem.’
The historian, speechwriter and brilliant analyst of language Don Watson has described Black Saturday as ‘the day words fell short’. Seven months after the fires he reflected on the evidence that fire managers were giving to the Royal Commission about what they called ‘communication’: ‘One CFA manager described the business of telling the public as “messaging”; “communicating the likely impact”; “to communicate the degree of the circumstance”; providing “precise complex fire behaviour information”; “to communicate more effectively in a timely manner not just that it is a bad day, but other factors as well.” He spoke of his task as “value-adding” and “populating the document”. He and other managers talked a good deal about “learnings”, “big learnings” and even “huge learnings’.

Watson concluded: ‘It was not that they did not do their very, very best. More likely, when it came to telling people what they had to know, their management training made their best inadequate. Telling people requires language whose meaning is plain and unmistakable. Managerial language is never this.’

Karen Kissane and Adrian Hyland have thrown off this blanket of bureaucratic blandness and set out to distil a very different kind of language of disaster. They have tapped into what Robert Hillman, writing in Griffith REVIEW 25: After the Crisis in 2009, called ‘the vernacular of Australian catastrophe’: spare, vivid storytelling, full of people doing things, full of verbs, full of agency and responsibility. Hillman, who lives near Warburton and found himself caught within a horseshoe of the fire, was spellbound through the night of 7 February by radio accounts from survivors, by ‘the terrible beauty of tales in which there is no exaggeration, no sentimentality’, and which were as gripping in their brevity ‘as the verses of an ancient ballad’. He confessed that he became ‘absorbed by the way in which disaster restores the vigour of language’, just as the fire cauterised the forest itself, ridding it of excess and reducing it to a weirdly beautiful austerity. Hillman felt that the best memorials to the victims of Black Saturday would not be the secular and religious services imbued with hyperbole and cliché, but the ‘unrehearsed narratives’ of those who escaped.

Adrian Hyland, especially, feeds off the lean poetry of these unrehearsed narratives by weaving a tapestry of stories in the present tense. This enables us to see that, even as people are overwhelmed by an unbelievable force of nature, there are still tiny interstices of time and space in which they can exercise their will, understanding and wisdom. Inevitability and luck are two dominant metaphors for explaining and coping with disaster, and they play large roles in Hyland’s narrative, too, but his focus on people doing things – especially the policemen at the centre of the drama – reveals how individuals can still make a difference in such a crisis. Hyland creates room for heroes without diminishing our understanding of the ecological and climatic forces within which they were trapped.

There are heroes in Worst of Days too, but also more death and inevitability. Having sat through the Royal Commission hearings, Karen Kissane understandably
grapples more directly with the ‘managerial language’ of the bureaucrats, and its consequences. There is a more sustained analysis of the systemic failures, and an impressive demolition of the ‘Prepare, Stay and Defend or Leave Early’ policy, abbreviated to ‘Stay or Go’ and often distilled in the official mantra that ‘People save houses. Houses save people.’ The Stay or Go policy evolved mostly out of experiences in other Australian fire regions but was also influenced by Ash Wednesday 1983, when so many people died fleeing fire in these mountain forests. Kissane declares this policy ‘the final victim of Black Saturday’.

IN THE WEEK after Black Saturday I argued on Inside Story and in The Age that the ‘Stay or Go’ policy was a death sentence in these Victorian mountain communities on a forty-something-degree day of high winds after a prolonged heatwave and a long drought. Although the policy has guided people well in most areas of Australia and has demonstrably saved lives and homes, it misled people in this distinctively deadly fire region to believe that they could defend an ordinary home in the face of an unimaginable force. Clearing the backyard, cleaning the gutters and installing a better water pump cannot save an ordinary home in the path of a surging torrent of explosive gas.

The policy – through its enshrinement of the defendable home in any circumstance – also implicitly sanctioned the gradual abandonment of community fire refuges over recent decades. The fire refuge dugout was a distinctive cultural response to the history of fire in these tall Victorian forests, and developed in the era of bush sawmilling in the early twentieth century. Few dugouts were built in other forest regions of Australia, but those that did exist in these Victorian ranges saved dozens of lives in 1939.

It is a clue to the emerging bush wisdom of the humans dwarfed by the giant trees of these distinctive forests. But it was an insight we forgot, or perhaps felt we had outgrown. There are hardly any official dugouts in the region today – many of the forest refuges collapsed or decayed, and some were deliberately destroyed because they were seen to be unsafe: casualties of our ever more litigious society. But they are making a comeback. The Black Saturday Royal Commission recommended the designation of community refuges in high-risk areas and, in October 2011, the building of the state’s first official fire refuge in the region was announced.

Controversially, the Stay or Go policy underpinned the lack of warnings issued by authorities to local residents about the movement of the fire front. Partly this was due to error and bureaucratic paralysis, but I believe it was also because of a conviction that late warnings would precipitate late departures, and that people are most vulnerable when in panicked flight. The logic of the policy is that, once the fire is on the move, it is best to keep people at home.
And it’s not just that people weren’t warned. They were falsely reassured – by the policy; by the advisory literature, which made defending a home in this region on such a day seem a reasonable option; and by the slow, vague and misleading official information that was released about the fire front. Kissane observes that at the same time as the Stay or Go policy insisted people take on an adult responsibility for their fates, it ‘also infantilised them by withholding key information’. Her analysis of ‘the official mind’ is devastating. ‘While the CFA was arguing over who should run the Kilmore fire,’ she writes, ‘the fire came and went.’ In the public messages issued there was ‘deadly oversight of the bleeding obvious’. The defensive managerial language observed by Don Watson was doing its work.

Disturbingly, this defensive language has, at times, also been assertive in undermining local experience and observation. People who live in Victoria’s ash ranges have developed special words and phrases for the extreme fire behaviour they have witnessed. But many fire scholars and professionals forgot the force of fire in tall, wet forests and began to doubt what people said they saw in 1851 or 1926 or 1939 or 1983. According to this view the unrehearsed narratives of survivors were actually exaggerated fictions or ‘myths’ that needed to be dispelled by calm professional education, fire science and ‘the laws of physics’.

As recently as 2008 thoughtfull fire officers – drawing on the science of grassfires! – argued that there were no such phenomena as ‘exploding houses’ or ‘firestorms’ or ‘fireballs’, and that these were just the delirious words of people unfamiliar with fire. And they suggested that such untutored and emotive words also falsely implied that ‘bushfire is something beyond human control’. Nothing shows the psychological blinkers of the Stay or Go policy more powerfully than this professional disparagement of eyewitness accounts of fire in a distinctive forest. Dugouts and ‘fireballs’ were material and verbal evidence of local cultural adaptation, and yet both were abandoned and disparaged by authorities seeking universal solutions and national policies.

IN HIS CLOSING reflection in Kinglake-350 Adrian Hyland asks: ‘So how does contemporary Australia respond to the dilemma of fire?’ His answer: ‘With lawyers.’ It is hard for a ‘profession whose primary function is to find somebody guilty or innocent’ not to be drawn into the blame game. But if there is blame to be assigned here, we all share in it. Hyland regrets ‘the trophy-hunting convolutions that surrounded the Black Saturday Royal Commission’, and the way barristers and journalists ‘circled for the kill’. These distractions meant, he believed, ‘that there was little attention left…for an examination of the nation’s soul’.

The former Victorian Emergency Services Commissioner Bruce Esplin observed in a radio interview in August 2010 that a Royal Commission ‘can be a very legal process and it can be a process that thereby stifles proper debate because people are concerned
about the implications of what they may or may not say.’ Perhaps the commissioners themselves were frustrated by these constraints, for their final recommendation (no. 67) is that ‘the state consider the development of legislation for the conduct of inquiries in Victoria – in particular, the conduct of Royal Commissions’.

The Black Saturday Royal Commission had some conspicuous strengths: it was consultative and exhaustive. In particular, it took very seriously its emotional and political commitment to the victims and their families – ‘We have been conscious of your pain and loss throughout our work.’ The commission made a priority of travelling to suffering communities for its initial consultation sessions, and shared its city proceedings with the general public through webcasts. It also convened special hearings into the circumstances of every death, sessions that were as much therapeutic as investigative. Family and friends of the deceased were welcomed, and invited to participate. Justice Teague explained to those present that it was ‘a different kind of hearing’, one that dispensed with some of the legal formalities and aimed ‘to get the information we need but in a way that will save you having to be exposed to a great deal of detail’. This was part of the commission’s very impressive commitment to ‘securing the memories of the fires’.

The Black Saturday Royal Commission was less successful in guiding the adversarial legal style of the courtroom away from the pursuit of personal blame. At times – most notably in the cross-examination of the former Victorian Police Chief Christine Nixon, by senior counsel Rachel Doyle – the commission allowed its proceedings to be hijacked by another agenda. Stronger moral guidance from the commission to counsel and to the media might have engendered greater public attention to the significant systemic and cultural flaws it unearthed. The shocking point about Christine Nixon’s whereabouts on the evening of 7 February is that, even if she had spent every second of that night in the newly established Integrated Emergency Coordination Centre (‘the war room’), she wouldn’t have known much more about the unfolding disaster than she did sitting in a North Melbourne pub.

Could Justice Teague have controlled the distracting media frenzy of blame? Possibly not. But it is worth recalling again that earlier Royal Commission in 1939 – admittedly a very different era in terms of media morals and power, but still an instructive example. Judge Leonard Stretton began proceedings with these words: ‘I wish to make it clear at the outset that this is not an inquisitorial Commission. I do not represent any punitive or detection arm of the law; I am here merely to arrive at the broad causes of the recent fire disasters and to make recommendations later, if any suggest themselves to me, for future assistance. If any person feels embarrassed by being asked to give evidence, or if he feels that he may incriminate himself, he has only to say so, and he will be given the protection which the law affords him.’

Stretton constantly monitored and guided his proceedings to ensure the investigation of broad causes rather than individual blame. ‘I want to get to the truth, but I do not want to embarrass anyone,’ he explained at his first country
hearing, in Healesville. But he did not hesitate to excoriate the daily newspapers when they threatened his search for truth. He blasted them for their ‘blackguardly lies’ in reporting his commission and its witnesses, especially – he added with typical wit and mischief – ‘that section of the press which is printed for the more unintelligent, who can absorb their news only in picture form apparently’.

In Worst of Days Karen Kissane identifies ‘a great historical truth’ that was somehow lost in the state’s bushfire response on Black Saturday: ‘some fires are so extraordinarily fast and intense that, in the face of their fury, even the best prepared and well-defended home is doomed to ashes.’ She adds: ‘Education campaigns skirted this brutal fact.’

I agree – and these were not just ‘some’ fires, but specific types of fires in a particular region on predictable kinds of days. The Royal Commission has gone some way towards being more discriminatory about the variety of bushfire, weather, topography and ecology; but not far enough. There is still insufficient recognition of the distinctiveness of the fire region through which the Black Saturday bushfire stormed. I find it astonishing that no vegetation map appears in the Royal Commission’s interim or final reports. The forests enter the report mostly as ‘fuel’. ‘The natural environment,’ the commissioners explain in their introduction, ‘was heavily impacted.’ I can see Don Watson wincing.

Adrian Hyland comments poignantly that on the day of the bushfires people ‘perished because they were staring at a screen and not at the sky’. Kissane found that ‘the evidence suggests the CFA was resistant to making warnings as high a priority as firefighting; its operational focus has been on trucks and crews rather than towns and residents.’ The commissioners concurred, and in their final report recommended that ‘fire agencies…attach the same value to community education and warnings as they do to fire-suppression operations’. Let us hope that this recommendation is followed. It will involve deep structural and philosophical change, and the signs so far are that things are moving very slowly.

OVER MILLENNIA IN Australia, Aboriginal people used tame fire to confine feral fire. ‘Fires of choice,’ as the historian Stephen Pyne put it, ‘replaced fires of chance.’ We are still engaged in that exciting and scary negotiation: what shall be our fires of choice, and to what extent can they tame our fires of chance? This is a good debate to have, and my only certainty is that the best answers will be local, ecological and historical. In the wet mountain forests of Victoria and Tasmania the fires of choice are fewer and the fires of chance more fatal.

There will be more Black days, and we have to accept them and plan for them, like drought and flood. We should aim to survive them, even if we can’t hope to prevent or control them. And we should celebrate, as I think we are already beginning to do, the stimulus that such fires give to community.
In early 2011 two residents from Steels Creek – a small community in the Yarra Valley that lost ten lives and two-thirds of its homes in Black Saturday – jumped in a car and drove north to the Murray River, to visit victims of the summer’s floods in Kerang. It was a spontaneous, heartfelt sense of kinship between disaster survivors. ‘The people all wore the shocked, stunned, enduring looks on their faces – which we recognised,’ wrote Dorothy Barber, one of the fire survivors. ‘Governments can do so much, but nothing replaces the random acts of kindness that we experienced when the volunteers turned up with help.’

Steels Creek offers a microcosm of the history of settler Australia, for it has evolved from a pioneer site of rural industry to a home for commuters, retirees and hobby farmers. Hardly any historic buildings survive in the valley, because bushfire has swept up and down it at regular intervals – and what was not destroyed by bushfire was burnt down from the inside as domestic fire escaped. Aboriginal people, squatters, farmers, miners, sawmillers and now vignerons, weekenders and retirees have all had to learn to expect fire.

After Black Saturday an old friend who is a resident of Steels Creek wrote to me about ‘how we might work to achieve a really worthwhile community benefit from the apparent disaster. We have lost friends, friends have lost homes and the community is still in shock. There needs to be a project to understand the community experience, the community response and the way forward to the future.’ A month after the fire the people of Steels Creek didn’t want any more hugs, soft toys or material things. As Roger Wettenhall would have put it, the fire for them was more than a problem in engineering – their little community had never depended much on infrastructure, anyway. They wanted help in their search for meaning, and in telling their stories. And they wanted answers to these questions: what exactly happened on the day? How did people die and how did they survive? What does ‘community’ mean in such a crisis and how does it work – or not? (This was one of Wettenhall’s central questions.) What is the emotional aftermath of the event and how are survivors reinventing their lives and their places? What does it mean to rebuild, knowing that your house may be vaporised at some time in the next generation? What kind of society evolves in conditions where investment in material culture is so insecure? I think it is a society that invests instead in social and intellectual capital, in the sinews and fabric of community, in the capacity to put life ahead of property.

Contemporary Australian society, like Australian nature and like Aboriginal civilisation, will learn to see the positives about fire. We cherish the green growth that returns so quickly. We can be proud that key concepts of fire ecology and models of bushfire behaviour were developed in Australia, and that landscape-scale prescribed burning has been pioneered here as a method of bushfire management. These innovations grew from a realisation that fire was so much a part of the Australian landscape and character that it could never be eliminated or suppressed. It had to be accepted and used.
Perhaps we can even, sometimes, learn to see a fired landscape (of the right intensity and frequency) as beautiful – as ‘clean’ – as Aboriginal people do.

People who suffered in Black Saturday have surprised themselves by finding beauty in the burnt landscape. In the months after the fire survivors often said: ‘I really shouldn’t say this, but there’s some beauty in that.’ With a vertiginous and guilty sense of liberation, they could see the bones of the land and the tracts of country without ‘all those fences we put in…suddenly you could see forever, that great sense of space!’ And it put humans in perspective too: ‘It’s not really about us,’ reflected one woman, Margaret. ‘Once you see those contours of the land revealed by the fire, you realise it’s a bigger story.’

The artists in Steels Creek ground the ash into paint and made use of black leaves, burnt wire, cauterised tools and the rust from the garden shed. Even the charred trees ‘are like sculptures in themselves’. Jane, a member of the local Stitchers group, thought of black lace because it seemed to fringe every ridge. One painter, Robyn, said she had never bought black paint until 2009, and then went through tubes and tubes of it. Her art after the fire began with black austerity, the dark trees like prison bars. Then, in the spring of 2009, she introduced her first colour. By the following year her palette had exploded into wild, joyous profusion: ‘This is what I see now…like a filigree, these gorgeous colours, the orange of the moss. I have burst into colour.’

References available at www.griffithreview.com

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Informed consent
The quest for a story
Michael Gawenda

‘Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on
knows that what he does is indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on
people’s vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without
remorse. Like the credulous widow who wakes up one day to find the charming young
man and all her savings gone, so the consenting subject of a piece of non-fiction writing
learns – when the article or book appears – his hard lesson. Journalists justify their treachery
in various ways according to their temperaments. The more pompous talk about freedom
of speech and the “public’s right to know”; the least talented talk about Art; the seemliest
murmur about earning a living.’


THIRTY years ago I wrote a series of articles for The Age about a group of
teenagers who were in their final year of school. They came from different schools
around Melbourne, private schools and public schools. There were perhaps twenty
teenagers in the group and we met regularly through that year, mostly at my home.
I met with some of them on their own, because the plan was for two or three major
pieces on the group and six or seven individual profiles. The series would run in
December and early January, before the VCE results came out. I planned to gather
the group together the following year to see what had happened to their dreams
and aspirations.

Those were different times for journalism. I was given time to develop this
idea and time to spend with the students and then I was given the space, lots of
space, in the paper for the series. I was in the thrall of the so-called new
journalism. I had been blown away by the New Journalism anthology, edited by
Tom Wolfe, and by Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood, the bible of new-journalism
disciples. By the time I came up with the idea for the school-leaver series, I had
spent weeks living in a Housing Commission flat in Richmond where there had
been a large number of suicides – almost daily someone jumped from one of
the top floors of the estate’s tower blocks. The piece I wrote afterwards was
perhaps six thousand words long and ran in the Saturday edition.
I had also lived on the streets of Melbourne for several weeks with the homeless and again the resulting piece ran in the large-circulation Saturday paper.

I believed back then – and perhaps I still do – that good journalism, good writing, needs no justification. This conviction, that the story was what mattered, enabled me to accept that one of the people I had met during my time with the homeless felt betrayed after the piece was published. She was in her early twenties, perhaps younger, and she had a three-year-old daughter. We met at one of the shelters. She liked me and trusted me. I was living homeless, but I wasn’t homeless. Somehow she knew this, or at least she knew that I could be relied on not to do her harm. One night a young man asked her to go with him to a party. She really wanted to go to the party. She arranged to leave her daughter with one of the shelter residents, a man she knew nothing about, whom she had met just hours before. I could not let her do this. I insisted that she decline the party invitation. The young man was furious. He accused me of being jealous, a failed old creep with no future who wanted to deny her a night out.

She didn’t go to the party. We talked late into the night and then we spent the next couple of days together – me, the young woman and her daughter – and then I disappeared, back onto the streets. I had a story to write and had to move on.

When the story was published I went back to the shelter to find her. When I did, she was furious and would not speak to me. The last time I saw her, through the window of the billiards room, she was sitting with her daughter on her knee. I had not named her in the story, nor had I written about the party incident. She did not feel comforted by this. With good reason, she felt betrayed.

Three months later I began on the school-leaver series. One of the teenagers I profiled was an eighteen-year-old from an inner-city high school. She was smart and articulate, and feisty, and impatient to get on with life. I knew she would make a page-one story. She was a second-generation Greek-Australian and she felt alienated from what she considered to be the conservatism and sexism of the local Greek community. She wanted to move in a wider world and she wanted to proclaim this ambition, dream her dreams, in the pages of The Age. I told her that there would be repercussions once the story was published. I told her that she couldn’t possibly imagine what it would be like for her to be on the front page of the paper, telling her story to hundreds of thousands of strangers. But she wanted her story told and, truth be told, I wanted to write it.

The series was a great success. The story duly appeared on page one with a lovely photograph of her standing on the St Kilda Beach pier, gorgeous and vivacious and hopeful, staring out across the water, dreaming her dreams. Two days later the local Greek newspaper published selective quotes from my story in a piece that soon had community leaders saying she had shamed her parents and the community. The Greek paper implied she was immoral and had betrayed her parents’ values.
As far as I know, the rift with the local Greek community was never repaired. I think her mother eventually forgave her. She and I stayed in touch over the years. She said she did not regret the article, despite the fallout. She had thrown off an anchor that would have weighed her down forever. The public humiliation and denigration was for a good cause, she said.

Her cause was not my cause. My cause was a good story.

THE CAUSE OF a good story is in a sense the subject of Janet Malcolm’s book The Journalist and the Murderer (Knopf, 1990). Published first as a two-part series in the New Yorker, in 1989, it examines the relationship between the writer Joe McGinniss and the convicted murderer Jeffrey MacDonald, who had consistently proclaimed his innocence in the murder of his wife and two children. McGinniss started out to write a book from MacDonald’s perspective. He was offered unfettered access to MacDonald’s legal team, his family, his friends and MacDonald himself. The two became close. In the course of his research McGinniss became convinced that MacDonald was a sociopath who had in all probability killed his wife and children. He did not tell MacDonald, but continued to see him and they stayed apparent friends. When the book was published MacDonald sued McGinniss for breach of contract and fraud. The case resulted in a hung jury and McGinniss settled the case by paying MacDonald more than $300,000 in damages. Leading journalists testified for McGinniss, arguing for the right of journalists, in the public interest – which meant, I believe, in the interests of good journalism – to mislead their subjects.

Janet Malcolm argued that McGinniss had committed a fraud and a betrayal, and from that she argued that all journalism involves betrayal. The interests of the subjects of journalism and the interests of the journalist are never aligned. The better the journalist, the more experienced and skilful, the more this non-alignment is hidden from their ‘victims’.

Every experienced journalist knows that, to some extent, this is true. On some level I betrayed that young homeless woman and betrayed the teenager whose life was changed by her story appearing on page one. There are many people I betrayed in this way, in the sense that they did not really understand what they were letting themselves in for. What they thought they were doing was not what I was doing. The stories I wrote about them were not their stories, but mine. What they thought was important was not necessarily what I thought was important. This helps explains why Paul Keating has never forgiven Don Watson for his wonderful book Recollections of a Bleeding Heart: A Portrait of Paul Keating, PM (Random House, 2002). Watson had ‘stolen’ Keating’s story and made it his own. Keating felt like Watson had broken an implicit contract between them. And the more widely Watson’s book was acclaimed, the more Keating felt that contract had been broken.
IN 2009, IN the aftermath of Victoria’s Black Saturday fires, I was the director of the Centre for Advanced Journalism at Melbourne University. Black Saturday was Australia’s worst peacetime disaster. One hundred and seventy-three people died in the fires and hundreds were injured. Thousands of houses were burnt; towns like Marysville were all but wiped out. Suddenly all the issues I had wrestled with – as a journalist, both when I was a reporter and, later, when I was an editor – came to the fore: the implicit contract between reporters and their subjects, what constitutes consent between reporter and subject, the balance between the public interest and the right to privacy of people in distress, the effects on ordinary people of being suddenly subjected to intense media coverage. All these issues are magnified in natural disasters.

We decided to embark on a major research project. The first part looked at how the media covered the fires, the ethical guidelines journalists used in approaching and writing victims’ stories, and the effects on journalists of reporting on a disaster that claimed so many lives and left so many people homeless and grief-stricken. The second part examined the effects on survivors of becoming the subject of reporting, how they viewed the reporting, and whether the stories about them were accurate and reflected their experience. We interviewed twenty-eight journalists, editors, executive producers, photographers and film crews, and twenty-seven survivors. This was not a scientific survey. It was qualitative research – almost a form of journalism – that used the skills and experience we had developed as journalists. Denis Muller, the chief researcher, had been a colleague of mine at The Age, and is now the leading authority in Australia on journalist ethics. He is both an academic and a working journalist, a rare combination in Australia.

The interviews with the media people were conducted in 2009, six months after the fires. We waited until early 2011 to interview the survivors. The Centre for Advanced Journalism has now published the reports of the research in Black Saturday in the Media Spotlight. I think it’s a landmark book. For the first time, to my knowledge, journalists and survivors of a major natural disaster – both sides of that implicit contract between journalists and their subjects – talked about their experiences, about how they interacted, how they judged the coverage of ‘their’ disaster, how the journalists were marked by the experience of reporting the disaster, and how the survivors experienced and reacted to that reporting.

Most of the journalists and editors we interviewed were thoughtful and glad of the opportunity to talk about their work. Many had been deeply affected by covering the fires and their aftermath. Many of them became emotional – some cried – when they recalled those days and nights. Few had received any counselling. Indeed, while counselling services were made available, most felt that the culture of their newsroom was such that seeking support would be seen as weakness. They might not be sent to cover a similar story again. None had received any training in dealing with grief-stricken and traumatised people. For many, reporting Black
Saturday was the first time they had been exposed to death and suffering on such a scale. All said they had to rely on their personal ethical values – their humanity – in deciding how to report. There simply were no shared, explicit ethical guidelines.

THE ISSUE OF consent goes to the heart of Janet Malcolm’s claim that all journalism involves a kind of fraud. The contract between journalist and subject, if not articulated, almost inevitably leads to the sort of betrayal she described as the black heart of journalism. Perhaps even when there is clarity in the relationship between reporter and subject, an understanding of what each brings and wants from the interaction, even then, especially after a calamity, more often than not there is betrayal. The survivor’s story becomes the reporter’s story. They are not the same. Then the journalist’s story goes through a process that transforms it into something else. Words are cut and spliced with others, and stories are changed, sometimes beyond recognition. In the end, it’s often impossible to say who the author is, but one thing is clear: it is no longer the survivor’s story.

Every experienced reporter has grappled with consent. There was a time when junior reporters were confronted with this issue in the most acute circumstances. Those of a certain age will never forget the time we spent covering road accidents, murders, all manner of bad things that happen to people. We had to do what was then called intrusions – seek out the family of the people who had died and ask them questions, ask for photographs to illustrate our story, ask how they felt. We quickly came to realise that in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy people want to talk. They will give you a photograph – as long as you are prepared to sit with them and look through their albums with them. They need to talk. You are all ears. The ability to listen, to give people space to talk – space they hardly ever have – is one of the skills central to good journalism.

They need to talk, but do they need to talk to a reporter? Do they, in their adrenaline-fuelled grief, know what they are consenting to? What does it mean that if you wait even a day or two after the event people will not want to talk to you, that they will feel like you are invading their grief which is private and not for public display? These are not questions open for discussion with most editors or news directors. They are off-limits. The story is important. The story has to be covered. There will inevitably be people who feel sick to their stomach by the coverage, but the story has to be told.

I agree, but how it’s told, how well it’s told, the form it takes and what journalists are prepared to do, as far as survivors are concerned, for the story, should be contestable.

Almost every journalist we spoke to understood that in the first forty-eight hours or so after a calamity survivors are most open to being interviewed, photographed, filmed. Most journalists put this down to survivors wanting their stories told and,
critically, the survivors being in a position to give consent. Most of the journalists agreed that after this time most survivors no longer wanted to be subjected to media coverage. They started to feel exploited. They wondered what the point of the coverage was, how it remained ‘news’.

All of this is contestable, especially the notion that in the immediate aftermath of a disaster – with many people having lost family members and friends, with their homes destroyed – survivors are in a fit state to consent to media exposure. Journalists have no training in recognising the symptoms of adrenalin-fuelled trauma that often manifests as ‘high spirits’ and that might make people incapable of understanding what they are doing.

THE JOURNALISTS AND survivors we interviewed were guaranteed anonymity, but there was one journalist who agreed that anonymity for him was impossible. *The Australian’s* Gary Hughes is both an experienced, award-winning journalist and a survivor of the fires. ‘I was staggered at what it’s like to be on the receiving end of the feeding frenzy,’ he said of being the subject of media coverage. ‘One of the lessons I learned is how draining it is for someone who’s been involved in something to give a media interview. It’s incredibly draining emotionally. My wife and daughter, I was very cautious about involving them and how much involvement, because when people talk about informed decisions, that word “informed”… I haven’t let other media near my daughter, which is probably a sad indictment on our profession.’

Hughes won a Gold Walkley for his reporting of the fires. His stories were intensely personal. He confined himself to his experience, and to his reactions to having his house destroyed by the fires and having sat in his car with his wife and adult daughter as the fire passed over them. Hughes had no need of a contract: he was both the journalist and the survivor. He owned his story.

Few of the survivors we interviewed – more than half had been the subject of stories by the journalists we interviewed – said they regretted having agreed to talk to journalists in the immediate aftermath of the fires. They felt the media exposure had, on balance, not been harmful to them personally and, in the main, had been beneficial. A majority said they felt more or less able to give consent to being the subject of reporting. In my view this cannot be taken at face value. Many of the survivors we interviewed said they had no recollection of what they said to the journalist or the film crew, and many said they had no recollection of the encounter at all.

One said, ‘A couple of days later, I realised – I had no grasp on reality – that our pictures would be in every major newspaper across the country, that my niece [overseas] would see me on YouTube… And here I was in newspapers and on [the] news across the country smiling because I’d found my husband and I wondered
how that must have looked to people who had lost their families. It was quite devastating for me and it took me a long time to get over it.’

Another said, ‘I think it [consent] was as informed as it could be. People tried to inform us, put it that way. But perhaps not having an understanding of our mental state at the time – and neither did we – I wonder if it is possible to properly inform people because their thinking processes… I just didn’t get it, is the easiest way to say it.’

How, in these circumstances, can there be a contract between journalist and subject, implicit or otherwise, that is not troublesome?

It is true that many of the survivors – and I believe this can only be in retrospect, or because journalists pressed this as a way to get access to survivor stories – said they agreed to be interviewed because they wanted to tell the world what had happened, because they wanted to inform friends and family of their survival, and, crucially, because they knew that telling their stories would trigger community support and get the authorities moving quickly to address their most urgent needs. These are compelling reasons for granting media access and allowing your story, an often intensely personal story of grief and loss, to be told to thousands of strangers. There’s also an implicit contract: This is why I am allowing you into my life, and if you do not meet my expectations I will feel cheated.

The question is: can survivors, in the hours after the disaster that has befallen them, without any experience of dealing with journalists, without any sense of how being in the media will affect them, really have such a clear view of the costs and benefits of giving a journalist – let alone photographers and film crews – entree to their lives? The journalist’s motivation is the story. They will be judged by how well they tell this story, how sensitively, how free of cliché it is, how nuanced. The story is an end in itself. The ‘good’ it does is really a by-product. So too, in a sense, is what Janet Malcolm calls the fraud at the heart of journalism.

NONE OF THIS is to suggest that there are no issues that journalists, editors and news executives need to consider and discuss. There is a need for clearer ethical guidelines for journalists covering natural disasters. Journalists need training in how to approach and relate to people who are victims. Above all, I believe journalists need to know that the impact on survivors – on everyone, but survivors in particular – of being exposed in the media can be life-changing and, at the very least, will be confronting.

The media is going through a revolution and that revolution will change the way journalism is produced, and the relationship between audiences and journalists. For natural disasters and conflict, it will change the relationship between survivors and media. If it hasn’t already done so. In the days after Black Saturday the Herald Sun set up a website exclusively for survivors, which they could use to contact family
and friends, and write about their experience if they wanted to. They could post photographs and update their posts any time. The paper made a commitment not to use any of the materials in the paper or on its main website.

I do not believe that sites like this will displace mainstream reporting of disasters and conflict, but they will change the nature of that reporting. Increasingly, journalism will involve a discussion between the journalist and her followers, and that discussion will take place on social media and on digital media and, if they are to survive, in newspapers as well. Even so, good journalism, good storytelling, will remain at a premium. Social media and digital media are delivery systems. What’s delivered will remain critically important. And the relationship between journalist and subject – even if that subject no longer has to be a passive ‘victim’ of the journalist’s story – will remain a complex one. Janet Malcolm’s characterisation of journalism as a fraud is not the whole story.

Looking back at the homelessness story and the story of the Greek-Australian girl, those pieces I wrote decades ago, would I write them differently if I could? Would I embark now on the homelessness story that led to that young women feeling betrayed, or the school leaver whose life was changed by being on page one of The Age? I had not read them for decades. At the time they were published I liked them very much. They were good stories. Writing and publishing those stories outweighed the possibility that I had caused people pain.

Re-reading them for this essay was a strange experience. It felt as if someone I did not know had written them. There are flaws and shortcomings, but still, I like them very much. If I were an editor I would publish them. They have energy and nuance and narrative flow, and managed to take two subjects that had been reduced to cliché by mostly forgettable, predictable reporting, and find ways of cutting through the dross to engage the reader. All those decades ago, the quality of the story mattered most. It still does.

In a career spanning three decades Michael Gawenda has won numerous journalism awards, including three Walkley Awards. He is the author of *American Notebook: A Personal and Political Journey* (2007) and *Rocky and Gawenda: The Story of a Man and His Mutt* (2009), both published by MUP. He was the inaugural director of the Centre for Advanced Journalism at the University of Melbourne, where he is now a senior research fellow.
**Ghost town**

Colin Mills

**I DIDN’T** want to go back to the town that wasn’t there. It was three months after the wave receded, and the network wanted a report on conditions in the north. They sent me in the first time, just after the wave struck. I saw the bodies in the mud and the survivors on their knees in the freezing cold. Their eyes were squeezed shut, their hands clasped over white cotton facemasks. Their shoulders shook. The other reporters and I walked around in our hardhats and pointed our cameras at splintered buildings and overturned vehicles. Then we went home.

In Tokyo musicians held concerts to raise money for the survivors, and people said how awful it all was. After that, I didn’t feel qualified to go back. I could do nothing for the people there. There was no way to describe the lives of the survivors on a piece of paper or squeeze it through a lens. My boss said if I wasn’t qualified, nobody was. And he was right; nobody was. But it was my job, and I thought I might stop thinking about Yuko if I spent time with people more unfortunate than myself. I decided to dilute my misery in the collective sorrow of others who had lost far more.

When I arrived everybody was living on the high ground. The international film crews and relief teams were gone. Most of the local reporters from Tokyo and Osaka were off covering the radiation leak at the nuclear power plant to the south. There was still something happening down in Fukushima, something to tell people. Events were still unfolding. Perhaps it was because the news from the leaky reactor remained so bad the network wanted to know if things up north were getting better. I didn’t want to be the one to tell them the truth.

I arrived with a box of canned food and juice. Takeshi’s sixty-year-old mother accepted it with a deep bow. If someone cared enough to come here, she was appreciative. The survivors didn’t want to be forgotten. After what they had been through, it was their greatest fear.

‘Thank you very much for coming,’ she said.

In the evening Takeshi and I sat on fold-up chairs outside the temporary shelter the government had built for his family in the grounds of an elementary school. Each room was fabricated in a factory and transported here for assembly. They had
refrigerators and washing machines from the Red Cross, toaster ovens and rice
cookers from the municipal government. The little house smelled of resin and new
tatami. Takeshi and his family were glad to have it after three months of living with
a thousand others on the floor of the city gymnasium. I had a room at a local
guesthouse that was not damaged by the water but Takeshi and his mother offered
me a futon, so I slept there. The futon was thin and I was uncomfortable on the floor
of their little unit. Being there made me feel better, as if I was sharing their suffering.

Takeshi and I propped our feet on a plastic beer crate. Another upturned crate sat
between us as our table. We worked our way through a plate of skipjack tuna and
got pretty drunk. The fish had arrived in the harbour that morning, part of a forty-
tonne haul landed by a trawler that came up from Shikoku; all of the fishing boats
from this area were lost to the wave. Takeshi’s mother seared and sliced up the fish
for us with some daikon and perilla. Then she sat on a cushion on the floor of their
prefab shelter, the laptop open on the low table in front of her. She still looked for
her friends. Takeshi had shown her how to go online, so each day she could check
the updated list of identified victims. The list for Miyagi Prefecture alone was over
two hundred pages. She gripped the mouse in one hand and held a cup of tea in the
other. Occasionally she found the name of somebody she knew. She rocked back on
her cushion, said ‘ah’ and nodded.

Takeshi’s father was one of five thousand still missing. He and Takeshi’s mother
had evacuated to high ground after the earth stopped shaking, but he had gone back
into town to look for his son before the water arrived.

THE RAINY SEASON was ending. The drizzle that began in the morning lifted
when the sun went down, but left the air heavy with humidity. During the day we
heard the rumble of heavy vehicles moving debris from the worst hit areas near the
waterfront. The sound of hammering echoed across the high ground as teams of
workers hurried to build more prefab units for the evacuees still left in the
gymnasium. But the night was quiet. To the east the ocean glinted in the moonlight.
Where once a carpet of lights would have twinkled in the town below between us
and the sea, now there was darkness punctured only by the muted red glow of
emergency lights left by the recovery teams. We sat on the edge of the abyss and
poured more shochu into our plastic cups. I knew I shouldn’t be drinking.

There was a shout from one of the kids in the unit two doors down.

‘Fireflies!’

We got up and walked over to the little stream that ran down the hill alongside
the school. My head swam. Beneath the trees, the darkness was a curtain I pushed at
with my hands. I heard one of the parents caution a child not to fall into the water.

‘Fireflies! Can you see them?’ another kid shouted. ‘Fireflies!’
A dozen tiny yellow-green lights drew circles in the black air. The kids thrust up their hands but were not tall enough to catch them. I extended my arm and in a moment one of the insects was on my palm, the lamp in its abdomen flashing every few seconds. The soft light expanded in my vision, absorbing the darkness around it. As I tried to focus, the glow made me think of the burning oil slicks on the harbour after the wave receded three months ago. They, too, had seemed larger in the darkness. For days afterwards the fire shimmered through the night like monstrous eyes glowing back at the shore.

I HAD MET Takeshi when I arrived two days after the wave. He was wandering through the rubble. I showed him my press badge and introduced myself. I didn’t know what to ask him, so we just walked. He didn’t seem to mind my presence. It was very cold. The grey sky and flickering snow sucked all the colour from the landscape, except for the red flags stuck in the debris marking the locations of bodies. Teams from the Self-Defense Forces in camoulage uniforms and facemasks searched the rubble for survivors. From time to time we came across groups of them, standing with heads bowed and hands together over a human form wrapped in a tarpaulin.

Takeshi used to work in a machining shop that processed metal parts for a subcontractor to one of Toyota’s subcontractors. Or something like that. He was a long way down the food chain. He showed me what was left of his company’s little factory. Two of the four walls were gone, the blades of the lathes red and rusty. Somehow the force of the water had bent one of them.

I saw a lot of Takeshi in the days that followed. He told me what had happened. He was my proxy. I lived it through him. I used him to make my own words more plausible. After the earthquake he and dozens of others evacuated to the local shrine on the hill overlooking the town. A kilometre from the sea, the wave didn’t look like anything to fear. From such a distance it seemed to move slowly, filling up the harbour on the far side of the ten-metre-high concrete sea wall. It made no noise. When the water came over the top of the wall, it slopped into the street like water overflowing from a bathtub. For a second it looked as if that would be the extent of it, as if the ocean would pull back. But then the second wave came and the water stood up. It surged over the barrier, sliding off the top of a sea that didn’t have enough room for itself. Pushing cars and boats ahead of it, the water built momentum, crunching and swallowing as it moved.

As the water sloughed off the sea there were gasps and even laughter at the sight of cars and buildings sailing along the streets of the town. Takeshi was embarrassed as he told me.

‘We didn’t realise what we were seeing,’ he said. He twirled his finger in the air next to his ear. ‘Your mind sometimes can’t process things. We’ve had disaster drills since we were kids. I think we just, you know, forgot what they were for.’
In those few moments – the last in which there was any hope for the town – the people on the hill assumed everyone must have made it out, that there was nobody left down there in the hospitals and nursing homes. They waited for the black water to stop, for it to drain back into the sea after swamping the two or three blocks closest to the breakwater.

But the wave kept coming, filthy and boiling. By now it was roaring. Takeshi said he remembered the noise most of all: the rush of the water, the monotonous wail of the siren, glass shattering, metal bending. The water wanted more of the earth. The onlookers began screaming. They saw people down in the town running ahead of the water. They watched cars driving along the road knocked sideways and flipped over as the water poured in. Reaching out like a huge hand, the wave crushed the town in its fist and flung it up the valley.

WHEN I GOT back to Tokyo after that first trip north, Yuko didn’t want to hear about what I’d seen. It was as if the smell of the place was still on me. Like everybody else she stayed glued to the television for two or three days after the wave but then decided to block it out. It upset her too much. She was from Kyushu and knew nobody in the tsunami zone, but it didn’t stop her having nightmares.

‘Don’t tell me,’ she said. ‘If I want to know I can see it on YouTube.’ Her shoulders shook like those of the people I had met up north. I didn’t think I had suffered enough to report accurately what had become of the survivors’ lives. She thought I did it too well.

It would have been stranger not to talk about what I’d seen, but she seemed angry with me for bringing it into the house. Of course, things were already strained between us. I told myself she wouldn’t have left if I hadn’t gone up to see it for myself. But I don’t suppose it would have made any difference. I think now she had been seeing him while I was away. He probably told her to bring matters to a head.

TAKESHI AND I went out again in the morning. He said he was looking for his father’s safe. I didn’t ask what was in it. I don’t even know if he knew. Two safes had already been dragged from the rubble by the recovery teams – I thought that gave him the idea. The metal boxes now sat at the local evacuee centre, waiting to be claimed. Other survivors were doing the same thing, combing through wreckage for the smallest plate or photograph or pot to remind them of what was gone.

‘I can’t remember what brand it was,’ he said. ‘But it was olive green. And big. Or maybe it was a filing cabinet. I’ll know it when I see it.’

We made our way down to where the sea had scoured the town from the flat land. The temperature was high and our T-shirts were wet through. A helicopter flew overhead. The stench was like the ocean rotting. Takeshi looked around. With
all the buildings gone he found it difficult to get his bearings, and wasn’t sure where
his parents’ house had been. He looked up at the hills above the town, as if noticing
them for the first time. Rubble had been pushed off the roads into huge piles by
hydraulic shovels. They sat like robotic vultures, pecking at the ground. Brown silt
covered everything.

Takeshi told me he could not remember what the town looked like. The
buildings and bridges, houses and shops were already sepia in his memory. What
he witnessed when the wave came was more indelible than any structure washed
away by the water.

Eventually he pointed to a square three-storey skeleton of steel beams that were
orange with rust.

‘I think that was the fire station,’ he said. ‘It’s this way.’

We came across a tiny old woman shuffling along the road. She squinted at me,
saw the press pass dangling from my neck and bowed from the waist. She smiled
but something inside her was knotted, hunching her over. I couldn’t believe how
small she was, how she had survived, how she could be grateful for my presence.

‘Thank you very much for coming,’ she said.

I wondered what she thought I had done for her, what I might do. I thought I
should probably take her picture, but I already felt like a voyeur.

Some locals were relieved to see journalists, yet suspicious of those who tried to
exploit more than report. The survivors were weary of those who only wanted the
clichéd story of the baby born in the evacuation shelter (‘new life to replace one of
those lost’), not that of the raw sewage still bubbling up into the streets from ruptured
pipes. Many journalists interviewed the barber who, having lost his shop, was giving
free haircuts on a rickety chair by the side of the road. Meanwhile, they skirted around
the news that disposing of twenty-five million tonnes of debris could take a decade.

I understood what the reporters were doing. It was tempting to try to find the
good amid all the misery. But nothing good had come of it, so I wondered what I
was supposed to do.

Takeshi and I walked past a fishing trawler perched neatly atop a two-storey
building. His T-shirt flapped around his thin torso. I noticed that his arms were
white. My camera felt like a rock around my neck.

And then I saw Yuko. At least, I thought it was her. A hundred metres away a
woman stood staring out at the ocean. She wore white jeans and a white blouse. Her
long black hair hung down her back beneath an orange hardhat. Her face was
turned away from me, but I knew her immediately. She could not possibly be there,
yet my mind quickly listed all the reasons why it must be her: she missed me, she
was sorry, she wanted me back.
At that moment Takeshi called out to me. ‘Help me, over here!’

I turned to look at him. He had clambered into a pile of debris by the roadside.

‘I found a safe!’ he yelled. ‘Help me get it out!’

He grabbed a long piece of timber and jammed it under the safe. I took one more look back at the woman in white and went to help him. We both leaned on the lever and lifted the big metal box from its nest of rubbish. Takeshi breathed deeply.

‘It’s not my father’s,’ he said at last. ‘Let’s leave it here by the road. One of the trucks can take it back to the evacuate centre.’

Takeshi, I knew, was really searching for his father. He felt guilty because his father had gone back to look for him when the wave hit. I figured he didn’t want anyone telling him it was pointless to expect to find the body after all this time. We both pictured his father entombed in the mud, or floating in the sea ten kilometres offshore, sucked out when the wave retreated. His grief, held so close to his chest, was the human story my bosses really wanted from me.

I looked up again and searched for the woman in white, but she was gone.

We walked back up the hill to Takeshi’s prefab shelter. The owner of the local guesthouse passed us in his minibus, going in the opposite direction. With few guests to look after, he spent his time ferrying evacuees from the local shelter to the hot bath at his inn. Outside the local convenience store a volunteer was distributing free T-shirts and rice balls to survivors. On the automatic sliding door the characters Ganbaro, Miyagi! were painted on the glass. Let’s do our best, Miyagi!

That day I met a strawberry farmer whose land had been swamped. His hothouses were washed away. Even after the tsunami receded, the salinity of the groundwater was too high to grow anything. He had decided to move his family to Hokkaido and start over.

The local seafood cannery had reopened, but not for any commercial reason. The manager had twelve employees who needed something to do. With the local trawler fleet gone, the cannery was buying fish from other parts of the country, and some from China. In any case, the small quantities of fish taken off the coast here had to be checked for traces of radioactivity from the Fukushima reactor. And the trawlers wouldn’t be back anytime soon; there was too much unseen debris on the bottom of the harbour. Teams of university researchers armed with sonar devices were out trying to map the new sea floor.

‘On the news they call this a disaster area,’ said Takeshi. ‘I wonder at what point will it stop being one? When will they stop calling it that?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

Takeshi shook his head. ‘They say they want to rebuild the town but I’m not sure why. And where? Nobody wants it back where it was by the water, and there’s no space up on the higher ground. It’s too steep.’
‘You’re not staying, then?’ I asked. He had just learned that his company was preparing to restart operations. A big electronics company had decided to donate an idle factory to small manufacturers wiped out by the wave. The new site was an hour’s drive inland. Takeshi didn’t have a car.

I knew he was thinking of his mother. She had already seen the ghosts of friends lost to the wave, or heard their voices in the night. She was wistful but not frightened. She had yet to mention her husband.

‘Do you believe in ghosts?’ Takeshi asked. ‘Because that’s what this whole town is now: a ghost. It’s dead and gone – it has no business coming back. You can see its outline, something you think you saw, but only out of the corner of your eye.’

I knew what he meant. I could have sworn there was a town here. But when I turned to look at it, it was gone.

THE DAY BEFORE I went back to Tokyo, Takeshi and I went to visit some of the old people who had moved from the gymnasium into their own prefab huts. The mayor had distributed pamphlets asking residents to check up on the older evacuees. Most lived alone. After weeks sleeping next to a hundred others, one woman was found dead in her new unit. The government had asked people to conserve energy, so she switched off her air-conditioner and died of heatstroke.

I wondered what would happen when the volunteers running the relief effort went back to their homes in other parts of the country. Most of the area’s inhabitants were already old. In ten years a lot of them would be gone. I didn’t know who the rebuilding was for. But to question the rebuilding efforts felt like treason. My job was to depict a hopeless situation as something inspiring.

As we stepped out of an apartment I saw the woman in white again. This time she was close and staring straight at me, and I could see that it wasn’t Yuko. She was older and not as pretty. There were dark circles under her eyes. She had no volunteer’s ID around her neck, so she must have been a local.

There is something about this place, I thought. It makes you see things that aren’t there.

The woman bowed deeply. ‘Thank you very much for coming,’ she said.
Disappeared
This disaster was not televised
Sophie Cunningham

‘On opening the bathroom door, I saw that the roof was off that part of the house and
when I opened the door the ceiling of the room also disappeared; we then went to the
toilet which was next door to the bathroom and as I opened the door, I saw the outside
wall of the toilet disappear; I then went to the main bedroom of the house and saw that
the end outside wall had disappeared and that the side walls of the room were moving
under the pressure of the wind... My wife and I attempted to hold the bathroom and
toilet doors shut and we placed our two children between our bodies to protect them.’
– Detective Sergeant Thomas C Baker

BY the end of that night, Christmas Eve 1974, Detective Sergeant Baker had lost
more than his walls, his roof, his house; his entire town had disappeared, and when
he scrambled out of the wreckage of his home at dawn on Christmas Day, Darwin
looked as if it had been hit by a bomb.

Reading through policemen’s personal accounts of their experiences of Cyclone
Tracy, you see that there is poetry in duress. There is also sadness. Constable Dane
Smith: ‘[I] was directed to the body of Peter Brian Daffey, 6 yrs. killed when bed
under which he sought refuge collapsed over him. Body taken to Casuarina Post
Office. I failed to identify the body with the result it remained unidentified for
several days.’ And exhaustion. Constable G Townsend: ‘I was placed in the
armoury section at the station and was also the pet destroyer... My hours of duty
are not possible to calculate.’

Out of a police force of 208 only six failed to arrive at work on Christmas Day –
rostered on or not – though one cop reported for work in his speedos, and several
others were so badly injured they had to be evacuated. These more personal police
reports had been filed in case there was a commission held into the capacity of
police to adequately work in the aftermath of the cyclone, given their experiences
during it. This issue – of the incapacitating nature of trauma – was a source of some
contention. Did the town need to be put under emergency rule, under the command
of Major General Alan Stretton, for five days?
There was a certain irony in the fact that Darwin had recently undergone disaster planning for war. That training stood it in good stead. Nonetheless, emergency rule could be construed as an invasion of the territory. Indeed, Crown Law Officer Clement O’Sullivan describes Stretton’s visit to the magistrate’s courts a few days after the cyclone, to berate Chief Magistrate David McCann, as an ‘invasion attack’. 4

But if you try to avoid reacting to the symbolic nature of the military response, if you read what happened to the forty-five thousand or so people who endured winds that are believed to have reached three hundred kilometres an hour (the instruments recording wind strength blew away at 217) you understand why the federal government was uncertain about whether Darwin’s residents would still be standing. Sure, Mayor Tiger Brennan, aided by a cocktail of rum, antihistamine and painkillers, slept through the night and woke in an intact house, but he was one of the lucky few.

TRACY – SO NAMED on 21 December – was a small and slow-moving cyclone. ‘You could have walked, a quick walk, and kept up with it,’ according to meteorologist Ray Wilkie.5 And because Tracy was slow, it stayed. And stayed. And stayed. ‘The big blow’, as locals called it, went for more than five hours, rattling houses until everything that held them together, every nail along with the nuts and bolts, came loose, at which point the buildings ‘unzipped’. Evaporated into the air. Exploded into the night. Seventy per cent of Darwin’s houses were laid waste. Every public building was destroyed or seriously damaged. While the loss of life was limited, the material damage was unparalleled.

People sheltering in cars were picked up into the air, blown a few hundred metres and then dumped down again. Babies were blown from parents’ arms. Housing girders twisted themselves into forms of abstract beauty. Thousands of sheets of corrugated iron scraped and scratched along the ground, sounding like millions of fingernails running down a blackboard. Ordinary household objects became lethal. Sergeant C Simpson: ‘I was struck on the left shin by a china mug and the handle became embedded in my leg…’ 6 The ABC journalist Richard Creswick sat in the bath with three cats, a dozen tinnies and a bottle of cognac, and taught his housemate Eric (who was sitting under the hand basin) the words to ‘Waltzing Matilda’. Elizabeth Carroll wore her new long nightie, one pretty enough to double as an evening dress, into the toilet cubicle where she took refuge, alongside three adults and five children, for the entire night. Dawn Lawrie, who went on to become the independent member for Nightcliff, escaped her collapsing house with nothing but her kids, a dog, a puppy and its special food. When she got to the cyclone shelter she put her kids in an industrial fridge for safety. Senator Bob Collins, who lived near Darwin, out in Howard Springs, spent much of the night trying to save his state-of-the-art stereo equipment. The palm in the botanical gardens that was due to flower for the first time in a hundred years that Christmas Day was destroyed.
David McCann, whose marriage had recently ended, sat in the YMCA with a mattress pulled over his head. (A lot more marriages would be over by the time the cyclone’s work was done. Separations escalated in the months and years after Tracy.) Ray Wilkie sat in his office, under the desk – on the phone, while he still had a line – trying to keep track of the situation. As lightning flashed, brilliant and bright, Wilkie had glimpses of a ruined Smith Street and began to get a sense of the damage being done. Architect Peter Dermoudy hunkered down in the gun batters of East Point and watched the strange green glow of the otherworldly sky as the eye of the storm moved over the town. The sound of the cyclone returning after the eye passed was described variously as hundreds of petrol tankers heading up the street, a jet plane in your garden, and ‘rather like an express train going through a tunnel’ that went on for hours and hours.

After all the noise, around dawn silence descended. Don Sanders, a broadcaster and the voice of the cyclone warning that people had been listening to (and ignoring) throughout Christmas Eve, weathered the storm at the ABC studios. He described emerging to ‘a most uneerie sort of sky and cloud formation. It was the utter silence. It was, as I can well imagine Hiroshima was two hours after the big egg went off, just nothing.’ Hedley Beare, then the Northern Territory’s director of education, described leaving his house for the first time as stepping ‘into a world I could never have conceived of. It was almost like stepping onto another planet’, but then ‘some lovely things occurred…neighbours started to check out neighbours.’ Soon after Beare saw a man, probably in shock, attempting to mow his debris-covered lawn.

Prisoners who had less than six months to serve on their sentence were released from Fannie Bay Gaol because it had practically been destroyed. As well, the prison officers had their own ruined homes and distraught families to attend to. A story went around about a guy who’d checked into the Mandorah Hotel, across Darwin Harbour, waking up and demanding room service. Rosemary Mayo went into labour at 1 pm on Christmas Day and gave birth to a son, Paul, that evening. There was a body in the Nightcliff Pool but the water was boiled and drunk anyway. Cars couldn’t start because petrol vapour got sucked out of engines through exhaust pipes during the cyclone, and they had to be towed around the block to start.

Without any landmarks to orientate them people could not find their way to where their houses had once been. ‘The whole geography of the area had completely changed – the topography nearly had changed – so you got lost,’ Ray Wilkie said. There was no sewerage or water, electricity or phones, which led to the loss of another set of bearings, a peculiarly modern predicament. As Hedley Beare put it, ‘When you’re without telephone, post office and all of those things, you’re actually standing alone in the universe.’
Pets suffered, alongside their owners. The day after the cyclone Barbara James, a journalist, found her cat – alive – in the washing machine, where it had waited for the storm to pass. Because of fears that hungry and traumatised dogs would form packs, they were shot – often without warning and in front of their owners. Willkie describes a recurring scene around Darwin: ‘one day an officer came around, and there was an old dog in our place – he was a nice old fellow – and the [policeman] said: “You got a dog there?” and I said: “Yes. He’s not hurting any one”… Out he came and bang, that was it.’ Lawrie, in contrast, managed to get her puppy evacuated and hid her Boxer bitch so she’d survive. Pets, she reasoned, were important to rebuilding a society.9

THE MORE YOU read of the devastation Cyclone Tracy wrought, the harder it is to believe that only seventy-seven people died that night – though there are still 160 listed as missing – and it’s no surprise to find that the figure is endlessly disputed. Little is known of the fate of those without formal addresses – the hippies who slept on the beaches, the Indigenous people known as ‘long-grassers’ – and from what I can gather no serious attempt was made to estimate the deaths in these groups. It’s been suggested that some Aboriginal people left town before the cyclone because they knew something was up, while others were flown to Aboriginal communities after the storm. One man, Echo Cole, said: ‘…because of my Aboriginal identity [I knew] – that something was going to happen to Darwin city at the time…everything just went dead. There was no bird life; no movement; even the trees were still. And when Tracy hit, it did hit hard; then the trees started to move.’10

When I wondered out loud about this figure of seventy-seven dead, and who was known to have died, an archivist at the Northern Territory Archives told me that the morgue photos were in the building. I could see them if I wanted. Then she hesitated. ‘But I wouldn’t recommend it.’ I chose not to look.

Photos had been taken for identification because the bodies had to be buried quickly. It was hot and there was no refrigeration. David McCann, the Chief Magistrate, recalled: ‘I said, “look, there’s no way we can keep the bodies just lying as they are. They have to be buried smartly and there are all sorts of reasons, including public health problems if you don’t.”’.11

Once the cyclone receded rumours began to buffet the town. The cyclone was doubling back on itself and was going to hit Darwin a second time. Mass graves had been dug and unaccounted-for bodies dumped in them. As well, there were endlessly repeated stories of Greek men dressing up as women so they could be evacuated on the first planes out – something that my research suggests happened just the once. It took twenty-seven hours for the ABC to get back on air after its transmitter blew away on Christmas morning. The first song played when radio was restored, just after lunch on Boxing Day, was the theme song to the new
television series *Rush*. A lot of people commented on the jauntiness of that tune and the lightness of that moment: how it lifted their spirits. After three days food still in fridges started rotting and the men who cleaned them out were often so overwhelmed by the stench they had to stop and vomit every few minutes. Because of fear of a cholera outbreak there was what some considered excessive spraying, particularly over the northern suburbs.

As always occurs in these circumstances, there was looting. This was also something Greeks were also accused of – one Greek man ending up in hospital with a broken jaw after being arrested at a roadblock. He was later found not guilty, but the *NT News*, which had been diligently fuelling all race-related rumours, failed to report the man’s innocence. Reading accounts of the hours and days after Tracy struck it’s hard to work out what the definition of looting actually was. A white public servant grabbing asthma drugs from a chemist wasn’t considered looting. An Aboriginal man grabbing a bottle of whisky from a bottle shop was.

McCann elaborated: ‘They charged this fellow and I was rather disappointed that the first person they’d managed to arrest and charge with stealing, which was in the area of looting, was an aborigine. It seemed unfortunate that they were again going to be represented in the record as people who were involved whereas I think it was, if not known, suggested by a number of people that lots of other people had been putting their hands on goods that didn’t have an owner prior to that and it would have been a little more representative of what was actually going on had somebody other than an aborigine been charged.’ The man in question had been charged with impersonating a police officer and stealing. Despite his disappointment that the man was Aboriginal, McCann went on to sentence him to either three or six months’ prison – a sentence no one can clearly recall, despite it becoming a matter of much contention. Stretton, upon hearing about the case, went to the courthouse and accused McCann of racism. Both men’s tempers frayed. McCann’s take: ‘My immediate view was I wasn’t going to take orders from anybody, particularly orders relating within a courthouse situation… Stretton, I think he was in his full regalia, not in his best uniform but, you know, it was quite obviously a military presence.’

Stretton may well have been right to query the treatment of Aboriginal people in Darwin at the time, but did he have the legal authority to impose his views on the courts? No one seemed to know. And while Stretton was meant to be – indeed was – bringing some order to Darwin, he was starting to crack under the strain of what he has since dubbed those ‘furious’ days. He began to cry in press conferences – the effect, in part, of only sleeping two hours out of seventy-two, and returned to Canberra on New Year’s Eve, which was sooner than expected. Just after he left, the Navy arrived. ‘I remember sitting in our house on New Year’s Day, when the fleet came up the harbour,’ Hedley Beare said. ‘It was one of those – almost a transcendental moment. They were just grey silhouettes as they moved up the harbour in the early morning.’
Police began to collapse with exhaustion. Constable Stephenson said: ‘We were relieved by the Commonwealth Police five days later, I think, as we had lost track of the time and days.’ The new cops carried guns and threw their weight around – so the story goes. Lorna Fejo, a member of the Stolen Generation, describes being ‘really terrified of them’. When asked to talk about people who died in shootings that occurred in the (surprisingly mild) anarchy after Tracy hit, she acknowledged such things happened but declined to discuss them because they weren’t ‘her’ knowledge.

Hours after the cyclone died down Beare was quick to ask himself, ‘“What do you do, when the world has ruptured like this?” The first thing a public servant says is: How do we rehabilitate it?” He went on to organise the evacuation of thirty thousand people from Darwin – the largest evacuation in Australia. The first to leave were the injured, children and women. With no homes to live in and no facilities, the logic ran, there was the risk of an epidemic. As well, the task of feeding so many under these circumstances would distract from the job of rebuilding. This all makes sense. What is harder to understand was the recurring, not oft-challenged suggestion that women had less to offer the rebuilding process. As a consequence, many were shipped out when they didn’t want to go. In an interview soon after the cyclone Jim Bowditch, editor of the NT News from 1954 to 1972, said, ‘I do think it was a mistake to rush the women out. I go along with the view that far too many men who were left here were quite useless and contributed nothing.’

Fejo found being evacuated particularly painful. ‘Oh it was really devastating… We had no home; we had nothing, but we still was determined we wanted to stay in Darwin. But we were more or less ordered: “Get out of Darwin. Go!”’ Meanwhile, ‘All the men from eighteen years and up had to stay back…to help clean up the place.’ Frejo was put on a bus to Mt Isa, though she ended up further south. She finally found a way to return to Darwin (illegally, without a permit) despite being told in Adelaide that Darwin was ‘finished’. Aboriginal people in particular encountered prejudice after their evacuation and were not offered the level of support white evacuees received.

It was traumatic for them all. Elizabeth Carroll describes landing in Sydney with nothing but a man’s shirt on and ‘feeling like a refugee’. She has continued to feel traumatised by the events of that night and the days that followed, and still experiences anxiety attacks whenever the wind picks up. She couldn’t bring herself to return to Darwin. This sense of ongoing trauma was more common among people who never returned. As Sally Roberts, who chose to stay, says, those who didn’t come back lost the chance to ‘see the optimism and the general cheerfulness of everybody who’d come back to rebuild Darwin, and all they could remember was the havoc and destruction.”
Peter Dermoudy is one of several who say they wouldn’t have missed the cyclone for the world: ‘It cleansed me.’ Those who lost their children, their limbs, their minds, felt otherwise. Either way it’s no easy thing to have life, as you know it, disappear into thin air.

The memories in this essay are drawn from archival records.

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Ear to the ground

Learning to make a fuss

Nic Low

‘If I am what I have and if what I have is lost, who then am I?’
- Erich Fromm

‘He aha te mea nui? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.’
- traditional Maori proverb

CHRISTCHURCH. I grew up in Christchurch. It was a quiet, peaceful place. Most nights I’d finish work round twelve, drop my skateboard to the cobbles and clatter home. My wheels were often the loudest sound. I’d roll down Columbo Street, past the straggle of hoodie kids awaiting the last bus, then cut through the bleak granite expanse of Cathedral Square. I could hear street-sweeper trucks, and the murmur of the last-drinks crowd at Warner’s, and something else too, just on the edge of my hearing. From the eastern corner of the square rose a shrill electronic whine. It was like having a mosquito trapped inside your skull. It was maddening.

The sound was produced by a device attached to the offices of the local newspaper. People over the age of twenty-five couldn’t hear it. Only young people could hear it. It was designed to stop us loitering and drive us away. And it wasn’t just The Press broadcasting that needling drone. It felt like the whole city. The sound was the suburban status quo running smoothly in its tracks, and the tiny wheels of petty bureaucracies, and the antique machinery of monocultural privilege. Once you hit your later twenties and began thinking respectable thoughts, you’d gain immunity. But it was getting to everyone I grew up with. Change felt impossible. The rest of the country thought us stiff and stuck-up and white. The tiny, vibrant subcultures that grew in the cracks felt under permanent siege. No matter how we’d enjoyed childhood, no matter the family ties and lovers and landscapes, that sound drove us to leave.

I moved to France, then Australia. I remained proudly Kiwi, yet at odds with the city that formed me. Each time I returned to see family and friends, Christchurch felt a little more empty. There were flashes of colour, but the stern stone facades and
endless one-way streets dominated. People and energy seemed to drain away like so much rain from the city’s slate roofs. On one visit I published an overheated opinion piece in The Press about the city’s out-of-sight, out-of-mind approach to youth and change. I was politely told to piss off back to Australia. It seems the feeling was mutual.

Then, early on a cold spring morning in September 2010, I was holidaying with my parents in Tasmania. We stopped at a church fair. A man sold us a jar of honey. He asked where our accent was from.

Christchurch, he repeated, looking concerned. Is your house okay?

The question made no sense. Everything was always okay in Christchurch.

And so, a radical thing has happened to a conservative place. The city I grew up in, the city much of my family and many of our ancestors grew up in, has been largely destroyed. I have been back twice since the earthquakes began, full of love and trepidation, like visiting an estranged family member on their deathbed. I can no longer hear that whining sound coming from the square. Partly because I am a bit older, and I can see that plenty of the whining was my own restless impatience. But mostly because it has been drowned out by something much deeper, something much older. It is the sound of the earth, and the feelings the earth awakens in people. It is partly fear and it is partly strength. I am trying to understand the ruined city’s new resonance.

When the first quake struck, the heavy bronze bells in the cathedral swayed and rang a ghostly warning across the city. My younger brother woke to the jolt and his first thought was Shit, that must have been Wellington, and it must have been catastrophic. Luckily, it was neither. The sleeping city woke in panic but the bricks and stones and concrete and glass fell into empty streets. It was the first time in modern history a 7-plus quake had hit an urban centre with no deaths. The quake was an ocean swell, a great rolling wave that rose and fell but left things much as they were. The quake scared the hell out of people, and houses cracked and the ground flooded with a fine mud, but it did not truly destroy the city’s sense of safety.

I remember my Standard Two teacher, Mr Ellis, explaining why we were so safe. He drew a wonky map on the blackboard. He tapped the bottom corner. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is New Zealand. Imagine someone wanted to attack us.’

He drew a dotted line heading our way, an attack force from Nauru, perhaps. Halfway across the blackboard Pacific it turned back. ‘See, they come to attack but it’s too far. They run out of petrol, and they have to turn round and go home.’

Christchurch really did feel that far from the pain of the world. We had no idea there were fault lines under the city, that earthquakes ran in the family. Nothing much happened and we were grateful. The reasons parents wanted to raise kids there – the relaxed pace, the near-totalitarian stability – were the same reasons those
kids wanted to get the hell out. The 7.0 quake in Haiti razed Port Au Prince, killed a hundred thousand and left more than a million homeless. Christchurch lost power, water and sewage, but often only for days or weeks. We treated crush injuries and concussions in our first-world hospitals and pulled down the damaged buildings. We had building codes, by god. Building codes and insurance. We had our deeply ingrained sense of luck. Even our earthquakes fit the pattern.

When I visited in December 2010 the main evidence of the quake was a rash of blue tarps over the city’s roofs. The streets were lined with piles of fallen chimney bricks, like little altars. There were a few cleared sites and some older buildings were fenced off, pending repairs or demolition. Everyone I met was compelled to share their stories, and those of their neighbours, all of whom they now knew. It was as if the quake had been a synchronising of watches, a zeroing of disparate lives that gave everyone a common origin: We survived the quake. We were scared shitless, and it’s been a drag boiling the drinking water, but we all survived. The gratitude was palpable. It felt like the city was a bit more willing to smile, even if its front teeth had been knocked out.

When I boarded a plane for Melbourne, the narrative was clear. You have a crisis, you respond, things get fixed up and life returns to normal. The Press published a letter to the editor claiming damage to the red-light district was a warning from God. Those little wheels began to turn. Things were going to be okay.

SOMEWHERE DOWN BY the hospital, in the crook of the river, is the site of a disaster, perhaps the area’s first. The place was called Puahi Pa, a settlement of the old Waitaha people. Our ancestors lived here, going back seven hundred years, then Ngai Tahu after them, moving across the landscape on foot, to the swamps and marshes, the grasslands and podocarp forests beside the river, hunting and gathering food, listening for the whoop of kereru. They used the long, hollow bones of bird wings as kōauau flutes, and made putorino trumpets from hardwood. Visitors were welcomed with the high and lonely cry of the karanga, and challenged with haka. The language itself that filled the landscape is deep and round. To my ear, the Maori word for ‘world’ sums this up: ao.

European whalers came in the 1830s, and European interest in settlement grew throughout the 1840s. For the people at Puahi and the other Ngai Tahu settlements, here was the first great rupture, the break point between one society and the next. It was a slow-motion disaster; it was catastrophic, and it was not. It was the founding of the city – land for my first European ancestor, William Newnham, in 1850. It meant the ring of picks on rock as foundation stones went down, and the nasal stammering of Maori spoken with a common cold; the sound of corks worked out of bottles, fence posts hammered in, the sudden thunder of horses and guns. Demand for land was fierce. Kemp’s Deed was inked in 1848 by the chiefs of Ngai
Tahu and the land passed over. Ten per cent was to be held aside for the tribe, written into the deed of sale. The land was not held aside. The land was cleared and planted with oaks and willows. Christchurch would be an idyllic, pre-industrial revolution English town.

Ngai Tahu were moved out to reserves. When visiting they camped near Puahi at Little Hagley Park, squatters on their own land. The sound of their presence in the landscape was silenced, and this silence became the true marker of the disaster. Children were forbidden to speak Maori at school; the later Suppression of Tohunga Act attempted to stop priests from practising their chants and prayers. Ngai Tahu presence in the city was reduced to the cry of a produce seller in Market Square.

In Christchurch, perhaps more than any other sizeable New Zealand city, there has been almost no Maori presence. But even if a disaster is not named, or addressed, it doesn’t go away. The social damage of that forced displacement was felt through the whole of the nation’s society. The tribe did not stop fighting for redress for one day. And the geography of the ancestors – the pa and kainga sites, the trails, the swamps, rivers and marshes – were still there, just beneath the surface.

THE SOUND ARRIVED first.

John Dodgson is an organist. To his trained ear it was the blast of a low C, the deepest note on the scale, coming from everywhere at once. He knew instantly what it was. My father, a jazz musician, knew it too. The sound came, and the fear came, and it surged up from a sound and a feeling into a mighty weight that roared through the house like an invisible freight train, twisting and popping the joists and beams, bursting open walls and floors. The ground tore itself up by the roots, and with sudden and extreme violence shrugged the people off.

The roar is louder than anything we can imagine. It’s the sound of a tectonic plate moving, and buildings collapsing and books and furniture going over, and it rises up through the scale to the wild crash of every fork and glass and plate hurled from every cupboard in your house, in every house, in every street. It’s the sound of the ground beneath your feet, and bedrock and safe as houses being torn down. It’s the death of the city’s narrative. Imagine the noise of it. Imagine the fear.

It was only 6.3 in magnitude but the g-force, the sudden ground acceleration, was among the highest ever recorded. If the September earthquake was a huge rolling wave, this was a sledgehammer. From the quake’s heart in Banks Peninsula, the ground jolted violently towards the city then, as the crust of the earth rose, then fell, a second massive shock rose up to meet it. The two shockwaves collided. This time the impact was catastrophic.

The cathedral spire and its enormous bells were thrown into the square. All across the city old brick buildings exploded. The central city’s heavy Victorian
facades were tossed directly onto people and cars below. Buildings corkscrewed on
their foundations and buckled and fell, and great halos of dust rose in their place.
The CTV building collapsed and caught fire. The Pyne Gould Guinness office tower
came down one floor at a time. Those on the top floor rode it down like a great
concrete wave. Those beneath were crushed. As the buildings came down, the
swamps and marshes and ancient, buried waterways rose up.

My uncle was at the back of a huge furniture showroom when it hit. He
struggled through the debris of a dozen destroyed living rooms and out into the
street, late enough to avoid the falling masonry. He spent the next few hours
shunted this way and that through the carnage, past bodies crushed in cars and
people trying to dig others out of the rubble. The city was filled with the deep
concussions of aftershocks and the sharp, vicious clatter of masonry coming down
on rescuers. Up on the Port Hills boulders thundered through houses as easily as a
kid kicks in a sandcastle. In the Durham Street Methodist Church three people were
killed when the roof collapsed. They were in the process of dismantling the huge
pipe organ. I can only imagine the noise that made when it came down.

What happened immediately after the quake is the stuff of horror movies. From
the sewers, from the drains, from garden beds and the cracks in roads, a thick,
suffocating grey-black mud began to spill out across the ground. It pooled in gutters,
then spread across roads and up over the footpaths and into houses. It flooded
through kitchens and living rooms and in some cases flowed up through the floor
itself. It came out of the toilets, mixed with sewage. It swallowed gardens and cars
and whole suburbs, turning them into a toxic, featureless black moonscape.

People knew what it was, technically. The super-fast vibrations of the quake
turned the fine topsoil to liquid, and as the heavier soil and rocks churned and sank,
the liquid was forced up and out. It’s called liquefaction, but it felt like a nightmare.
It felt mythical. It was as if the city’s fear had been made physically real, and come
spilling out of the ground.

After the noise, silence. A frantic kind of silence punctuated by car alarms and the
rolling boom of aftershocks. Strangers first, then police, then urban search and
rescue teams moved through the city grid, shouting to one another, building-to-
building, rubble-to-rubble. The city was declared a no-fly zone so that the search
teams’ ultra-sensitive audio equipment could pick up the slightest sound –
scratching, tapping, a voice, a breath. It was an incongruous picture: workers poised,
almost on tiptoe, listening to the rubble; and at their backs, lines of huge steel
diggers, claws upraised, listening too.

The strongest instinct was to get home to family. The city emptied out, but it was
a slow and stressful process. The bridges across the Avon were all damaged, and the
roads a buckled mess of debris, of mud, of people wandering in shock. I met a
woman who ran home to find her children. She had been in the Family Court
signing her divorce papers when the quake struck. She and the court clerk flung themselves under the table. *Fuck it,* she thought. She reached back up, grabbed the papers and signed them anyway, though the signature is unlikely to match the one on her licence. When the immediate shocks subsided she and the clerk ran. When she finally got home, seven kilometres through the mud, her youngest daughter said, ‘What took you so long?’

Many had no homes to go to. Their homes had either collapsed, been thrown off their foundations, were buried in sewage and mud, or lacked water, power and shelter from the weather. Hagley Park, where Ngai Tahu had squatted after being removed from their land in the 1850s, once again became a campsite for the displaced.

IN THE FOLLOWING days and weeks people helped each other. The porcelain veneer of Christchurch politeness cracked with the sewage pipes. No matter what Mayor Bob Parker was talking about on TV or radio, he stressed helping. *Check on your neighbours. See how they’re going. Do it. Do it again.* People were physically unprepared, but responded psychologically without hesitation. Thousands of student volunteers dug out the buried suburbs, and distributed food and water. The pragmatic, stoic, shut up and get on with it side of the city’s character came into its own. I felt proud when a work colleague spoke of interviews with Christchurch people on TV: ‘They’re so down-to-earth about it. The city’s buggered, but oh well, we’ll build a new one. Not like people I saw in Queensland with the cyclone. Oh! Oh! My house is destroyed – my life is over. Oh! Oh!’

It was around this time that the word ‘munted’ gained almost universal currency, used by everyone up to and including the New Zealand Prime Minister to describe things that were severely damaged. *My house is munted. The sewage system is munted.* Yeah, the city’s munted. The word is blunt, flat, heavy in the mouth, without pretension or melodrama. It seemed perfect for the newly emerging Christchurch.

As people worked to clear the rubble, they talked. There was a sense of disbelief that could only be whittled away through talking. Underneath the specifics of each individual story, I imagine those conversations were all the same. They boiled down to people telling each other, over and over, *this is shared,* and *this is real.*

I WAS IN the bush outside Castlemaine when I got the news. My friend Malcolm looked up from his laptop and said, ‘Six point four, in Christchurch. Fatalities, they –’ and I was gone, out the door, running through the bush to get phone reception. I blundered into a thick spider’s web that clung to my face, gummed my eyes and mouth shut. Christchurch was my family, my parents, my brother, grandfather, uncle, cousins, old friends and old flames. I stood on top of the hill behind my house in perfect sunshine, and called and called and called. I’ve never felt so sick.

NIC LOW: Ear to the ground
It took days to get confirmation that everyone I knew was okay, and in those
days I obsessively consumed the news. One video stayed with me, of three young
women moving slowly through the ruins. I knew those women a generation earlier.
Elegantly dressed in asymmetrical black, they were the ones selling Nom*D clothes,
or making coffees at C1 or out for a dance at Ministry. The one in the middle had
lost half her face. It hung off in a bloody clump that sagged as she walked.

For the first few hours the reporting was urgent and upset. It was hastily typed,
hand-held, full of mistakes. Then the postings began to resemble news items, giving
overviews and summaries. The press releases arrived, the carefully crafted statements
of politicians and officials. But in those initial raw hours a conduit had opened. It was
possible to feel the weight and distress of what was happening, and share the total
disbelief that it could be happening to Christchurch. This was the place I’d escaped
because of its immutable sameness. I thought of the people who might be dead. I
thought of all the stories contained in those bricks. All the history I’d left behind.

I WENT BACK a month later. I sat up late with Mum in the dining room, talking
about family, about our own crisis that ran parallel to the earthquakes. She said, ‘I
don’t know what to say,’ and the earth said it for her. Thunder rose sharply beneath
us, and the shockwave slammed through, a sickening drag in the guts like the thrust
of a huge and wilful hand. It lifted and rolled the floor under our feet and set the
house shuddering and moaning in protest. Every object reached a rattling crescendo
then the shock passed on and was gone. I was terrified. Mum laughed, not unkindly.
‘Four point three, four point four,’ she said. ‘You’ll be okay.’ She bounded upstairs to
check the Geonet website. She came back down triumphant. ‘Four point four.’

Having experienced thousands of tremors, the inhabitants of Christchurch had
become accurate human seismographs. It was a daily game, this filing of
earthquakes under precise, knowable numbers, and a small attempt to assert some
human control. But the ongoing aftershocks were so severe that, according to the
local mental health expert Cerina Altenburg, Christchurch citizens were displaying
the symptoms of extreme stress usually seen in war zones. The adrenaline had worn
off. Grief for people, land and place was setting in. One hundred and eighty-one
people were confirmed dead. Whole suburbs would be written off. Most schools
and businesses were closed or badly disrupted. My friend Eric posted on Facebook:
‘Um…what do we do now?’

I went walking. The city did look and feel like a war zone. The streets were
silent. The city’s once private homes were visible in intimate cross-section, where a
fallen wall or chimney had torn the side of the building open. Soldiers in tanks and
troop carriers stood guard among the willows and oaks. An older woman with a
lip ring asked what the tanks were for. ‘We’re a tank unit,’ insisted the soldier.
‘That’s just our ride.’
I headed through Hagley Park, down to Armagh Street and the river. I felt like I had lost the power of speech. So much was gone, and something in the line of the buildings still standing was wrong. They were dreamlike, somehow slumped or bulging, seen through distorted glass. Nothing was straight, not roads nor footpaths nor walls.

On Armagh Street the Provincial Chambers had not fallen down. They were as if bombed. In the autumn sun I had a moment of surreal clarity, watching the light catch on a jagged mess of stone against a blank blue sky. The building’s pulverised earthquake strengthening frame was visible through the ruin and, beyond that, its dragon-scale slate roof twisted down like some great creature with a broken spine. My experience and vocabulary were so inadequate that all I could write in my notebook was ‘like a large-scale public art installation’.

Walking south I came to the Worcester Boulevard Bridge. It stood at the centre of a colonial vista running east to the cathedral and west to the museum. A nostalgic tourist tram ran its length. It was peopled with statues of the founding old boys. The gentle willow-lined Avon ran beneath its ironwork railings, and a long-forgotten sandwich board advertised Genuine Edwardian Punting. This was the apex of the city’s conservative heritage, its visual link with the past. It was, as they say, munted.

At one end the city founder William Rolleston lay with his head buried six inches deep in the brickwork. At the other, Godley had toppled. Shackelton lay down there on the riverbank like a stiff-legged old drunk. All along this vista and throughout the city, heritage buildings had borne the brunt of the damage. The old city’s symbol, the Anglican cathedral, had been beheaded.

These monuments and beautiful old Gothic buildings were from the era of colonial arch-conservatism, of tradition and entitlement and the God-given right to the land. They were built stone by stone as the public face of the Better Britain of the South. They had such internal mass that when the earth changed direction beneath them, the buildings did not follow. They collapsed. Like the city’s old identities and self-beliefs, they were largely held together by their own weight, and by the unspoken premise that they would never, ever budge.

The streets of Christchurch contained more than the ghosts of an archaic British culture. They contained the personal ghosts of our earlier selves. Moving through Christchurch was always like moving back in time. Looking along Kilmore Street into the cordoned-off Red Zone, I could just see Victoria Square. If Worcester Boulevard was the apex of the city’s colonial history, Victoria Square might be my familial equivalent. I imagined myself jumping up onto the bricks, skating past my former selves, past the ghost of my mum aged twenty, reading TS Eliot on her lunchbreak. From the Caledonian I can hear the liquid-glass sounds of free jazz from my dad’s band. My grandfather is up by the bridge, a crowd gathered round the purring engine of his open-topped 1936 Opel, the same model that ferried Hitler through the streets of Berlin.
I imagine myself hitting the amphitheatre at speed now, popping the skateboard out on the two-step, catching it beneath my feet and resetting for the five. My great-grandmother Emerald Anne, a singer and a gambler, croons an old *waiata* to herself, waiting outside the courthouse where she translated for Maori prisoners. My wheels blur over the bricks, and as I crouch and then launch myself off the stairs, the earthquake hits my imaginings. It is impossible now to think about these memories without thinking about their erasure.

Up ahead, the great wide face of the Park Royal Hotel, where I ate my graduation dinner of bloody lamb, and wondered at the weight of my great-great-grandfather’s mortar cap: it ripples and bulges forward, and its windows shear down into the amphitheatre. Our Tuahiriri ancestors are there below, in the old Market Square, blankets about their shoulders, running. I imagine horses screaming in the streets, and my great-great-grandmother watching as the river, *Te OtaKaro*, devours its banks, and the willows, and its English name. The European city going under. Stones falling, the earth opening, a phantom geography of swamp and marshland welling up. Waitaha ancestors stalking through the rushes. All those memories, all the way back, unearthed.

Standing there looking towards Victoria Square, it seemed to me that the memories bound up in the city were not erased, but unearthed. They had floated free from the wreckage, like the sound of bells, or the haze of dust that hung over the city when it all came down. We were thinking and talking about our own personal stories, and the city’s histories, as never before. Some would be retained and re-anchored in the new city. Some, like that thin, high drone of complacency, had already blown away.

DOWN BY PUAHI Pa and all along the line of the river Avon, the geography of the ancestors was still there, just beneath the surface. In the flooded suburbs, the pre-European landscape of waterways and marshes was suddenly and terribly visible.

This is a disaster; it is catastrophic, and it is not. Like colonisation, the earthquake means the destruction of the old and the creation of the new. It marks a symbolic rupture to match the arrival of Europeans, the break point between one society and the next. And with the CBD to be rebuilt from the ground up, there is an opportunity for Ngai Tahu to re-enter the city, and a bicultural identity to enter with them.

Ngai Tahu are, to use an Australian term, the traditional owners of Christchurch. But they are modern capitalist owners as well. Following the *iwi*’s 1997 Treaty settlement the tribe has grown its assets to NZ$650 million, and is now a heavy hitter in the city’s residential and commercial development. Even before the quakes, Ngai Tahu had bought the central police station, the courts, the old army barracks, and a 50 per cent stake in the city council buildings. The tribal leadership has an eye
for reliable tenants, and a healthy sense of historic irony. The tribe will be one of the key partners and financial engines of the city’s regrowth.

Beyond this economic role is the desire to give voice to *iwi* values and culture. The tribe has identified as key priorities the enhancement of waterways, indigenous ecosystems and sacred places, and has a focus on sustainability and good urban design. The heart of the new city is likely to be a huge bicultural riverfront park, built as a partnership between the council and Ngai Tahu. This is the land where our ancestors gathered, hunted and sang, and may include the old site of Puahi Pa. It would be fitting if the response to the current disaster also helped break the silence surrounding a much older one.

**WHAT DOES CHRISTCHURCH** sound like now? It shifts between the quiet, steady murmur of merely surviving the quake – filling buckets with water, rustling through insurance policies – and a healthy cacophony. Much is grief and fear, as people make sense of their loss by sharing it aloud. There is enormous anger and frustration too, ultimately caused by the earth, but being vented on those in charge of the clean-up. Civil Defence bulldozers are finishing off unsafe buildings, and those adjacent, and owners must stand by while their possessions inside are destroyed. In the working-class east, where a cold easterly whips in off the sea, whole suburbs are being written off. This is where most of the city’s Maori and Polynesian communities live, and it is a part of Christchurch that has never bought into, or been included in, the city’s Englishness. There is a slower, more subtle sense of tragedy unfolding out there, as each street is abandoned house by house.

The cacophony also contains a clear note of determination, and a healthy fuck-you to those who would downplay the city’s value or the disaster’s scale. Remarkable projects like Gap Filler are bringing music, film and creativity back to the city’s ruined spaces. Humour is present, too. In response to those who claimed damage to the red-light district was proof that God hates prostitutes, it has been pointed out that the February quake destroyed most of the city’s churches. Social connections formed through coping are moving from side effect to centre-stage. Whole streets have become more than just neighbours since September, and there is talk of relocating en masse.

Another aspect of the city’s new sound is intimate family conversation, prompted by the act of survival. Christchurch has been a stoic place in the past. Silence has been one of its strongest instincts. At my great-aunt and great-uncle’s funeral, a theme was *they were so humble*, and *they never made a fuss*. If there is one thing Christchurch taught its sons and daughters, it was never to make a fuss. But at their funeral I began to learn about the full, difficult, human richness of their lives. The same has happened since the earthquake in February, when people, faced with loss of life and loss of history, have given voice to more family stories.
I have learned about my great-grandfather, a ship’s engineer who survived World War I, lost everything in the Depression, and was forced to work on his brother’s raspberry farm. His bullying at times drove his wife to an asylum. He spent his days shovelling strawberries and raspberries and a swift, sour anger into the vats of jam. His daughter, my great-aunt, made that same jam, but rendered it generous and sweet. I have heard about the Panzer tank that picked off my great-uncle as he ran for cover in an Italian field. Shrapnel emerged from his skull decades later. He and his paralysed left arm helped build back-country huts throughout the Southern Alps. I have heard the quiet whisper of melancholia, that most subtle and destructive of tremors, starting with my great-great-great-grandfather who was a guest in the Lyttelton Jail. The superintendent treated him with books and conversation. In all of this, I’ve come to think about resilience and rebuilding. Each of these stories are disasters; catastrophic, and not.

It is sad that it takes a disaster to make a stronger city. So often, too, it takes a disaster to start the conversations needed to make a stronger family. These processes are underway, and to both the city and my family I say: let’s make a fuss!

THESE MYRIAD CONVERSATIONS have come together in the City Council’s Draft City Plan. More than a hundred thousand submissions were gathered, from a population of 380,000. My cynical, nineteen-year-old self assumed the conservative old city would simply propose a conservative new city, statues, willow trees and all. But, given the chance, Christchurch has collectively proposed something radically different from its old elitist robes. The plan details a green, people-friendly, low-rise, largely car-free space. Ngai Tahu are front and centre, and the river, Te Ota\textit{karo}, will form a bicultural corridor through the heart of the city. We tend to think of the built environment as giving form to our values. But it can also constrain their evolution. Christchurch inhabited its old built environment as an adult still wearing its childhood clothes, stretched to bursting in some parts, hanging empty in others. Its population has seized the chance to make something new.

It is easy to be optimistic from thousands of miles away. The proposal is part design plan, part PR exercise and part wish list, written and read while the city is still in collapse. The proposal has plenty of problems, and the city’s conservative culture is still vocal and powerful. But if even half of the new plan could be achieved, Christchurch would become one of the great little cities in the world. I’ve never cried over a city council document before. Reading this one, I felt a surge of love and pride.

When the city is finally rebuilt, the council has decreed there will be a memorial at its heart. I have a suggestion. It is based on the resonance of the city. I think about the ghostly ringing of the cathedral bells in the first quake. I think about how church bells have rung in times of distress or celebration, and how the wave form of a
seismograph resembles the wave form of a piece of music. After all, music and earthquakes are both a type of vibration.

I propose a set of earthquake bells, one for each of the 181 people killed in the February 2011 quake. The bells would be made from the materials of the old city – the bells and organ pipes, the copper roofs and domes. There would be bells of greenstone, and of wood, the materials of the even older settlements. They would range in size from tiny, high and clear all the way down to that biblical, thunderous low C. They would hang in a glistening galaxy beside the ruined cathedral for people to walk among.

Most importantly, the bells would translate the Richter scale into a musical scale. The bells would be played by earthquakes. They would turn the surges of the earth into a strange, exquisite music. The tiny, high-pitched bells would ring almost continuously, a faint flickering sound just on the edge of hearing, a constant reminder not of complacency, but of the living earth. At memorial services, the bells would replay the actual 2010 and 2011 earthquakes, tremor for tremor like a vast symphony. As the vibrations increased, the larger, deeper bells would begin to ring, with great volume and intensity, all the way up to the strikes of the great 6.3 and 7.1 bells. They would transform the power of the earth into a musical, cathartic act of remembrance.

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MEMOIR

How to survive an earthquake
Moments of solidarity amid the turmoil
Tom Bamforth

The numbers rose slowly, like a cricket innings, and the commentators droned. There was little new information and the television news recycled the same repetitive pictures with a boxed scorecard showing a slowly growing body count. An apartment complex in Islamabad had collapsed: fifteen people missing. An hour later it had turned to twenty-five; by mid-afternoon it was 150. The army had been called up, and stood around with guns looking helpless as rapid-reaction teams with sniffer dogs arrived to pull the living from the vast pile of concrete and dust. The news was the steadily rising death toll and the threat of many more.

But for me, living in Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province1 in 2005, this was no distant event. I had felt the ground shake violently, and had taken cover under my bed as the plaster fell from the ceiling and furniture crashed around me. For a moment it seemed that the walls and the ceiling were swaying in a disjointed waltz. I watched as the fan slowly detached itself from the ceiling, and made the calculation that it was too late to bolt down three flights of stairs. I had heard the term ‘triangulation’ – getting down next to a solid object so that when the roof came down it would form a small triangular, survivable space. But the furniture didn’t look that solid and, as I got down next to the bed, the earth moved again – first from side to side, and then up and down in jolts.

And in those minutes, shortly before breakfast on a Sunday morning, eighty-three thousand people were crushed to death and a further three million rendered instantly homeless across the hills of the Karakorum and the Himalaya.

I knew nothing of this at the time. After the hotel stopped shaking I went out into the bustling town of Mingora, in the Swat Valley (later the site of a major battle against the Pakistani Taliban), and continued what I had left Australia to do: explore the astonishing and ancient remains of Indo-Hellenic civilisation that had spread across Pakistan’s northern plains and into the foothills of the Hindu Kush. Oblivious to the news of the earthquake slowly trickling in, I climbed amid the ruined monasteries and universities of the Bactrian Greeks, whose mesmeric fusion of Greek and Buddhist cultures scatters the Gandhara Plains from Kabul to Peshawar.
and the outskirts of Islamabad. I pored over ancient coins embossed with the profile of Alexander the Great and sculptures of curly-haired, toga-clad Buddhas. My Muslim guides spoke of the importance of pluralism, the subjectivity of truth and the arcane theological meaning embodied in the myriad poses of Greco-Buddhist statues exquisitely preserved in the stone of the North West Frontier.

One guide had studied to be a teacher in Russia and returned to the Swat Valley because of its strong educational traditions. He used to take his classes around the ruins, explaining to them the pre-Islamic history of the region. When I got back to the hotel that evening I received a call from ABC Radio National, desperately seeking an Australian ‘eyewitness’ to the earthquake. ‘Is there a danger,’ the interviewer asked, ‘that orphans will attend madrasahs and become the next generation of terrorists?’

While the cosmic stone masonry of the Bactrian Greeks had lasted the millennia, the squat concrete structures of modern Pakistan disintegrated in seconds. Back in Islamabad, some days later, I could see the true size of the catastrophe. I attended public meetings of the UN co-ordination team, and the situation looked desperate. The earthquake had ripped across the entire north of the country, shattering cities and destroying villages. There were insufficient resources, mountain roads had been swept away and thousands of small villages at vast altitudes were inaccessible. Helicopters had been ordered to fly reconnaissance and aid sorties over the deep valleys of Pakistan’s north – but there were too few of these available. Most of the army’s 114 Chinooks were engaged fighting a nebulous ‘war on terror’ in the country’s tribal agencies and could not be recalled. In any case, we were told, it was technically too difficult to remove the machine-gun awnings to make way for cargoes of aid.

For forty-eight hours the international media circus descended on the city – flown in from New York, London, Paris, Brussels and Tehran – to capture on camera the reeling of a concussed nation and the growing stench of the stricken cities, before flying out again. Night after night the TV brought updates and crossed live to journalists in Islamabad solemnly intoning the ‘universal truths’ about Pakistan: a nuclear-armed Islamic state beset by ‘terror, the bomb and military rule’.

I recalled the words of my Russian history lecturer, who had said he wanted to rescue the past, and consequently the present, from theorists and commentators who saw the world in terms of systems rather than societies. In Pakistan the same experts and analysts had migrated from Soviet studies to the more fashionable concerns of terrorism, Islam and South Asia. Having failed to predict the demise of the Soviet Union in their previous careers, they were now equally unable to account for Pakistan’s resilience. But, for the remaining three million people in the distant hills of the Himalayas, brutally dislodged from their mountain fastness, facing rain and sleet, snow and ice, these debates were meaningless.

Feeling useless in this chaos, I volunteered at a local charity and spent an afternoon loading trucks with anything people could throw together to send into the
mountains. Blankets, jumpers, bedding and food arrived from across the country, its inhabitants all knowing there would be little hope for the millions of earthquake survivors once the Himalayan winter set in. I sat in a small circle with the charity’s founder – a Gandhian figure whose humility, simplicity and perhaps feigned illiteracy were a foil for his immense organisational abilities and intellect. He had founded the country’s only national ambulance service, and a network of schools and orphanages. Deeply devout, he was asked by one woman seeking to imitate the depths of his Islamic belief how many times he prayed each day. ‘Sister,’ he replied with more than a hint of the Mahatma’s wit, ‘I deal in wholesale, not retail.’

WANTING TO DO more than load trucks, I was tipped off by a friend that an international aid organisation was expanding its operations and needed people for more substantive work. I was invited to an interview with the operations manager, who already looked haggard and overworked. We sat on directors chairs in a garden in a leafy and subdued Islamabad suburb. He looked over my CV for a few minutes before asking if I liked camping, ‘Very much,’ I replied, and tried to look as if I meant it while he examined me for an unnerving moment before throwing his hands up in resignation: ‘Look, you can walk, you can talk and right now we need bodies on the ground. Do you know where I can get a case of Scotch in Islamabad?’

Fortuitously, I had just been given the number of shady alcohol supplier known simply as Mr Scotch. I was hired.

The following day I was put in a car and driven to Mansehra, the town that would become a hub for the relief effort in the North West Frontier Province and my home for the next eighteen months. I had no idea what I would be doing or who I would be working with. The first signs weren’t good.

I was dropped off at a small collapsed primary school, which was where I slept and where our makeshift headquarters would be situated for the next few weeks. Ostensibly we were co-ordinating all organisations providing emergency shelter to the more than seven hundred thousand people who had lost their homes during the earthquake. We had been lent some space amid the concrete debris by a mobile German medical unit that had quartered there, and during the day we set up our office on a series of string beds, one of which we turned on its head and moved every half hour with the rotation of the sun, to provide shade. Every few minutes the dull thud of rotor blades roared overhead as NATO helicopters – sent over from Afghanistan – flew past on aid missions. The nights were bitterly cold, and even though I slept in a cracked classroom I learned quickly to leave my sleeping bag open and to run out into the courtyard every time there was an aftershock – which came frequently and massively in the aftermath of that first tectonic jolt.

The organisation I was working for had arrived late on the scene and had been given a central role in the relief effort. The reception was harsh. We were addressed by our institutional acronym, rather than by name. The multi-pocketed pseudo-military jerkins
we wore quickly became known as ‘the target’, owing to the organisation’s round logo and the hostile response they guaranteed. Subsequently, as they became an established part of ‘field wear’, sported by anyone who wished to suggest they had somehow been ‘at the front’, they became known as ‘the wanker jacket’. ‘Don’t you realise there’s been an earthquake?’ I was asked early on by one exasperated aid worker who, ironically, had come to us for help.

The nights were equally unremitting, and what was officially termed ‘the close of play’ began sometime after 10 pm with the announcement of an hour of reflection – a sort of humanitarian Nunc dimittis, complete with the swirling smoke of Raj-nostalgic cigarettes: Players, Pall Mall, Craven A. We called this almost religious moment ‘fuck-up of the day’.

But information on the earthquake was limited and uncoordinated. Reports dribbled in from field staff of new population movements, uncontacted villages and whole districts in the mountains still reeling from aftershocks. Random shell-shocked people would turn up at our door asking for aid, sometimes with battered handwritten letters of supplication in English or Urdu that had clearly been taken from aid agency to aid agency in the hope of finding a tent, sleeping bag or box of military rations.

I spent a day with a team conducting aerial assessments of the northern valleys most severely hit by the earthquake. I had read the reports and seen some footage but only after eight hours in a helicopter, weaving in and out of the valleys, did I begin to comprehend the full picture. From on high little damage could be seen, but as we swooped low on unsuspecting hamlets clustered together at altitudes of up to ten thousand feet the destruction was evident. Roofs of houses that looked intact from above suddenly appeared unsupported by walls and sat a few feet off the ground, covering the debris that had crushed those inside. Roads, carved over decades with conscripted muscle and dynamite through the vast mountains, had been swept away in seconds, cutting off whole regions from the outside world. In a land of swallowed roads and shattered bridges, and covered in the grey dust of concrete, rubble and brick, only the domed mosques – built, ironically, for another world – continued to stand.

In a few places we landed – blowing down tents and covering the landscape and its inhabitants with dust from the helicopter’s downdraft. We leapt out clutching notebooks and GPS units vigorously recording our altitude, co-ordinates and observations, as if this rush of note-taking would somehow shrink mountains, unify villages and bring order to chaos.

But this new appreciation for the enormity of the disaster only diminished our feeble initial response. After some days trying to establish a presence in Mansehra and acting as the de facto punching bag for the international community, I was sent north to the town of Balakot to assess the effectiveness of our operations there. I had never seen a disaster zone like this before: the scene was shocking and unreal, familiar to me only from the grainy footage of post-apocalyptic Hiroshima after the flight of the Enola Gay. Towering snow-capped peaks, like monumental tombstones,
were etched sharply against the sky and stood guard over the remains of a city of thirty thousand people now compacted to little more than knee height. No structures remained standing. Even in the ruins of the town the air was so clear it crackled with each breath and the vertiginous scale of the mountains lent a paradoxical clarity and euphoria to a scene of confusion, disorientation and loss. Men and women walked through the former streets and surrounding encampments at once familiar and yet now vanished, displaced strangers amid the destruction of their own home and city.

Strangely, given Northern Pakistan’s conservative and patriarchal society, I saw a young girl leading her father, bleeding from the head and evidently unable to see, towards a Pakistan Red Crescent field hospital. As if responding to the absurdity of a world turned upside down, fruit sellers had set up stalls in the rubble of a collapsed market, offering their oranges to non-existent crowds. The sole surviving building – a green-domed mosque – emitted a call to prayer, a lone human voice that echoed hauntingly in the brutal grandeur of the valley.

Our set-up in Balakot was dysfunctional and needed almost as much assistance as the homeless former residents themselves. Huddling in leaky canvas tents, wallowing in sludge, already coughing from bronchial infections and ineffectually led, the team of Pashtuns was demoralised and at breaking point. I had been sent up in an effort to take control of the local operation, and get evidence to dismiss its venal and incompetent international manager – Jabba the Hutt, as he had become known. On arrival I had received a message from headquarters in Islamabad to ‘rock no boats’, and had no authority to intervene in the operation or the treatment of staff. ‘I will eat him,’ roared one of my Pashtun colleagues in rage, having just been dismissed for the unpardonable crime of being competent. It was a mess; the city was destroyed; our operational response was useless and its field management beyond redemption. As I walked out of yet another freezing tent I stumbled into a muddy and treacherous area by the riverbank that turned out to be an open sewer. Everything in that place on that day seemed to have been cursed.

Back in Islamabad I met with our new operations manager: an American with pale blue eyes and slightly bucked front teeth whose number was listed in my phone as Bugs. New to the business of aid and overwhelmed by the enormousness of the task ahead of us, I hoped he would give some clear direction and advice. We discussed the weather and his recent visit to Indonesia, and before heading off he handed me a brown envelope. ‘Read this on your way back,’ he said. ‘It’ll give you a good idea of what we’re all about.’ In the car I tore open the envelope, looking for the instructions that would solve the earthquake and provide winter shelters for the almost one million people who were now homeless. ‘Proposal for Rubble Removal,’ the document said. Back at base – amid the debris of the former primary school – my emails addressed to ‘rubble rouser’ and ‘rubble with a cause’ went unanswered.
‘YOU KNOW, TOM,’ said Colonel Mohsin, settling into an expansive postprandial mood on the veranda of the Frontier Force Officers’ Mess in the leafy garrison town of Abbottabad, ‘I was once a POW.’ I had known Col. Mohsin (Retd) for some time now. He had appeared one day at our office with a brilliantly trimmed moustache, regimental cravat, and cuffs that crackled and shot at every opportunity. Since then he had managed a vast logistics operation – three hundred trucks, drivers and field staff – moving hundreds of thousands of tarpaulins, blankets, mattresses, tents, tools, clothes, and tens of thousands of people, around the treacherous mountain roads with sangfroid and studied understatement. He had converted our office into an operation and had, with his years in the army, brought the art of war into the business of aid. Because of him, there was purpose in our work and the rooms were now covered in maps, diagrams and checklists; the atmosphere was of a strangely relaxed, avuncular authority. Everyone now addressed each other as bhai or bhai (brother/sister), while heels clicked and salutes were given in the corridors of what had become a humanitarian war room.

Behind the nicotine-fuelled histrionics of the internationals, so visible during the initial phases of the earthquake response, our Pakistani friends and colleagues had brought order, humour, clarity, dignity and direction to the response. ‘Thank God the earthquake happened here,’ one departing aid worker told me. ‘We would have been lost anywhere else.’ With Col. Mohsin and my indomitable colleagues – Shahab, Zubair, Usman and Samira – grinning broadly in response to each new setback (and there were many), we thought we could do anything. One glorious day I overheard Shahab, a fearlessly self-confident Pashtun, talking to a recently arrived international head of a major UN agency. ‘Boy,’ he commanded across the gulf of rank and pay, ‘I would advise you to go outside and see actually what’s happening.’

Some time later, at Col. Mohsin’s invitation, I had driven to Abbottabad on my way back to the capital to join him in his spiritual home: the mess. After a tour of the extensive gardens and regimental dining room with its gleaming silverware we proceeded to the billiard room, where a portrait of the Islamic Republic’s Founder, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, gazed down from the wall. This was no ordinary Jinnah. In most portraits he was misleadingly shown in Islamic dress: the sober, steely-willed founder of the nation, its first governor-general and moral light. Yet in the Frontier Force Officers’ Mess, another Jinnah appeared. Cigar clenched between his teeth, he leaned over the very billiard table on which Col. Mohsin and I now played, taking aim while a tumbler of whisky (not, judging from the evidence on the wall, his first) balanced precariously next to him. The picture had been taken many years before alcohol was banned in Pakistan. ‘Ah, yes,’ sighed Col. Mohsin as he caught my eye. ‘This used to be a wet bar, but since 1973 we have been dry… Wet bar, dry bar…’ he repeated softly as we left the room, an untouched cup of milky tea going cold in a corner behind us.

Back on the veranda, we sat and talked and he returned to the subject of prisoners of war. Having been captured as a young lieutenant by Indian forces
intervening in Bangladesh’s war of liberation from West Pakistan in 1971, he had decided that it was the duty of every young officer to resist capture and to escape. With his fellow conspirators he had tunneled vigorously to get out of the POW camp, but every tunnel had collapsed inches from the perimeter fence. ‘So, after all these failed attempts to tunnel our way out, you know what we did, Tom,’ he said as I shook my head. ‘We made a run for it.’

Comrades in the disaster response, we embraced, shook hands and saluted as I said goodbye. A peacock wandered past the gate and I started my journey back to the capital, wondering which country and century I was in.

Years later I was stunned when ‘sociable Abbottabad’, as we had known it, with its leafy streets and parks and charming markets, shot to international infamy as the final hideout of Osama bin Laden. Introduced to the town by my friend Col. Mohsin, I had seen it not through the lens of twenty-first-century struggles but through the perspective of another age somehow lingering, just, on the brutal frontiers of the new Great Game.

MY TIME IN the cosy and endearingly civil world of Pakistan’s retired officer class was regrettably brief. ‘Good morning, sunshine,’ my all-too-contemporary American boss would say each day through a plume of cigarette smoke, as I stumbled into the office from my cot on the floor, trying desperately to wake up. The daily repetition of this sardonic mantra over seven months would become almost a curse. With those words I entered the highly politicised and ruthless world of a major humanitarian operation.

The old certainties vanished instantly. To assist the people affected by the earthquake the game had to be played, and much of this depended on what kind of guy you were. There were good guys and bad guys, cowboys, guys who ‘knew their shit’ and those who didn’t. And there was the inevitable division between the smooth, multilingual and well-paid UN staff, known for their relative timidity in promoting humanitarian principles to Pakistan’s military dictatorship, and the grotty NGO workers who glowed with self-righteousness. All complained about the honchos from headquarters, who had no idea about ‘the field’. Conversations with aid workers were replete with invocations of remote gods – ‘Geneva knows’, ‘New York is watching’, ‘Oslo is aware’. And when the ‘goodwill ambassadors’ Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie suddenly presented themselves, hardened ‘grass roots’ aid workers suddenly abandoned the mysterious joys of tents, drainage ditches and latrines in search of a fleeting moment of glamour.

Then there was the cast of complete weirdos – some well intentioned, others malign – that attends major catastrophes. There was a circus troupe that travelled through the mountains trying to cheer people up, and a Korean NGO promoting the health benefits of tofu consumption (with a tofu-eating cartoon character featuring, appropriately enough for an Islamic republic, a smiling pig). And there
was a series of querulous American Vietnam vets who had been given sinecures with the US government aid agency as compensation for missing limbs. Congenitally opposed to the idea of an international community and viewing the UN as some kind of communist plot, these ‘one-armed bandits’, as they were known, strutted and twitched their way around the province. Britain also sent its finest minds. After a long meeting with an earnest Englishwoman from the UK’s Department for International Development my boss turned to me with an acrid exhalation of cigarette smoke and growled, ‘Horse’s ass with teeth.’

Everyone had an agenda – personal, professional, institutional, political – and any action needed somehow to negotiate these. Institutions were at war; UN agencies and NGOs argued with each other and within themselves over responsibilities, visibility and turf. Bucks were passed and credit appropriated. Individuals on short-term emergency contracts were making connections for their next ‘gig’, while donors attempted to buy political favour through their generosity. Villagers were taught to say their tents were ‘from the American people’, and flags and logos jostled for precedence in the muddy and crowded camps that were now home to hundreds of thousands fleeing the encroaching snowline. At one meeting for the heads of the seven leading co-ordination agencies, I calculated 2,401 permutations of vested interests and agendas that any collective decision would somehow have to negotiate.

It was a desperate game of survival for not only the people affected by the earthquake but also the humanitarians. The institutional architecture for such a major international disaster response was weak and progress was dependent on the charismatic personalities who led the way. Reputations crumbled and were made; hardened aid workers went home early – shattered by the mud, cold, arguments and complex logistics of the operation. One room of our office was converted into a sick bay for stricken colleagues who had caved under the pressure and needed to recuperate. ‘It’s like the Somme,’ said one friend on his way back down from the mountains, having decided he could not continue. Gone was his earlier self-confidence; we clapped and cheered as he climbed into a helicopter waiting to take him back to the capital. He had more than done his bit, and we sensed that this mission was to be his last.

SOMEHOW, DESPITE THE immense obstacles, pressure and confusion of the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, a coherent and effective humanitarian response emerged, more by trial and error, it seemed, than by design. And for all the follies and foibles, personalities and turf wars, it was amazing to be part of it. Alliances formed, organisations stabilised, and the initial panic, desperation and reactivity transformed into a collective purpose. It was like catching a wave – the momentum bore us along. During those months in this fascinating, politically fractured country everyone seemed finally to think and act as one.

In the distant hills of Khala Dhaka (‘Black Mountain’) – a tribal territory well beyond the ‘writ of the state’ and now the NATO frontier in an ever-expanding

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Afghan war – I met with groups of bearded elders wrapped in coarse woollen cloaks and smelling of wood smoke. We discussed the earthquake and its consequences in the tribal belt and beyond, and they were exceptionally well informed – partly through their networks of tribe and extended family across Pakistan and Afghanistan, and partly from listening to the BBC Pashto Service.

We are a neutral humanitarian agency, I said. We had no politics and would only work with them if they needed and wanted us. If not, we would go away – the choice was theirs. We discussed the Green Howards (a British Army regiment), the last Europeans to have entered the area prior to the Independence and Partition of the Indian subcontinent, and I assured them I was anything but a Green Howard.

Had they been badly affected, I asked?
‘Ha,’ they replied – the guttural Pashto word for ‘yes’.
Could we conduct an assessment?
‘Ha.’
Would we be able to speak to women and children?
‘Ha.’
Could we ensure that the most vulnerable people were assisted first?
‘Ha.’
Would we be able to come back and monitor the aid distribution, to ensure all needs had been met?
‘Ha,’ again came the reply.

We called for green tea to cement our deal – a sign that the substantive discussions were over and that trust had been established. And then they left, each one shaking hands and embracing, walking quickly back to the Black Mountain – a distant chorus of ‘Ha... Ha... Ha’ fading gently into the wood smoke and the night.

This is how we survived the earthquake – rare moments of solidarity in the turmoil of the Frontier Province – but now can we survive the drone attacks, and can we survive the war?

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1 Now known as Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) in deference to Pashtun ethno-nationalist aspirations
2 In Pakistan today, there is a remote area called the Kalash Valley inhabited by an animist tribe of fair-skinned, light-eyed people who drink wine from amphorae and who are said to be the descendants of Alexander’s armies.
The car deaf as a hearse
from the screaming weight
of all that came before,
we drive down a tarmac slashed
by white line, white line,
into the splintered light
of the woods waiting,
like eternity, just outside town.
We seek loam incestuous
with sodden bracken and leaf-rot,
homing to the earth that gruels
hair, skin, nails and flesh,
mulling bones for dogs.
There is no ground here
for the posthumous,
its ceremonies and detectives.
Psychology is impure as memory,
and anger a grubby friend,
the loner we embrace
when we masturbate.
Look: there is a birch leaf,
dazzling and uncertain,
yet to fall in this forest of late sun.
ON a sultry mid-December day an Indonesian fishing boat manned only by its skipper chugged out of the port of Muara Angke, in north Jakarta, and headed west along the Javanese coast towards the Sunda Strait, the waterway that separates Indonesia’s main island from its larger neighbour, Sumatra. The fishermen and market vendors in the bustling harbour probably noticed nothing unusual about the Janga, except the sound of its engine revving like a tractor. It was a wooden vessel about eight metres wide and thirty-five long, with a blue tarpaulin rigged up on deck for shade. The boat had undergone repairs before it left but the motor remained faulty; perhaps its owner was unwilling to spend more on a boat he knew would be impounded and destroyed when it reached its destination. A close observer might have noticed that all its fishing gear had been removed.

The Janga’s first stop that day was a smaller port at the western end of Java, where it recruited three crewmen for the journey. One was a sixty-year-old fisherman, Abdul Rasjid, who had known the skipper for three years. Abdul Rasjid had never sailed this route before, but the down payment of a million rupiah (about A$108) with the promise of a further nineteen million was too good to refuse – more than a year’s income for a poor fisherman. The second recruit, a 32-year-old named Supriyadi, was an experienced fisherman but a novice on boats, with no knowledge of engines. Little is known about the third crewman, except that he was twenty-two and his name was Hardi Hans.

After the crew embarked the Janga headed for its next stop, the island of Palau Panaitan off the far south-western tip of Java, a remote World Heritage-listed wilderness inhabited by Javan rhinoceroses and Komodo dragons, fishermen and forest rangers, and Western surfers lured by its famous barrel waves. The skipper cut the rackety engine and moored the boat off the island to await its human cargo.
On shore, a 43-year-old Iraqi man I will call Abbass Hussein, his wife and their ten-year-old daughter clutched their meagre belongings and the food and water they had packed for the journey. Hussein and his family had fled their native Iraq amid the chaos of the first Gulf War and its aftermath, in the early 1990s, but found scant respite under the oppressive theocratic regime in neighbouring Iran. They left for Indonesia, and were joined by his sister-in-law, her husband and their daughter. Hussein, who has since secured refugee status in Australia, paid a people smuggler US$5000 for each adult for the journey. ‘We were all hopeful... I thought about a better future for my children. We were going to a nice country and all had hope for the future.’

Hussein handed his family’s savings to a forty-year-old Iranian known as Ali Hamid, who had migrated to Australia and secured citizenship in 2003. Hamid spent much of his time in Indonesia and created a lucrative niche in the people-smuggling trade. He was well known to Indonesian police, who believe he had sent five boatloads of asylum seekers to Australia in the previous two months. Hamid was an associate of Abdul Khadem, a veteran smuggler who spent two years in jail after pleading guilty to bringing 353 asylum seekers to Australia in November 1999. Indonesian police had briefly detained Hamid in 2009 after he was spotted escorting twenty-five Iranians, and both men featured on Four Corners in August 2010, secretly filmed discussing people shipments to Australia. By the end of that year they were still operating with apparent impunity.

Abbass Hussein had met Hamid at the airport in Indonesia, where the smuggler big-noted about being a millionaire and not needing the money, though he didn’t hesitate to take it. He assured Hussein the boat was shipshape and the journey would be safe.

On 12 December 2010 Hussein and his family were picked up from their lodgings in Jakarta and driven to West Java, where the Janga was anchored offshore. Eighty-nine passengers – mostly Iranians and Iraqis, fifty-five males and thirty-four females, ranging in age from two months to fifty-four years – were ferried in two small boats across the waves to board the Janga that night. The vessel was basic, overloaded and cramped. There wasn’t enough room below, so some had to stay on deck, sheltering from the monsoonal rain under the blue tarp. At the back of the boat a hole served as a toilet.

Hussein’s main concern was that there were only twenty or thirty life jackets aboard. Some passengers were annoyed; they had offered to buy their own life vests but were assured that wouldn’t be necessary. They were given no safety instructions, and the skipper showed little interest in the maritime law that makes the master of a vessel responsible for the safety of his craft and passengers at sea. Still, Hussein was optimistic as the boat set sail: ‘From the beginning I didn’t think it was going to be a dangerous trip.’
It was slow going as the Janga headed south through the darkness into the Indian Ocean. The engine seemed to struggle through the heaving seas, roiled by the north-west monsoon that bears down from November to March, when more prudent sailors avoid the trip. They saw no other boats, except for a small vessel that had trailed the Janga from the beginning. Hussein was glad his family had brought food and water as there wasn’t much aboard, despite the assurances they had been given.

The next day the seas became very rough, and towards evening the engine suddenly stopped. The engine room was half a metre deep in water and the pump wasn’t working. Passengers and crew formed a chain and began bailing water with a plastic bucket, handing it upstairs to be thrown overboard. This went on for almost an hour until the captain started the engine again. The voyage usually takes twenty-four to thirty-six hours, but they spent the better part of three nights and two days on the ocean.

THE JANGA’S DESTINATION, the Australian territory of Christmas Island, just ten degrees below the equator and more than a thousand miles north-west of the mainland, lay only three hundred nautical miles to the south. The island is a rocky outcrop, the flat summit of an ancient submarine volcano that rises 4500 metres from the ocean floor, fringed by a narrow reef and surrounded by deep, partly uncharted waters. Much of its coastline is sheer limestone cliffs, which ascend to a central plateau swathed in tropical rainforest. Before the influx of asylum seekers the island’s most famous inhabitants were its millions of red crabs, which stage a spectacular annual wet-season migration from burrows in the forest to the sea, to mate and spawn.

To outsiders Christmas Island may seem inhospitable, but its residents – fifteen hundred people of predominantly Chinese, European and Malay descent – pride themselves on offering sanctuary to newcomers. ‘Christmas Island is a place where displaced persons, people made homeless by terrifying and horrific acts of inhumanity, can find safety and care,’ the island’s administrator, Brian Lacy, said in 2010. ‘We are in that unique part of the world that can provide safe harbour to people who, driven from their homeland, want to be Australian… I am proud to [say that we] are members of a community that receives and cares for the asylum seekers who choose to come to our shore.’

The Australian government and mainland voters have been far less welcoming to the eighteen thousand asylum seekers who have arrived on Christmas Island in the past decade. The Australian Customs and Border Protection Service (CBP), whose task is to ‘protect Australia’s national interests in [its] maritime domain’, identifies ‘irregular maritime arrivals’ as one of eight security threats it is obliged to ‘mitigate or eliminate’. The service places such arrivals third on its list of threats, while the Defence Department lists them first: ahead of terrorists, pirates, illegal fishing boats, marine pollution, prohibited imports and other illicit activity.
The Defence component of border protection is known as Operation Resolute, which took over in 2006 from Operation Relex, the Howard government’s military-led campaign to get tough on ‘queue jumpers’ by stopping boats from landing in Australia. The current policy, which has softened somewhat, is to intercept all known irregular arrivals and divert them to Christmas Island: ‘The operational priority with regards to irregular maritime arrivals [IMAs] was and remains the prevention of mainland arrivals.’ Half of the Navy’s fourteen Armidale class patrol boats and four hundred Defence personnel are assigned to Operation Resolute. Between July 2009 and May 2010 they stopped and boarded more than 270 boats suspected of illegal fishing or people smuggling, and apprehended more than a hundred suspects. Defence and CBP work jointly under the control of Border Protection Command, headed by Navy Rear Admiral Timothy Barrett.

On Tuesday, 14 December 2010, as the Janga ploughed on towards its destination, two border-protection vessels were on duty at Christmas Island. The naval ship HMAS Pirie, an Armidale class patrol boat, had been deployed from Darwin in early December in response to the ‘perceived threat of future IMAs’. There had been a huge surge in arrivals over the previous two years: 195 boats brought almost ten thousand people in 2009–10, compared with just twelve boats carrying 309 people in the preceding two years.

HMAS Pirie was the designated ‘operational response vessel’ on duty, expected to undertake surveillance and to investigate and intercept any illegal vessel. The second boat on duty was the Australian Customs vessel ACV Triton, a 98-metre diesel-fuelled trimaran, operated for Customs by the marine contractors Gardline Australia. ACV Triton had arrived at Christmas Island the day before, ferrying 108 asylum seekers picked up from two illegal boats seized near Ashmore Reef on 9 December. The Triton had transported its human consignment to Ethel Beach, on the protected lee side of the island’s east, where it hoped to unload them. But the prevailing conditions were judged unsafe, so the people remained aboard. The ship had obtained an exemption from the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, allowing it to carry more than twice the number of people it was authorised to hold.

The weather had been deteriorating for days, as a monsoonal trough drifted south over Christmas Island. Around lunchtime on 14 December the Pirie’s captain, Lieutenant Commander Mitchell Livingstone, reported a four-metre swell and winds gusting up to forty knots; rain squalls and thunderstorms were forecast, and conditions expected to worsen.

The Pirie and the Triton were stretched already. While patrolling north of the island, the Pirie’s crew had discovered an engineering defect that needed checking, but it was so rough they retreated to the calmer waters at Ethel Beach. The Triton was there too, figuring how to offload its 108 seasick asylum seekers in the foul conditions.
There was more trouble brewing. Border Patrol Command had been advised that morning that two more Suspected Illegal Entry Vessels (SIEVs) were en route; one was expected at Ashmore, the other at Christmas Island. The advice had come from the People Smuggling Intelligence Analysis Team inside Customs, who provide a daily ‘threat picture’ based on material from open-source to highly classified information. The politics surrounding asylum seekers has become so charged that the classified assessment is distributed to the prime minister’s office, some ministers, agency heads and designated overseas missions.

Predicting SIEV arrivals ‘is not a science’, the deputy chief executive of Customs and Border Protection, Marion Grant, told federal parliament’s Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy in May 2011. Much of the information fed into the intelligence team is unreliable. ‘We have to make assessments as to whether it is disinformation [or] marketing material by the people smugglers. So even though we get a piece of information it does not actually indicate that that is a fact.’

As it turned out, the intelligence that day was spot-on. At 10:22 am Defence headquarters instructed HMAS Pirie to head off a SIEV spotted near Flying Fish Cove with eleven passengers and crew. The Pirie intercepted the vessel and escorted it to Ethel Beach. The boat, designated SIEV 220, was later identified as the first of the two illegal craft whose arrival had been predicted that morning.

The seas at Ethel Beach were calmer, but still too rough to transfer the eleven detained passengers and crew from SIEV 220 to land. But there was pressure to do so.

A senior officer from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Sonia Radovanovic, later testified to the Western Australian Coroner that Customs officials at Ethel Beach told her that the Pirie needed to offload the people from SIEV 220 because another boat was on its way. Immigration staff considered it dangerous to attempt disembarkation, and argued against it. Radovanovic said that when she questioned the urgency of the transfer Customs officers told her the Navy was expecting another boat. Eventually Customs prevailed and the eleven detainees were safely transferred to land. Radovanovic said she then directed her team on the island to prepare for the next arrival.

At the inquest headed by Coroner Alastair Hope seven months later in Perth, counsel for the Commonwealth, which has repeatedly insisted it had no forewarning of the janga’s arrival, objected to Radovanovic’s account and said it contradicted previous statements on the official position. This denial is at odds with the advice from the government’s people-smuggling intelligence analysts, who had indicated that a second boat was expected.

It is also at odds with Lieutenant Commander Livingstone’s evidence to the Coroner that, after SIEV 220 arrived on 14 December, the ‘threat level’ for the island increased from medium to high. According to an internal review by Customs in January 2011, a ‘high’ threat level equates to ‘imminent departures where both
passengers and the vessel are ready and when the venture is believed to be within seventy-two hours of departure (or has already departed).’ The Janga was only hours away.

ON THE AFTERNOON of Tuesday 14 December 2010, crewman Abdul Rasjid was woken from a nap aboard the Janga by the captain, who announced he was leaving the boat and going home to organise payment to the families of the three crew. Unlike the crewmen the captain no doubt knew what awaited them on arrival: detention, trial and imprisonment. Rasjid was more concerned about the engine, but the captain assured him it was fine and would last the journey.

Just before midnight the skipper abandoned ship and boarded the smaller vessel that had been trailing the Janga, to return to Indonesia. Rasjid was instructed to steer the boat 170 degrees on the compass and told that they would reach Christmas Island in about five hours. He did as he was told, but said later that he didn’t even know what direction he was going. The second crewman, Supriyadi, who had no experience of boats or engines, was told to look after the motor. He later said he had been ‘duped’. Rasjid was told that when they arrived ‘someone would pick them up’.

Around 2 am on Wednesday, 15 December, as the Janga neared Christmas Island, its engine stopped again. The heavy seas had swamped the engine room and the faulty water pump had broken down. Some passengers volunteered to start bailing again until the crew managed to restart the engine. Around this time the acting skipper, Abdul Rasjid, spoke by phone to one of the organisers in Indonesia – presumably Ali Hamid or an associate – who told him to ditch the GPS in the sea and order the passengers to throw their phones and passports overboard. Some, including an Iranian passenger, ‘Hafez’, who was travelling with his new wife, refused to do so. By this time they could see the lights at Flying Fish Cove. Rasjid gave some passengers a battery-operated flashlight and told them to wave it around to attract attention on shore.

NEARBY AT THE Christmas Island detention centre, asylum seekers who’d come on previous boats nervously awaited the incoming vessel. A Janga passenger later testified: ‘The detainees in Christmas Island were talking among themselves...they knew another boat was coming.’

At about 2.30 am an Iraqi detainee, ‘Malik’, was playing pool when a nervous and agitated man approached him. He told Malik he had just spoken by phone to a people smuggler who said the boat carrying his wife and two children was close and the passengers could see the lights of the island. Malik, one of the better English speakers, said the man wanted him to alert staff. ‘We knew how risky and dangerous it is to come on the boat so it would be normal for him to be that nervous at the time,’ Malik testified at the Perth coronial inquiry.

SALLY NEIGHBOUR: Life and death on the high seas
Malik said he then approached a guard from the private security firm, Serco, that runs the detention centre. The guard went away, then came back and said, ‘I called my manager to see what we can do and my manager said we can’t do anything now because it’s night, we have to wait until morning.’ Malik said when he told the other man this he got angry and started yelling. He ‘went insane. He left and then another guy went after him. [He] went to get a razor because he wanted to hurt himself.’ (Self-harm is common among detainees.) The man was taken to the medical centre and apparently sedated. Serco has denied this account and said there are no phone records or other evidence to support it.

By this time the Janga was two or three kilometres from the island. Apart from the odd light Abdul Rasjid ‘couldn’t see anything at all’ through the three-to-four-metre waves and spray thrown up by winds gusting at gale force. He steered the Janga slowly along the coast as he had been instructed, without trying to make landfall.

The Iranian passenger Hafez later testified: ‘People in the boat told me we had to stay in the sea for the night because Australian authorities or ships don’t come and take us during the night. So we have to sit and wait there until it became morning. In the morning they come after us.’ As counsel assisting the coroner, Malcolm McCusker QC, told the inquest: ‘On arrival, he was waiting for someone to pick them up, but no one did.’ The Australian authorities did not even know they were there.

MAINTAINING SURVEILLANCE OVER Australia’s maritime territory is an enormous task. The area stretches across eleven million square nautical miles, more than a tenth of all the earth’s oceans. The waters policed by Customs and Border Protection cover a tenth of that area, 1.1 million nautical miles. At a cost of $46,000 per hour, constant aerial surveillance is financially and logistically prohibitive, and impossible in bad weather.

Australia’s principal tool for maritime surveillance is the over-the-horizon Jindalee Operational Radar Network, JORN, a state-of-the-art alert system developed at a cost of $1.8 billion over twenty years, which operates from land-based stations at Laverton in Western Australia, Jindalee in the Northern Territory and Longreach in Queensland. According to the Defence Department website JORN provides ‘all weather detection of air and surface targets inside an arc of up to 3,000 km range extending from Geraldton in the west to Cairns in the east [and] makes a crucial contribution to broad area surveillance of Australia’s strategically important northern approaches.’

It emerged at the coronial inquiry, to the surprise of some observers, that JORN was not operating at the time of the Janga’s arrival. Rear Admiral Barrett confirmed this, but did not explain why. In response to my question Customs deferred to the Defence Department, which sent a link to its ‘JORN FAQs’ page, which states:
‘JORN is not resourced or tasked to conduct surveillance operations 24-hours-a-day 7-days-a-week.’ According to one witness the system is switched off at night to save money.

However, expert witnesses testified at the inquiry that, even if it had been working, it was ‘highly improbable’ that JORN would have detected the Janga, as small wooden boats are usually invisible to radar (which primarily detects metal), especially in high seas and bad weather. Defence and Customs have been working to develop a new radar system for Christmas Island since July 2010. Field tests began in 2011, but Customs executive Marion Grant said the trials so far had proved unsuccessful in picking up timber fishing boats.

On Wednesday, 15 December 2010 the job of surveillance fell to HMAS Pirie, as part of its role as operational response vessel. It relied on its onboard radar, electro-optic and visual means.

But as the Janga struggled in the swell on the north side of the island the Pirie was sheltering at Ethel Beach on the east, where its position, the high seas and atrocious weather severely restricted the effectiveness of its radar and visual lookout. The Pirie’s crew also had other things to worry about. Commander Livingstone had been on the bridge since 1.30 am because of concerns about the safety of the asylum-seeker boat he’d intercepted on Tuesday, SIEV 220, which was now under the control of some of his crew, lurching dangerously in the rough seas while it awaited destruction. ACV Triton was hunkered down four or five kilometres further south, with the 108 asylum seekers and crew from the two SIEVs it had intercepted near Ashmore Reef still aboard. Both ships were unable to moor and were steaming in the heavy seas, using only one engine each to conserve fuel because refuelling was too difficult in the conditions.

The weather had continued to worsen, with winds up to fifty-five kilometres an hour, rain squalls, thunderstorms and visibility down to 150 metres. The harbormaster at Flying Fish Cove had closed the port for the day; it was too dangerous for vessels to launch.

Australian authorities have insisted they had no specific forewarning of the Janga’s arrival. CBP states the vessel was ‘un-alerted and un-attributed’. Yet there was prior intelligence of another asylum-seeker boat. Should they have been looking out for it, and preparing assistance in the treacherous conditions? Under the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, adopted in 1914 after the sinking of the Titanic, responsible authorities are obliged to assist any person in distress at sea and ‘deliver them to a place of safety’.

In evidence given to the Western Australian coroner and the parliamentary committee, however, Defence and Customs officials insisted that ensuring safe passage for asylum seekers is not part of their mandate. When asked by Coroner Alastair Hope if his command had a responsibility to anticipate the arrival of an
asylum-seeker boat in bad weather and be ready to assist it, Rear Admiral Barrett replied that he knew of no agency with that responsibility. Border Protection Command is ‘not a search and rescue organisation’, he said.

AS DAWN BROKE at 5.30 on Wednesday, 15 December, residents near Rocky Point, a jagged bluff at the north-eastern end of Christmas Island, were woken by screaming and yelling. Long-time resident Adrian Morganti thought it must have been an all-night party down the road. Biologist Brian Keed, who was staying at the Sunset Motel while attending a scientific conference, went out to his first-floor balcony and saw a boat floundering offshore, the people aboard yelling to attract attention. Dive operator Taruki Hamanaka was driving home from Ethel Beach, where he’d gone to check out the conditions, when he spotted a fishing boat wallowing in the waves and drifting closer to the rocks. Other witnesses reported that the boat was under its own power, but belching black smoke and diesel fumes and struggling in the swell. Amy Luetich, a teacher, rang 000 to report the boat was in trouble.

The first official sighting was at 5.40 by a Customs officer staying at the Mango Tree Lodge, who spotted the janga off Rocky Point and reported it to the Customs and Border Protection duty officer on the island. In contrast to some of the residents’ accounts, this report ‘did not indicate the vessel was in distress’. The advice was passed on to Customs’ National Operations Centre and the Australian Maritime Security Operations Centre, in Canberra. Neither saw any urgency. ‘From this point until 6.16 [am] it was being managed as a routine SIEV arrival,’ according to CBP.

But to the watching Christmas Islanders there was nothing routine about the janga’s plight. Paul Maberly, treasurer of the local volunteer rescue service, also called 000 after the fishing boat passed his house at about 6 am. ‘As the boat was extremely close to the shore I was concerned for the people on board because the weather conditions were so bad. I got through quite quickly to the operator [and] told him I saw a refugee boat outside the front of my house and said it needed someone to give it a hand, as it appeared to need assistance. The operator said something along the lines of “we are aware of that” or “we will take care of it”.

Maberley’s wife, Glenda, was distressed and Maberley felt frustrated at what seemed an inadequate response. He stayed on the phone, calling other members of the volunteer rescue and the local police. ‘I felt I still needed to raise the alarm.’

It wasn’t until 6.05 am, twenty-five minutes after the first official sighting, that Defence headquarters notified the commander of HMAS Pirie, whose crew were still mostly asleep, that a SIEV had been detected off the north of the island. The Pirie was not told that an emergency was unfolding, but simply that a routine interception was required. ‘The information we got at 0605 was, were we aware of another SIEV to the north of Flying Fish Cove,’ Commander Livingstone testified at the coronial hearing.
He said he and his crew ‘prepared for a boarding of the SIEV’, with no hint of urgency. ‘The narrative does not provide evidence of the vessel being in distress at this time,’ the CBP submission to the parliamentary inquiry asserts.

A few minutes later the Janga’s waterlogged engine finally gave up. The engine room flooded, the battery was flat and the fuel drum had gone overboard, spilling diesel into the sea. The crew and passengers frantically resumed bailing, until fatigue overwhelmed them. Children and adults were crying. Crewman Abdul Rasjid said he and his shipmates ‘could not do anything, just gathered and prayed’.

Abbass Hussein grabbed some of the precious life jackets and put them on his wife and daughter; then, realising his sister-in-law didn’t have one, took his off and gave it to her. The Iranian passenger who had refused to throw his phone overboard, Hafez, dialled 911 and was diverted to 000, then handed the phone to another asylum seeker who spoke better English. The man’s anguished call, one of three from the boat that made it through to the emergency operator, was played in the Western Australian Coroner’s Court.

‘Help me, help me. My ship near beach, in island Christmas, my ship is dangerous, please help me,’ the man cries. The call lasts twelve minutes as the man tries to describe his location, telling the operator he can see a beach and ‘a big rock’ and that the boat is on fire, apparently mistaking the black smoke pouring from the engine for fire. The background is filled with screaming and yelling. While the operator tries to establish the boat’s location, the man pleads ‘please help...hurry, hurry’. The caller eventually breaks down, sobbing, and the line goes dead.

Aboard the Janga the distressed caller gave Hafez back his phone with the grim news: ‘they cannot find us.’

THE EMERGENCY CALL threw the agencies on shore into confusion. The operator reported that the caller had said his boat was on fire on a beach between Ashmore and Christmas Island; the authorities thought there was another boat in trouble. It took forty-five minutes to sort out the mix-up. It was unclear who was in charge and the various agencies struggled to ‘efficiently reconcile multiple streams of information’, the parliamentary committee later reported. Communications problems also hampered the response, as mobile phones became waterlogged or were useless in reception black spots around the island, and there were not enough VHF and UHF radio handsets.

At 6.16 am, thirty-six minutes after the first sighting, the Border Patrol office at Christmas Island informed headquarters in Canberra that the Janga had broken down a hundred metres offshore and ‘a major catastrophe was unfolding’. This was the first official indication that the vessel was in distress. This was passed on to the Maritime Security Operations Centre in Canberra, which advised that it would take HMAS Pirie half an hour to get there; in fact, it took more than an hour.
Inexplicably, another nine precious minutes elapsed before the Pirie was instructed by Defence headquarters, at 6.25, ‘to proceed at full power’ to the scene. By this time the Pirie master knew he was dealing with a ‘mass SOLAS [safety of life at sea] situation’. But Commander Livingstone told the parliamentary committee that, regardless of whether he is dealing with a routine SIEV interception or a SOLAS, ‘Our response does not change. We always [go] into a boarding with a SOLAS in mind as the worst-case scenario. So preparations [and] speed of response does not change.’

At about 6.30 onlookers on the cliffs near the Golden Bosun Tavern at Rocky Point watched in horror as the janga was washed towards the rocks. Raymond Murray, the first to arrive at the scene, told the committee: ‘There was this overwhelming feeling of helplessness. Standing right out on the edge of the rocks, there were times when that boat was closer than you are to me now. I will never forget seeing a woman holding up a baby, obviously wanting me to take it, and not being able to do anything. It was just a feeling of absolute helplessness. It was like it was happening in slow motion. A wave would pick the boat up and almost hit the rocks and then go back again, and then finally it was like it exploded.’

Adrian Morganti recalled seeing ‘absolutely terrified men, women and children’ on the boat, then: ‘A massive wave came through [that] was higher than me where I was standing on the rocks. After this wave, stuff was everywhere and you could tell the boat was gone and people were in the water.’

Zainal Majid, president of the Island’s Islamic Council, later told a memorial service: ‘I cannot stop seeing the eyes, the faces, of the people on the boat as it was dashed against the rocks, the father desperately clinging to the boat with one hand and with the other clutching his child to his side. Then a child [was] swept from the arms of the mother. It was horrible.’

As the boat hit the rocks, Hafez, the passenger who had phoned 000, fell down among a tumble of bodies. ‘The only thing I remember was a lot of passengers were yelling, crying and praying.’ He stumbled to the stern, where his wife was holding someone’s child. ‘It was the last minute and I said everybody was going to die, so I wanted her to give the child back to her mother.’ He led her, terrified, to the front of the boat and they both jumped overboard and managed to grab life jackets thrown to them by Christmas Islanders on land. He saw a little boy struggling in the waves and threw him his jacket, but the child couldn’t grab it. Hafez and his wife were separated in the churning sea.

Abbass Hussein was thrown overboard as the boat broke apart. ‘I can’t swim… I went into the water and when I came up from the water a life jacket came to me and I just grabbed the life jacket.’

On shore, residents had formed a human chain to throw life vests and ropes into the waves. One passenger managed to grab the end of a rope and was hauled
ashore. ‘We had one girl holding onto the rope but the rocks were razor sharp and just cut through it,’ Adrian Morganti recounted. ‘There wasn’t much we could do. I felt helpless and [in] absolute shock because all we could do was watch. I don’t know if they were men, women or children, they were all just heads in the water floating in the wreckage.’

Dive operator Teruki Hamanaka ran home and came back with an aluminium ladder. ‘I tried to lower it down to the cliff where the people were in the water but I couldn’t reach and it was dangerous for people to come up.’

Sergeant Peter Swann of the Australian Federal Police co-ordinated rescue attempts from the shore, as best he could. ‘I saw a small girl about four years old who was struggling, splashing around and trying to keep her head above water. I called out several times but she did not respond or move towards the cliffs. Her struggles became less until she stopped and lay face-down on the water.’ He also saw a woman standing on the timber wreckage, holding a baby to her neck, then watched them both sink under the waves. Swann said he had an urge to jump into the violent swell, but was restrained by a local who put a hand on his shoulder.

Immigration officer Fiona Andrew recalled: ‘I saw people standing on the rocks attempting to stretch out as far as they could to save people and I saw the look of despair when, exhausted, they realised they could do no more.’

THE FEDERAL POLICE are responsible for emergency and search and rescue on the island, but they and the local Volunteer Marine Rescue service were ill-equipped to help. Both rescue boats were out of service, having failed routine safety inspections by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority. They would have been useless in the conditions anyway.

Rescue volunteer Raymond Murray remembers ‘feeling ridiculous that I am a member of this group that is called Volunteer Marine Rescue and we had nothing we could do. The boat was not capable of being launched in that weather, and we had no equipment or no nothing. We were a volunteer rescue group by name only.’

Both the volunteer group’s boat, the Sea Eye, and the AFP vessel, MV Colin Winchester, are Leisure Cats, essentially pleasure boats not suited to the often wild weather at Christmas Island, because of poor buoyancy and stability. The volunteers had argued for single-hulled Naiads, which are more manoeuvrable and can be launched in monsoonal conditions, but Commonwealth officials had opted for the Leisure Cats. The AFP chose Leisure Cats ‘to maintain uniformity across the AFP fleet’, the coronial inquest was told. Sergeant Adam Mack from the Western Australia Water Police testified that the catamarans ‘do have their place, but they don’t have a place at Christmas Island’.
Even if they’d had the right vessel, the local volunteers weren’t trained for the treacherous conditions. ‘If the crew were trained in any vessel that had the capacity to work in those conditions then without hesitation I would have asked them to consider their launch that day. [But] we didn’t have a competently trained crew to handle those conditions,’ said the chief of the rescue service, Greg Riley. The parliamentary inquiry concluded: ‘No rescue boats of any kind could have been safely launched from the island.’

Even as the disaster unfolded, Paul Maberley, who had raised the alarm an hour earlier and been frustrated by the response, sent an email to the other rescue service members at 7 am: ‘This type of event is likely to be repeated in the future and I believe we need to ensure this community has a plan in place to deal with a vessel that sinks or runs aground on Christmas Island, especially with [a] large number of passengers on board.’

Another resident, Chris Su, told the parliamentary inquiry: ‘Canberra is asking the CI community to do a lot of things. When they house, at one point, three thousand asylum seekers on Christmas Island, they have to rely on our volunteer fire-fighting service, our volunteer ambulance drivers and our volunteer marine rescue. We are staffed by volunteers… For us to help Canberra look after the people they want us to look after, they need to give us more things to help do the job… We have had more than two hundred boats come in, and they know the CI cliff face is very sharp and very steep. Without them giving us the things to help people with, it is not very fair to us.’

AT 7.05 AM, half an hour after the Janga hit the rocks, a pair of rigid-hulled inflatable boats dispatched from HMAS Pirie were the first rescue craft to arrive on the scene. The Pirie was still labouring towards Rocky Point, slowed by the heavy seas and an engineering fault that caused an emergency shutdown while the fault was rectified and its engine restarted. By the time the inflatables arrived it was clear ‘there were less survivors and more deceased’, Commander Livingstone later testified.

As the inflatable rescue boats rounded Rocky Point Lieutenant Jeremy Evain, in charge of one of them, surveyed the scene in front of him. ‘The sea was throwing debris and people into the cliff face. I could hear shouting and screaming from the people in the water.’ The foaming sea was full of wreckage, bodies and about a hundred litres of spilt diesel, which coated the survivors and made them hard to grab. The inflatables had to stay clear of the debris, which would have blocked the intakes to their engines, and throw lines with lifebelts attached to the people nearest them in the water.

‘I had to ignore people’s cries for help, though I didn’t want to,’ said Lieutenant Evain. He hauled four people to safety, then noticed a child being dragged under
the water by a dead woman who was tied to the child’s life jacket, so he cut the woman’s body free. Leading Seaman Jonathan West counted sixteen dead in the water, including three children and a baby, none with a life jacket. His crew risked their own lives to haul in six people, only to see four of them washed away by five-metre waves. Abbass Hussein, who had been in the water for more than thirty minutes, clinging to a life vest, was thrown a rope and pulled to safety with his wife and ten-year-old daughter.

Two tenders sent on ahead from the ACV Triton joined the rescue effort. Customs officer Michael Burgess and his crew pulled a man and woman, clinging together in the water, into their boat, where the woman screamed ‘my babies’ over and over again, pointing into the sea. His colleague Troy Daniels saw two men holding a piece of timber with an infant on it, still alive, but a wave hurled the plank into the cliff face and the baby disappeared.

Christmas Island administrator Brian Lacy watched the rescue efforts from the shore. ‘It was one of the most horrific things I’ve seen [done] by Navy personnel. They were putting their lives in danger… The wave conditions itself were just horrendous and at times you couldn’t even see the boat because of the rise of the waves and then them going down in the swell. It was just astounding how they operated.’

HMAS Pirie finally arrived at the scene at 7.18 am. ACV Triton made it a few minutes later. For much of the way the Triton had been steaming on one engine, still conserving fuel, until instructed to increase speed. Asked at the inquest how much sooner they would have arrived if they had moved more quickly the ship’s master, Captain Andrew Stammers, replied: ‘Probably twenty minutes earlier than when we did get there.’ He said he could also have launched his rescue tenders twenty minutes earlier, ‘if we had known’. Abbass Hussein testified: ‘In my humble mind, I think ten to fifteen minutes earlier, many people would have survived.’

Once there, both ships had to stand off from the immediate vicinity because they too were in danger of being washed onto the rocks. ‘We were at the absolute limit of what our ship could do,’ said Customs Supervisor Matthew Saunders, who was aboard the Triton. ‘What we were working with was probably beyond what it was even built for and was especially above our operational procedures… That is the thin line of risking your life to save someone else’s. I think we were right on the edge of that.’

The inflatables and tenders suffered repeated mechanical breakdowns as kelp and debris were sucked into their engines. One had to be towed back to the Pirie for repairs after its engine was clogged by wreckage, including the blue tarpaulin from the Janga. By the time it returned, there were no survivors to be rescued.

For people who had been in the water now for an hour, struggling to stay afloat, the response seemed agonisingly slow. An Iranian man, ‘Ali’, who was on the boat
with his wife and three-month-old son, later asked bitterly: ‘How long do you think a wife and a child can exist in water like that, even with a life jacket?’ Ali was eventually rescued but never saw his wife again; the last he saw of his child was the infant’s lifeless body floating face-down in the sea.

NAVY AND CUSTOMS rescue crews pulled forty-one people, including the three crewmen, alive from the ocean that morning. There were forty-two survivors, including the man who had been hauled to safety on the rocks. Thirty bodies were recovered, and another twenty were declared missing and presumed dead. All the survivors were in immigration detention by the end of the day.

The three crew were arrested and are awaiting trial on charges of illegally bringing non-citizens to Australia. The accused people smuggler Ali Hamid, who was deported from Indonesia in May 2011, could face up to twenty years in prison if convicted of bringing more than three hundred people to Australia on four boats between June 2010 and January 2011. The last boat he is accused of arranging arrived in Australia three weeks after the Janga.

The Federal Parliament’s Joint Select Committee on the Christmas Island Tragedy reported in June 2011 that, despite some shortcomings, the response was ‘professional, courageous and as effective as it could possibly be under the prevailing weather conditions’. The Western Australian coroner concluded hearings in September 2011 and was due to release his judgment later in the year. Coroner Alastair Hope put the head of Border Protection Command, Rear Admiral Timothy Barrett, on notice that there might be adverse findings.

Thirty-five Janga survivors have since been granted permanent protection visas and are endeavouring to restart their lives in Australia, while four remain in community detention awaiting a decision by the Immigration Department.

Ali, the Iranian man who lost his wife and three-month-old baby, might have been speaking for all them – not only the survivors but the rescue crews and Christmas Island residents – when he told the coroner: ‘We can’t sleep during the night because as soon as we shut our eyes, all these scenes and memories come to our eyes.’

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'I went off with my hands in my torn coat pockets. My overcoat too was becoming ideal. I travelled beneath the sky, Muse! And I was your vassal. Oh dear me! What marvellous loves I dreamed of!'  
– Rimbaud

EVENTUALLY it would be Miriam Papiashvilli, the queen of hashish and orgies, the professional teenage runaway and con artist, the most unlikely candidate for such benevolent matters, who would help mend my rapidly breaking heart. I was turning seventeen when love invaded my life as suddenly as the Iraqi Scud missiles would invade my country soon after. But what was Saddam’s threat compared with falling in love for the first time?

Miriam was my age and already a mythical figure, at least in our neighbourhood perched on the edge of Ashdod, an industrial port city on the coast of the Mediterranean. She had been mysteriously absent for more than a year, having run away from home shortly before my family moved into her building from another equally seedy place full of people without means. Miriam’s parents lived on the fifth floor, directly beneath our apartment, theirs mirroring ours in shape and size. Like my mother, hers was obsessed with God and, to please Him, covered her hair. Miriam’s mother’s headscarves were always black, and she reminded me of the Georgian grandmas with equally dark headscarves who used to sit on our chipped street benches, lazily baking their decaying flesh. Miriam’s father, a bald, silent man, spent most of his time working on the crew of some commercial ship. There were other daughters too – so many that I lost count. I wondered how they all coped with Miriam’s absence. And with her reputation.

Rumours about Miriam trailed like ghosts between our giant housing commission edifices that smelled of piss and sweat, and the poorly restored 1960s American cars, and the overflowing rubbish bins left out front that provided a home to stray cats. I had heard many stories about her, in several accents and dialects:
from the Moroccan guitarist with the black man’s wide lips who claimed to have slept with Miriam once, from the shy Ethiopian schoolboys who hadn’t yet sufficiently mastered Hebrew, and from Boris, the Russian representative of the housing commission, who warned me not to go near her if she reappeared.

There were debates about Miriam’s fate, and all the options sounded equally fascinating to my eager ears. The guitarist talked with a knowing air about some smuggling business she might have been involved in. An unemployed alcoholic from the middle building suggested she had joined a hippie commune where they practised sex with horses. Others maintained she was probably a junkie by now, or else dead.

Despite the latter prediction, I still fantasised about meeting Miriam. Restless and lonely, I felt trapped in Ashdod. It was a city where tradition oozed through every pavement crack, where suntanned skin and a taste for mediocrity were cultivated. I, the recent Russian arrival equipped with oversized glasses and a passion for the classics, lacked both these attributes.

Already adamant about becoming a writer, I hoped this occupation would rescue me from the drudgery of my existence. Enthusiastically I copied a quote from Arthur Rimbaud into my diary: ‘the poet makes himself a seer by a long, prodigious and rational disordering of all the senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness; he searches himself, he consumes all the poisons in him, and keeps only their quintessence.’

I was impressed with Rimbaud’s formula of the disordering of senses as a fertiliser for creativity, or perhaps liked the permission to transgress that writing could grant. Whatever it was, I believed him that it was at the margins that life laid itself bare, and spent my days daydreaming of all things dark, forbidden, carnivalesque: anything that took place at night or in back rooms.

Indeed, in my mid-twenties, I – the good Russian girl – would publish a collection of short stories populated with psychopaths, minor gangsters and women living on the edge. But in 1990 this was still an unknown future. Cowardice made me worry about the poisons’ side effects. So I opted for voyeurism. I hoped one day to meet Miriam, to live out my fantasies through her.

EVEN BEFORE MIRIAM’S return I found an unexpected ticket to the world beyond Ashdod. After merely four years in the Promised Land I somehow wound up a finalist in a competition to join the elite club of young reporters for Maariv Lanoar, a popular youth journal with an editorial office in Tel Aviv. I would be making frequent pilgrimages to a city I took to be an intellectual Mecca.

But even there, I soon found out, I was misplaced. If in Ashdod I was seen as too eccentric in my hippie clothes and bookishness – too Russian – then for my new
colleagues, mostly rich Tel Avivian kids from elite schools, I was too timid and lacking in urbane flair (in a typically Slavic way, they must have thought). Russian migrants had never been fashionable in Israel, especially not in Tel Aviv, a city which prided itself on having a worldly soul, so long as the world was limited to New York, London and a handful of other funky western metropolises. Still, I hoped time and perseverance would turn me into one of my new peers.

Whoever first likened love to the act of falling was an expert on the teenage condition. In my case, love turned out to be a banana skin thrown under my skipping feet. Adam Shalev, the star of our journal, whose witty words I’d been reading religiously every week, turned out to be much shorter than I had imagined him to be, and sported an overgrown beard and torn dirty jeans. But who cared?

Adam had his own interpretation of why I kept staring at him and, dispensing with the usual introductions, explained to me his dishevelled state. He said that, inspired by Zen writings, he was conducting a social experiment meant to prove the shallowness of our society – its tendency to judge people by their looks. I agreed immediately that this was the right thing to do, although I had no idea what Zen meant (and therefore associated it with sophistication). In turn, Adam wanted to know whether my accent was Russian. I nodded with a sinking heart, anticipating a swift end to our conversation.

To my surprise Adam revealed himself to be a fan of Solzhenitsyn and, apparently curious about my childhood under communism, suggested we retreat to the privacy of an interview room to discuss it. I followed him, amazed at my luck.

Unlike Tel Aviv, Adam Shalev declared his love for me very quickly. Shortly after our first meeting we became known as the couple at Maariv Lanoar. My male colleagues became friendlier towards me and the female journalists occasionally checked me out, presumably trying to understand why I, such an oddity, was the chosen one. I had no idea either, but I felt like I had finally achieved something important in my life.

Yet I hardly ever saw Adam. He spent most of his time writing and tending to his crazy mother, with whom he lived in a cockroach-ridden apartment and who, between her frequent hospitalisations, managed to tend to eleven cats. Otherwise, he often travelled the country in search of stories and to practise free love (another social experiment derived from the philosophy of Zen, he explained) with his many female fans who, most likely, weren’t virgins like me.

To fit into Adam’s life I’d skip school and take the bus to Tel Aviv to spend a few hours with him. After those brief meetings, peppered with fervent kissing, shared journalistic assignments and my tears at our imminent separation, I lay in my bed, depressed. Love, contrary to the wisdom of the Maariv Lanoar advice columnists, didn’t turn out to be a panacea for loneliness.
When Miriam finally returned it was mid-autumn. Kuwait had already been invaded and my mother had replaced her gaudy headscarves with a banana-blond wig to keep herself warm as well as modest. The sky had become grey like our emaciated street cats and the air had a melancholic coolness that made me pine for Adam even more.

That autumn, though still shy, I started to grasp the power of the pen. It got me to many previously unattainable places. I met pop stars and politicians. With the excuse of looking for a story, I went down to the fifth floor and knocked on Miriam’s door. My fingers felt numb.

Miriam’s mother let me in without greeting me. Their apartment, like ours, smelled of migration and tradition, with its heavy, meaty odours of bodies and cooking food. Their living room was dark, with brown velvet curtains always drawn across the windows. Like ours, this home was a secretive, messy place, not meant for guests.

We moved through a narrow hallway that led to three crammed bedrooms. In one of them Miriam was seated on an unmade bottom bunk. Stocky and brown like the curtains, she wore a white singlet without a bra and white panties. She was shaving her legs with a razor and didn’t even look up at me. I forgot my rehearsed introduction and kept staring at her muscled calves, shocked by this nonchalant performance of what I considered to be a shameful secret ritual.

‘So, you’re the journalist,’ Miriam said finally.

I was pleased to discover she was not the only subject of the neighbourhood storytellers.

‘Y…yep. For Maariv Lanoar…’

‘No fucking way!’ Miriam said with appreciation. Unselfconsciously she moved aside the lacy edge of her panties, exposing thick pubic hair. The voyeur had finally met her exhibitionist. Breathlessly I watched as she slowly, pedantically sculpted her bikini line.

‘Right… You can write a whole book about me, not just an article, you know?’

I believed her.

‘Go on, sit down and ask your questions.’

‘So…’ I said, trying to appear professional as I carefully placed myself in the corner of the bunk. ‘Is it true about the horses?’

Without even blinking Miriam shook her long black curls and burst into laughter – a marvellous masculine staccato alternating with the sound of a stuttering motor. She laughed and laughed, until I finally snapped out of my stupor and, realising the comedy of the situation, weaved my own nervous laughter into hers.
'You must be a virgin, sister,' Miriam said, her strong triangular shoulders still shuddering. 'Let me tell you, fucking men is good enough. Why bother with horses? So, what else would you like to know about me?'

WHAT DID I not want to know about her? Ignoring the tight-lipped disapproval of my mother I continued my expeditions down to the fifth floor. Miriam and I discovered we could talk for hours. Or, more precisely, she could talk and I could listen. Sprawled odalisque-like on the bunk in her lace underwear and scratching her crotch like a man, Miriam described her life in Jaffa’s refuge for runaway teenagers. The wildness of her tales – pot smoking, jamming parties, petty betrayals, car stealing, fistfights – narrated within the familiarity of her apartment was exciting without being frightening. I was especially fascinated by her sexuality.

‘Listen, sister,’ she’d tell me in her thick voice, ‘when I meet a man, I never waste time. I check straight away what he’s got in his pants.’

Miriam’s attitude confused me. I struggled to reconcile her unabashed appetite for men with the kind of masculinity she favoured, which feminism had made unfashionable. Unshaven faces, heavy belt buckles, crooked teeth, leather jackets and calloused hands turned her on. Was she a pervert? A wounded teenager? A fallen woman or a truly liberated one? I held her in contempt for being so easy, while simultaneously envying the freedom of her desire. At that time I was too busy negotiating territories with Adam (my breasts were still a bastion) to concern myself with pleasure. I wouldn’t confide in Miriam about my boyfriend, though, as I was too insecure to admit my defeats.

Miriam seemed to like my bespectacled attention and, surely, my writing pen. But she came and went unpredictably, never inviting me into her other life, the one outside our neighbourhood.

IN DECEMBER, SADDAM declared poetically that if the Americans attacked Iraq he’d let his fire eat half of Israel. Everyone around me was talking incessantly of war and death and stocking their pantries with canned food. But I had more urgent matters to attend to. During one of Miriam’s absences Adam finally invited me into his home. I loved everything about that apartment: the rotting floorboards covered with cat excrement, the empty fridge, the toothless mother. What I found there assured me that I did have something in common with that confident, self-sufficient man.

When it was time to catch the last bus to Ashdod, Adam made the Zen point that the future, with its potential for war and other disappointments, was non-existent, and it would be beneficial for my personal development to learn to focus on the present, to live in the moment. He suggested I ignore my parents’ prohibition and stay the night. I did, and we spent it tucked together tight in his single bed. I was
drunk on his body, with its citrusy scent. Eventually I got over my inhibitions and
let him be the first man to touch my breasts.

The next morning, with Adam’s smell still clinging to my skin, I sniffed myself all
the way home on the bus. On my return, the illusionary future quickly materialised
and I was grounded. Adam was too busy to visit me in Ashdod. Again I fell ill with
loneliness.

In January 1991 the first missiles hit Israel. Whenever the radio announced the
‘viper snake’ warning alarm for a Scud attack everyone, anticipating the horrors of
biochemical death, would lock themselves into what we assumed would become
our coffins – rooms sealed with plastic sheeting.

I wondered whether it was all God’s plot to punish me for my promiscuity. I
spent hours in a stuffy, cramped bedroom with my three younger brothers and my
parents, who managed to fight with each other even with their gasmasks on. I
thought I’d go mad if I didn’t get out. Miriam too grew restless in her familial
microcosm. She decided to visit a lover, a lifeguard from Giv’at Olga – a little coastal
town rich with flowers and vivid sunsets. But now even Miriam wouldn’t hit the
road on her own. So finally I was invited.

I was scared of Saddam and my parents, but at night I packed a rucksack and with
the sunrise we snuck out to hitchhike. Uncharacteristically for our overcrowded
country, that morning the roads were mostly empty of traffic and stretched silently
alongside the skeletons of wintry trees. I assumed that because of the war any passing
drivers would stop to deliver us to the dubious safety of sealed rooms. But only some
men offered us rides. Occasionally we had to wait for hours at hitchhiking shelters or
in the midst of empty highways, hoping no ‘viper snake’ would be heard.

To reduce the risk of getting raped or killed or both, we only accepted lifts from
single drivers, flirting with them, sometimes willingly, sometimes out of obligation.
Miriam, who always took the front seat, at times would progress to kissing and
once, lying down in the back, I glimpsed her French-manicured hand sliding up
some young driver’s crotch.

A novice at hitchhiking, I soon became addicted to the movement, the ever-
changing cars, men and conversations. I was happy. Miriam had a sharp knife
inside her boot, and I trusted her to protect us. The winter was soft and sunny, and
winked through the windscreens as the drivers accelerated to impress us – though
they always had their radios on and we got all the political updates in between the
flirting, cold sunshine and speed. Fortunately the viper snake stayed in its lair, and
as we kept moving the war faded to a mere apparition. Still, we carried our
gasmasks with us – just in case.

Kobi the lifeguard was long, smooth and shiny, like a groomed python:
alluring, despite his broken front tooth and acne scars. When he spoke to
Miriam, even when he kissed her, he sneaked glances at me, just like the drivers had.

I was not a terribly pretty teenager. But next to Miriam I must have appeared ultra-feminine, with my long hair, excess of purple lipstick and hourglass figure encased in a rainbow-coloured dress. Miriam didn’t seem disturbed by the lifeguard’s divided attentions. She walked around his well-heated little house wearing a white G-string, playing absentmindedly with her small triangular breasts. Kobi mostly limited his attire to shorts. I, fully dressed, envied the freedom of their bodies, but also felt vicariously decadent and daring.

When Miriam and Kobi weren’t busy in the bedroom the three of us sat in the tiny space that Kobi called the living room, where I slept on one of the two single beds substituting for couches. He and Miriam smoked joints as we followed the combat on television, proud that ours was the first war ever to be broadcast live. The news of the fire explosions, buildings reduced to rubble and elderly dying from heart attacks whenever the alarm was sounded made us all feel sharply alive.

We drank wine and talked incessantly. In fact, it was my turn to play the role of Scheherazade, as Kobi was a man of few words and Miriam’s tongue was mostly busy with his skin. Despite their mutual preoccupation, never before had I enjoyed a more attentive audience for my stories, mostly borrowed from books. Neither of them was a reader, but both were curious about anything, always up for a good tale. It was easy to please them, even with the unfashionable classics I so loved. In their company I forgot to pretend I was someone else.

Eventually I told them about Adam: ‘My boyfriend, like you, believes in free love. He says individual freedom is necessary to experience life fully. I can see his point. But then, it’s he who is experiencing life. I’m mainly...waiting for him.’ I had never voiced these sorrows to anyone before.

‘He’s full of shit, yer boyfriend!’ Miriam spat something yellow into an ashtray. ‘Free or not, love isn’t about neglecting.’

Kobi nodded in agreement. I was thinking hard. No one had ever before raised the possibility that Adam Shalev, the guru of Israeli youth, could be full of shit.

ON OUR THIRD and final night in Giv’at Olga, Iraqi soldiers torched more Kuwaiti oil wells. On the news we heard Arafat declaring Saddam’s invasion to be the first step towards the liberation of Palestine. As I glanced towards the other bed I realised Miriam and Kobi had just liberated themselves from their underwear, and I saw my friend, small and strong, mounting Kobi’s body, sliding up and down his hairless chest.

I could have walked out. Or retreated to the bedroom. But I didn’t. Instead, I pretended to be watching Arafat, while from the corner of my eye I followed my
naked friends. I saw Kobi’s large hands holding on to Miriam’s buttocks, covering them entirely, grasping at them as though her behind was a fruit he wanted to split. The distance between our beds was so insignificant that I could smell their juices. I was terribly embarrassed, but I wouldn’t have left the room even if the viper snake had hissed its call.

Their duet went on for a while. Despite the eagerness painted on their faces neither seemed to orgasm. Perhaps the additional excitement they sought – that of my witnessing gaze – turned out to be an embarrassment. Perhaps they were more modest than they imagined themselves to be. Whatever it was, Miriam slid off the lifeguard. I heard her call my name, and: ‘Oops, look what’s happened to Kobi! Come on, don’t be a prude, have a look…’

I did. I had never before seen a fully naked man in such proximity. He lay still, his long muscles stretching like guitar strings, and with an odd little smile he gestured down his body. His cock was hidden between his legs and all I could see was the reddish triangle of his pubic hair.

‘Didn’t you know I’m a tranny? I had it chopped off.’ He laughed.

We all laughed, as though the three of us were sitting around the television again. It felt almost comfortable.

Miriam resumed her position on top. ‘Want to join us?’

‘Course not,’ I said quickly. But now that some invisible barrier had been broken, I stopped faking my interest in Arafat. I watched them openly.

This time Miriam moved slower, sitting very upright. I watched her close her eyes, biting her bottom lip, silent; Kobi kept quiet too. I could no longer distinguish clearly between them and myself. I felt their pleasure flushing through my body, and yet there was no price to pay for this. I didn’t need to lose my virginity, mask my Russianness or my shyness, or even write. I felt free just being – in that moment, in that room.

Eventually I came back to my senses and decided it was time to afford my friends some privacy. I got up and walked out of Kobi’s house, into the winter of 1991.

YEARS LATER I came across Jack Kerouac’s autobiographical novel On the Road, his love poem to his larger-than-life friend Neal Cassady. ‘The only people for me,’ Kerouac wrote, referring primarily to Cassady, ‘are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles…’

Like Kerouac, I too have always needed someone else’s flame to illuminate my writing path. And when I met Miriam, she was on fire. Yet, rather than being a mere muse, she gave me the gift of true friendship.
Things shifted after that trip. On our return my parents were so relieved to have me back intact that no punishment was ever delivered. And even though Scuds still hovered above our icy sky like exotic birds of prey, Gorbachev and Bush were already negotiating a ceasefire. Adam also called to negotiate our love, perhaps alerted by my recent absence. Forgoing Zen for a moment, he went as far as suggesting future plans for us, which even included him coming all the way to Ashdod. But I did the previously unimaginable. I told him it was over. The words – unplanned – slid off my tongue by themselves.

I didn’t get the chance to discuss the break-up with Miriam. In that same week her father returned too, from the sea, and broke her nose, and she left our neighbourhood once again.

The next time we would meet we would be adults making new lives for ourselves in Tel Aviv. That night, in a little wooden bar on Ben Yehuda Street not far from my former editorial office, I’d tell Miriam I had heard Adam had gone mad like his mother. And she’d tell me about her recent career as a well-paid callgirl, and that the satisfaction in the job was that she was at last getting laid enough. We’d laugh and repeatedly clink our glasses to express our affection for each other, and I’d confide that I was writing stories about her. And she’d smile at me approvingly: ‘No fucking way, sister!’ And when the book would get published she’d never dispute my didactic fantasies of her getting raped with a vodka bottle, as bad girls ‘deserved’, but say proudly to her new man: ‘This book is about me.’

Even in her final metamorphosis, when she would cover her curls with a headscarf like our mothers did, and grow her post-pregnancy body large, Miriam would still display my stories alongside her husband’s holy books. The last time we’d meet, this time over Kiddush wine, she would advise me to find God ASAP, and a husband. ‘Forget writing, sister. Have a child,’ she’d say with her usual conviction.

It would be then that I’d know I was on my own again. And there would be delicious sadness in that realisation.

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Twenty years ago last August
they had me running down the platform,
howling in that flannel dress,
those two from the ‘Protection’ Board,
the woman with the narrow mouth,
the bloke there with his suit and glasses
who wished that he was somewhere else
and Jeanie screaming for me still,
not likely to let up till Sydney.
Talking here with Sharon now,
I often get a little jealous,
the way she’s still got hers together
despite that white bloke shooting through.
Five of them all told, she has.
I try to tell her now and then
‘Go on back there to your kids.
Don’t leave ’em with Janene
even if she is a “marvel”.
You never know just when the Board
might come back snooping round.’
Today, she’ll hang around till five
then wobble home at last.
My Jeanie would be twenty-four.
I wonder if I’d know her,
working for some stingy boss man
out there west of Bourke.
Or maybe, just like Sharon here,
she’s got her little batch of five.
And be down drinking in the park?
They’d be my grandkids, eh?
Or then again the whiter side
she picked up from her dad
might just have let her jump the bar
to ‘high society’,
house-with-lawn and man-with-job,
passing as Italian.
I’m sure we could’ve met again
if only I had really tried;
stood up to them gubba blokes
and kept on with me questions,
‘squeaky wheel will get the oil’
and all that sort of thing.
I’m pretty sure she can’t forgive me,
letting her be dragged away
off into that half-arsed mission
way down there in Sydney.
Or maybe she won’t want to know me,
drinking in the park,
her snow-white and la-di-da
and me here on the skids, she’d reckon.
My mob all call me Auntie May though.
I’ve done my bit. I’ve been around.
I’ve wiped the noses, dried the tears,
mothering my cousin’s kids
and even cousins’ cousins.
To them I’m still old Auntie May –
and they don’t seem to care too much
if Auntie May might smell of grog
and cry a little now and then
with no real explanation.
‘What the trouble, Auntie May?’
They know I’d never try to hit them,
half crazy with a stick.
Auntie May is good for hugs,
especially when the going’s rough.
I won’t stay on too long today though.
I’m not a drinker really but…
I wouldn’t want to leave them either.
They’re all my family now.

Geoff Page is an award-winning poet who has published eighteen collections of poetry, as well as two novels, four verse novels and several other works, including anthologies, translations and a biography of the jazz musician Bernie McGann.
Europe’s Trojan horse
Portrait of a wounded nation
Jorge Sotirios

HESIOD might have written the script. The 2004 summer was Greece’s last Golden Age. The Athens Olympics focused the world’s attention on a small but thriving country in the Mediterranean. In no other nation could the Olympic flame be lit and returned home, as though Zeus’s eagles had once again found the centre of the earth. A brilliant opening ceremony reminded the world of Greece’s ancient glory. The marathon began in the outer-lying suburb of Marathon, exactly 42.195 kilometres from the finish line in Athens (provided you took the old road). Medals awarded in gold, silver and bronze even replicated Hesiod’s hierarchy of Ages that befell humankind.

Added to this were supporting acts like Euro 2004, when the Greek soccer team flew back from Portugal, victorious, and was garlanded with laurel at the Pan-Hellenic Stadium used for the inaugural 1896 Olympic Games. Commentators drooled on TV: ‘May this immense – unforgettable – summer never end!’ When Eurovision and Miss World success came promptly after, it only brightened the glow.

Departing Athens for Buenos Aires as the clouds rolled over Mount Lycabettus, my Argentine amigos put it to me bluntly. ‘Is there anything Greeks haven’t won?’ they said in unison, as though a tragic chorus, minutes prior to the hero’s downfall. How different the two countries were. Abandoned shops with graffiti sprayed over boarding, a devalued peso, and social and industrial unrest were the norm in Buenos Aires’s once-fashionable streets. Athens, by contrast, was scrubbed up, its art-deco buildings renovated and freshly painted. Newly planted trees in Syntagma Square sprouted over tiled walkways that led to an underground station doubling as Metro and Museum of Archaeology, due to finds made during excavations. Even the steel scaffolds had been removed from the Parthenon, as though the Acropolis’s tenant – a senior citizen known as Athena – had been freed of her Zimmer frame, and was proudly standing upright.
As recently as early 2004 George Papandreou, then the Minister for Foreign Affairs, boldly announced that Greece had thrown off the Ottoman shackles and was no longer a Balkan country in Europe: the country had blossomed into ‘a European nation in the Balkans’. Greece had become a regional power, exporting expertise in telecommunications, transportation and agriculture to its poor Balkan neighbours – so the mantra went. Greek modernity had reached a pinnacle: a new international airport, fast highways, swanky bars and restaurants. And its privileged position at the crossroads of East and West made it a vital commercial hub for global trade. The stock exchange, advancing like a rampaging bull, proved Greece had acquired economic clout to match its cultural capital.

AS HESIOD MIGHT have predicted, there was an almighty fall. In Syntagma, where the Greek parliament beams a bright golden yellow, there has been a running battle between the riot squads and their tear gas, anarchists and their Molotov cocktails, the aganaktismeni (indignant) and their flags scrawled with Kleftes! (Thieves!). Even senior citizens like the traditional yiayia are railing against the failures of the political class, left and right, in bankrupting Greece.

Just as Napoleon believed that whoever controls Paris controls France, so the contemporary media thinks that if Athens is burning, the rest of Greece is too. The images of clashes juxtaposing ancient statuary with urban warfare have been a boon to the media. Daily popular assemblies that use a lottery for speakers to address the indignant camped in Syntagma reinforced the connection, but also the distance, between ancient and modern. Not even Aristophanes could have come up with this scene: portly politicians audaciously deflecting Greece’s ills onto all Greeks because ‘We all ate from the same EU trough.’

The failure of democracy was best articulated by the besieged, and now former, Prime Minister George Papandreou holed up in parliament, rustling up ballots to enact legislation demanded by the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. ‘Not only are these measures an affront,’ one dissenting MP said at the dispatch box, ‘they’re embarrassing to even read.’

Cutbacks on welfare, wages and other entitlements have been forced through. The 2010 bailout came with stringent conditions from the European Union: the GST was upped from 19 to 23 per cent and the holy trinity of Greek pleasure – fuel, cigarettes and alcohol – has been significantly taxed. The 2011 austerity package underpinned by the IMF called for even harsher measures: a one-third reduction in public wages, a one-tenth cut in public spending, pensions slashed by almost one-third and the retirement age raised by two years. The late Tony Judt called these draconian measures an attack on the very idea of the welfare state. Papandreou assented to harder work and longer hours, with a minimal safety net – perhaps he used Hesiod as a model? In Works and Days ‘men who never rest from labour and sorrow’ must accept their backbreaking struggles as the price for falling from the Golden Age.
AMID THE CARNAGE of 2011 my parents decided to undertake a voyage sentimental to their homeland. Another face of Greece emerged. Yes, there was turmoil in Athens, but the riots were a spectacle seen by Greeks on TV, just as they were for the rest of the world. Family feasts, religious fetes devoted to saints and apostles, and swims at pebbled beaches in the Peloponnese all ran counter to the media narrative.

My parents saw changes for the worse. They noted far too many empty stores with ENOIKIAZETAI (FOR RENT) scrolled in bold red, West African immigrants hurriedly selling contraband Versace and Prada before fleeing when police emerged, and the wildfires that scorched Laconia, an echo of the 2007 fires that killed fifty-three people around Father’s ancestral village of Zaharo.

Other things hadn’t changed. Mother’s claim for resumed land in Neapoli, three hours’ drive from Sparta, was still on hold. Given she filed for compensation in 1979, a mere thirty-year wait was considered fast processing by the slow-moving bureaucracy. The supreme indication of how inefficient Greek bureaucracy has become is the state rail system. It has run at such a loss that it would have been cheaper to transport every passenger by cab.

Costas Markos of the Greek Community in Victoria has observed a ‘reverse exodus’ streaming from Greece to Australia again. Those who were born in Australia and lived in Athens or Crete or Kozani are returning with their children in tow. Skilled professionals and tradespeople, including engineers, teachers, doctors and electricians, are arriving at Lonsdale Street in Melbourne’s CBD, armed with their ticketed luggage straight from the carousel.

One such person is Kathryn Koromilas. Fed on a diet of Greek philosophy and drama, the books of Nikos Kazantzakis, Greek songs extolling golden summers and films depicting bleak winters, Koromilas was lured from Australia to Athens, as were many twentysomethings whose parents had emigrated here years before. A bohemian existence within reach of the Aegean sounded as inviting as the siren’s call to Ulysses. These reverse émigrés, romantic to the bone, strapped themselves to an airline seat and journeyed towards adventure.

Greece gave Koromilas the place and space to write her engaging first novel, Palimpsest. Greece taught her life lessons, although she was never quite sure where she stood in society. Frustrated by the Byzantine bureaucracy and limited employment, Koromilas has now returned to Australia, as have many of her compatriots.

Previous generations of single men arrived by ship eager for opportunities in Australia’s emerging economy. Hardly any of the current arrivals will find work in their more specialised fields. Archival photos line the interior of the 1920s Greek Community building in Melbourne: men in dapper suits wait portside with bouquets of flowers for intended wives. By contrast today’s intake is restricted to
young families seeking the security Greece cannot provide. As the poet George Seferis wrote prophetically: ‘Wherever I go, Greece wounds me.’ That wound, articulated in the 1940s, has reopened in the twenty-first century.

OF ALL THE coverage of the Greek economic crisis, one image most clearly revealed the ties that bind the country’s power elite. In it two men, both around sixty, walk side by side. They wear identical blue suits and ties; they even have the same posture, curved at a slight angle to the world. As the scions of notable Greek families, they’re on opposite sides of the political spectrum – meaning their party’s remedy to the crisis is practically alike. George Papandreou, from the socialist party Pasok, is one figure. Antonis Samaras, from the right-wing New Democracy, is the other.

Both men led privileged lives as children of the elite. Both were educated at the same American college during the 1970s, when George preferred to strum protest songs on his guitar. The only real difference is that George – or Yioryaki, ‘Little George’, as he is called to denote his diminished stature – hasn’t the respect commanded by his grandfather, who was prime minister in the mid-1960s, or the clout of his father, the charismatic spiv Andreas, who presided as an Ottoman Pasha throughout the 1980s, dispensing favours to associates and creaming off state wealth to buy a lavish home to keep his much younger girlfriend happy. To be fair, Andreas Papandreou pushed through progressive legislation: the abolition of dowries, the recognition of the Greek resistance, and solidarity with third-world movements.

In fact, the photograph is fairly ordinary if you consider Greece as a post-Ottoman society where dynasties control power. Transparency International monitors institutional and financial corruption, and ranked Greece last in Europe alongside Bulgaria and Romania – former Ottoman regimes paralysed by the nepotism that bloated their bureaucracy, and gave to a coterie with inherited positions in the public service the right to wield rubber stamps. Bulgaria and Romania can at least blame their lot on being post-Soviet states. What’s Greece’s excuse? Compensation claims for resumed land, like my mother’s, have little chance once they enter the labyrinthine process of multiple approvals. ‘Greece is not something you can rationalise,’ Kathryn Koromilas came to understand during her decade there. ‘Even its politics is emotional.’

Emotional, perplexing, and tainted by history. In 2004 Dora Bakoyiannis, scion of the Mitsotakis dynasty, in her capacity as mayor of Athens placed garlands on the Euro victors before speaking perfect German to the Greek coach, Otto Rehhagel. That scene illustrated the complex relationship between Greece and Germany. German banks underpin the euro and German investment is still strong in Greece. Some of the political elite benefited from the German occupation during World War II, a dark period that concealed collaboration – a taboo subject for the plutocracy.
The German remedy for the Greek crisis has been galling. ‘Greeks must change their culture and society,’ Berlin has declared. The stereotypical view is that Greeks are lazy, like their southern European cousins, the Italians and Spanish. A Protestant work ethic, allayed to fiscal prudence, it is implied, could remake Greece.

No one can deny that Greece cooked the books with creative accounting overseen by Goldman Sachs. But Greeks are not lazy – they just value hedonism. After all, Germans take their holidays in Greece; Greeks once went to Germany only as gastarbeiter – guest workers.

In The Tyranny of Greece over Germany (1935), the English scholar EM Butler analysed the contribution of Greece to German literature, philosophy and the arts: Goethe, Hölderlin, Winckelmann and Nietzsche. Nietzsche used Dionysus to make his point about the corroding effect of repressing instincts; Marx used Prometheus as the defining figure of rebellion. Greeks don’t just see rebellion as a literary conceit. It’s a call to arms.

Defying authority is celebrated in Greece. The Greek Communist Party, KKE, remains relevant because it trades on its oppositional ideology and its worship of rebels. That the KKE has a strict Stalinist ideology and is a dynasty is another matter. German thinkers valorise the rebel and so does the Greek left. Greece resisted the Persians at Salamis, the Crusaders in Byzantium, the Turks during the Ottoman era, and most recently the Italians and Germans – its identity has been forged by resistance and rebellion throughout its warring history.

Greece has cultural capital. The Acropolis is not simply a vantage point to unfurl a banner of resistance – ‘THE PEOPLE'S HAVE THE POWER AND NEVER SURRENDER’ – it is a reminder of the past and a provocation for the future. Greeks have fallen from this height, from gods to the mortals as German philosophers might put it, but any sense of enduring achievement contrasts with the grubby politics played out below the Acropolis. And here is the dilemma facing political groups dealing with the ancient legacy of the Greeks – the left draws strength from it, and far-right groups like Golden Dawn also co-opt the ancients to validate their nationalist agenda.

Greece, like Oedipus, always seems to be at the crossroads. The Greeks believe others include Greece when thinking of Europe, but the outsider status remains because Greeks see Europe as existing beyond their shores, especially since decisions for Greece are made by the European Union and European Central Bank.

WHEN MY PARENTS returned to Sydney they looked ragged, having missed a connecting flight in Dubai, but a day later they perked up. The scent of basil, the courtyard banter over cups of warm Greek coffee and the never-ending parade of families along the seaside agora had made for a nostalgic trip. Even the replacement of splintered wooden shutters with aluminium on Mother's ancestral home impressed.
But it was also a trip tinged with the sadness of funerals. The death that affected me most was that of her aunt, Thia Pota. Living to ninety-five with her mind ‘400’ (the Ottoman weight of 400 dramia, making up a whole okà; that is, she possessed all her marbles), Pota’s no-nonsense approach to life was not that far removed from Hesiod’s portrayal in *Works and Days*. It was the lot of the farmer to cultivate his land, wait for the *meltemi* to arrive with rains and then harvest the results.

When I last visited Pota, in 2008, she lay in bed, her body infirm and her hair cropped to the skull. I felt privileged to hear her stories, especially as she referred to me as ‘Yioryaki’ often. She had tended her olive groves, watched every drachma, brought up a large family and supported her relatives with little fuss. She remembered the generation of young men who pushed Mussolini’s troops back into Albania during the harsh 1940 winter, and hiding from German soldiers who patrolled the mountains around Cape Maleas. Her life had been a dignified one. But I also know of the ambivalence of Pota’s milieu towards the Colonel’s junta, from 1967 to 1974. The junta was tolerated in Laconia because they rid the debts of farmers, built roads to inaccessible villages and validated conservatism, a fierce trait of Laconia and Mani. This was one of the reasons the Menzies government sourced the Peloponnese: hardworking people, knowledgeable about agrarian practises and ideologically compliant.

My mother used to think the Greeks were lazy – a belief that came from her Germanic side, no doubt (meaning a Protestant work ethic that Max Weber identified years before). But this three-month trip tempered her view. Life was hard. Rating agencies, sovereign debt, hedge funds, contagion, derivatives, bonds, credit swaps and ‘haircuts’: all this economic jargon was Greek to her. Instead she bought numerous pairs of flannelette pyjamas at Kmart, stuffed them in an enormous Postpak and made me address them to relatives in black texta. Then she marched off to Australia Post. Mother knew a bleak winter lay ahead for Greece.

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*Jorge Sotirios’s Lonesome George, C’est Moi! is published by Big Sky Publishing. His essay ‘Lost city of the Amazon’ appeared in Griffith REVIEW 20: Cities on the Edge; this is his fifth publication in Griffith REVIEW.*
SISTER Clara Ford comes at me with eyes deep as sonnets, the whites of them bright as her dress and the black of them black as the shine on her forehead. Fingers that reach forward and touch my pale brow, send me floating backwards into the arms of men. *Loose him, in the name of the Saints of Jerusalem, loose him.* And I fall, feel the hands that catch me, large hands that rest me down among the pews, among others splayed here on the solid green First African Methodist Episcopal carpet. All of us laid out by her touch and the words that come with it, and I am *loosed* down here, but *loosed* of what? Floating, buoyant in a kind of spaciousness as if there’s air and distance between me and the carpet, bodies strewn about me in their Sunday best, one bangled arm flung over my choir robe. Launched by only a touch on my brow and a ferocity in Sister Clara’s eyes. Feelings gathering up into one that’s singular, rising high in my body. But what is it? A taste of serenity, or being softly held together?

Through the blur of my lashes, Lily Outerbridge is lowered, poured onto the floor and arranged in the aisle beside me, her old arms flailing. This healing is going on right after the twelve o’clock service. All morning I’ve been singing spirituals and anthems, the choir performing for hours, roiling in music and praising *His Holy Matchless Name.* The only white boy, in my black and cream nylon robe, up in the choir loft among these old folks, singing out ‘Ain’t Nobody Do Me Like Jesus’, when I’m not exactly a Jesus man. Now I lie in some half-focused light, hungry, faint-headed, susceptible perhaps, but the weightlessness is real, the clarity, the wailing and faint hallelujahs. I can’t pretend I don’t feel something. The sound of old Lily singing *wonderful counsellor.* I know the tunes by now. Sister Clara above us like a giant black angel, her nappy-grey hair with its great white taffeta rose, her fainting hand barely paler on its underside, her palm the darkest purple.

There is something going on here, something that can’t be proven. Singing since dawn, as usual, first Sunday. Promoted to lead the tenors in the oldest black choir in Los Angeles. More the result of attrition than bona fide talent, straining my voice till it’s hoarse.
Enthusiasm is my true gift, my voice is only from singing the solos at the Peninsula School, south of Melbourne, but I was never quite taught how to breathe. And here in Los Angeles I hardly seem to eat or sleep, out into the night at Catch One, dancing all hours with the black boys to their deep house music, the pounding bass, intoxicated by the flow of bodies. Maybe I just want to be touched. To be held by a stranger, or God.

I DRIVE FROM the club as the sun comes up, directly to this church on Sugar Hill, my wash-and-wear robe pulled over my jeans. I come to feel more of it, searching for the same thing maybe, in the rhythm of the ‘Holy Praises’, the thunder of Pastor Murray preaching, the drug of sound and movement. I roll and hum and shout, respond to the call of things I can’t quite believe, raise my hands to the sky.

Knowing I wouldn’t experience or stomach it among my own; I would feel nothing, I would run. But in the midst of these folk I shout regardless, caught up in it all. The mural behind me, those coloured saints and sages, black shepherds with sheep and the leadlight windows. Dark-faced Jesus and John the Baptist, their cheeks black as everyone’s here but my own.

Yet this is where I feel at home. My mother on the farm so far away, so staunch in logic and an atheist – if she could see her golden boy now, lost and found and lost again, bewitched by these old-time Jesus people with their hollering and voodoo. There’d be incomprehension. A shaking of the head.

But I belong. Sister Clara, silk rose in her hair and her bright white crinoline dress, the same one she always wears. Her face and hands extruding, sweat-shined as molasses, laying us out like rows of planks. Sitting half-up I feel queasy, a buzzing of energy about my crown and the murmurs surround me, the almost silent talking in tongues, omshubadolothashada, keening and twitching, feverish, altered. Mabel Silent from the altos calls out in a deep, hoarse voice. Manulasenbario, repeating and repeating, swooning.

I’m afraid words might spill up from me, spontaneously, some language that doesn’t find air, from a place I’ve never been, a past life bleeding through. A dialect I once started scribbling down when I woke from a dream, words on a page from some African girl on a ship. Like the words from the old church mothers spread about, who believe their exorcised evil now lolls in the aisle. Sister Clara’s accent so Southern I can barely understand. Give um to me, in de only name of Jayus. Singing rhythmic hallelujahs as she sermonises, ranting how leshines are only coz a girl a bin incest, coz a all de sin. She’s come up to this place all the way from Mississippi, but I am from a deeper south. And rumour has it she fled an institution, and not one of higher learning.

What is it I’m fleeing? She makes no sense but I come back each week for more, to share in this transcendence, lift out of myself, reach up and escape my body.
I’m supposed to be down on the basement level for rehearsal: Bennie Pruitt’s Truth is Marching On, his homespun gospel musical. I’d better get myself there. The only white boy to play the only white boy, the one behind the counter in the lunch counter scene, sing a song to the ‘negro’ boys who come to sit in protest. My solo is titled ‘Leave oh leave I hate you’ but I sing it as a love song, my purest yearning tenor voice, as if hate means love. And no one seems to notice. I get no direction – they’re just happy to have me.

Bennie Pruitt thinks I should have a screen test, as if I’m so handsome – but I’m not so handsome, it’s just that Bennie lives so deep in South Central, way down near One Hundred and Third and Success, that anyone foreign looks like a film star. Now I’m late for the run-through, opening my eyes again, closing them, woozy, among the groaning and swaying. Afraid my bliss will pass too soon, a cloud of hope that’s sinking. It’s the euphoria I long for. Freedom.

The shadow of Sister Clara above me as she wipes a spittled finger in the eyes of a woman, healing. Old Bessie Slaughter from the back row of the sopranos watches, her handbag over her arm like the Queen, smiling the faintest approval. I think of what Sister Clara said about lesbians and incest and I know in my heart these folks are so old school. I’ll have to write a letter to the trustees. You should be aware that Clara Ford is preaching bigotry and nonsense. But what would they say if they knew where I’d been all night? Is that what Sister Clara wants to rid me of? My yearnings and rituals, my proclivities. Loose me, then, it might be easier, loose me.

I ended up here the night of the riots, or what’s since been coined The Insurrection, driving home from my office downtown at White & Jablonski, way up on the forty-first floor with a view all the way to Palos Verdes and the bridges of Long Beach. The Rodney King verdict had just been announced and I was indignant, disbelieving. I’d seen the endless repeat of the video footage. Beaten to a pulp. How could that be justice? Reginald Denny had been dragged from his truck, pummelled to a pulp in retribution on the corner of Florence and Normandie. Radio KJLH said a rally had been called at the First African Methodist Episcopal, a church I’d never heard of, a good stretch from Florence and Normandie. Incensed as the next man, I did what the next white man didn’t, pulled off the freeway and found my way to South Harvard Boulevard. My own heightened search for adrenaline.

A high stucco church on a hill and black folks filing in, spilling out. A night falling warm and close, expectant. I parked and heard singing echo from the sanctuary so I crept in among them to get a glimpse of where the music came from. Ride on, King Jesus. I thought they were singing Right on, King Jesus, and I knew I was in the right place. I felt high just being there.

The old black mayor of the city was speechifying, the church interior cream and maroon and full of black men and women jostling to see, a general sense of fervour
and rage. A couple of white men with extension cords and cameras, the press. One of them saw me, shook his head. Standing room only and I was stuck in the entry hall, couldn’t quite catch sight of the pulpit.

The voice of the mayor through loudspeakers was guttural and incensed. The legacy of Martin King, as if we knew him personally. Are we back to business and beatings as usual? Reverend Cecil ‘Chip’ Murray, the pastor, up there pleading for peace and almost in tears, his voice so profundo the stained glass shook. Whispers around me of marching to the court in Simi Valley where the verdict came down, to make it historic. A scene in a film I once saw of Selma on the Edmund Pettis Bridge. How we have overcome little if we just stand by. Then the press was gone and I was the only white face left.

As the church doors reopened I also knew there’d be no walk on Simi Valley, it wasn’t safe out there. Flames roped up from Adams Boulevard, just down the hill, sirens floated through the dark. People running, shouting, the crashing of a window. This adventure had become real. Black kids willy-nilly, looting. A boy about twelve with a big microwave, like a scene from TV. The smell of smoke and the media vans leaving quickly as I made a dash for my car, only one street over, but a group of kids marauding, one in a low-rider who shouted out his window – Hey motherfuckah watch you doin down here? And I was bolting back to where I’d come from, back towards the church, to a crowd that remained in this same sanctuary, too afraid to leave. A car in flames, like a distant torch.

We ain’t goin’ nowhere, a big man said, making plans in case the church got overrun. They seemed to know how crazy folks could get. We was here for Watts in ’64. We know this pressure cooker. He rolled his eyes and scoffed with the excitement of it. And I was left among them, awkward, foreign, shy but friendly, searching for other white faces, but there were just flames climbing out from an apartment building down the hill, and a hot Santa Ana feeling, the smell of fire borne on dry winds. The crack, crack, crack of gunshots and I was being ushered away from church doors that were being locked as I went downstairs and joined the others, doing their church-smiling when they saw me, thinking Oh God, what are we going to do with him? Unsure what to do with myself.

The lights in the basement dimmed as I stood amid trestle tables, church fete-style, kitchen smells, a poster about a musical: When Harlem Was in Vogue. Everyone hushed now. I thought how I might need to slide into the walls like Otto Frank, if the anger from the street leaked down in here. I eyed an open broom closet, pictured myself wedged between the carpet sweeper and hanging brooms. A lady in an African head rag asked where I was from and eagerly I said Australia, as if that might not be so bad. You found yourself where you shouldn’t been tonight, she said, smiling. We’ll take care of you. She gave me a bosomy hug and left me among about a hundred left over, milling about, a grim expectation settling in. A man jabbered
loudly about how we always burn our own. But I had no memory of Watts or Selma, all I knew right then was how I was a far cry from Tooradin, from the farm and the bush and the horses twitching at flies.

After midnight a band of brothers made a barricade around me, got me out. You’ll be a wheel within a wheel, one said, with a generous white-tooth smile, and I sensed it a biblical reference. They hummed as they circled me out into the smoke-filled darkness, like a many-legged creature, coralling me a block towards my car. The sounds of sirens and distant shouting, shadows running into the rioting night. If you survive this, come back join us for church. They moved me through the unlit street.

You drive right outta here, don’t stop for nothing, no light, no cop, no street-block, you keep driving. Thanking them awkwardly, profusely, I took their direction and high-tailed it north, cut through from Sugar Hill to Western Boulevard, my little Acura like a pistol through a city now devoid of streetlights or traffic, just the shape of an occasional person sprinting. Like Atlanta burning in Gone with the Wind, I thought, or Johannesburg. All silent, then another firecracker echo of a bullet, so distinct from a car backfiring, the sound of my own car pressing towards the distant hills. I turned on the radio – a city on lockdown, a curfew. Stay inside your homes. All over the city there are buildings on fire, looting. No kidding.

Like an idiot, out among it. A camera shop burning, a pet store next door. I imagined the parrots and kittens inside, wondered if I should stop to save them. But a fire engine passed me, bleating, and I pretended to myself it would be taken care of, just not by me. A Channel Seven van parked in the middle of nowhere. I imagined the story. Stupid white boy dies saving kittens. I headed on to where I should have been already, hours ago, up into Laurel Canyon, swooping up into those Hollywood Hills like a homing pigeon, the eucalyptus avenues, past the Canyon store, winding up Wonderland and the overgrown film-star gardens.

On the crest of Lookout Mountain I witnessed the view, the great basin of the city below, specks of burning buildings like distant fireflies, hovering. Back in my world, safe, alone, but the feeling of community gone. I wondered how my new friends were, the barricade of men who risked themselves. They took me in, those people, protected me, invited me back as if they somehow knew I belonged. If you survive this, come worship with us.

AND HERE I am these ten months later, couldn’t keep myself away. Hungering for the sounds that soared, they were exultant and I kept appearing, until I hungered for more. In the back pew in my suit from the office, eavesdropping on evening rehearsals, silent as a child, waiting to be part of something, to bathe in the unknown, protection or some state of grace. They greeted me with cautious, open arms, and when I was away from here I yearned for the timbre of their voices, their
flights of ecstasy and inhibition. I had danced most of the night in the dark, then watched and swayed all morning in brightness. And I got brave enough to join the Cathedral Choir, slipped into the back row alongside the ancients, absorbing rhythms and words. *There is a balm in Gilead.* For weeks I sang a *bomb in Gilead*, assuming some modern take on the Middle East. But no one seemed to notice. *Elijah Rock, Shout, Shout, Elijah Rock, Comin’ Up Lord.* I just sang and wept until I belonged. I was raised up high.

Now I sing in the front row, over-prepared and bright pink with trying, close to the pulpit, rehearsing the tenor parts in my car on the freeway, humming my way through work. We’ve since sung with the LA Philharmonic at Easter, and came on as the warm-up act for the Dalai Lama at the World Festival of Sacred Music, on stage at the Hollywood Bowl, swinging and shouting in our choir robes, raising our palms to the night.

There are even some faces in the congregation that I recognise from downtown: Lizzie the night word-processor in my office, a trustee from Bank of America. A few young guys from the nightclub who come here on the *down low* to the late service smile at me slyly, surprised. Gays are not embraced in black churches, but they are here. And I’m friends with Pastor Murray now, I’ll tell him what I heard from Sister Clara’s lips.

I will be gay and white and foreign, sing until I have no voice. *I want to walk worthy, my calling to fulfil…*

Not sure what I’ve come to believe, except perhaps in mystery and the frailty of my understanding. I reach for something among these black folks in their Sunday’s best, proud men in their *kente* cloth vests, Jessamine Hidden and the old church mothers. I’m only able to guess at their lives, what they’ve seen. But they’re unfazed and shout, be lifted up and out. It’s not so different from the rhythms of Catch One maybe, heat and light and percussive sounds, piano, organs, bass, bodies that move and sweat, the barricades of men. But here the stimulants aren’t so artificial, no smoke or ecstasy or vodka, just Sister Clara shouting now: *won’t be no heaven for any who don’t speak in tongues.* I can’t even fathom that kind of thinking. Bus as Bessie Slaughter closes her eyes and is ushered down so carefully, draped on the floor with her handbag still over her arm, I don’t believe I’m here by accident. Laid out on this carpet from the touch of that big woman’s hand, I feel as if I might grow wings.

Originally from West Gippsland, in Victoria, David Francis has lived mostly in the US since 1985. His first novel, *Agapanthus Tango* (2001), was published internationally in seven languages and in the US as *The Great Inland Sea*. David’s second novel, *Stray Dog Winter* (2008), was named Australian Novel of the Year in the *Australian Literary Review*, was a finalist for the LAMBDA Literary Award and received the American Library Association Stonewall Literary Award for 2010. His writing has appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald, The Age, Wet Ink, The Best Australian Stories* and *Harvard Review*.
When bystanders fail

‘I just did my job and minded my own business’

Kathy Marks

\textbf{WINTER} is a hectic time on Pitcairn Island: the arrowroot crop is ready for harvesting, as are the wild beans that sprout in profusion, clambering over bushes and twining themselves around tree trunks. The sugarcane, too, stands tall in the wind, and once cut has to be processed within days, otherwise it starts to lose its sweetness.

The tin-roofed shed where inhabitants of the South Pacific island gather for this communal task – crushing the cane to extract the juice, then thickening it into a syrup – is on the fringes of Adamstown, Pitcairn’s one, slightly ramshackle village. Swaddling the shed are thickets of banana palms, and it was here, in the mid-1990s, just metres from the whirl of molasses-making, that ten-year-old Belinda was gagged with a T-shirt, held down and raped in turn by two brothers.

I used to pass that shed every day, while covering the trials in 2004 of seven Pitcairn men accused of sexually assaulting children over the previous four decades. The little shack was near a dirt track leading to the courthouse and village, and after I had heard Belinda’s account of being cornered in a banana grove, the sight of it always filled me with dread. It seemed to symbolise the darkness at the heart of this community, where young girls had been preyed on for as long as anyone could remember – ever since, perhaps, the \textit{Bounty} mutineers landed here with twelve Tahitian women, most of them abducted.

Places scarred by exceptionally violent events can feel oppressive, as if the atmosphere were suffused with the suffering of victims. That struck me powerfully when I visited Port Arthur a few years ago, and likewise at Tuol Seng prison in Phnom Penh, where thousands of Cambodians were tortured and murdered. On Pitcairn, living among the rapists and their families for six uneasy weeks, I felt at times like I was suffocating. Even the island itself appeared malign, with a brooding physical presence that was almost overwhelming; climbing the steep, muddy trails carved through the cloying tangle of vegetation, and watching waves the size of an apartment block crash against the cliff tops, I had the notion that this spot – a volcanic rock planted in the middle of the world’s biggest ocean – was never meant to be inhabited.
In 1790, however, it proved an ideal refuge for nine of the sailors from His Majesty’s Armed Vessel *Bounty*, fleeing the wrath of the Royal Navy after their celebrated uprising against Captain William Bligh. As well as being a natural fortress, the island had been wrongly charted; it was eighteen years before an American whaler stumbled upon Fletcher Christian and his followers, who had burnt the *Bounty* to the waterline. Still home to their descendants, Pitcairn even nowadays remains formidably isolated, with no airstrip or safe anchorage and only an infrequent boat service linking it with the nearest populated place, the French Polynesian island of Mangareva, a choppy thirty-two hours away.

That isolation – which almost takes your breath away when you ascend to Pitcairn’s summit and survey the nothingness stretching to the horizon in every direction – was, no doubt, a crucial factor in the evolution of the sexual abuse. It may also help to account for the sheer scale of it: British detectives assigned to the investigation – Pitcairn is still a British overseas territory – believe that every girl was a victim, and virtually every man an offender. Yet it seemed to me, while I was on the island, and later, while researching a book on the case, that geography was only part of the picture. It did not explain how children could be treated so brutally, nor did it illuminate the other question that still gnaws at me: why did no one who knew what was happening to the girls – and some of the boys, too, though it’s not clear how many – make any effort to halt it?

I found myself reflecting on evil. It’s rather unfashionable these days; apart from the odd flurry of interest in the wake of, for instance, Anders Behring Brevik’s deadly rampage in Norway in 2011, it seldom figures in public debate. I’d always baulked at the idea of evil, with its supernatural overtones and crude absolutism, but as I immersed myself in this intensely disturbing story, thoughts of it kept insinuating themselves into my brain. I wondered how this strange little place had gone rotten – and how close to the surface of our own societies, theoretically more civilised, evil might lurk. And I asked myself: how many of us, born or thrust into circumstances similar to Pitcairn, would, like successive generations of islanders, succumb to our worst instincts?

Hanging on the wall of my kitchen in Sydney is a wooden shark with real shark’s teeth. It was carved by Terry Young who, like the rest of the Pitcairn community, made a good living from the Pacific cruise ships that visit the island in summer. A taciturn mountain of a man, Terry – whose ancestor was the mutineer Edward Young – looked after his ailing widowed mother, Vula, with singular devotion. During the 1980s, he raped a twelve-year-old girl approximately once a week, having indecently assaulted her since she was six.

The girl, whom I call Marion in my book, *Pitcairn: Paradise Lost* (HarperCollins, 2008), never told anyone what was happening to her; she felt ashamed, she explained to the New Zealand judges presiding over the trials in Pitcairn’s dilapidated courthouse. There was, though, no one to tell, for the policemen and magistrates
were abusing, too; British diplomats were based thousands of kilometres away in Wellington; and VHF radio and a highly erratic postal system were the sole means of communication. To point the finger, anyway, would have been almost unimaginable in those claustrophobic confines: five square kilometres of rock and a tortuously interrelated population that has long hovered at around fifty.

Until 1999, none of the victims spoke up. As Jennifer, who was raped four times by Steve Christian – a former mayor and the father of Belinda’s two assailants, Randy and Shawn – told the British-appointed judges: ‘It just seemed to be…how the girls are treated, as though they’re a sex thing. Men could do what they want with them. They seemed to be a rule unto themselves… That’s the way of life on Pitcairn.’

Jennifer’s parents, and other adults, must have known what was going on. Secrets are a scarce commodity on Pitcairn; and besides, most fathers were offending, while mothers had been abused themselves. Yet the majority of parents turned a blind eye; they made no attempt to protect their daughters, and in living memory it appears that only one publicly complained. ‘It was shoved under the carpet,’ according to Charlotte, another of Steve Christian’s victims. ‘It’s an act that everyone on the island knew was happening, and nobody wanted to say it was wrong and deal with it.’

Indefensible though that may be, parents were not the only adults who could have intervened. For much of the twentieth century Pitcairn had a resident New Zealand teacher, and also a Seventh Day Adventist minister, sent out from Australia or New Zealand – the locals had converted to Adventism in 1890. Many of these people, who lived at the heart of the community for two years, working and socialising alongside the islanders, became aware of the children’s plight. Allen Cox was one of Marion’s teachers; returning to Pitcairn in 2003, at the height of the scandal, he observed in an email to his son, Andrew: ‘I have no doubt the guys are guilty as sin. The sexual abuse has been going on from the time of the Bounty.’ Walter Ferguson was the pastor during Cox’s first stint; his wife, Phyllis, was approached by a parishioner whose daughter, a friend of Marion’s, had been raped. Like Cox, the Fergusons took the matter no further.

Two teachers tried to warn the British government in the 1950s that something was amiss, but were not taken seriously. And that was it: none of the other outsiders posted to Pitcairn in a professional capacity ever relayed their concerns. The children were left to their fate, and when the veil of silence was finally lifted, it was not by a parent, or teacher, or minister of the church, but by Belinda, the girl in the banana grove. She was still just fifteen years old.

ANCIENT PETROGLYPHS GOUGED into a cliff face indicate that Pitcairn, perched midway between New Zealand and Chile, was occupied by Polynesians from about 800 to 1400 AD. Why they departed is not clear; at any rate, the place
was empty when the mutineers alighted with their Tahitian ‘wives’ and six native men. Modern Pitcairn’s birth was soaked in blood; within a decade, all but one of the men were dead, murdered mostly in quarrels over women. The sole survivor, John Adams, then embraced Christianity, and the island, after being rediscovered, became renowned for its piety – which is one reason Britain, after hoisting the Union flag in 1838, left it largely to its own devices.

But while the community displayed a virtuous face to visitors, reports filtered out of incest, rapes, abortions, wife-beating, illegitimate births and unexplained ‘accidental’ deaths; by the early twentieth century, a pattern of girls being ‘seduced’ or ‘broken in’ by adult men had established itself. Those girls, in more recent times, included two sisters, Isobel and Jeanie, whom I interviewed in New Zealand in 2007. While talking to Isobel, I realised we were almost the same age, and I contemplated the cruel lottery of birth. One spin of the wheel and you were condemned to a nightmarish childhood on Pitcairn; another spin and you grew up in a loving family in England.

From the ages of nine and seven, respectively, Isobel and Jeanie were raped by Terry Young’s elder brother, Brian, one of thirty alleged offenders identified by detectives. By the time the abuse came to light, some of those men were dead or too frail to stand trial; ten ended up going to court – seven of them on the island, where they comprised two-thirds of the adult male population; three in New Zealand, where many expatriates live. All except one were convicted and five of them were jailed, serving their sentences in a purpose-built prison on Pitcairn. Brian, who spent the longest behind bars, was released after just over two years. (Invoking ‘unique’ circumstances, the judges had been extraordinarily lenient.)

During the 1970s, Brian would arrive at the sisters’ house on his motorbike and, with their mother’s permission, whisk them off, supposedly to help him collect firewood. He would then drive them to an old hut in a secluded location and assault them in turn, sometimes in front of each other. How could he – how could any of the men – do that to children? Dimly, I’ve come to understand, I think, some of their motives. There was the sense of entitlement, created by Pitcairn’s swashbuckling history. There was the macho culture, which encouraged sex with young girls as a mark of virility. There was the ingrained nature of the abuse, which was handed down from father to son, and there was the isolation, thanks to which men felt untouchable. Isolation may also have dislocated the islanders from mainstream social norms, albeit only to a degree – from 1914, when the Panama Canal opened, they were travelling to and from New Zealand regularly.

How did the abuse of children become routine – virtually institutionalised – in the British colony? I found myself reading about the atrocities in Rwanda, Cambodia, Nazi Germany; while I draw the parallel very cautiously – no one died on Pitcairn, although countless lives were blighted, and two sisters committed
suicide in mysterious circumstances – what those places have in common, it seems
to me, is the way darkness seeped into every corner of the society. And in each
instance, the evil – if you want to call it that – was, on some level, state-sanctioned,
which presumably explains why it proliferated so vigorously.

Cruelty, though, begins and ends with individuals, and most of us could not
envisage taking part in killing, torture and genocide. Adam Morton, a professor of
philosophy at the University of Alberta, Canada, argues in On Evil (Routledge, 2004)
that evildoers have to overcome an innate aversion to harming others. Ideology can
assist in breaching the barrier, he writes, and so can ethnic prejudice, group
dynamics and a prevailing culture. Several of those factors were at play on Pitcairn,
where child abuse was – if not openly condoned – widely tolerated; certainly, there
was no stigma attached. Closer to home, dozens of men participated in orchestrated
pack-rapes in the northern Queensland town of Ingham during the 1970s, with the
community’s knowledge and tacit acceptance.

Baron-Cohen advocates that evil be understood, primarily, as a lack of empathy; a
Cambridge University professor of developmental psychopathology, Baron-Cohen
also contends that a circuit within the brain determines where we all lie on an
‘empathy spectrum’ of zero to six degrees. (Psychopaths score zero.) Yet as Stanley
Milgram’s experiments at Yale University in 1961 demonstrated, empathy can be
readily suspended: under orders from an authority figure, two-thirds of his subjects
administered what they thought were potentially lethal electric shocks to other
participants.

The evidence, moreover, suggests that empathy does not necessarily preclude
sexual offending, according to Paul Wilson, a forensic psychologist and professor of
criminology at the Gold Coast’s Bond University.

MY FIRST IMPRESSION of Pitcairn, on stepping out of a longboat crewed by the
men facing trial for raping and molesting children, was its mundanity. Adamstown,
apart from its setting, could have been a nondescript rural settlement in Australia,
and the islanders had similar preoccupations: the state of their crops, petty feuds, the
weather. I would bump into the defendants between court appearances; they
seemed like ordinary people leading ordinary lives, and yet – according to the
women giving evidence by video-link from New Zealand – they had committed
acts of barbarity. It was as if two parallel universes co-existed on this surf-battered
chunk of rock: one humdrum and one blackly terrifying.

The men did not look like monsters – but then, what do monsters look like? As I
watched them trade jibes and banter in the village square one day, Hannah Arendt’s
oft-quoted phrase ‘the banality of evil’ came to mind. The German-American
philosopher wrote that Adolf Eichmann and ‘so many...like him...were neither
perverted nor sadistic… they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal’. An estimated half a million people took part in the Holocaust, and afterwards the majority reintegrated with ease into civil society; it is ‘very normal human beings who commit the most atrocious crimes’, remarks Paul Wilson, who has studied the Khmer Rouge’s reign of terror. Wilson, when I spoke to him, drew an analogy between sexual abuse and genocide, noting that in both cases the perpetrators ‘have no deviant personality characteristics… They’re not psychopaths, and they suffer no recognised mental illness. We might like to see the evildoers within our ranks as being exceptionally different from the rest of us, but I don’t think the empirical evidence shows that.’

Are we all, then, capable of such deeds; does ‘the line dividing good and evil [cut] through the heart of every human being’, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn asserted? And if so, how much influence does environment exert, as opposed to personality and genetics? In The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil (Random House, 2007) the American psychologist Philip Zimbardo – who built on Milgram’s work with a notorious experiment at Stanford University in 1971 – asks: ‘Are we born good and then corrupted by an evil society or born evil and redeemed by a good society?’ An alternative perspective, he suggests, is that ‘each of us has the capacity to be a saint or a sinner, altruistic or selfish, gentle or cruel, dominant or submissive, perpetrator or victim, prisoner or guard’.

Zimbardo set up a mock prison at Stanford, dividing his students into inmates and jailers, and was dismayed by how swiftly the guards’ behaviour deteriorated. For him, circumstances are decisive; torture was rife at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison, he believes, not because of ‘a few bad apples’, as American military commanders claimed, but because ‘we put good apples in a bad barrel’.

What makes a barrel go bad? With its bloody history, extreme isolation, lack of social constraints and minimal external supervision, Pitcairn seems a classic example of a place where evil was likely to thrive – in the absence of a meaningful rule of law, powerful men made up their own rules and the island population went feral. Yet there is little reason to suppose that our own societies are, fundamentally, more robust. One theory has us ‘nine meals from anarchy’, liable to degenerate into violence and looting if food supplies were disrupted for just three days – that may need to be revised following the riots in half a dozen English cities in recent times, which required no such provocation. Writing about the Holocaust, the American rabbi and theologian Richard L Rubenstein observed ‘how fragile are the bonds of civility and decency that keep any kind of human community from utter collapse’.

IN ‘THE ONES Who Walk Away from Omelas’, a short story by Ursula Le Guin, the inhabitants of a utopian city all discover, on coming of age, that their privileged existence depends on the misery of one child incarcerated in a filthy basement
without sunlight or human contact. Although initially appalled, most people reconcile themselves to that knowledge; a handful, unable to countenance it, walk away.

On Pitcairn, viewed as a paradise by outsiders since the early nineteenth century, adults put up with their daughters being abused because – despite the remoteness and rugged conditions – the lifestyle was uniquely appealing. Everyone had a ‘government job’ and a salary; the islanders paid no income tax, and with no one looking over their shoulder they enjoyed a rare degree of freedom. They also received fan letters and sacks of gifts from around the world – from Seventh Day Adventists, South Pacific junkies and Bounty mutiny enthusiasts. Who would give that up?

One who walked away was the mother of Isobel and Jeanie, who returned to her native New Zealand, taking her husband, a Pitcairner, and her children with her. The only parent to make a stand, she had complained to the local council about Brian’s behaviour; the councillors, though, had ignored her, and afterwards her family had been ostracised. Other parents attempted lower-key tactics. One father offered a fellow islander a collection of his wooden carvings to sell, if he would only promise to leave his daughter alone.

Most parents stayed, and perhaps they succeeded in convincing themselves that nothing was wrong. Denial is a typical response to child abuse; on Pitcairn, where the community relied on its men to unload supplies from the ships that anchored offshore, often in mountainous seas, it was a necessity. And it was not just male brawn that kept the community afloat; everyone had to co-operate, which meant avoiding conflict and accepting societal norms, however warped. As a result, that most elemental of impulses, to protect one’s young, was stifled by many parents, it appears – to be supplanted by an almost pathological attachment to place, and a determination to remain there, whatever the cost.

As the twentieth century was ending, the spell was broken: emboldened by the presence of a visiting English policewoman, Gail Cox, Belinda revealed for the first time what happened near the sugarcane hut. Despite the subsequent investigation unearthing multiple victims, some as young as three and five, locals insisted that theirs was a laid-back Polynesian culture and the girls had been willing sexual partners. Parents pressured their daughters, warning them that if men went to jail it would be impossible to crew the boats and the island would have to be abandoned. More than half the women withdrew their statements.

Among those who resisted was Belinda, and although she had the satisfaction of seeing the Christian brothers imprisoned, she paid dearly for it. I met her in 2008, in a weatherboard cottage in New Zealand; she had been disowned by her entire family – parents, grandfather, siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins. Belinda knew she would never be able to go home, even to visit, so reviled was she on Pitcairn. Her mother had
testified against her in court; her father had let slip that she had nearly drowned in a well as a toddler; she had not been right in the head since, in his opinion.

While such conduct is unforgivable, it is difficult to know how harshly the parents, generally, should be judged. They were handicapped by their own experiences and their stake in the Pitcairn myth; as they were related to both victims and offenders, their loyalties were excruciatingly split. There is no doubt that parental abuse and neglect are not confined to Pitcairn, and that childhood is less cherished in the developing world. I remember being shocked to learn, while investigating child sex tourism in South-East Asia, that most juvenile prostitutes are sold to traffickers by their parents. The latter claim that the money earned by their daughters enables them to support their other children.

Although Pitcairn was not a third-world country, the islanders were focused, in an immediate way, on survival, and boys and girls of twelve or younger were expected to perform quite arduous chores. That they were also perceived as sexually available – and that their welfare was trampled for the sake of community cohesion, and to safeguard the Pitcairn way of life – is an unpalatable reality of this story.

IN STUDIES OF genocide, protagonists are categorised as victims, perpetrators or bystanders. In Nazi Germany, the last were the millions of ordinary Germans who knew Jews were being systematically annihilated; in Rwanda, it was the international community that stood by as an estimated 800,000 people, mainly Tutsis, were slaughtered. On Pitcairn, there were three sets of bystanders: parents, who were hopelessly compromised; British colonial officials, who seldom visited; and teachers and ministers, who were, arguably, the most culpable.

It is a worse thing to commit evil than to contemplate it and look away. But how much worse? When I think about the girls who were the equivalent of Omelas’s sacrificial child, it is the outsiders’ role that troubles me most. I’m haunted by their silence, and I’m ever more acutely aware of how frequently we fail, most of us, to confront wrongdoing and injustice – and I scrutinise my own actions and find myself wanting.

Edmund Burke, the eighteenth-century philosopher-politician, reputedly declared that ‘all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing’. Those words – even whether he uttered them at all – are disputed, but the moral truth they convey seems to me blindingly important. For while there are comparatively few evildoers in any society, there are multitudes of bystanders, and what they do – or do not do – is critical. Bystanders facilitated the Holocaust, and the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, and many of the other horrors that punctuated the twentieth century. Their inaction – our inaction – also perpetuates more everyday evils such as domestic violence and racism, which often go unchallenged by the vast mass of people who are neither perpetrators nor victims.
Philosophers like to debate whether acts and omissions are equally blameworthy; the Pitcairn affair demonstrates that omissions can have dreadful consequences. Tony Washington, who taught on the island in the early 1990s, suspected that girls were being mistreated; in New Zealand, he told me, he would have alerted the authorities – since this was Pitcairn, where such things ‘seemed to be a fact of life’, he ‘didn’t think there was anything I needed to report’. After Washington left, the rapes and assaults continued: not just of his former pupils, who included Belinda, but – as the years went by – of successive waves of children.

Barrie Baronian, dispatched to Pitcairn by the Adventist Church in the mid-1990s, soon picked up on the sexual offending; indeed, he and his wife, Debbie, sent their fourteen-year-old daughter home to Australia. However, they did not notify the church hierarchy, or British officials, that girls who lived on the island were in peril. It felt like ‘too big a thing...to cope with’, Debbie confided, and she added: ‘There’s also in your mind that that’s Pitcairn Island, that’s their life, that’s the way they want to be.’

Washington, Baronian and others who ran the church and school were professionals entrusted with the children’s well-being. Unlike parents, they were not hamstrung by convoluted family ties or trapped in an intergenerational cycle of abuse; unlike, say, dissidents in Argentina or Soviet Russia, they did not risk torture or death by speaking up. They could have put a stop to the abuse years ago, yet – apart from exhorting each other to keep an eye on their own daughters – they said nothing.

Philip Zimbardo, who conducted the Stanford University experiment, believes ‘the failure to act can...be a form of evil, when helping, dissent, disobedience, or whistle-blowing are required’. In The Pathology of Man: A Study of Human Evil (Charles C Thomas, 2005), Stephen J Bartlett describes mass killers and bystanders as ‘two sides of the same phenomenon’. And Roy F Baumeister, an American social psychologist and the author of Evil: Inside Human Violence and Cruelty (WH Freeman, 1997), writes that victims ‘depend on bystanders to bear witness to what is happening and to take a stand against it. It is the only way.’

Unfortunately – like Tony Washington, who ‘just did my job and minded my own business’ – most of us exist in a bubble. Thirty-eight witnesses saw James Bulger – the little boy abducted near Liverpool, England, in 1992 – being pushed around by Robert Thompson and John Venables, who went on to murder him; not one of them reported it. In a survey by the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, fewer than half of respondents said they would take action if presented with unambiguous evidence of neglect or abuse. Last year, according to the Weekend Australian magazine, hundreds of motorists sped past a six-year-old autistic boy, Kieran Le Couteur, as he tried to cross the Princes Highway near Geelong, Victoria. Only one telephoned police, and it was already too late.

Away from the headlines there are daily tugs on our humanity: an elderly, confused woman wandering in the street, a man kicking a dog, a homeless person in need of food. Much of the time we avert our gaze and walk on – too busy or self-
absorbed, too fearful of confrontation or social embarrassment, occasionally worried about our own safety. We delude ourselves that not seeing equals not knowing, or we assume that someone else will intervene: the classic example of that syndrome, which psychologists call ‘diffusion of responsibility’, is the rape and stabbing of Kitty Genovese outside her New York apartment block in 1968 as possibly dozens of neighbours looked on. The existence of ‘Good Samaritan’ laws in certain countries, compelling people to help those who are in danger, indicates, perhaps, how far we fall short of doing what ought to come naturally.

In The Contract of Mutual Indifference (Verso, 1998), Norman Geras, emeritus professor of government at the University of Manchester, argues that if we disregard the suffering of others, we cannot expect others to come to our aid. But if ‘not to remain a bystander...[is] the queen of all the virtues’, as Geras maintains, how wide are our responsibilities and how much of our lives ought we to devote to them? We cannot right every wrong we come across, solve every crisis we read about; the well of human misfortune is bottomless, and sometimes we simply have to close our eyes. Consequently, as Adam Morton, the Canadian philosopher, put it to me in a Skype interview: ‘Just about everybody is an accomplice in evil, everybody plays their little part in some large-scale bad stuff.’

Rather than feeling paralysed by the boundless duties of not being a bystander, we could try to address the small injustices we encounter day to day. For to be passively good, or actively to do no wrong – not hurting others but not helping them – is surely not good enough. Simon Longstaff, executive director of the St James Ethics Centre, says that it is relatively easy to lead a ‘conventional moral life’, as opposed to an ‘ethical life’ characterised by unceasing reflection. ‘If you live an examined life,’ explains Longstaff, ‘you know why you’re doing things; you’re constantly asking why, and is it good or bad. You create more space for an underlying conscience to be heard. An ethical position requires moral courage, and it requires you to be committed not only to acting, but thinking about what action is appropriate and effective.’

WHAT OF EVIL? My feeling is that if this tricky little word serves a purpose, it is to highlight behaviour so heinous as to demand its own category. While the abuse that riddled Pitcairn certainly fits that definition, I don’t believe that the perpetrators were intrinsically evil – rather, they were unremarkable people who acted on the violent impulses nearly all of us experience. As Hannah Arendt realised, evildoers are generally not sadists or psychopaths, nor do they resemble monsters; they look like you and me. Says one pastor posted to the island after the trials: ‘I suspect they [the Pitcairn men] are not much different from the rest of us, and that’s the problem.’

There was a fourth set of protagonists in the Holocaust: those who risked their lives to shelter Jews and help them escape. The ‘rescuers’ exhibited the very best of human qualities: who were they, and what were their motives? According to
Norman Geras, who has reviewed their testimony, they came from all walks of life – every social class, political affiliation and educational background. Some were Christians, others atheists. ‘Only one thing stands out: they all subscribed very strongly to a universalist ethic,’ Geras told me. ‘They believed that human beings are all equal, to be treated properly and with respect, and you don’t do things to people just because they’re Jews or gypsies or whatever.’

How broad is your moral universe? Imagine a diagram with concentric ‘circles of concern’ emanating out from you at the centre, says Simon Longstaff. Some people care only about themselves – that’s one slim circle; others care about family, community, nation – three more circles. Yet others extend their concern to all humanity, or all life, or even, like Indigenous groups, all creation. The rescuers did not consider themselves heroic; according to Geras, ‘they saw it as an elemental human duty to help another person in danger…many said, “I just did what anybody would have done.”’ In fact, less than half of one per cent of the German population did what they did; to Geras, nonetheless, these extraordinary individuals represent an ‘alternative possible ethical landscape’, one where mutual aid would replace mutual indifference, where ‘an obligation to come to the assistance of others in danger or distress was widely felt as amongst the most powerful of imperatives’.

On Pitcairn, there were no rescuers – not of the children, anyway. But these men performed rescues at sea: plucking strangers from shipwrecks, saving locals swept off rocks by freak waves. They were propelled, I think, by instincts etched into their survivalist DNA, but also, presumably, by altruism. The island was not all bad – the old and the sick were always looked after – and had the men grown up elsewhere, in a place less conducive to the flourishing of evil, they would probably have been different people. Whether the trials had a purging effect, and whether a different kind of community – one that values its young and shields them from harm – can be built in that same spot, is another question.

Oskar Schindler, the German businessman who saved almost twelve hundred Polish Jews from the gas chambers, was a bystander initially. Although ‘in many ways a scoundrel’, at a crucial moment he chose to stand up to evil, Adam Morton notes. Does Schindler’s transformation prove that we all have the capacity to become rescuers? Philip Zimbardo, for one, is convinced of it. Just as evildoers are ordinary, average people, he says, so are the perpetrators of heroic deeds; countering the ‘banality of evil’ is the ‘banality of heroism’. Zimbardo would like every one of us to see ourselves as ‘a hero in waiting who will be counted upon to do the right thing when the moment of decision comes’. It’s an ideal worth aspiring to.

The names of all victims in this piece have been changed.

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Babo
Nikola Gurovic

The grey light of the cold November afternoon, like tracing paper, was getting weaker as he reached the southern edges of the Arizona flea market on the northern plains of Bosnia. The fear of war was creeping like a slow and silent beast into the lives of common people, and Babo considered himself one of them – except he was not afraid. He had promised a new iron stove to his mother who, despite her old age and health problems, refused to abandon her house and animals in the village to spend the winter with Babo, her eldest son, and his wife and two little boys in his city apartment. Asparuhov – ‘the Bulgarian’, as everyone at the Arizona market knew him – had sworn he would have those stoves in stock by late September. Since then, instead of goods he was delivering one pathetic excuse after another.

Babo wasn’t fooled easily, but he didn’t have much choice. The talk of war meant people were buying wooden stoves, petrol lamps, candles, torches, and stocking up on food and fuel.

On that late November afternoon Asparuhov didn’t appear at his usual spot at the Arizona market. His neighbouring tradesman, a cheerful young Chinese selling underwear, flannel shirts and huge chequered plastic bags, spoke only a few words of Bosnian, usually those that would facilitate his trade, and was not of much use. Babo wasn’t sure whether the Chinese understood his questions about Asparuhov, but he didn’t want to give up and leave the market empty-handed once more.

‘He won’t be back,’ snapped an old woman sitting on a small fruit crate and displaying contraband cigarettes on another. ‘He lost all his money playing blackjack at the Monte Carlo Motel, up on the highway. He couldn’t afford a pack of Marlboros – how on earth could he provide the stove for you, mister? Get serious, my man!’

Babo tried his best to suppress a growing anger. How could he trust the bloody Bulgarian? Why didn’t he listen to his friend Milan and ask his former business partners in Slovenia to get him a stove? He lit a cigarette and turned to leave the ugly place. Not twenty steps from where his Volkswagen Golf was parked, he
heard a voice: ‘Hey mister, hey mister… Do you want to buy a gun?’ The boy hurried to keep up with him. He wore jeans stained with splashes of beige paint, black Nike sneakers and a heavy handmade crewneck jumper.

‘I don’t need a gun,’ Babo replied mildly, while regarding the stranger with suspicion. No older than seventeen, he thought. The face was still boyish, but the strong lines of his chin and jaw, cheeks and nose were chiselled like those of a young man. He was smiling, and his dark eyes couldn’t hide the thirst to make a deal.

‘It’s a very good gun, it’s new, never fired a single shot, it’s a gem,’ the boy continued.

‘What is your name, boy?’ Babo asked.

‘Robert.’

‘Robert, like the Red Star midfielder who played in the mid-1970s?’

‘Yes, my father is a huge Red Star fan and so am I,’ the boy said proudly.

‘Why would I need a gun?’ Babo asked. He was starting to enjoy the conversation.

‘There will be a war soon – everyone needs a gun,’ the boy said, as if declaring the simple fact that tomorrow it would snow on the plains of Northern Bosnia.

‘Who says that the war is coming…your father, your mother, your teacher?’

‘No, my older brother Vladislav.’

‘And Vladislav is a clairvoyant, or a defence minister, or a CIA agent?’

‘No, no, he is studying medicine in Belgrade and he is a huge supporter of Slobodan Milosevic.’

‘Why would your brother support the Serbian leader, such a warmonger?’

The boy hesitated for a moment. He didn’t want to say anything that would push away a possible buyer. ‘Because Milosevic is promising that all Serbs will live in one state and no one will subjugate them ever again,’ he said hurriedly.

‘Tell me something, Robert, has someone been harassing you here in Bosnia?’

‘No, but who knows what could happen tomorrow.’

‘Do you think that I could be capable of harming you or killing you?’

‘I dunno, mister. You didn’t tell me your name or ethnic origin.’

‘They call me Babo but my real name is Ahmed. I am a Bosnian Muslim, and when it comes to humans the only distinction I make is between good and bad.’

‘So, you don’t want to buy a gun? How will you be able to protect your family and yourself when the war starts tomorrow?’
‘I don’t need a gun, Robert, and there will be no war tomorrow or next week, or next month or next year. Get back to your painting business and don’t worry!’

‘I’m still in high school – I just helped my friend Haris to paint his room,’ the boy said, looking down at the stains on his pants.

‘Haris is a Muslim, I assume,’ Babo replied.

‘Yeah, he is my best friend, and he agrees that there will be a war soon.’

‘And would you fight against Haris if the war starts?’

‘No, no way, he is my friend – we’ve known each other since first grade.’

‘See…there is no reason to fight. No war, then.’

The boy was silent for a while. ‘Haris and I are just little mushrooms in the immense woods of Bosnia, mister. You will need a gun, and you’ll see that I was right,’ he whispered, making a final attempt to sell the gun, which was wrapped in several layers of thick hazelnut-coloured paper under his right arm.

‘Go home, Robert – selling guns is not a job for a boy like you. Just go home.’

‘See you in the war, mister,’ the boy said extending his hand and smiling.

‘There will be no war,’ Babo repeated, taking the boy’s hand and sensing that he sounded utterly unconvincing. He walked to the car, opened the door and put the keys in the ignition. The engine didn’t start. He tried again and again, pausing to allow the battery to recuperate.

HE WAS LYING awake and cold sweat was covering every inch of his body. Instinctively he turned his head towards the bedside table with the oversized digital clock: 3.43 am, his usual time to break off from another nightmare.

Almost twenty years, several oceans and a few continents were dividing his present life on Australia’s eastern shore from the shadows of his past in the hills of Bosnia.

He slowly removed the blanket and got up.

‘Where are you going? It’s too early,’ his wife whispered. ‘Did you have one of those dreams again?’

‘Everything is fine – try to sleep, Alma. I’ll make some coffee and go for my usual walk.’

Moving carefully in the darkness he reached the kitchen, turned on the rangehood light and put the kettle over the ring of blue flames. He lit a cigarette and checked on his grandson Dino, who was sleeping in a room at the far end of the hall. Dino, the youngest, was his favourite. He was only five and didn’t mock Babo’s broken English or make funny comments about Grandpa’s boldness like his two
older brothers: Vedran, nine, and Amar, eleven. Babo loved them all tenderly, but he had a soft spot for Dino.

From the threshold of the boy’s room Babo could hear regular breathing. Back in the kitchen he put three little spoons of instant coffee into a half-litre yellow thermos, one of the rare objects he saved from his previous life. He poured the boiling water carefully, waited for the steam to become invisible and screwed on the plastic top.

He put on a long-sleeved shirt with oversized front pockets, jeans and a pair of joggers he left at the front door of their townhouse. It took him about fifteen minutes to walk from their dead-end street, through the sleepy Gold Coast suburb, to reach a promenade that stretched at least a mile along the ocean and ended at a massive white wooden jetty illuminated with old-fashioned pole lights on the left side. He walked slowly, feeling the warmth of the flask in his hand and the coldness of the salty air on his face.

Every hundred metres or so he would stop to turn his face towards the breeze coming from the crashing waves. He would take a deep breath and try to keep it for ten seconds.

Then he would continue his lonely walk, feeling that with every break and breathing exercise the heavy burden of his dreams was dissipating into the darkness.

People who come from the countryside usually feel unease, even fear, when they find themselves by the ocean. The first time Babo saw the Pacific was the morning of his arrival at the Gold Coast after a long, exhausting journey from the refugee camp in Hungary. The ocean’s terrifying vastness meant freedom at last, a universe of water to protect him from the killing and hatred of war, and the misery of the camp.

It was still dark when he stepped onto the deserted jetty. He sat on a bench and stayed motionless for a while. Even a slow, longer walk was an achievement for his heart patched with double bypasses and for his lungs congested with nicotine from years of smoking. His promise to the Australian surgeon that he would give up tobacco lasted shorter than his recovery after a successful heart operation.

He lit another cigarette and poured coffee into the plastic cup of the thermos. Daybreaks at the shore had become his salvation since his arrival in Australia.

IN THE BEGINNING he had hoped that the memories of war would be replaced by the events of his new life in a foreign country so different from his native land. The summers were endless, the winters mild and brief, the people reserved but genuinely kind. He and his wife’s poor English made their social life unrewarding. They were lonely, but he refused to consider his wife’s suggestion that they seek out new friends among other refugees from the same part of the world. ‘I had enough of them in Bosnia,’ Babo would say if his wife started nagging.
He enjoyed his night shifts at a busy petrol station and from time to time he would manage to have a chat with a customer. Everything was fine until the heart attack that came out of the blue for his family but not for him, who had stubbornly ignored chest pain, prolonged headaches and shallow breathing. The truck driver who found him unconscious on the floor of the petrol station took him to the Gold Coast Hospital and from there he was flown to Brisbane for an urgent operation. Six months later a Social Security officer told him that he was eligible for early retirement because of his health problems.

Long days at home and sleepless nights made him depressed and the nightmares about the war were recurring even more frequently. Robert was in most of them. Several months of counselling didn’t help much. As the sessions advanced he was talking less and his counsellor more. Both were aware that any progress was insignificant.

The coffee was cold when he took the first sip, and he tried to light what remained of a cigarette that had died out while his mind was stumbling through the labyrinth of his previous life.

WHEN THE FLAMES of war reached Northern Bosnia, Babo was among the last men to leave his small town, which was known for its huge oil refinery.

‘They are coming!’ his neighbour shouted and waved from the street. He had a bursting canvas rucksack on his shoulders and sheer panic on his face.

‘Where will you go?’ Babo asked, standing by the window of his kitchen, his expression calm.

‘Into the woods,’ the neighbour said, as if he was going fishing.

As the sound of heavy gunfire became louder Babo had no choice but to leave in a hurry. He abandoned his apartment without locking it and with no idea where he was heading. On the kitchen table he left a bottle of homemade plum brandy sealed with red postal wax. Under the bottle was a note written on a sheet of paper torn from his son’s notebook. He had written in neat block letters: TAKE EVERYTHING BUT DON’T INCINERATE, PLEASE.

Five weeks later he was leading a crew of twenty-seven, most of them boys not older than twenty but eager to fight. They marched during the night and rested high in the mountains during the day. Babo and a couple of the boys knew every inch of the terrain from their Scout days, when he spent many summers in the woods teaching school children about survival skills and life in the wilderness. Being in his early forties Babo was the most natural choice for a commander. He accepted this duty with no grudge and no goal in mind but to save the lives of these youngsters and to see the end of the war they were thrown into unwillingly.
THE SUMMER MONTHS were marked by frequent skirmishes. A couple of risky night operations enabled Babo’s unit to get automatic rifles, ammunition, boots and proper winter clothes. With the cold late autumn, the crew’s morale started to erode. The boys missed their families and girlfriends, movies and soccer games, and most of all proper meals made by their mothers.

The intensity of the fighting diminished as the days got shorter, which made things no easier for Babo. He missed his sons and wife as well. From occasional messages passed by couriers he knew that they were safe in a refugee camp in Hungary. His twin sister, Azra, remained in a Serb-held town with very few Bosnian Muslims. She had never married and her job in a small flower shop owned by a Serbian woman, Milena, was her life. Milena’s husband, Danko, was a kidney patient dependent on dialysis twice a week in a local hospital. Their only son was recruited into the Bosnian Serb forces just a week before his eighteenth birthday. Working for about a year for Mrs Milena, Azra grew close to the family. Still, for security reasons she was hesitant to leave her apartment close to the train station and move into Milena’s house. Things changed when she found a message on her apartment’s front door. ‘Whore, go to Tehran,’ it read in the Cyrillic alphabet preferred by Bosnian Serbs. She packed and half an hour later knocked on Milena’s door.

Less than two hours’ drive up in the mountains, Babo got an order from the regional commander to take more initiative and switch to daily operations. ‘Serbs must learn that the war will last much longer than they hoped for.’

‘Do those morons in Tuzla think I am in charge of a battalion of the best trained soldiers eager to go into open fights with Chetniks?’ Babo swore and cursed. He wanted desperately to ignore the orders. During the first summer of the war his crew had only lost two men, when a landmine had gone off.

He wanted the coming spring to see some palpable results of the international efforts to stop the bloodshed. He never understood why the West gave up on Yugoslavia and then on Bosnia. One of his boys had a small FM radio. The late-night broadcasts of an independent station based on a cargo ship cruising in the Adriatic Sea off the coast of Italy were Babo’s only connection to the wider world. The reception was usually poor, and what he could hear was wrapped in diplomatic hypocrisy. Yet it couldn’t camouflage the bleak truth: the international community could not, or would not, intervene. Not yet.

DECEMBER STARTED WITH light snow, thick, milky morning fogs, freezing temperatures and instructions for Babo’s company to take control of two remote hamlets loosely connected to the steep mountainous road the Bosnian Serb forces used for random attacks on the Bosnian supply line. Heavy snow would make that road useless until early spring, but that was still in nature’s hands.
Babo got through his briefing quickly, the company packed in a hurry and they reached the first hamlet of simple white houses well before noon. The buildings had tiny low windows and shingle roofs, and were scattered on a kidney-shaped clearing bordering old black pine trees on one side. Not a creature could be seen or heard, save for a hawk cruising high in the sky. Half an hour later the unit was marching again.

If Babo’s recollection was correct, the second village was about two miles away. He ordered his men refrain from smoking and use sign language. They were entering territory that might hide unpleasant surprises. First they saw black smoke coming from the direction of the hamlet, stretched on a slope and touching a creek hardly five metres wide. Still, there was no way to cross it and keep your feet dry. Waiting was risky, to move even riskier. Babo was not a gambler but he rolled the dice. Halfway across freezing knee-high water he thought: if the Serbs are waiting for us this is their best chance to shoot us like a flock of wild ducks who lost their way.

The platoon crossed the creek in groups of three and was just two hundred metres from the first houses when shots rang out. The boys flattened themselves on the ground and reached for cover behind huge piles of firewood, unused building blocks and a wall of dry stone marking the boundaries of the property. The Serbs opened up with four AK-47s and four or five semi-automatic M59s – the Yugoslav army version of the Soviet SKS carbine. Babo’s men responded with a burst of machine-gun fire, peppering the walls of two houses held by the enemy. With every round Babo’s men were getting more accurate. Inside all that noise he came to the conclusion that the unit was facing a mere dozen adversaries. Still, he didn’t want to see his boys crawl forward and enter the range of hand grenades.

The adrenaline of battle diluted his perception of time. Babo could only judge by the first shadows of dusk that the shootout lasted half an hour or so. They waited another half hour in silence and then moved towards the village. The search-and-destroy mission started with the houses the Serbs used during the skirmish. The first one was deserted. Hundreds of small-arms shells, cigarette butts and an empty half-litre bottle of brandy on the rough timber floor covered with mud were the only remains of fresh combat. After a while Babo and Mirza, his back-up, slowly pushed open a screeching door of the second house, not thirty metres away. The cobalt light of late autumn evening left little visibility indoors. As his eyes adapted Babo saw a man seated by the window with his back towards the room. He pressed his AK-47 to his right shoulder and aimed at the motionless silhouette. Mirza followed.

‘Hands up – don’t move!’ he shouted, and waited.

‘Have you been wounded?’ he said in a firm but not unfriendly voice. Mirza had his gun ready but Babo was hoping to see a sign of life. In the eerie silence they moved closer. A metre from the seated body Babo knelt down. His first impression was that the enemy soldier was still alive.
He put his index and middle finger on the soldier’s neck, trying to feel his pulse. ‘Torch,’ he whispered to Mirza. The yellow circle of light landed on the beautiful face of a young man, a boy almost. His beard, if that was the right word for the line of gentle dark moss on his jaw and chin and space above the upper lip, would within a year or two have turned into something distinctive.

The boy’s dark eyes were wide open and ghostly. Tears ran in two tiny streaks down bloodless cheeks, which were covered with a fine layer of ashes from the houses his unit was burning and looting before Babo’s company arrived. He had been crying before his heart took its last beat. Did he feel that the end was near? Did he beg his comrades not to leave him behind, or call for his mother or a sibling? Did he pray to be forgiven?

A mixture of sudden anger and sadness or something deeper engulfed Babo’s heart. He thought the war made him tough, capable of facing death and suffering and yet remaining in total control. In Bosnian his nickname meant father, old man, someone who commands wisdom and respect. He was in his late twenties and working at the oil refinery as a sales representative when he was given the nickname. Premature baldness and quiet manners, even in the most heated debates at work or on sporting fields, had earned him unusual respect.

Again he looked at the dead boy’s face: chiselled as if following the canons of an ancient Greek sculptor. ‘Keep that torch steady,’ he said in a toneless voice. He searched the two upper pockets of the boy’s olive-grey woollen jacket and didn’t find anything except the tiny hole encircled with drying blood where the bullet hit him in the chest. From the lower pocket Babo fished out a piece of hard plastic no bigger than a business card. He knew that he had found the identity card.

Mirza moved closer, doing his best to keep the torch steady.

‘Robert Beljanski, born October 26, 1974, Doboj, Bosnia Herzegovina. Address: Belgrade Street, 48.’

This boy was barely eighteen, Babo thought.

He felt Mirza’s hand on his shoulders. ‘Let’s go – we can’t help him. It’s all over for him.’

‘Gather our company – we will bury this young man,’ Babo said in a voice that wouldn’t brook argument. Mirza didn’t move for a second, and then he handed his torch to Babo and rushed through the door.

Ten minutes later the loud voices coming from outside signalled that the unit was waiting for Babo’s order. He got up and switched off the lamp. In the darkness he could still recognise his men.

‘I need two volunteers to take the body from the house and another four to dig the grave,’ he said, trying to remove any emotion from his voice. Silence followed.
He repeated his demand, and after another silence Pasha, the bravest and the most outspoken soldier in Babo’s company, said: ‘Why should we bury a Chetnik? Don’t you see what his companions are doing? They are not humans, they are animals, and they are burning, looting, raping and killing… I would leave him to the hungry wolves. He got what he and people like him deserve.’

‘Do you all agree with Pasha?’ Babo asked as the silence became unbearable.

Silence made their answer clear.

‘This boy deserves a decent burial,’ Babo continued, his voice still calm. ‘We don’t know if he did anything wrong. Maybe he just followed orders; he is only eighteen and he was called into this war the same as you.’

‘He is not a baby – he knew what he was doing,’ Pasha said without suppressing his rage.

‘If there are no volunteers I will bury this young man myself, but in that case you will have to choose a new leader and he will have to take command from this very moment. Understood?’ Babo slowly turned and entered the house.

He sat next to Robert in full darkness and tried to light a cigarette. His hands were trembling and his whole body hurt; his heart was pounding as if it would explode. Tears of sadness and defeat came slowly to his eyes.

He had hoped his boys would grow tough and strong but not ruthless, brutal combatants, the same as the soldiers from the other side of the trenches. Had the war killed all the innocence and kindness in their young hearts? What would become of them when the war was over? Would they be able to live with a past so tarnished by revenge and bestial acts?

As the tears dried up he was able to light a cigarette and inhale deeply.

‘I will help you bury Robert,’ Mirza whispered from the door.

‘Let me finish my cigarette first,’ Babo said, regaining his composure.

Mirza switched on his torch and placed it on the window’s edge, turning the light towards the room. Babo slowly moved Robert’s body from the wall and lifted his torso from under the armpits; Mirza grabbed him at the shins. They watched their every step to avoid Robert’s arms hitting the ground, wall or doorframe. Once they were out they put the body on a patch of grass protected from the snow and rain by an elm tree.

The unit gathered.

‘I will dig a grave, but that doesn’t mean I changed my mind,’ Pasha said, anger still in his voice. ‘Where would you like me to start digging?’ he asked, coming forward from the semicircle the unit had formed.

Babo grabbed the torch from Mirza and scanned the terrain quickly. ‘This will be fine,’ he said, drawing a rectangle with the torch.
When Pasha bent to press the small soldier’s shovel with his right foot, two other soldiers came to do the same. Babo disappeared towards the creek and a short time later he was back with two straight birch logs for the cross.

He took the knife off his AK-47, sat on the threshold of the house and started to carve a connecting point for the cross into the wood. He was not happy with the outcome but at least Robert’s grave would be marked, he thought.

Mirza, assisted by two soldiers, wrapped the body in to a washed-out army tarp, tightening Robert’s feet and positioning his arms across his chest.

The skies were clearing when they lowered the body into the grave, filling it with dark reddish earth without waiting for Babo’s orders. He fixed the cross at the head of the grave, pushing down with all his weight to stabilise it. Mirza was always the quickest to read his mind. He handed over fist-size stones to be arranged around the base of the grave and strengthen the makeshift cross.

‘Can we pay tribute to Robert Beljanski with a minute of silence?’ Babo asked when the job was done.

The soldiers took their berets off and stood motionless.

‘The war is over for him at least,’ Mirza said after a minute passed.

‘We will spend the night here and move around 5 am tomorrow,’ Babo said.

SPRING CAME WITH no significant change on the battlefield or in international diplomacy. The tectonic shift occurred in June, when Bosnian Serbs intensified their attacks to prevent their territories being cut in half by Bosnian Muslim forces.

Babo’s unit, like many others, started to feel the heat, with no opportunity to select targets or the time of attacks. They became a target themselves.

As the situation deteriorated, the order – shocking to them all – came to surrender to the Croatian units, which had become more aggressive on Bosnian soil. The day he and his boys surrendered was the saddest since the start of the war. They were taken by a Croatian army truck to the football stadium in the bordering town on the Sava River. Days of humiliation followed. They slept on the soccer field, and sweated during the long and scorching summer days. The food was disgusting and they were allowed a quick shower only twice a week. It was a life like those Babo had read about in books written by Soviet dissidents.

The Red Cross delegation visited the camp in early July. Mirko, a Croatian major whom Babo knew through his work contacts in the oil business, guided it.

Mirko was reserved but before the delegation left he promised Babo to hasten prisoners-of-war exchanges with Croatian forces, which were now fighting against Bosnian Muslims in several regions. The war had reached the stage where three ethnic groups in Bosnia were all fighting each other.
In late August Babo was allowed to join his wife and sons in their refugee camp in Hungary. His ailing mother was there as well. The family hadn’t heard any news from his sister, Azra, for several months. When the excitement of the reunion faded Babo started his search with the help of ‘Uncle Janos’, the administrator of the camp, a cordial Hungarian with short white hair and a cheap bulldog pipe always in his mouth. Babo started making calls late at night from Uncle Janos’s office, phoning his acquaintances all over the former Yugoslavia, developing a web of contacts that might help him locate Azra.

In mid-September the International Migration Organisation officials visited the camp, offering resettlement to Canada and Australia.

‘Is it cold in Canada?’ his mother asked.

‘A bit colder than in Bosnia,’ Babo replied, knowing that he was telling a little lie.

‘What about Australia?’ she continued with a faint smile.

‘That’s a continent of long summers, endless beaches, sleeping koalas and lush gardens,’ Babo said cheerfully.

‘That sounds nice – can we try to get visas, son?’

‘Yes, mother, we can try,’ he said softly.

By mid-October Babo learned that their visa applications for Australia were accepted and that they would probably depart in late November from Vienna. His family was over the moon, but not him. He wanted to find Azra before leaving.

AS NOVEMBER STARTED the anguish in Babo’s heart grew stronger. How could he ever depart without knowing what had become of his sister? Was she alive and safe? How was she coping with the fear of persecution and hatred?

The answer came suddenly. Early one morning Uncle Janos knocked on Babo’s door. ‘There is someone on the phone for you,’ he said. ‘Come with me to my office.’

Babo didn’t bother to find his joggers or to put on his jumper. He rushed through the long corridors of the former orphanage and found himself struggling for air.

He almost fell on the table while trying to reach the receiver.

‘Babo, is that you?’ a familiar voice asked.

‘Azra, my God, is this real? Where are you calling from?’

‘From the flower shop. It’s still standing, and I continued working for Mrs Milena.’

‘Are you okay, sister, can you talk?’

‘I am fine, thanks to Mrs Milena. She is my guardian angel – she protects me and she gives me shelter at their place. I moved in last autumn because I was too scared to stay alone. Mrs Milena has been insulted quite often for helping me, but she doesn’t care.’
‘I am glad that someone is watching over you, sis. I will find a way to show my gratitude and to repay Mrs Milena.’

‘She doesn’t need that – she is happy that I am helping with the shop and with Mr Danko, whose illness is getting worse. They are so worried about Robert, their son. They haven’t heard from him for a long time. They were told he was wounded and evacuated to Moscow to be treated by the best Russian doctors. At first Mrs Milena learned that Robert was recovering in Belgrade’s best military hospital, so she rushed there and, after three days of visiting various hospitals, didn’t find him. She had been crying, praying that Robert would ring the doorbell some day.’

‘Wait, sister, wait… What’s Mrs Milena’s surname?’

‘Beljanski. I think I mentioned that a long time ago. Why?’

‘Beljanski from 48 Belgrade Street?’

‘Yes, they haven’t changed their address for ages.’

Babo couldn’t believe the coincidence.

‘Listen to me, Azra, listen to me carefully. Robert Beljanski, born on 26 October 1974, was killed in action and I buried him in the mountains less than a year ago. You can tell Mrs Milena that her son didn’t suffer but his companions left him behind. I could not provide a priest or organise a proper service according to the Orthodox tradition, but Robert was buried like a human being. It’s not much, I know, but that was all I could do in the madness of a bloody war.’

‘Are you absolutely sure about this, Babo?’

‘I am absolutely positive. I still keep Robert’s identity card and I can send it to the Beljanski family some day if they want me to.’

HE EMPTIED THE last drops of coffee into the ocean, replaced the plastic cup on top of the flask and was about to leave the pier when the first fishermen started to arrive and arrange their rods, nets and buckets, hoping for overcast weather and a good catch.

Dino was still asleep when Babo sneaked in. His wife was waiting for him with breakfast and fresh coffee in the plunger.

‘I must buy some paint today for the front fence if it’s not raining. Tonight I am going to call Azra. We haven’t heard from her for a week.’

Real characters and events inspired this story.

Nikola Gurovic was born in Yugoslavia and is a freelance journalist living in Brisbane. He previously worked for Television Sarajevo and Radio Free Europe in Prague and Washington. His memoirs have appeared in Griffith REVIEW editions 22 and 27.
I KNOW three stories about the Moriori, a long-ago people who survived, in tatters, a determined attempt to eradicate them. The first goes like this: at a time that nobody can remember a group of men, women and children set off from the east coast of New Zealand and plunged into the vast ocean wilderness of the south-east Pacific. Nobody knows why they left the safety of the mainland — whether it was restlessness, or curiosity about what lay beyond the horizon, or grim necessity. They packed food and fresh water into a two-hulled canoe and, presumably, hoped for the best.

A few days into their voyage a mist closed around them until they could see nothing, wherever they looked. All they could hear were the thrashing of waves against the sides of their canoe and the cries of seabirds warning them of land. Cautiously they rowed on, until they came upon black rocks looming out of the fog, then an island and, within the perimeter of this chunk of earth, a safe harbour where they were able to land.

They called this place Rekohu, after the white vapour which hung over it day after day. It was not as salubrious as the land they had come from — it was bleak, windswept, with bare, skinny trees which ended in tufts or sprays of foliage — but it was liveable, with plenty of seafood and wild birds to feed on, and a thriving population of seals to give the new inhabitants skins to wear when it was bitterly cold, as it all too often was.

Over the years of isolation from the rest of the world these people developed a way of settling disputes between families without endangering their small population. This way is called Numuku’s law, named after the man who proposed it. Each disputing family puts forward a single representative. These two men meet and fight. As soon as they draw blood the fight is over and the winner decided. This law ensured the survival of these people over centuries, until the arrival of the first Europeans.
Until this time the people had believed they were alone in the world. They called themselves Moriori, which means ‘normal’, the way people these days call themselves ‘human’.

Whenever I think of this story of migration, survival and adaptation I try to imagine who these people were, the personality of the canoe’s captain, the nature of these people, which allowed them to set out on such a voyage with no guarantee that they would ever reach land again. I think about their daily life in their double-hulled vessel carved out of tree trunks, how they endured rain and wind and piercing chill. How did the children put up with not being able to run around? How remarkable that the expedition was a family affair, not a matter for the men alone, as it was for the European explorers who found the Moriori descendants in the late eighteenth century.

I wonder all this because, through my mother’s mother, I am connected by blood to these intrepid migrants. I will never find answers to my questions. All the Moriori remembered of this migration was a vague reference to the place they came from, which they called Aotearoa, meaning ‘far away’. The scraps of information I have been able to glean are maddeningly elusive. They weren’t thinking of their descendants as they rowed across the watery wasteland; they weren’t thinking of us as they settled into their new home and allowed the story of the voyage to be forgotten. But I think of them; I try to imagine them, and come up with empty air. I think of my grandmother and my mother, and find myself in a similar position, as if this elusiveness is a family trait.

This, then, is the story of the Moriori arrival on Rekohu, which the English renamed Chatham Island.

The second story I know about the Moriori is much more savage.

ALTHOUGH I MET my grandmother about five times in my life I know almost as little of her as I know of her Moriori ancestors. My mother refused to tell me about my grandmother, just as she refused to tell me about herself, her early life, her memories of Chatham Island, her thoughts and feelings, her private self. I had to pester her night and day to get anything out of her. Her usual answer was, ‘I forget.’ Sometimes she said, ‘It’s none of your business.’ I didn’t believe that she had forgotten, and I didn’t accept that it was none of my business. I was her daughter. Who had more right to know than I did? More than that, I wanted her to be open to me, not closed; I wanted to figure out who this woman was. If I could know who she was, I could understand why she did the terrible things she did, why she kept me stiflingly close yet shut me out. If I could know her, then I could know something essential about myself. I would look into her face and see who I was. This quest was my obsession when I was an adolescent, and it remains so much a part of me that I am unsure I would know how to think of my mother if I had no more vital questions to turn over in my mind.
This is what Mother told me about my grandmother: she was twenty-three when she married, and her husband was nineteen. She bore sixteen live children, six of whom died in childhood. Her father-in-law, Tiwai, attended some of these births and, to hurry the process along, knelt on her belly and used his knees to push the infant out. When Mother told me this story, I flinched. Was it possible? Was it physically possible? He would surely have had to sit on my grandmother’s face in order to do it. Or at any rate, his backside would have hung suffocatingly close to her face. In Maori culture, the head is sacred and the backside is profane. Did he do this to show his contempt for his daughter-in-law? His action was so bizarre, so barbarously against nature (why not let her own body do its job?), that I wondered if Mother was telling the truth.

At the birth of her youngest son, my grandmother wanted to call the child Benjamin. My grandfather preferred the name David, and to get his way he trotted along to the magistrate’s office to register his son’s name himself. But my uncle was known all his life as Bin.

Mother took her fiancé to meet her. At twenty-seven, my father was seven years older than Mother. My grandmother said, ‘Why you want to marry an old man?’

Mother married soon after the death, from heart disease, of her father. His will left his land to all his children, including Mother. This land was in Taranaki, in New Zealand’s North Island, and covered part of the Waitara River. It was his tribal land, not the land he had farmed on Chatham Island. My grandmother had to give the names of all her children so that they could receive their inheritance, but she got Mother’s married name wrong. As she told me this story Mother tossed her head like a little girl who has been told she can’t play with the other children. ‘I don’t want it anyway. I have to go to court to have the name changed, but I’m not going to because I don’t want the land. It’s in the middle of the river. Why would I want that land?’

Mother told me, ‘When I was little the old crows wanted to take me away and tattoo my chin.’ The old crows were the *kuia*, the senior women of the clan. Mother called them crows because they wore black to honour the ancestors. ‘They came to our house and carried me away, but Ma followed them and took me back. They fought over me there on the road. Ma won. She wanted me to have a chance in life. She wouldn’t teach me Maori and she wouldn’t let the women tattoo me so I could have a chance in life.’

That is the sum total of all Mother told me about my grandmother, apart from that she was of Moriori descent. The rest comes to me through my own observation.

Whenever Ma visited Wellington she stayed with her youngest child, my Aunty Daph. She never stayed with us, though Mother longed for this sign of love and approval. I longed for it on Mother’s behalf, feeling her exclusion in every trembling nerve of my body. Even more urgently, I longed for it for myself. I thought Ma would be a better mother, a more open and giving mother, than my own. I
daydreamed about Ma adopting me. I imagined life with Ma would be idyllic. She 
would hug me and make much of me. She would lift the invisible cordon Mother 
had thrown around me that kept others at bay. But it was fantasy. In reality my 
brothers hit me in secret, not in front of Mother; my father didn’t touch me at all. 
Once, when I was nine, I came home with a shilling a man had given me for holding 
his penis. Mother flew into a frenzy of possessiveness. Gripping me by the shoulder, 
she whipped me with a belt, repeating with every cutting stroke, ‘Nobody is 
allowed to touch you. You don’t let anybody touch you.’

Only Mother was allowed to lay hands on me; Mother was allowed to put her 
hands anywhere on my body that she chose, even on forbidden places. I didn’t 
know whether I was too sacred for others or too defiled. All I knew was that, 
without human touch, I was wasting away, that soon nothing would be left of me 
except a thin, pale vapour. But all that would be different if Ma adopted me. Ma 
would make me human. Ma would tell me where we all came from: her, Mother, 
me, and how Mother came to be the way she was. Ma would tell me everything I 
could ever wish to know about her early life, her marriage, her private thoughts, her 
secret self and thus, at last, I would be connected to a history and people, and no 
longer have to be this thing called Mother’s property.

During my grandmother’s stays in Wellington, Mother and I made the 
pilgrimage out to Daph’s house. All the Wellington branch of the family was there, 
as if Ma was a visiting monarch. She was sitting on the couch when we arrived, 
flanked by eager grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Alternating smiles and 
frowns flickered across her ancient face according to the tick-tock of her thoughts. 
Whenever she wanted a cup of tea she stood up to get it herself. One of the women 
said, ‘You stay there, Ma. I’ll make it for you.’ Ma said, ‘Don’t fuss. Stop fussing. I do 
it myself.’

She was seventy-one when I was born and into her eighties by the time I 
became aware of her, yet she didn’t act like an old woman. She took a walk 
around the block after each meal. Her daughters and grandchildren offered to 
go with her. ‘I go by myself,’ she snapped. When she returned she was 
beaming, as if on her walk she had met someone who had given her good 
news.

On one occasion, when Mother and I arrived Ma scooped me onto her lap, thrust 
hers swollen, crooked old hand up under my T-shirt and passed it back and forth 
over my ribs. I felt pleased and clumsy: a stranger to affection, I didn’t know how to 
respond. ‘You skinny,’ she said. She poked me in the stomach. ‘You got no puku. I put 
some meat on your bones.’

Ma’s strong Maori accent sounded like bare feet thudding across hard-packed 
sand. She spoke in a mixture of Maori and English. She pronounced wh the 
traditional way, by blowing air between her tightened lips. Everyone else in New
Zealand pronounced *wh* as if it were an *f*. These days, I pronounce it the way she did. That and my coarse hair and the arthritis in my fingers are all I have of her.

MY GRANDMOTHER WAS a relic of a brutal history. In December 1835, fifty years before Ma was born, the Moriori suffered a barbarous fate. This is the second story I know of them.

At that time two Maori tribes, the Ngati Mutunga and the Ngati Tama, were living in Wellington, having been driven out of their ancestral home in the Taranaki region of the North Island by a neighbouring tribe. Ever since their displacement they had been hankering after land they could similarly steal and make their own. They needed land for their sense of self-respect and identity. The Maori were nothing without land. They considered sailing to Samoa or Norfolk Island, but chose instead to turn their rapacious appetite on the Chatham Islands. They hired the brig Rodney, kidnapped the second mate and held him in Wellington to ensure the captain of the ship would return to pick up the second group of invaders. As part of the plan the Ngati Tama would go first and wait until the Ngati Mutunga arrived before claiming the land. They predicted that it would be a piece of cake, since the Moriori were not fighters. Five hundred Ngati Tama – men, women and children – swarmed onto the Rodney and crammed themselves into the hold. It was so tight that nobody could lie down. The best they could do was squat. They couldn’t bring enough water for such a large number, and when the crew passed the supply down the men seized and drank it all. Everyone suffered terrible thirst over the five days and nearly 900 kilometres of the voyage. By the time they staggered onto the dock at Whangaraoa Harbour, they were too weak and sick to do anything.

In the meantime, to make doubly sure the Rodney would return for them, the Ngati Mutunga sacrificed several dogs and a twelve-year-old girl, killing and hanging them from the branches of a tree. The Rodney did return, but by the time the second lot arrived at Whangaraoa Harbour the Ngati Tama had broken their word and already claimed the choicest part of the island for themselves. This was the start of a flourishing feud between the two tribes. From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century it looks as though these people didn’t know what to do with themselves if they weren’t fighting someone.

The Moriori men met at the most sacred place on Chatham Island, on Rekohu, and discussed possible plans of action. The young men wanted to fight off the Maori invaders. The Maori were a warlike people: all they understood was fighting. The older men disagreed. Their honour and self-respect, their mana, demanded that they obey Numuku’s law and offer the invaders a peaceful partnership. The land was rich enough in food to support them all.

The Moriori sent a group of dignitaries to offer the Maori a share of the island and its resources. The Maori scornfully refused the gesture.
As soon as they were strong enough the first load of invaders set off in all directions to claim as their own property the land and everything on it, including the Moriori. Part of the ritual of tikenga was to kill a number of the former proprietors. For some of the invaders that meant killing only a symbolic handful of people. For others it meant wholesale slaughter. Moriori men, women and children were murdered with a savage blow to the temple. Women were speared through the belly and left to die in agony. Some of the conquerors so lusted for the kill that their more moderate allies took in fleeing Moriori and protected them until the worst of the hunt was over. By the end of the day corpses lay everywhere. Blood soaked into the earth; hot blood mingled with the cold water in rivers, lakes and in the lagoon.

After the massacre the killers went among the dead, sliced off the penises of the murdered men and tossed them to the Maori women, who ate them. Corpses were butchered, cooked and feasted on.

It is hard not to feel horrified by this account of human beings killing and eating human beings. The surviving Moriori and their descendants looked on the cannibalism as a shocking transgression; in later years they described the Maori as taupeke, flesh-eating demons. It is so shocking that I can’t quite comprehend it. Part of me is left cold by this account, because I can’t imagine myself into the skin of the Maori invaders. I can imagine myself into them up until the invasion, but not what they did to ratify their claims. Yet I want to understand, because I am descended through my grandfather from one of the leaders of the Ngati Mutunga. And even if I wasn’t, I would want to understand, because that’s how I make human aggression and human suffering bearable. But I can’t. I try to find a psychological explanation for the Maori cannibalism: in eating their opponents, they were proving that the Moriori were not human, not like themselves. The facts don’t bear this out, though. The conquerors renamed a place where many Moriori were killed and cooked: they called it Kai Tangata, human food.

The survivors of the slaughter were pressed into slavery. From then on the Maori acted in recognisable ways, using methods of division, demoralisation and extermination that other oppressors around the world have used. They separated wives from their husbands, parents from children, and forbade any kind of sexual contact between Moriori men and women. Over the following decades Moriori numbers fell from hundreds to just a few. A census taken in 1861 counted only 161 Moriori living; of those, twelve were children. These people died from malnutrition, from unpredictable murderous acts by their owners, from hopelessness. The living were treated with unremitting cruelty, fed on starvation rations, forced to totter under burdens that bent them double, the young women raped. The sick and injured were left to die where they fell, without medical help. Worse, their Maori oppressors and European observers alike read in their features the signs that said they deserved their new place in the world. The shape of their features, whether gaunt or round, defined or formless, always signified to others that they were beings apart, subhuman.
Knowing all this I think of my grandfather Ngawharewiti, who was Ngati Mutunga, and my grandmother Tongo, with her Moriori blood ties, and I marvel that they married. I don’t see this as a sign of hope or unity, of peace between conquerors and slaves. I don’t know what it’s a sign of. Perversity, perhaps. Or the sheer will to survive, no matter what. All I know is that my mother was ashamed of her Moriori connection, even more ashamed than she was of her Maori blood.

THE LAST TIME I saw my grandmother she was ninety-three. Mother and I flew down to the South Island to spend a week with her in Nelson, where she had been living since the 1940s.

Mother had had a hysterectomy some months earlier. I learned of it only after she had been admitted to hospital, when I noticed that Mother didn’t come home from work. I probably wouldn’t have heard about the operation at all if I hadn’t asked my father where she was. He frowned and shook his head, as a parent does when a child broaches a forbidden subject. He whispered, ‘Women’s troubles. Don’t talk about it.’ A couple of days after the operation he took me into hospital to see her. All the way there he smoked cigarettes with more than usual anxiety. After he had parked the car he loitered on the street, smoking hard, as if preparing himself for an ordeal. At last he took me inside and up to the gynaecology ward.

Mother was in the bed at the far end, next to the window. My father perched on the sill and fiddled uneasily with a fresh packet of Capstan Cork. Mother had me kneel beside the bed. She stroked my hair, a sign of affection she had never shown me before. I kept very still as I tried to figure out what it meant. Mother was a robber by nature: whatever she pretended to give was always a theft in disguise. She told me, ‘The nurse came around yesterday afternoon and asked if I wanted a painkiller. I wasn’t feeling any pain, so I said, “No, thank you.” An hour later, I hurt so much I cried. I asked the nurse if I could have a painkiller now. She said, “No, you have to wait for the next round of medication.”’ I stifled a sigh of impatience and incomprehension. The story was typical of Mother: anything that was common sense to other people was the opposite to her.

A little later she told me, ‘I had a baby before Lynn was born.’ I pricked up my ears. This was new. Lynn was my eldest brother.

My father said gruffly, ‘Don’t talk about it.’

Mother ignored him. She had been silent for almost thirty years, and now she would have her way. ‘He came at five months and died. We named him Lawrence.’ Her eyes were wet with unshed tears. Then, still with tears in her eyes, she said, ‘Your hair feels rough. You should use conditioner more often.’ That too was typical of Mother: for her, there was no difference in emotional register between her stories about pain and grief and her criticism of my hair.
Five months later we reached Nelson and the grey weatherboard where Ma lived. It was a drab three-bedroom abode. Across the road horses grazed in the paddocks. On the crown of a nearby hill stood an old insane asylum, no longer in use.

I hadn’t seen Ma in six years and was amazed at her vigour. She walked briskly, without the aid of a stick. Though her face was a mask of wrinkles – wrinkles piled upon wrinkles, as if every expression her face had ever shown had plunged its flag of ownership into her features – she still didn’t seem an old woman. She seemed to have visited humanity from another, alien species, one noted for its robustness and longevity, and had become stranded here. She was distracted, her thoughts turned so far inward that, though she greeted my mother with a hug, it looked like a brief salute between strangers. Mother sought her gaze with a mixture of timidity and greed. Ma kept it turned away from her. I thought of the many times I had looked into Mother’s face in the hope of a response, and received none. To both of us our mothers were like undiscovered islands. Neither of us could feel we existed until our presence was acknowledged.

Ma put the kettle on and served us tinned corn, and bread and butter. Though a vegetable patch thrived in the rear of her backyard I didn’t see fresh vegetables on our plates during the entire visit. Mother offered Ma presents she had brought down, in particular a maroon caftan with grey braid stitched around the neck and cuffs, which she had sewn for her. Ma accepted with grudging thanks and left the gifts untouched on a chair.

Mother and I divvied up the accommodation. She took the sunny bedroom. As she dumped her suitcase on the bed, she turned to me with a plea inadequately masked by the appearance of indifference. ‘You can sleep in here if you want. There’s plenty of room.’ On the contrary, there was only a double bed. I chose the bedroom on the other side of the passage.

As I sat in the club armchair, writing the latest chapter in a story I had brought with me, I listened to Mother walk around her room as she settled in. The wardrobe door creaked open and thumped shut. A drawer shuffled stiffly out, then back. Sometimes she visited the kitchen. I heard a bright question and a muttered answer.

Over the past two years I had forced a shift in the power balance between us. My dealings with Mother were almost always a struggle now; she needed to keep our old relationship intact, even if that meant letting me act the tyrannical master. Inside, I felt the struggle between my longing for the old way and my urgent need for something new. The old way was familiar but it had hurt me so badly that I knew I had to get away if I was to have any chance at a life of my own choosing. The question was how to find that life, how to create it, when I didn’t know what it looked like.

The story I was working on was embarrassingly juvenile – about a community of women cut off from the rest of the world. An intrepid explorer ventures out of the community. Not that she sees herself in those terms. She sees herself as driven to
leave. The community is airless; a deadening atmosphere hangs over it. The older women tell her she can’t come back if she goes; their warning frightens her; and yet she walks out one night while everyone is asleep, and with every step that takes her deeper into the larger world beyond she thinks back to the place she has left, trying to figure out the new by comparison with the old. Many years later, as I think back to that girl in the club armchair, that me, that not-me, I realise that I am still working on a version of this story of an isolated community of women and the one who leaves for a better life.

I came out of my room to eat and use the bathroom. This was how I lived at home; I saw no way of changing my habit. The heroine of my story left in one decisive act. I was still trying to work out how to do it myself, how to ignore the warning that sounded in my head every time I thought of leaving: if you go, you will die. Other people younger than me had managed it. But they had not been burdened with a mother like mine, a mother who couldn’t live without me.

The next day, as I was washing the lunch dishes, Mother told Ma about the operation. This, I realised, was why she had come down to Nelson. Her reason was understandable; she had been hurt by it and she wanted to tell her mother how it had hurt her. I loved her then, the way you love an injured child and want to protect it from further harm. How could I show her, though, when the only language we shared was one of coldness and isolation?

Ma sat looking out the window, so that she didn’t have to look at Mother. Though her back was to me I could see by the set of her shoulders that she wasn’t paying attention. I had seen that particular set of the shoulders in my own mother often enough.

Mother put on the bright-eyed look that made her resemble a demented schoolgirl. She was telling the story of how the nurse had asked if she wanted a painkiller and she had said no. ‘Heng!’ she cried. ‘It hurt like anything!’

Ma said, ‘You weak. Don’t tell me how you hurt. I don’t care.’

The bright smile on Mother’s lips threatened to slide into wretchedness. It trembled on the verge. I wanted it to happen. I thought that if it happened Mother would turn into a real human being and we would be able to leave this horrible community of women together. The moment passed. She tossed her head and swung her feet like a wounded little girl. I knew then that she would never be able to leave and that, somehow, I must find a way to do it alone.

I put away the washed and dried dishes, and returned to my room. I sat in the club armchair, the pages of my story piled on one arm, my fountain pen turning over and over between my fingers. I kept thinking of how Mother had tried to tell Ma something important and how Ma had dismissed her contemptuously. Mother would have done the same to me, had done the same to me, on numberless
occasions. Mother had no comfort to offer anyone, no warmth, no reassurance. All she had was coldness. But I disliked Ma for rejecting her and blamed her. If Ma had given Mother what she needed, perhaps Mother could have become the person I had always wanted her to be. I knew it wouldn’t have happened but I couldn’t stop yearning for that mythic mother, the one who had withered in an inhospitable climate.

I got up and went out to the kitchen to get something to drink. This was my pretext for checking on Mother. The kitchen was empty. The back door was open. Ma must be taking her midday walk. I stepped outside and froze to the spot. My eye snapped to Mother as a pin snaps to a magnet. She was lying on a beach towel on the lawn, naked except for her knickers, which she had pushed down until a line of her black pubic hair showed. She had unfastened her bra and laid it across her breasts. The purple scar of her hysterectomy plunged from the pubic line into the wasteland of her mountainous belly. Her face flushed, her lips quivering, she turned to me with an awful yearning in her eyes. I was aware of Ma sauntering under the trees in her backyard, her hands behind her back, aware of her beaming face, as if the special someone who gave her good news was strolling beside her. It was as if this someone and Ma were the only two people in the world; she spared not a glance for her daughter, who was offering herself to me. Mother’s hands rose towards me. Her legs parted to take me in. Her lips trembled open. I couldn’t wait to hear what she would say. I fled inside and locked myself in my bedroom.

THE THIRD STORY I know of the Moriori is of a determined search for justice and reparation. Although the Maori had stolen their land and enslaved them, the Moriori never forgot that they had preserved their mana by adhering to Numuku’s law. They told their story to Europeans, who recorded it faithfully. They sent a petition to the governor of New Zealand, protesting at what had been done to them. They were still arguing their case in 1994, when a tribunal was held at Te Awapati, the very place where, in 1835, the Moriori men had gathered to discuss what was to be done about the Maori invasion.

No full-blooded Moriori survived by this time. What was left were men and women who insisted on their Moriori heritage and identity in the face of a concerted attempt in New Zealand to deny that their forebears had ever existed.

My mother and her family did not side with these people: they were Ngati Mutunganga through their father. And yet they never denied that the Moriori existed, the way others did. To Mother, her Moriori blood was a shameful mark that must be acknowledged because it could not be ignored. It was the site of an ongoing struggle between reality and a longed-for ideal.
OVER THE YEARS after I left Mother and struck out into the world by myself, unsure whether I would find a safe harbour, I have tried to explain her to many people. Each time I realised with renewed force how strange she was, how like a creature apart, not quite human yet not quite anything else. I compared her again and again to an occupying army, an aggressive invader who walked over me as an act of ownership and kept me in thrall to her. It came upon me slowly that, when I left her, I took her with me.

For a long time I fought against this. I couldn’t see her as anything other than an oppressor. When I lived with her I couldn’t stop her any more than the Moriori could stop the Maori. So I ran away, not realising that she had branded me and that her mark would stay on my skin for life. I know it now; I know that mark intimately. It’s the mark that sets me apart. It says I am her property, not quite human yet not quite anything else. But in walking through the world I have acquired other marks, which act as camouflage and allow me to pass for human. I still see her as an occupying army, but I understand that she has another identity, one which speaks of loss and grief and hopeless demoralisation, one which speaks in the language of incest and unsatisfied need. I try to accept now that this is the woman who reared me and what that means. She is my one true mother and hers is the face of love.

Sydney Smith is the director of the Victorian Mentoring Service for Writers. Her writing has previously appeared in Griffith REVIEW editions 17, 22 and 26. The Lost Woman, a memoir, will be published by Text in June 2012.
I’m meant to be writing a book about murder, a particular murder. It took place five years ago in Lismore, northern New South Wales. The victim was a young woman who came from a small village in Germany. I was initially drawn to her Missing Persons photo. It ran for days in the local paper: a picture of her standing on a white beach, barefoot, her mahogany mane tangled from a recent swim. Directly behind her a low-slung branch looped into the frame, protruding from the sides of her head, like antlers. The antlers gave the already statuesque girl a proud, majestic look.

She did not look like a victim, my mother and I agreed as we studied the front page of the newspaper in a café. I thought she looked familiar, but not like anyone I knew.

Six days after the girl was reported missing her naked body was found decomposing beneath a palm tree in the centre of Lismore, half an hour from where I live. It was a case that interested me very much. It also interested my mother.

Three years ago she and I attended the inquest into the girl’s death. I couldn’t quite see how this big case could be moulded to fit my usual length, eight thousand words, and I had a suspicion that it was me who’d have to expand: to broaden my thinking, move away from my short domestic fiction, take a bigger space in the world.

The second day of evidence I told my mother she was not to come with me anymore. ‘The police won’t take me seriously if they see you with me everyday,’ I explained, as she sat next to me in the car in her red sneakers and jeans.

‘But I have every right to be there.’

Silence.

‘I won’t sit with you,’ she bargained.

‘The trouble is, you look like me,’ I told her. Although she was eighty-three and her hair was white, we had the same haircut. Her leather jacket was even similar to mine. ‘And the police,’ I continued, ‘have already seen me with you. This is my career we’re talking about. This is not entertainment.’
It was the bit about my career that finally got her. I was yet to publish, unless you count two stories in a student anthology. My mother didn’t come anymore.

At the end of the inquest I approached the detective in charge of the case and asked him for full access to the evidence. He never mentioned seeing my old doppelganger. To reward my curiosity he gave me an office to work from at the police station. The sign on the door read Special Operations. I worked there for months. I was given carte blanche with the files.

SIMONE, THE VICTIM of this murder, my murder victim, led me back to her little village in Germany – her plan being, I imagine, to help her family come to understand what happened to her, and perhaps even solve the crime.

I kept up a steam I’ve never quite been able to account for, grappling to prove who killed her as much as to understand why exactly I’d become so intimately involved. But now that has all changed. I’ve lost my focus.

Von Hooklah, as I call my mother, affectionately, and for no reason other than it sounds vaguely pompous, has inserted herself into the middle of things again. She is about to die. She has cancer in an organ she never knew she had, the pancreas, and every time I try to write she keeps popping into my head, as though she has something to do with it all – murder, that is.

Lately, having plenty of time to speculate rather than write my book, I’m realising my mother and I have a long history with crime. When I was a child in New Zealand she’d take me out of school for the day to attend the criminal courts. Later, languishing in the latter stages of my pregnancies, we’d watch cases at the courts in Sydney for several days at a time. Independent of each other, we always seem to follow the same articles in the newspaper, identifying with murder stories involving unlikely female victims – those who, according to victimology studies I’ve since read, have less chance of being murdered due to their education and social habits, for example – in short, we were interested in victims not so dissimilar to ourselves.

When I was nine my mother might have had cause to mourn my own death, but I didn’t drown. My best friend had invited another child that weekend, instead. I was sure I was involved in the poor girl’s death, that somehow I’d psychically murdered her. ‘You do realise that should have been me,’ I told my mother years later, when I finally felt able to talk about it. ‘I went to that house every other weekend.’

She looked intrigued. ‘You know, the thought never crossed my mind.’

It continues to cross mine. Ineradicable guilt, a tendency to weep when watching a heft of water slowly shift down a river.

Shortly after the drowning I channelled my energies into a gang loosely based on
Enid Blyton’s Famous Five series. I called it Police Five. We identified and followed shoplifters at Coastland’s shopping mall, and were paid by the in-house detective in hamburgers and milkshakes.

Later that year, we became ambitious and decided to investigate the mysterious disappearance of a young woman who never returned from her day at the beach. We arrived at the area of last sighting after a two-hour trek along the sand, only to find that it looked nothing like a crime scene at all. People were swimming, hordes being tossed about like sticks in rolling surf. There was nothing for us to do but join them.

Two days later, after a news flash on the kitchen radio, my mother drove me back to the site. I discovered that the exact place where I’d changed into my swimsuit in the bush-clad dunes was now bare: in its place, a hole where a body had been buried in a shallow grave.

‘I was standing on top of her,’ I told my mother.

I’ve never forgotten the sensation on realising that the sand covering a murdered woman had been sifting between my toes.

IN THE TWO years between Simone’s death and her inquest the state attorney of Wurzburg declared in the German media that her three travelling companions were suspects. They were all German nationals. Two were siblings: Tobias and Katrin Suckfuell. They made an odd pair. Tobias was tall and elegant, with flowing blond hair and a pubescent tuft on his chin – more romantisch than contemporary. His sister looked stronger than her little brother: quite the man, with her short crop and heavy features. It was as though they’d been genetically rewired.

As I sat in the Lismore courtroom with the national media and the police, all gathered in Simone’s honour, I could see several people were missing. For starters, the Suckfuell siblings, under no obligation to attend, had declined an expenses-paid trip back to Australia. Only the third traveller had made the effort to come.

Tobias’s friend Jens Martin was a quiet young man with long brown hair and the face of Jesus. He’d been depicted as a silhouette in previous news coverage and proved to be just as elusive in the flesh. Despite being present the night Simone disappeared, he insisted he saw and heard nothing.

Her family was also missing at the inquest. That I couldn’t understand.

‘They’re pig farmers,’ a journalist told me. ‘And they don’t speak English.’ They were also very religious and came from a tiny, centuries-old village in Bavaria. I pictured them cut off from the rest of the world – reality, even – living in sepia.

The word around the traps was that since the Suckfuell siblings had been named suspects, Simone’s family had bizarrely closed ranks, protecting them. I couldn’t fathom why.
The coroner wound up the week-long proceedings by saying that the siblings needed to clear their names, as two detectives had taken the stand and accused them of murder. He would write personally, extending yet another invitation to visit our shores. How civil. How genteel. How like an invitation to high tea.

AT THE TIME I decided to write a book I didn’t know that there was a body of research and theory about ‘true crime’. Lately I’ve been wading through the academic texts. I’ve learned that theorists fashionably describe reading the newspaper reports of murders as ‘synthetic witnessing’ – as though we wear polyester. We, apparently, are witnessing representations of crime, constructions of the real world otherwise made fairly unreal, in a media that is little more than a machine. We come through the other end of this machine having happily spent our own pains and fears on other people’s problems: vicarious experience. I’m disappointed by this reductive approach, this attempt to stereotype and make common a phenomenon I’ve always felt was unique and personal.

When I wasn’t sifting through files at the police station I was thinking about Simone. I couldn’t stop. The evidence had me hooked. Except I wasn’t just reading, I was living it. Like her, I started to drink beer. I hung around the places where she’d last been seen. I ate the Gollan Pub nachos, her last meal. I got the feeling she was following me, and I would catch glimpses over my shoulder of other dark-haired girls. Often I’d wake in the night, my eyes opening like a shutter lens, hoping to snap her ghost at the side of my bed.

Where was I going with all this? The shelf space devoted to true crime is a section I avoid. I can’t bear the black covers, the tabloid starbursts and drips of gloss red, the grinning murderers with their walrus moustaches. If I couldn’t even bring myself to read a book in this genre, I wondered why I was trying to write one that might join them.

So far my book begins, not with Simone, the victim, but with me. A banal scene that, abbreviated, looks something like this:

I’m sitting at my laptop. An oil painting of a giant pear hangs over my head – a birthday present from my husband. That year, the year of my forty-second birthday, he’d bought me a scarf, a mix of silk and wool, expensive, but brown. It’s 2005 – otherwise known as the year of the brown scarf.

I’m writing a short story set in a mental institution, a really nice one surrounded by a sea of undulating mowed grass. As yet, I don’t know why the first-person narrator is in this place, nor do I know what’s going to happen to her, and I’m wondering if that’s the point of the story, her dilemma, that nothing ever ‘happens’ to her.

It’s a recurring problem in my stories, I’ve been told by my tutor at uni, nothing happening. ‘It’s fiction – make something up! Stick in a car crash, sex, murder!’
'But I can't. It won't feel real.' I can only write what I think I know.

What's always captured my imagination, and my mother's, about crime is the sense that the story is not made up, that it at least feels real. We like the disturbance of reality; better still, the breakdown of domestic order. Perhaps this relates to the sense of possibility in our own lives, the idea that a normal day can continue on as a normal day, until something goes terribly wrong. It keeps us on edge. We've never been interested in the garish spectacle of mass murder, nor the meaninglessness of random violence. We're interested in relationships, the small gestures and details of middle-class ordinariness, its fences and hedges and civility that contain life to a cliché, the capriciousness of it all. Not that we expected anything to happen to us. In fact, I'd become despondent with the comforting thought that nothing ever would.

THEY HAD BEEN expecting me, and I was prepared with a briefcase filled with dictaphone, cardboard-covered notebooks, pens and a set of freshly printed cards listing my name and address. Despite having the right paraphernalia for non-fiction and a letter from the university verifying I was a student, plus a prayer from my mother for luck, I was wondering how crime writers did this. How did they write with such authority and omniscience, as though they had a god-given ticket to enter into the living room of grieving strangers?

A grey light filtered through a small window behind Simone's father. He looked in his mid-fifties, physically very strong, and his eyes were small and kind, glittering with emotion as he leaned forward on a low chair.

Simone's younger sister, twenty years old, sat beside her father. Diametrically opposite to her sister, she had pale skin and pale blond hair that she wore like a thick Elizabethan veil. Between them, a tea-light flickered inside a glass holder.

'For Simone,' her sister said as she bent to light it. Whenever they entered a room, they always lit a candle for her. Eighteen months, I calculated. How long could this continue? How could it stop?

I sat on a '70s-style brown leather sofa beneath a black and white enlargement of Simone that had made me gasp as I walked through the door. I couldn't see her now, but I knew she was hovering above me, her larger-than-life head resting sideways in the palm of her hand.

'Sie wissen mehr als wir. Bitte sagen Sie uns alles, was Sie wissen,' Simone's father said. You know more than us. Please tell us everything you know.

'Perhaps,' I began hesitantly, 'it would be better if we begin by you telling me what you want to know.'

After all, I was meant to be on the outside of the story. I was the newspaper reader trying to imagine what was going on within.
Simone’s father sat with his elbows on his knees. He let his head fall. He scrutinised his hands, clasped and squeezed them before looking back at me.

“How did my daughter die?”

Why do you need me to answer that, I wanted to counter. Surely he’d read it in the newspaper, or heard it broadcast, as I had. Or the police must have told him.

He was waiting.

“She was suffocated,’ I heard myself say. I was surprised to hear the voice sounded like me, as though it should have changed to suit the circumstances and I’d have sounded more like a policeman or an actor playing a policeman, but it was just me – the tone too thin, too light for the words.

‘With either a pillow or a plastic bag,’ I added.

He sucked in a shot of air, nodded slowly.

The reason for his question, I learned that afternoon, was that nothing in the media had penetrated the family’s bunker. I also learned that die Polizei, under the directive of the state attorney, had decided not to tell Simone’s family anything about the inner workings of their investigation. Asked how Simone died, all they were prepared to say to her parents was She did not suffer.

‘I think they’re not able to tell us,’ her father explained when I looked askance, ‘because of our close relationship with Tobias and Katrin.’

I nodded slowly, wondering how it was in this age a state’s relationship to a victim could be more important than that of grieving parents. And surely if the family had been more enlightened, the bond with the Suckfuell siblings might not have been what it was.

This secrecy of die Polizei highlighted how bizarre it was becoming that someone like me, a short-story writer, an otherwise fully engaged housewife who up until now had nothing more than a fascination with crime, had gained entry to this inner circle of knowledge. Perhaps I had a part to play, after all.

‘I’ll tell you everything,’ I told them that evening as they gathered around, Simone’s mother and brother as well, all leaning forward in their chairs. ‘But first,’ I warned, ‘I should tell you that the further into the evidence I’ve gone, the more I’ve found myself forming opinions.’

I had spoken carefully, gently, yet Simone’s mother cried an invocation, reached for her husband’s hand.

‘It would kill us if you told us you thought Tobias had anything to do with it,’ he said. ‘I have always said I would put my hand in the fire for him.’

Hand in the fire. Kill us. I looked at them, waiting to catch a slight curve of a smile on someone’s face, a hint that this was all happening in my imagination. But no, they were still looking at me, to me.
I suspected that in the genre of true-crime writing this wasn’t how it was meant to be, the writer potentially affecting the story. It was all beginning to feel too much like my fiction – something of my own creation loosely based around a set of facts.

FOR THE PURPOSES of writing the book I’ve had to consider my interest in murder as artistic and slightly academic. I’m meant to be a researcher, a professional. My mother’s interest, on the other hand, I must distance myself from. She’s a voyeur. She even confesses this in a salacious tone. I have to stand back from her, and myself, to observe myself as a sort of witness. I’m reading myself reading the newspaper, examining my responses to mediated information about crime, seeing myself as a reflection of society, no longer an individual simply indulging in lurid details like my mother. It’s a kind of doubling-up. A splitting-away.

‘Why are you doing this?’ I’m always asked.

On this occasion the question came from Simone’s parents.

‘I felt compelled to know more about your daughter,’ I told them.

But the more I know about Simone, the less I feel this is true. She’d barely had time to live a life. It’s her murder I’m drawn to. The hours that remain unaccounted for still lure me like a good book and I’m ashamed by this, the spike of excitement I feel as I think I’m getting closer to the minutes, the exact moment of fully understanding her death. I’ve been wondering if her family realises there are two of me. The empathic, caring me – and the other one. The one that follows several steps behind, like a shadow on a lead. She looks a bit like my mother, this other one. I can’t shake her.

Sometimes I think I’m even worse than my mother for having dared to personalise my relationship with crime. I’ve entered the murder scene. I’ve inserted myself into the text. It makes me recoil at times, as though I too am in part guilty of committing a crime.

‘You don’t intend to talk about the murder in this book, do you? I was asked by a German woman who Simone’s mother introduced me to. She was the director of the kindergarten where Simone once worked, a prickly redhead.

‘I wouldn’t be writing a book if there hadn’t been a murder,’ I told her in a measured tone.

‘And the family know you will write about this’, she asked, hoarse with disbelief.

‘Of course – there’s nothing secretive about what I’m doing,’ I explained.

‘But it’s just for yourself. No one else will read it.’

There’s always the possibility that no one will want to read your work, but I was not prepared to make this admission to her. ‘It will be published,’ I said quietly.
That day, she wrote a note to Simone’s family. She told them to beware Frau Peters. This book would be for her, not them. She said I’d asked her scandalous questions about their family relationships.

I happened to be there the day after the note arrived. They were all very upset—not with me, as it turned out—but with the woman from the kindergarten, for casting aspersions about my character.

‘Of course you must write about the murder,’ Simone’s mother said, incredulously. ‘What does she think you’re going to write?’

I mirrored her surprise, but at the same time I was considering Frau M, wondering why she’d tried to frame me. She’d spoken to me patronisingly, as though she was teaching something as basic as the alphabet. It was all about the letter E, I suspected. Ethics. She found the premise for my book to be nothing more than snooping—at worst, scurrilous exploitation.

I HAVEN’T BEEN thinking so much about Simone in the last few months. I’ve been too distracted with Von Hooklah. The book, half-written, sits in a computer bag next to my desk. I take it away with me whenever I travel, like an unnecessary brick that has no other purpose than to weigh me down. Stacks of exercise books, journals, evidence, newspapers and crime studies remain piled up on trestles, like traps sprung at opposite ends of the house, waiting to catch me. Sometimes I look at all these piles and ask myself if the story is really to be found in them, and if it’s not more in me—and even more about me than Simone.

I still keep in touch with Simone’s family. Her mother tells me she’s lighting candles for me and my mother. I passed this on to Von Hooklah.

‘I don’t want any of that holy business.’ She scowls and tosses her head, as though people on both sides of the world are already preparing her for burial.

We’re keeping busy, going to appointments with the various doctors—Dunstan the spunky GP, James the deathly pale oncologist. My mother has developed a deep affection for these men. They woo her with their gentle talk about bowel obstructions, stomach distension and drainage. Last time she showed them photos of her final holiday, just so they can feel a little bit more involved.

I’m involved. I’m so involved I suspect a part of mother wants me to pop over the other side with her.

‘I’m managing to do a little bit of writing at the moment,’ I tell her, apprehensively. ‘It’s an essay about you. And murder.’

‘Oh, really,’ she says, vaguely.

We get talking about the link, about how her boredom as a housewife and her ghastly interest in crime became something more productive in my hands,
something investigative and worthwhile, potentially artistic, how one day I might possibly even help solve the crime.

She tells me, ‘That’s wonderful, darling…’ What a clever little girl I am.

WE’RE SITTING IN the car after having coffee at the Top Shop, our post-diagnosis hangout. She’s about to move into my house, for her final days. I can tell she’s distracted before she lets out a sigh.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I want to know what’s coming,’ she says.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I want to know how it will end.’ She’s looking out the window. ‘Do you know?’

‘One of your organs will fail,’ I tell the side of her face. ‘Depending on which one, we won’t know how long it will take.’

‘You won’t feel anything,’ I promise her. ‘By then you’ll be so dosed up. That’s what the drugs are for.’

It sounds like an execution, I think, as I watch her nod, her eyes still looking out the window and down the street. I notice the new makeup we’d recently bought in an effort to make death more glamorous is a bit too peach for her complexion today, the skin on her cheek crumpling beneath the scientifically formulated light-reflecting shimmer. I’m numbed by this analysis of her skin, this distance from which I’m looking at her, not to mention how calmly I’ve described the process of her death to her, as smoothly as James the oncologist, who specialises in repeating this information daily. I watch her fingers smoothing the leather strap of her brand new handbag, back and forth, back and forth.

‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m not worried about me,’ she says, breathily. ‘It’s only those I’m leaving behind I worry about.’

‘I’ll be all right,’ I tell her, ‘But of course I’ll miss you, because we see each other…’

Every day, I was going to say, but I’m interrupted by a sharp yelp of air ripping through my throat.

She’s looking at me sideways. ‘Oh, darling,’ she says, and I feel her cool, slightly withered pads rubbing across the bones in my fingers.

‘It’s probably all a big hoax,’ she’s saying now in her singsong voice. ‘What’s the bet I’ll be here this time next year. I’m a fraud. I’m a con artist. Just you wait and see. I’ll be here next Christmas.’
That’s more than a year away, I think. I look away, out the window, at nothing. I have to quell a treacherous urge to blurt out that she must be joking. Even if it were possible, I can’t keep this up that long.

I reread this essay for the umpteenth time. Shit. It still doesn’t work. I’m beginning to wonder if it’s the implausibility of the story itself, of someone like me, perhaps more suited to being a victim than an investigator, inserting myself in the middle of a murder inquiry. Or is it that everything in my life is now being funnelled through my mother’s dying, no matter how remote the connection?

Whatever it is, the Simone strand is in conflict with my mother’s. I’ve jammed the pair together: a garden-variety domestic death and a murder of international interest. I give up. I’m unable to cement the connection between the two, other than feeling that the parts are damn near inseparable, inside me – and that’s aside from the realisation I can’t come to grips with one without enduring the end of the other, my dying other.

Gladys Mary Rees, née Pettersson, died at 2.30 am on 30 September 2010.

Virginia Peters’ short stories have appeared in various publications, including Sleepers, Overland, New Australian Stories and Kill Your Darlings. She has an MA in writing from UTS and is living in Oxford with her partner and three children, where she is working on a non-fiction book in the area of true crime for her PhD in creative writing.
The sleepers (from the Futures Museum)

Lisa Gorton

resin, oils, human hair, camphor solution (potassium nitrate, ammonium chloride, water, ethanol, camphor), fishing wire

In this display the artist
has wrapped life-cast figures in a hand-made net of fishing wire – Figures
painted with a one-hair brush and true
even to the number of their eyelashes, the blind
sheen of their nails – so much like life
they bring home the strangeness of things
being motionless.

Only the net,
its each thread soaked in camphor solution,
grows counterfeit ice, first as if by fraying,
by threads so fine as to be speculative –
each thread the colour of a needle-scratch
in glass – and they divide from each division
till like regret, which feeds on hunger, they
close in the effigies –

as if they would prove
by what trick of longing the blankest fact is
closed in dreams the way a new-hatched bird’s
bluish flesh-clot pricks with feathers
each exact as fossil etchings, and it is the blood-
fist free in its device – Some force there is
will be consoled, will make these votives
of a stranger’s loss. Of any stranger’s loss.

Lisa Gorton is an award-winning poet and the author of an acclaimed novel for children, Cloudland (Pan Macmillan, 2008). She was the 2010 poet in residence at the Australian Poetry Centre.
The meaning of a disaster

Making sense of random events

Sidney Dekker

‘NO rush.’

The obstetrician sounds dead tired through the phone.

Shaving foam is clinging to my cheeks, and I bend the handle away from my face to prevent the white fluff from clogging the speaker holes. Behind me, a wet trail of hasty footsteps leads into the kitchen, to the bathroom, out of the bedroom.

There, one side of our bed lies untouched – my wife is in hospital after a traffic accident yesterday.

‘How are you?’ he asks politely.

He doesn’t want to know. Around five that morning my anxiety had finally surrendered to a dozing landscape of softness and a depthless sky, and limbs heavy and filled with liquid mud. Now sleep is draining thickly from the bottom of my brainpan, the lint and fuzz of it clinging to the back of my eyeballs and my upper gums.

My face is getting cold and hard from the aborted shave.

The little sleep has done me no good. The frazzle has settled too deeply even for the pounding of a hot shower. The top of my head gives off a crackling, brittle sensation, like dried paper, something I know can be washed away only by more sleep. Or lots of caffeine. Or by not having picked up the damned phone.

WE HAD ARRIVED in this Scandinavian land a year earlier. It had been summer, then as now. The sun had been shining obscenely, unreservedly. The grass was high, the air thick and golden and filled with light and laughter and mosquitoes. My wife and I had been flown up for job interviews, and mine was conducted in a little restaurant overlooking a canal, a bit out of town. I was told that the canal was dug a century and a half earlier by enlisted men, but overtaken by the railroad a few years after the digging was done. The canal now seemed mainly to keep German tourists
afloat. Recreational vessels (always with the man on the wheel, always) of all kinds floated by. It would have made for a fine vacation, judging from the big bellies and lazy movements onboard. The canal slowly meandered past the restaurant and on through a swath of countryside and locks, setting its own pace, so bucolic, so pastoral, so rustic you couldn’t keep a heart rate over 30 bpm while sitting next to it.

Another glass of fine red wine was poured, and we looked at blond girls hopping into the canal a few steps down the towpath.

The evening lasted forever; the sun simply would not go away.

I signed the contract there and then.

Later, I learned that this was the finest summer that they’d had in tjugo fyra år – twenty-four years.

We got married, packed up in grimy Northern England and, with the last few hundred quid in our pocket, found that we could afford a miserly walled-off portion in the bowels of the ferry across the North Sea. It was a paper-thin excuse for a cabin. A dictionary entry for steerage. It felt lonely and forgotten, and entirely plausible that we would never find our way out again, the way the staircases seemed to disappear up dark holes. The thumping and shaking of the ship’s engines reverberated in my chest cavity for three days after we stepped ashore on the other side.

When we arrived in the harbour, where almost a quarter of the country’s population had decanted for better shores about a century before, we were greeted by snow. It was wet and thick and blew in all kinds of directions. It was also getting dark.

It was not yet three in the afternoon.

Our first encounter with a Scandinavian winter was grim. And winters would forever stay grim. ‘There is no such thing as bad weather,’ soothing Scandinavian voices confided to us. ‘There is only bad clothing.’

They were all wrong.

There is such a thing as bad weather. And it would persist through the next few years. The once-in-24-years summer had relocated to Brazil and taken all the mosquitoes with it. But winters were the worst. They shut people in; they shut them up. Talk to your neighbour in the street and risk saliva freezing against the roof of your mouth.

THE PROMISE OF a new land, new positions, a new future pulled us through, though. And soon enough the promise got brighter still: a baby was moving around in almost grotesque waves and bobbles in my young wife’s belly.
And then it was spring, and it was summer, and then one day I got stuck at work and I phoned my wife to ask her to come pick me up.

She hesitated, was working on the baby room. Cleaning out stuff, getting things ready.

But I had no other options, I said.

This, for the record, is patently false. There are always other options. Today, I would pay an infinite sum of money to take a cab. Today, I would walk. Hitchhike. Steal a car. Sleep on the floor and try again the next day. There are always other options.

Okay, she said. She would come over.

Then, not much later, she called me. Her voice trembled. She had been on her way to pick me up, but there’d been an accident. She was all right, but the baby, she was worried about the baby.

Eight months pregnant.

So worried about the baby.

The tremor of her anxiety played all the way through the phone line, setting off in me a fear and uncertainty that rode my spine like a cold finger. I tried to shake it off, hold it at bay, appear stable and strong while still on the phone. I told her there was nothing to worry about. I mean, if she was walking and talking and all, what could possibly be wrong with our child inside of her? I told her things would be fine, we’d check it out, but she’d see – there would be no problem.

I rushed out on foot to find her, and when I had I commandeered a colleague’s car to take her to the hospital. Where she had to stay for observation.

Deep into the night I’d finally left to get some sleep. Indications about what might be wrong with the baby, if anything, had been vague and uncertain, but also stable. There had been little to no change throughout the evening.

‘There’s nothing to be afraid of,’ I’d said.

But of course there was.

THE WINDOW BLINDS in our apartment kitchen are open, and I cower from the hard slices of morning sun coming through them.

What the doctor says to me on the phone hits me like the blast of a jet engine.

‘We’ve had to get the baby.’

The way he tells it, my wife is fine. Well, she hasn’t woken up yet after the emergency C-section, so he doesn’t really know, but all indications are good. The accident pretty much spared her: a haematoma on the abdomen is all. What
happened inside is a different story. Hard to say. He’s been on shift all day yesterday and all night. He’s done the operation and is going home now, but before he does, he just, you know, wants to put in a little courtesy call…

‘You know, before going home. Tell you how things have developed.’

*They’ve had to get the baby.*

There’s no rush, he tells me again. Things are stable now. Under control.

*They’ve had to get the baby.*

My heart climbs higher.

‘Hur mår barnet?’ I ask in a tender rendition of a language that is new for me. My voice feels feeble and squashed. *How is the child?*

The line is silent for a little while, the hiss of its static merging with the throbbing in my ears, the frazzle in my head.

‘Inte så bra.’ Not so good. The words come out in a whisper, an apology, a wish that things were different.

A cold fear closes around my throat. A terrible sense of prickling, tingling foreboding crawls all over my skin, from my toes up through my legs and torso and neck, and all the way up over my scalp from back to front. The skin in my face goes hot, then cold.

My chin juts up involuntarily and I find myself looking up at the ceiling, biting my lower lip. My eyes sting, then fill rapidly. A layer of normalcy, of fairness, of predictability crumbles away from the world I know. I stand there, the blue plastic handle of the cheap phone clutched and sweaty in my hand, in the kitchen of a new flat, a new town, a new country.

*They’ve had to get the baby.*

This is not how I imagined my induction into fatherhood. Over the phone, with a baby that hadn’t been due just yet, who was not doing so good, and with my wife anaesthetised, out cold in the hospital. I’m not ready: don’t they recognise that? My wife isn’t here – how can we even finalise our deliberations on the name?

‘Vad blev det?’ I say quietly.

‘En flicka.’ A girl.

A block of ice settles at the core of my gut.

Then my legs give way. I slump, slide down past the slivers of sunlight that are stacked against the cupboards, and sit on the cold floor, breathing hard into the phone.

A girl.
A baby girl.

*Can pain travel by phone?*

The obstetrician seems to get it. There is little more to say. Or perhaps he knows, from years of bringing bad news and good news, that platitudes create distance, that real sympathy nestles in the silences in between.

‘I’m going home now,’ he says softly. ‘Come when you can. *Ingen bråka*. No rush.’

I scramble up from the floor and dress as quickly as I can. Not much later I’m running through hospital corridors and up the zigzag of stairs and through wide doors that open too slowly. The dash through the neon world feels endless, my legs like never before, limp, mushy, scarcely gliding under me, reaching for a future I desperately want to avert.

AS I BARREL past the nursing station a woman ducks out. She grabs me by the arm and leads me into a room down the corridor, one of the big red doors to the right, a room where babies get delivered. We go in.

‘I am the father of…’ I start, out of breath.

*Yeah, of…?*

‘I know,’ she says softly. She looks down at her sandals, as if to share a secret. ‘Why don’t you sit down.’ Her hand sweeps to one of the chairs at the foot of the empty bed.

I look at the woman, keep standing.

‘The doctor will be with you shortly.’

I don’t move.

She is short and has maroon hair cropped closely around her cheeks. Her scrubs are ample with Scandinavian wholesomeness, her hands pink and hard from washing and lifting and more washing. She puts them on her hips and studies me with her head cocked.

The scramble of my heart makes me reluctant to talk. I feel my words might crumble in my mouth and shatter their way out. And something tells me I won’t get answers anyway. I break away from her stare and look past her, out the window, willing my heart to climb down out of my throat.

A chestnut tree reaches up along the outside wall. The Nordic July sun, up for ages, has arched behind the leaves, scattering a thousand golden coins onto the linoleum floor around the woman. I know it won’t last long. July has been unseasonably dark and wet. Rain has filled almost every day since the start of summer. A grey slate of low cloud is poised to move in any moment.
The woman looks up at me and recaptures my glance. Her round face is a conference of bad news. She looks as if she knows what is going to happen.

And eager to get out of this room before it does.

‘You sure?’ she says.

‘I’m fine,’ I lie.

Her eyes flicker under the maroon brim, then soften. Something of a sympathetic oh-you-poor-bastard creeps into them. Our gazes linger a moment longer.

‘Okay,’ she says. She gives her head a little shake, as if to clear it. Her hands fall away from her hips.

She walks past me and squeaks across the linoleum. My eyes follow her. Her scrubs form a square outline in the back. She pulls the large chrome handle and sweeps into the hallway, the door retching on its spring. Then it clicks softly closed behind her.

I stand there, the empty room glaring at me in cold anticipation. Muffled sounds bounce at the door from outside. The screech of tired hinges, the glassy slam of a cabinet door. The rolling of little wheels, metallic, rattling. A smothered command, a man’s voice. A baby’s cry.

The father of…

Air gasps in through my puckered lips, hobbled, jolting.

Behind the chestnut tree the sun is gone.

IT WAS THE blond ponytail.

To me, the backward dash of it was always the perfect complement to the face in front. Her jaw jutted out slightly further than her forehead, pressing her nose up at a stubborn, cute angle, and spreading it broadly onto her cheeks. The ponytail kept it all in balance, the counterweight on a delicate construction.

I once told my mother that I’d either spend the rest of my life with this gorgeous girl or buy a golden retriever. There was no way I could imagine spending it with any other woman. But she was young, a number of years younger than I. What I needed was patience, and more patience.

She was the eldest of three sisters, two blond ponytails, one red. My older brother pointed her out to me. Giggles and trepidation filled the first meetings. But when we found common love in music, a smoothness gradually settled over us. I delighted and shuddered at the constant challenge of reaching back to an age that I’d left seven years before. Anticipation filled every day I might see her. Devastation followed every one I didn’t.
When I first felt her arm around my waist, a mere glimpse of a moment that lasted forever, she was twelve. I was nineteen, and left for the other side of the world soon after.

The first letter was hers. A folded card, really. It came only days after our goodbye. I ripped it open not a foot from the mailbox, my eyes flying over the billowing, rotund handwriting. Chitchat guided her through the first sentences, like a pussycat padding around hot milk. Then came the last line.

‘Of course, I’m going to really miss you.’

My heart leapt.

I spent the day writing back, producing all of a word an hour. Sense and proportion battled with a galloping urge to not lose, to not let this slip away, to grab and cradle and secure it, now and forever.

Sense won.

We stopped counting letters soon after that, and each of us saved every one. Our first kiss would have to wait for years.

When it finally came it was the moist thwack of fresh cherry, of red voluptuousness. A kiss that had my fingertips reaching up to my mouth for hours afterward to make sure it was still there – the tingling hypoxic buzz of it.

On our wedding day, after so many years of suspense, of writing and waiting, of hoping and praying, nervousness only grudgingly made way for happiness. If things were so hard to get, would they be easy to keep? In the hours before I saw her in her wedding dress on that day, Kierkegaard’s dread was my companion. That form of fear experienced in the pit of the stomach, the dread of what is not, but which may be. The dread of possibility. I didn’t want to lose that face, those lips, that arm around my waist.

And I didn’t.

Fate hunted down another girl.

THE DOOR BEHIND me clicks again. I rip my gaze from the window, turn around. A doctor strides in, and another one.

‘Hey,’ the first one says. She thrusts out her hand. ‘I’m Lucia.’ A ponytail the colour of mahogany and coffee beans dances on her shoulders.

Lucia. Light.

She exudes something young and soft and pristine, like a basket of fresh fruit. Her lab coat is buttoned up, stretched over the press of her bosom. The man introduces himself. His name never registers. On his head an alarming array of hair sticks straight up, as if someone has pushed it through the scalp from below. Winter stubble on a deserted cornfield.
Lucia motions to the chairs. This time I offer no resistance, sink down into the yellow shadows of the room, facing her in silence. She leans forward, bathing me momentarily in a waft of coconut and jasmine. She folds her hands in her lap and studies me with hazel eyes before she speaks.

‘Your daughter’s had a bad night.’

She looks down. The clock above the door gives off three ticks, four. I stop breathing. The male doctor, clearly senior, has propped himself against the foot of the bed, watching over the two of us huddled on the chairs facing each other. Outside, all traces of a sun ever risen have been wiped away. The light in the room has been halved at least, and turned from yellow to gun-metal grey.

Lucia’s head comes back up. Her eyes search me even more intently before she speaks again.

‘Unfortunately, she died.’

All the sounds in the world disappear.

My jaw drops and my eyes bulge wide.

‘I’m really sorry,’ Lucia says. Her head swings softly from side to side. She looks up at the male doctor, then back at me.

‘Would you like to see her?’

At first I don’t understand. I have to remind myself to breathe.

‘But…she’s dead.’

Lucia ignores my croak. ‘I’m sorry,’ she says again, and gets up and leaves the room. A minute later she is back and behind her comes the scrub-wearing nurse with maroon hair. The nurse is holding a basket, tightly clutching the hoops and hugging it closely to her breasts.

My heart climbs higher. Again, I forget to breathe.

The nurse puts the basket on the bed, slowly folds down the handles and I try to peer in, anticipation and devastation doing battle in my chest. Wordlessly, surrounded by the two doctors, the nurse reaches in and gingerly folds one of her hands behind the little head, the other around the body.

Suddenly the harsh pinkness of her hands turns into something else. And I fault myself for not seeing it before. Something resembling motherly love, tenderness, radiates from them. The baby is carefully swaddled in cotton. I reach out to the pink hands.

I hold my first child.

The three are standing guard around me, silently. I have to grope around a bit to prevent tiny arms or legs from flopping out. There is no muscle tone. I have to
firmly hold her little head – her neck won’t do it for her. Her skin is still slightly warm from the womb, but cooling rapidly.

Then I see her small face, really see it.

It is beautiful. Angelic and undisturbed in a way only little children can look, her jaws jutting out slightly further than her forehead, pressing her little nose up in a stubborn angle so cute, so recognisable, so familiar.

It threads through my heart like a length of pipe.

My first cry roars out of me as if I have to puke. Violent and involuntary, it doubles me over, all but squashing the small child in my arms. Six arms fly out to me, catching me and holding me up.

I retch and sob and don’t know how long I sit there with a little angel forever sleeping in my lap.

It cannot last long enough.

By the time I look up, the maroon-haired nurse has left. I look at my child, again, and again.

As my body sags under a fresh wave of pain I inhale with a violent gasp, then see Lucia press the back of her hand against her nose, dropping it back into her lap. I hear a slurp of air, thick and moist.

‘Lucia?’ It is the male doctor. Quietly.

‘Yeah?’ She looks at him.

He puts a hand on her shoulder. Points at her with a nod of his head.

‘Really?’

‘Feel your face.’

Lucia reaches up and touches her cheeks, pulls her hands back, sees them glistening in the dim light of the spoilt July morning.

‘Wow,’ she whispers.

‘Want to leave for a bit?’ he says.

She nods, gets up, slips out of the room.

The doctor turns to me. His eyes are glistening unapologetically. His cheeks are wet. He squats beside my chair, puts an arm around my shoulders. We sit in tears with a cold, dead baby between us.

Outside, rain has started spitting at the window.

AS WE GREW up, separated by oceans, the letters never stopped. The anticipation of slicing open a blue airmail envelope never abated. Hope congealed into something more real, even if at a distance. Reading her news, her wishes and her
gradual crescendo from ‘I miss you’ to ‘I love you’ was immensely satisfying. At the same time, it inflamed a hunger for more, for evermore.

We did allow ourselves to make forays into other territories, other relationships. Perhaps these were little more than conquests of calibration. We both later acknowledged our half-heartedness. Nonetheless, it was not always easy to convince the rest of the world that I was waiting for the most gorgeous girl to grow old enough to marry me – if she still wanted to, of course. That uncertainty, and having nothing concrete to show for it, made me fair game for some.

One of them, a feisty young woman hell-bent on spending the rest of her life in a country other than the one she was a citizen of, and for which I was the ticket, took offence at a picture on my desk.

‘How do you know you love her?’ she demanded.

I was silent for a while.

‘I have known this girl since she was twelve,’ I finally said, trying to catch myself for letting too much air escape my lungs. ‘I could never imagine living with anybody else. This girl is my everything.’

I searched the young woman’s face, but saw only blankness. I turned to the photograph. In it, with her blond ponytail sticking backwards, she squatted on an impossibly large lawn of a Picardy chateau, petting the sweetest black lab, whose name was Art and who belonged to a French baroness. I pointed at her and said, ‘I think she’s gorgeous. I am in love.’

The young woman next to me scrunched up her brow, as if befuddled, as if in agony.

‘How do you know that it’s not loyalty? That you’re not confusing loyalty with love?’

Later, morose and uninterested in getting any more dates pushed upon me by matchmaking friends, I awoke from yet another night I did not spend partying. The door of my little apartment rattled, noisily ending my lonely musings and hopes to stay by myself for a while still.

‘Hey, where were you yesterday?’ Bob demanded as he swung the door open and stepped through. ‘We missed you, man!’

Bob had taken me under his wing soon after my arrival a few years back. He embodied most of the stereotypes of his larger-than-life land. He was hospitable and enormously friendly. He was also parochial and Lord, he was loud. I said nothing, glanced around furtively, as if trying to find the large audience Bob was addressing. He smelled like dust and sweat and a hyperglycaemic breakfast and the fusty whiff of what could have been a wet dog.
He held still just in front of the opening, looking at me, cocking his head slightly, as if waiting for an explanation. I looked back, quiet. A drastically undersized pair of aviator sunglasses had been pressed into his pink face, like two round pebbles into soft clay. Strands of hair were pulled back over his bald scalp. He held a cinnamon bun in his right hand and a mega-sized plastic cup from some fine fast-food establishment in his left, the drinking straw sticking straight up from its rotund lid, like a feeding tube for the senile.

When he got no explanation, he looked down and tore a bite off the bun and stuck the straw in his mouth, his lips forming a small pouting O around it, his cheeks making simultaneous sucking and chewing movements.

‘Met these awesome girls,’ he grumbled to the lid of his mega-cup through one unused corner of his mouth. Bob was the only person I knew who could eat and drink and talk all at the same time. ‘Awesome, I’m telling you. You would have loved one of them, what’s her name again… Anyway, your type, man, exactly your type. You like blond, right? I told them…’

He belched. And then he coughed. And then he wheezed, and had to cough again, and because he was eating and drinking and talking all at the same time he also started choking.

Years later, at our wedding many thousands of kilometres away, Bob was there. He took to the microphone and announced that he had been among the first to see the photograph on my desk.

The photo of what he called my ‘childhood sweetheart’.

He told all the wedding guests that the way I’d announced to him who she was, and the way I’d looked at that photograph, it’d turned him into an instant believer.

THE WAD OF paper is large and rough as sandpaper and I’m already having trouble finding a spot on it without snot, blubber, tears. The doctor with the stubble-hair strides next to me, his arm an occasional support. We move in and out of the pale wash of neon lights, and more corridors glide by. The walk is so long that my wife may as well lie in a recovery room in another city. Doors open at just the right tempo this time. My legs are no longer jelly. A leaden apprehension has begun to drive nails through my shoes, adding drag to each step across the linoleum. My stomach seems to have spilled out, weighed down and suspended between my knees like a sagging stoma bag.

Then, at last, into a ward, a yellow crisscross of corridors and green curtains and the quiet hiss of air-conditioning, two nurses silent spectators behind the safe glass of a cubicle.
The doctor’s arm tightens around my shoulders, then lets go. He comes to a standstill and drops behind. The officer staying behind in the trench, sending his foot soldier over the top.

*Go ahead, boy. Godspeed.*

Ahead of me, propped up on a bed that sits ninety degrees against all apparent convention in the ward’s interior, is no blond ponytail. Her hair is a zigzag of darkened moisture, glued to a small, perfectly oval forehead. Her eyes are closed. I stop walking.

Then I see the belly under the hospital blanket. Or what is left of it. The deflation seems grotesque, its flatness the result of a sudden robbery, a snatch-and-grab, with whatever was in there gone, nothing to show for it.

When my wife was pregnant – that is, yesterday – it was hard to see from behind that she was expecting at all. Her figure held up beautifully, the front-to-back symmetry distorted only by a huge ball on the front, but radiantly, brilliantly so. The little girl inside used to move an amazing amount, setting off strange waves and undulations in my wife’s belly. And a luminescence in her face that I had scarcely seen before.

Now I notice that her eyes are studying me from behind a haze of narcotics. They are dull, and worried. I stumble forward and land with my arms on the pillow, on the bed, and with my mouth on hers. The kiss lacks nothing in warmth, in love, in consolation. The soaked salt of my tears tries to press between our lips and I whisper, ‘Our baby is dead, she is dead…’

My wife pulls away, dozy and softly. ‘Dead?’

I nod, a new surge of tears and pain flowing onto the blanket.

‘Dead? Our baby is dead, a little girl? She is dead?’ Her head pivots back and forth on the pillow in confusion.

Again, I nod.

‘But,’ she protests drowsily, ‘she was alive yesterday. I felt her moving around in me!’

I have no answer.

Then comes her own realisation.

‘The accident?’

Guilt and sorrow and the whole world surge and push into the ward, loudly, inescapably, and crash down on us.

THE LAST TIME we see our daughter we are in the hospital morgue. There are just three of us: the grieving parents and a white-clad attendant. He has lit a large candle in an otherwise clinically harsh, darkened space. The hospital has sent its staff
photographer. She has taken pictures of us and our first child, an insistence on their part I am eternally grateful for. A footprint is taken too. Some family members have come and looked at our child and cried, and gone.

Then it is time to call it quits. We silently dress our daughter for the first and the last time, in a smock given to us a few weeks ago. She feels cold, a bit stiff. The coffin is of solid wood, white, the size of a laser printer. The inside is lined with white needlework, the only soft edges to our hard inevitability.

My wife has a hard time standing up straight because of the surgical rip in her abdomen. I can’t stand up straight either. We lay our daughter down in the coffin together, and the moments stretch out.

I finally summon the courage to pick up the lid, and together with the attendant I lay it in place, catching a final glimpse of the jaws, the stubborn and cute angle of the tiny nose. The closed eyes, the image of peaceful sleep. As the attendant firmly screws down the lid I see hopes and futures crumble. My heart is slit out of its chest cavity, a toilet of tears flushes inside.

In the days that follow I feel as if I have died. Yet my departure is being refused. I feel dead but packed in ice, preserved relentlessly, cold and claustrophobic.

We decide to cremate our daughter, for we do not know whether we will stay in the town or the country. Better to have her carried on the wind with us. In a non-denominational chapel her little white coffin takes centre stage. The handful of friends we managed to assemble in our short time in this new land is there in full complement, in black. On the white coffin lie a red rose and a ruffle of field flowers that I bought in town with my brother. Before the service I sit on the cold floor next to the coffin, rose in hand, willing the white-clad morgue attendant to show up with his screwdriver and undo this whole mess.

My mother, an ordained minister, leads the service. She vividly conjures images of a riot in heaven where my deceased grandmother, who was always full of warmth and piss and vinegar, takes our daughter into her lap and shakes her fist at God.

Before my wife comes home I make sure the baby room is gone. The pram, proudly waiting in our hallway for the last few weeks, goes into the basement, where I put it to rest under picture frames and a box and a bicycle inner tube.

‘MEANING? THESE THINGS have no meaning.’

There are only two men in the break room off the main corridor, a few days later. Me and a senior professor, an old colleague and wise guy who’d told me long ago he was a staunch atheist. He is dressed the way he might usually be dressed for work at the university: like a bum. Unshaven, black jeans and a grimy dark-green T-shirt that has egg yolk on it. He wears what is left of his greying hair slicked back.
Dawn has never really happened, the sun incapable of breaching the shale of the late-summer sky. The only light in the room is a cold slice coming from underneath the row of cupboards above the countertop. Stacks of smeary coffee cups rise out of the sink, like crooked chimneys stretching for a hand to attend to them. A cloth hangs down from a hook next to the countertop, streaks of black and grey against what’d once been white with blue checkers.

‘Random events,’ he says. ‘No meaning at all. Coffee? Hell, we’re here anyway.’

He turns to the countertop, reaches into the sink. His head is in lockstep with his neck, producing the stale motions of a robot. Maybe he has arthritis.

I sit down at a little blond table behind him. ‘No, thanks, I’m fine.’

I watch him as he measures coffee out by the spoonful.

‘So tell me about the accident,’ he says. ‘How long ago?’

‘Last week. Ten days, eleven?’

He switches on the coffee machine, and it starts gurgling and hissing.

‘So why’d things go wrong with the girl?’ he asks, and turns to look at me. His butt is resting against the countertop, arms folded across his chest, legs crossed.

‘What, my daughter, or my wife?’

‘Both, I guess. Start with the daughter.’ A shadow briefly crosses his face. ‘I’m sorry, by the way.’

I nod. ‘They didn’t know. Had no idea. I mean, how the accident affected the baby. Turned out the liver ruptured in the accident.’

‘The baby’s?’

‘Hm-mm.’

He whistles and stares at the electrical outlet just off the floor across the room.

‘I’ll be damned.’ He turns around, lets the coffee machine hiss some more, pours two cups and brings them over. The coffee looks so thick you’d need a pair of scissors to cut it off at the spout. He puts the cups down on the table with a clunk.

‘How you have this?’ He wags his finger at the coffee in front of us. It stares back at me like black oil, a thin blue film shimmering on top.

‘I’m fine,’ I say. ‘Really.’

‘What, you don’t like coffee?’ He keeps standing.

What sits before me looks like crude centrifuged from the Alberta tar sands.

I tell him about the accident, the wait, the many times through the evening and the night on ultrasound to try to figure out what was wrong with the baby, if anything, and he gets it and soon he is doing the talking, most of which makes little sense to me. He is standing next to our little blond table and talking about when the patient’s heart rate goes down ‘...and, well, not really down, but you’ve got this
saltatorial pattern, and then you pretty much always get metabolic acidosis, lipemic plasma, and of course it would have been abruptio placentae, you know apart from the oxygen then the syncytial layer’s all screwed up, you might get uteroplacental apoplexy or myoglobinuria, can’t forget myo... Oh, I got some real nice orange juice,’ he says, turning to me, brows arched. ‘Want some? Freshly squeezed. Get it from an organic farm out east, Mostorp. Just south of Björnstorp.’

He trudges back to the fridge, bottles in the door rattling when he opens it. He ducks his head down, the grey hair sticking out against the yellow light from inside. ‘But foetal liver damage? Pretty damn unlikely scenario, though,’ he says, talking into the fridge, ‘that’s the problem...nobody expects...uh.’ He peers intently at the labels on the bottles on the inside of the door. ‘So, yeah...unlikely that the liver would...I mean the baby’s... Ah, here it is.’ He pulls a bottle loose from inside the fridge door and comes back to me. ‘You know, garden-pathing and all that. Docs think it’s one thing, based on vague symptoms. Because they’ve seen it before. Happens all over the place, man.’

‘Cognitive fixation,’ I say.
‘Or lock-up, yeah. Cognitive lock-up.’

He pours the orange juice, holds it out for me. Something sticky pulls on my skin as I try to reach the glass. It seems my hand is glued to the grimy tabletop. Suddenly, grief and impotence and emptiness boil up inside of me. ‘Actually, why do we even care?’ I demand as I tear my hand free. ‘My daughter is dead. If it is all meaningless, then why do we even care how disasters happen? To prevent them?’ I snort, wet and loud. ‘Give me a break.’

He pulls up a chair from the table next to me, swings it around, the thin back swivelling on his fingertips. He seems in no hurry. ‘I mean, hell,’ I continue, ‘if the thing that killed her is so way out there, so unlikely, so infinitesimal, then what good is it to poke into the messy details of some diagnostic, organisational archaeology? Chart review? Will it bring her back? Will it do anybody else any good?’

He sits on the chair, front to back, leans his chin in his hand, supports his elbow on the chair’s back.

‘See, that’s the puzzle.’ He lifts the cup to his mouth, takes a swig of tar sand. His Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows coffee. ‘We can do all kinds of forensic work on accidents, on deaths. But we do a crap job explaining suffering. These are meaningless coincidences of space and time. And then we make up some god who is behind it all...’

He swivels the cup away from his face, puts two fingers in his mouth and makes a puking sound. ‘I mean, what’s the whole childish script that the Judeo-Christian tradition can come up with?’ His cup is wagging in front of my face now, coffee fluttering over the edge, angry and challenging. He inhales savagely. ‘We invent some god who then invents rules, spells them out. People violate them, they
disobey, and wham, they get punished for their transgressions. Check out the stories. You’ll see. Rules, disobeying, punishment, suffering.’

The coffee cup lands on the table with a wooden bang. Up close, his face is a rumpled piece of wax paper. He looks like an artist on a smoke break from kneading a clay sculpture, the gunk of it jellied and smacked across his chest. ‘You get what that means?’ His eyebrows fly skyward. ‘The whole idea of suffering is that it’s your own damn fault. You’re made to suffer? Well, feel guilty, damn it – don’t feel sorry for yourself.’ He pushes back from the table, stomps off to the counter to refill his cup.

On the blond table he leaves behind a furious Rorschach of dark coffee stains.

I am silent.

In my mind I can see nothing but the shocked crumble of my wife’s face, the puckered agony that has squeezed out all her pretty features.

The accident?

My gut contracts sharply, bracing for a new torrent of guilt, the wet prickle of pain that pushes behind my eyeballs.

‘Think I want to be an atheist too,’ I mumble.

I sip some of the orange juice.

It is divine.

THE RAIN COMES.

First it is a soft hiss through the forest to my right. From the sound it seems to move along the narrow road, soon to arrive in spatter and dribble. The sky above the trees is low, a depthless grey. Light from the waning evening is diffuse, landing everywhere and nowhere.

My search for why my daughter died has led me here. I stand at the bend where two people met some weeks ago. Where they crashed into each other, killing a third. I peer among the trees, study the dead quiet of the road, no skid marks, no debris, nothing.

A life snuffed out, nothing to show for it.

No clues, no traces.

I stand there a long time, sucking in the saturated air, willing the bend in the road to yield something. To give me at least the hint of an answer. The road lies there, gaping back at me in stupid ignorance, with all the innocence of an imbecile. As Kierkegaard might have put it, it is existentially indifferent.

Random coincidences of time and space…

Indeed, there is something inescapably random, something existentially indifferent about the death of my little girl, of the trajectories intersecting the way they did, of her being positioned in the womb the way she was. Why not a second
earlier or later, why not a few degrees off to the left or right? The chances of all the pieces coming together like they did are so mind-numbingly small, infinitesimal. The arbitrariness is so riling, so intractable. Why was it my daughter who died and not my neighbour’s?

Rain has made it to the bend now. Black splotches on the tarmac merge and become a shiny, slick surface.

Does disaster have meaning? All my probing here on this corner of a forested road yields no answer to the question I most desperately want an answer to. Why? Why her? Why us, why me?

I look at the bend again. None of the forensic clues that I could generate from what it yields, about closure rates and vehicular vectors, will do me any good. The epistemological question of what happened is a lousy stand-in for the existential one of why I am made to suffer.

What is the meaning of disaster?

AT THAT MOMENT I have no idea that thirteen years later my wife will have become an expert in gestational disease and difficult pregnancies. That one day, out of many like them, she is confronted with the devastation of a patient, a would-be mum of thirty-nine, with six miscarriages, and now with a forced abortion because of the seventh foetus’ neural tube deficiency, the husband crying alone in an anonymous lobby downstairs.

Nor do I know that, by that time, I will have written my umpteen book on disaster, error, failure and suffering, translated into languages and reaching into corners of the world I do not even know.

Decades from now I might see that we ourselves are the hinge between disaster and meaning. That we, ourselves, evoke some kind of order, some significance, to colonise areas of intense chaos and turn them into pockets of bivouac.

But not that evening.

Not yet.

I look up at what passes for the sky. I turn to leave. The rain has let up; the evening is aching to shut down.

Nothing is left but stillness and the steady drip of wet leaves.

Sidney Dekker is professor and director of the Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice and Governance at Griffith University. He is the author of several bestselling books on system failure, human error, ethics and governance, including most recently Patient Safety: A Human Factors Approach (CRC Press, 2011).
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