

MAGDALENA

Cilka Žagar

MAGDALENA

With Lightning Ridge opal miners

Oh, the wasted hours of life
that have drifted by;
oh, the good we might have done,
lost without a sigh!

Love that we might once have saved
with but a single word;
thoughts conceived but never penned
perishing unheard.

Take the lesson to your heart,
take and hold it fast:
the mill will never grind again
with the waters that are past.

Money speaks sense in a language all nations understand.
Behn

Kelly

The humidity of the summer flood makes people irritable. The waters from the 1974 rains barely subsided when the flood hit us again in 1976. Lightning Ridge became a tiny island isolated from the rest of the world. Perched on the raised ground we feel like shipwrecked strangers in the middle of the ocean.

Lisa and I are sitting under the meagre shade of the cedar tree at Lightning Ridge Primary school, waiting for our children.

Lisa was cutting opal on our opal cutting machine because they have no electricity in the camp.

My camp became a swamp full of mosquitoes. I would be the happiest person alive if I had a home like yours, says Lisa.

You are under the tent one day and own the best place in town the next. That's opal business, I try to cheer her up.

In the camp its either dust or mud. With kids at school there is nothing for me there, Lisa puffs on a cigarette.

They lifted the bishop with the helicopter, because he had to do a confirmation in Brewarrina. He was mining before the flood cut us off.

There are a doctor and his wife waiting to be evacuated as well. He has appointments waiting. They came for a holiday and couldn't part from opal on time.

The shafts are full of water. Miners want to get out for a holiday but the roads are impassable.

A couple of miners are pulling cars over the Narran river with the tractor. They open all doors so the river runs through the car as they cross it. I saw a man and a woman standing on one side each of their brand new Ford so the current wouldn't pull it down.

A new car is no big deal for someone on opal.

We are like debris brought down by the flood and stopped on the way somewhere, says Lisa.

Until the next flood takes us a little further, maybe.

Mobs of fat domestic pigs from Queensland were brought down with the flood. They'll go feral.

Good for pig hunting.

It feels like we are all on a holiday and nobody really lives here.

Weird, I agree.

Seven years old Kelly sits on the kerb waiting for her mum.

If we had a million dollars we would be very rich and everybody would love us and want our money, Kelly tells her battered rag doll. Kelly does not question the right and the wrong of things. She knows how things are.

Lisa's daughter told us that Kelly spread nasty rumours about Samantha's mother. Samantha is the most popular girl in Kelly's class. The teacher told Kelly that nice girls don't tell lies.

Nice girls never pick Kelly to be their best friend, said Lisa's daughter.

It isn't easy to love Kelly. She isn't clever and her red, fat cheeks have scaly skin. Her clothes smell on moth balls because her mum does not wash them after she brings them home from a second hand shop.

Kelly smells like a smoked sausage, said my son and I told him that nice boys don't say nasty things like that.

It's because she stands around the camp fire waiting for her food, I try to minimise the smell. Kelly's family has no running water or electricity in the camp.

When Kelly wasn't at school, the teacher asked the class to be kind to poor Kelly, Lisa's daughter tells us.

Kelly's mum ends pregnant every year. Kelly heard a woman say to her friend, that it was about time the government put a stop to it. We are all paying for the poor bastards, the woman looked at Kelly as she said that.

Samantha brought a new set of coloured pencils to school. All the nice girls circled around Samantha. Tim had a five dollar note his nanny gave him for his seventh birthday. Kelly stole Tim's money to buy coloured pencils so she could lend them to her best friends. Kelly figured that if she had coloured pencils she would also have best friends, but the kids who asked her for a loan of coloured pencils, weren't nice kids.

A boy scribbled dirty words on the toilet wall with Kelly's coloured pencils and his mum was sent for. Kelly's mum also came and she insisted that Kelly didn't even own any coloured pencils. Kelly asked her mum to remember when her father gave her the money to buy coloured pencils. Kelly's mum suddenly remembered and Kelly wondered how mum remembered something that did not happen. Kelly doesn't even know who her father is. Kelly is confused and wanders that maybe she has a father after all and that maybe her father really gave her the money, because he loves her.

When we find opal, people will love us and want our money, laughs Lisa.

That's what we are here for, I admit.

Nothing that actually occurs is of the smallest importance.
Wilde

THE ODD SOCKS

Same place, same time, same table, same people, says Tom as we gather in Lightning Ridge Bowling club on the last night of 95.

We celebrated New Year's Eve together for the last five years, remembers Ema.

Tradition, says Peter.

Traditions here are young, says Lisa.

Better young than none, says Melanie.

It is hard to imagine that a hundred years ago nobody lived here, says Tom.

Lightning Ridge may become a ghost town in a couple of years, says Peter.

People said that thirty years ago when I began to build my house, says Tom.

Aborigines might put a claim over the field like they did in Coober Pedy, warns Jack.

That was the nail in the coffin for Coober Pedy, says Marty.

It's bad enough that you can't find opal or sell it, says Tom.

We are one of the kind, says Melanie sweeping the crowd in the auditorium of the Club with her glance.

What kind would that be? teases Jack, Ema's husband.

Odd socks. Damaged people, weirdoes, geniuses, adventurers, vagabonds, artists, laughs Melanie. She looks radiant in her almost transparent, long, silky, richly coloured dress.

I thought we escaped all of those when we moved to the Ridge, says Peter.

There are at least two men to each woman here tonight, says Melanie.

Trust Melanie to check the men, laughs Lisa.

The town's a haven for single women, says Tom.

Or a nightmare, says Melanie.

Why?

A town full of handsome rejects.

Definitely a man's town, says Tom looking at the crowd.

Boys bring boyfriends to the party, laughs Ema.

A great big pile of odd socks, laughs Lisa.

One always hopes that another sock would be a perfect match to the one we don't want to throw away, agrees Ema.

You can't throw away something you didn't wear out yet, I say thinking of all the rejected people.

Some are almost new, some are good quality, says Lisa.

Some are rare and expensive, you wouldn't throw out a good sock, like that, says Melanie looking at Marty. I think Melanie fell in love with Marty. Or maybe she just fell in love. Both probably fell in love. They are that kind of people, the life of the party, not concerned with morality or propriety.

Some are so common you'd be sure to find a match but either the matching colour sock is too worn out, too short, too long, too stretched or shrunk, Ema is still thinking of socks.

You wouldn't find a worn out, cheap, worthless sock on the pile of odd socks. It would be thrown out if it wasn't a pair. We only keep the socks we hope to match up again sometime in the future. Melanie probably hopes that Marty will prove to be a perfect match.

A sock becomes fragile and brittle if not used for long. If you put it on, it's bound to fall to pieces, warns Lisa.

I wonder where all the matching socks disappear. Do they gather in some other mismatched drawer, I say.

There is always some safe remote corner found for odd socks, says Lisa.

They gather in weird places like Lightning Ridge, says Marty, squeezing Melanie's hand.

One can wear an old sock one grew old with but an old sock from the gutter is pushed deeper into oblivion, I say.

The sock gets a shape of a foot that has worn it. A new foot could never change the character of the sock, says Ema.

I feel like an odd sock, I laugh.

We admire you and Tom, because you are the properly matched pair, corrects Lisa.

Maybe not a perfect match but you are certainly matched, corrects Melanie.

Sometimes you buy a dress and if you are lucky you feel good in it until it falls into shreds, says Ema.

More often you buy a thing and give it away because you made a mistake, says Melanie.

It is never new again regardless of the price you paid for it. The person you give it to treats it as second hand and worthless, says Lisa.

Marty and I are the only real odd socks here tonight, concludes Melanie. They will remember this New Year's eve as lovers remember the few magic moments that make life worth living.

Peter, Tom and Jack begin to plan their January fishing expedition to Tumut. Women always whinge about going to the same old place year after year but men like the familiarity and the fishing. I have no idea where I would like to go for holidays. Just as well I don't have to choose.

Marty looks at his watch, its close to the magic moment of the New year's well wishing and kissing.

Four years to the end of the world, says Lisa, remembering Susan's warnings.

Susan is praying at home to atone for our sins, says Ema.

For some of us the world may end even sooner, I say and we become silent.

Let's promise to celebrate 2000 together, says Marty.

Who knows what will happen in the next four years, says Lisa. She is in her early forties but in her girlish pink top and black pants she can still pretend to be young. As soon as you tip fifty, the awareness of becoming old is written on your face.

One could almost tell what kind of people we are by the clothes we choose to wear, I think, but then I remember, that I bought my red dress to please Tom.

I wonder if Tom liked my red dress, because it was the first I tried on. Tom goes to the shop to buy what he needs. He can not understand why I like to touch things I do not need. I am not likely to buy something I don't need. When Tom finds an item he likes, he often buys three or four of the same in different colours. He made me buy two pairs of shoes once, because I said that they were comfortable. Saves time next time. Tom is economical but he would never admit that he is stingy.

Tom wears a light blue shirt and grey pants. He doesn't need clothes to attract people. They take notice of his ideas and plans. He talks about physics and electronics and we listen amazed at the possibilities he presents. Maybe we really are a tiny part of the one whole big something only Tom can envisage.

Long ago Tom hung a sign on the wall of his office: Never, never give up. He never gives up or gives in. You can count on Tom to win any game he plays.

The last seconds of 1995 are ticking away, reminds Jack ready to take Ema on the dance floor. Jack looks elegant in multi-coloured silk shirt and white pants. Ema's Italian influence is evident. She glows in her soft

Italian designed white linen dress. Her sun tanned skin stands out. Ema and Jack are a beautiful couple.

These people are the only proof that I am. If they vanished would I still be alive? The thought scares me.

To believe your own thought,
to believe that what is true for you
in your private heart
is true for all men-
that is genius.

Waldo

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

It is over forty degrees Celsius outside and the air conditioners are working full blast.

I am invited to exhibit my paintings in Europe. I show Lisa the letter. The curator of a gallery asked me to write a short story of my life for their pamphlet.

Congratulation. Start writing, says Lisa.

If I start with Once upon the time, they might think that my life was a fairy tale.

You better stick to the facts. People are not interested in fairy stuff, says Lisa.

Everybody loved fairies once, I protest.

Men want to pin the fairy down and have her under control, says Lisa.

I feel like a centipede wandering which leg comes after which. What should I write?

Whatever you write will show what you consider important. You would probably do the same in painting, says Lisa.

I paint details of little events that have no meaning for others.

But you give these events your meaning, I am so proud of you, says Lisa.

It's not a big deal, everybody paints in Lightning Ridge, I protest modestly.

You always downplay your achievements, scolds Lisa.

Whoever will say that I achieved nothing will be second hand, because I already said that, I laugh.

Modesty and humility will get you nowhere, says Lisa.

Where would you want me to get.

I probably figured subconsciously that others would not criticise me as harshly if I put myself down first. Much less painful that way. Maybe my master plan was to be insignificant.

You are not ambitious, says Lisa.

My only ambition is to keep my family happy, I confess. I know that my family is what people admire.

How do I explain to Lisa that I would like to discover who I am, why I am here, where I am going. I am searching for that other half of me that will make me feel whole. Sometimes I feel like I am standing outside my body watching my performance.

I never trusted anybody completely. I am afraid to jump in at the deep end. I hold back. I never discovered the joy of surrender. I have nightmares about drowning. I need the safety net, the cage.

Put your hand in the hand of the Lord, the voice of the pious Susan follows me. But I can't. I obey Tom and he never ever gave up trying to make me surrender. He made me feel smaller and smaller with every step I took while I was looking for a way out.

I have no best friend.

Believe me, everybody is waiting for a pat on the back, Lisa brings me back.

Of course.

You are scared that maybe you don't deserve it.

Maybe I am. Maybe I don't.

Your pictures seem so cheerful when I first look at them but later they make me feel kind of lonely, says Lisa.

I am glad they make you feel something. I never told Lisa about myself. She seems to be telling my story. I am glad that she likes my pictures.

Even I make pictures of sorts although they are not really my pictures. Lisa is doing tapestry. Lightning Ridge people have to leave lasting impressions.

I wish I knew what to write. Born, married, one daughter and two sons, two grandchildren. This summary would fit millions of women who have nothing to do with my pictures.

Write about things you like, suggests Lisa.

I lived an ordinary life, I lie. I can't explain that I only really lived in those moments when I felt united with another soul in my dreams. I paint an enchanted life that has little to do with things I do or with people around me.

Just the milestones, reminds Lisa.

I really don't know what the milestones of my life are.

Something exciting and significant, says Lisa.

Things that are significant and exciting to me may not be so for others. Imagine a caged bird longing to join the flock of birds flying South. Is the cage real or the longing?

A bird is a bird and a cage is a cage. You can touch and see these things.
What you can't see you can't share.

But invisible things make you happy and sad and angry and guilty.
Dreams are invisible.

What's the use of dreams if you can't realise them?

They are realised as long as they make you feel alive. They may be the only life. Imagine a person in an iron lung. How would a totally paralysed person live without imagining.

Oh, be sensible.

Young people expect old people to be sensible. I was always sensible maybe it's my to be silly, I laugh.

Life is really just a chronological recount of things that happen around you, says Lisa.

It could also be our invisible thoughts.
We become silent wandering about the duplicity of life.

My public image covers my private chaotic existence. My two opposite selves live a healthy life together but one can not go on without the other. Before I go to sleep I travel unnoticed in my fantasies. Is that life also a part of me? And then there is my body living another life independently as I dream in my sleep.

Am I my father's Cinderella or the lost Little Red Riding Hood? Am I Eve or Jezebel? Am I Magdalena that loved Jesus or an Amazon that loved power? Am I an abused teenager, rejected child, desired maiden or despised other woman? Am I a pious Catholic or a sinful fornicator, am I the legacy of my father's dreams or the result of my mother's praying? Am I Adam and Eve in one? The Eve part of me is eyeing the apple, reaching out for what is sacred and secret and sweet. The Eve in me wants to be god, the almighty. The Adam part of me is following. My children, like Cain and Abel, are equally loved and equally jealous. We are cursed because Eve picked of the fruit and we lost our innocence and we know right from wrong. We are nothing like god despite the fruit Eve picked. We only know the shame and the guilt and the everlasting lust for love.

The scientists say that cosmos is expanding, I say to Lisa.

Only our awareness of cosmos is expanding. What is, always was.

How could something that is endless expand? Eternity and universe and god, what is at the end of it all, what is after or before? I feel so small and afraid.

Except for human anxiety about afterlife, there is no difference between us and animals, says Lisa.

What do we know about the anxieties of the monkeys or the prayers of a mole?

Every group of people claims that their god is better.

God created humans in his likeness.

Only by our criteria. Animals live, love, and procreate. Only they don't agonise about the meaning of it all and about their final destination.

How do we know that animals don't search for meaning. To us African tribes don't search for meaning either.

They search for survival. Searching for meaning is a curse.

We play with bits of yesterday and bits of tomorrow, says Lisa.

The present is not even a moment. It isn't even a dot on the road to eternity.

You have always been a dreamer, says Lisa.

I am a tiny bit of this endless everything that always was but I worry about the whole big everything.

I only understand the little bit around me and don't agonise about more. If god wants me to know more he will let me know more.

Is my life just a register of the experiences my body had in its battle with the environment, I try to joke.

We become silent again.

Are my feelings and emotions only biological reactions to what is outside? Am I just a mirror image of events outside my body? Is there nothing that is essentially me? Are my thoughts only the rearrangement of the information gathered from outside, is there no thinking me? Would I feel anything for people if I was never exposed to them? If a surgeon changed my heart and replaced my blood, whose pulse would I feel in my veins? Whose heartache?

If, indeed, the micro neuro surgeon refurbished the centres of my mind and reorganised my genetic structure, would I still be I? Whose biography would I be writing? Are billions of neurones in my brain just as mindless as the atoms of a stone or the buttons on a disconnected computer?

Has the Internet captured what people presumed to be unique human capacity? Does the computer feel sad? Dogs feel sad. Is there nothing that is independently and uniquely me?

Of course, there is my soul, mum told me about this secret sacred part of me that nobody can take away or change. Only my soul can comprehend the enormity of god and the universe and love. In my soul I say prayers to the almighty who keeps the stars in heaven and the waves in the ocean and the memories visiting at night. My soul tells me that I am a little part of the big whole, accounted for

and protected. The soul tells me that somebody is in charge and that I should not be afraid. It tells me that everything is as it should be.

Mum told me about the soul when the pages of my awareness were still lily white, I smile at Lisa.

The memory of Ben is in my soul. I loved Ben. Even if Ben died the memory of him will live. Memories are bitter sweet goodbyes of days gone by, these glimpses of the sad partings tell me that I was and that I am. There is a meaning to it all, the light shines over the visible reality of my environment.

There is more to me than the software a computer has, I have the divine in me that causes me to feel happiness, anguish and anxiety. The delicious bitter sweet sensations are mine alone.

The rest of the creation only feels physical pain and deprivation.

We don't know what the rest of the creation feels. How do you know that eagles do not dream of things they can not have. Maybe bees buzzing among the flowers dream of snowflakes. Maybe a well fed lion dreams of love. Maybe they worship their god, says Lisa.

Someone once said that when you tug at a single thing in nature you find it attached to the rest of the world. We are all part of what is. We can't separate ourselves from anything.

You blossom, reproduce and die, I say.

Like a cactus blooming one day and a prickle the next, says Lisa.

We pass on what we discover and our children keep on discovering and passing on their discoveries.

My father insisted that a man will never walk on the moon because god told Adam that he and his descendants shall till the land until they return into the dust they were made from.

We all return to dust, but life goes on, says Lisa.

We are all on the same road.

Less frightening.

I might go home, I say.

Your feet take you where your heart is, smiles Lisa.

Mum said that love is suffering for the good of others. I wonder if others are suffering for my good.

You are wondering too much.

Maybe I should write about people of Lightning Ridge. Their knowing me is the only proof that I am.

In Lightning Ridge people remain a mystery to each other. Do they know you well enough to know that you are alive? teases Lisa.

I don't know anyone well enough to say for sure what they feel they know about me. If they feel anything at all. I can see tiny reflections of myself in their knowing. Maybe there are a handful of people that will notice when I die.

We hide things we don't dare remember, says Lisa.

And things we are ashamed of, I add.

And things that scare us, says Lisa.

We grew roots into opal clay.

We lost a sense of nationality and religion and culture and kinship.

We try to find where we fit in a jig-saw. We make a unique picture. You never find two identical opals in Lightning Ridge or two of the same people.

I was confirmed at the age of twelve. I stood in front of my mother in a long white dress. Mum said: Listen to your guardian angel and you will always know what you must do. There is always a guardian angel looking after you. Remember that. Ask him which way to go.

Mum's words stayed with me because she whispered them with intensity like she was bequeathing me a fortune.

Before I went with my sponsor to church mum hugged me and said: Sometimes it might be hard but in the end you will come to where you want to go. Don't ever forget your guardian angel.

My sponsor told me on the way to church: You can never love others if you don't love the divine part of yourself. You must love yourself. You are special, remember that.

Maybe that was how the women initiated me into the womanhood. Or into the Catholicism.

It's never wise to know anybody too well, because nobody is as fine as one would imagine, warned my dad. I wonder what he meant.

Maybe I am not as nice as people can imagine, maybe I know myself too well to love myself well enough. Are we all fighting for adoration, god and devil and the rest of us? Am I a neighbour whom god told you to love as himself. I search for that other part of me which is divine and adorable. I follow the rainbow but there is no end or the beginning to a rainbow.

Talk to god and you will fall in love with god and everything else will fall in place by itself, said mum.

How can you love something you don't know, I blasphemed in my budding innocence.

Speak to him in your heart and you will get to know him like you know me, said mum.

Is it a sin not to love god, I asked.

There is no sin but only love will keep you happy. Jesus is love, he works miracles with our hands, said mum.

Maybe, like myself, mum needed to believe something.

I will write about Lightning Ridge people. perhaps what they know about me is what I am.

For words, like Nature, half reveal
and half conceal the soul within.
Tennyson

Magdalena

I wonder if my parents knew that I was born with two personalities, when they named me Magdalena. They died before I had enough sense to ask them. Maybe they knew that I would commit many sins and would need to be forgiven many times. Maybe they hoped that the name would save me.

I think that I was meant to be one very un-identical twin and that is the reason why the two personalities fight inside me. I am Martha and Mary. I am Magdalena but Magda and Lena are two different people. Tom is often accusing me that I want my cake and eat it too.

Did my mother herself feel like Magdalena? I only ever knew my mother's saintly part but maybe she was secretly a sinner like Mary Magdalene. I found her in the orchard once crying desperately. I didn't dare ask why she cried. Maybe my father knew a Magdalena sometime somewhere or someone who was like her. He had a mischievous smile dancing around his lips as he told me fairy tales that inflamed my imagination and transformed me into a magical princess.

Magda is like my mother, she wants to please god and my husband. My parents made me afraid of god and Tom made me afraid of himself. Men and gods need sacrifices and gifts and worship. I wonder how god looks at my sacrifices, he may reject them like Tom rejects them, at random. Is god happy with my penance and suffering and denial? Are god and Tom grateful for my humility and obedience. When I feel that they are not happy, I try harder. Sometimes I rebel. Of course, I pay the price and then I sacrifice again. I light big candles for the big god and little candles for the saints. I am not certain what is suitable for the virgin Mary.

Santa of long ago declared that I had to be grateful for little gifts. I had to be happy that Santa tolerated me at all.

I always do what I'd like others to do to me but they don't.

Magda is a quiet, predictable river, a meaningless cloak for the threatening furnace that is Lena who is a nymph reaching into the burning torch, never satisfied. She sits beside the flames like a vestal virgin, perpetually guarding the precious light.

Magda and Lena despise each other. Magda always wins and Lena silently plans revenge.

I used to laugh one minute and cry the next, but I learned to balance my act. Now I am never completely happy or miserable so people call me sensible.

I cough a lot. Maybe smoking isn't helping me to be sensible any more.

Magda shut Lena into her subconscious, for her own good, because Magda knows that Lena would never survive in the real world. Lena gets me in trouble. It seems that Lena's whole existence depends on love. She is like a fish out of water without love. Lena lives in the twilight, she is a mushroom thriving in the dark. Lena is afraid that the light would go out and she would have to be in the dark for ever. She is of no practical use to anybody. Lena would never get things done because things don't matter to her.

Lena wants to end the banality of Magda's existence, because the flickering flames of her longing have to be hidden behind Magda's sensible actions. Magda protects Lena against people who would ridicule and reject her.

Mum would probably say that Lena is a devil in me.

Magda knows that one has to put up with things for the sake of peace and for the good of the family. All I have is a family.

I took the wrong turn somewhere sometimes. I kept going in the hope that the road I took would eventually join the right road. It was never the right time to go back and take the right turn. When the pain of powerlessness becomes unbearable I light a smoke. Like an anaesthetic smoking helps me continue on the wrong road. I can't escape but at least I can make things look agreeable.

My husband Tom is a well respected man and he is convinced that I am not properly grateful for his faithfulness and that I don't love him as I should. If I loved him properly, he wouldn't have to worry about me. Tom promised to love me and look after me. He was an experienced man and he knew what he was doing. I was only young then and didn't know where I wanted to be and why things happen as they do. I still don't know.

It was never a good time to leave and go back. I had to look after my children. It still isn't a very good time to leave because my grandchildren like to visit. I could not be happy seeing my children unloved.

I never had a good reason for leaving anyway.

Tom makes me feel small, bad and insignificant. Maybe I am all these things and that is why I keep running away from this unworthy self. Only I was never strong enough to get away. I can't leave myself behind. I am searching for someone who will love me as I am.

Lena dreams that one day soon, one glorious day, I will return home and start again.

Tom seems just as obsessed with love as Lena. He says that he would rather kill me than let me go. He wants to impress me by the enormity of his love.

There are people sitting on my train talking to Magda about the weather and politics, we travel to the same destination while Lena travels on another train experiencing sensations unknown to other travellers.

I remember the small apartment in Europe where Tom and I first lived. The view from the small living room was over the railway. You could see the trains disappear far into the forest and over the hill.

Lena watched the constant coming and going of trains, people lugging heavy suitcases, embracing, kissing and crying in anticipation of a new beginning. She imagined herself walking with a suitcase in hand, alone and free. Magda stayed in the safety of the apartment making a home for her family.

It bothers me that as a practising Catholic I can not truthfully say that I firmly believe or disbelieve anything. I could never make sense of all the details about the virgin birth and heaven and it bothers me that I can not in all certainty accept every lesson of scripture and every letter of the bible.

The reality of god written on little Magdalena's consciousness by my parents, stayed with me forever. The threat of purgatory and hell are frightening.

I need the church to keep me going straight, I suppose. My god shakes his head disapprovingly. My guardian angel flutters behind me to illuminate the righteous path in front of me like my mother promised that he would as she guided me through the dark forest to the early six o'clock mass. That was in another life and time, of course, but the right path still shines.

I keep wondering what god expects from me. Do both god and devil watch my confusion. Are god and devil both cheering as I am being pulled apart? Is that all there is? God's spirit winning over devil's body? Is this purgatory or hell?

God sees all, knows all, mum's words echo the warning in my subconscious.

Is anyone really watching? I ask Lisa.

Once you are brought up in faith you need faith to survive, warns Lisa but what would Lisa know, she never goes to church.

Without faith I am nothing, I say. If you have faith you have love.

Those that have ever learned a prayer are forever hoping that god will hear them, says Lisa.

One does not live from bread alone, I quote the scripture. The soul, I begin but Lisa stops me.

If we all started as a minute fish, when did we suddenly develop a soul? Which of your ancestors was the first to have the soul? Do monkeys develop the soul at a certain point of evolution? Is soul evolving until you get to a point of nirvana. Maybe even god is evolving and getting smarter every day. People invented god and soul to protect themselves from death. But we all die like monkeys.

God must have a plan for us, I say frightened of Lisa's blasphemies.

We will never know if there is a plan, or what his plan might be, says Lisa.

He revealed his plan in the bible.

Jewish men wrote the bible. They invented god who made them a chosen people. They have tentacles in every business, they have the world in their hands. They are the most powerful.

Maybe that is the plan.

They want to conquer the gentiles and make a new Jerusalem the capital of the world.

Maybe god planned that.

That's why Hitler wanted to exterminate them. He wanted the Aryan race to rule for the millennium.

Maybe he was the last anti-Christ. He hit Jews on both cheeks and that's how people took notice.

He made it possible for Jews to return to Jerusalem.

But Jesus died for us because he loved us. He gave a meaning to it all. Only love can save us.

In nature there is no love or generosity, there is only the fight for power and survival. Everybody wants power. That is natural, says Lisa.

But there is a desire to love.

Parents love their young because they want to survive through their offspring. That's all.

Love gives everything a meaning.

You love your children because they are an extension of yourself. All species do it.

People have a need to be good and kind.

The leaders brainwash their followers to be good and kind and to submit. It's the same in the wolf pack.

But people feel good when they do good for others.

Kids are brainwashed by authorities that selfish acts will be punished by god or other authorities. If the law does not get you god will in the end. Those that want us to be good and kind created the law and god. They teach us that it pays to suffer so we suffer willingly but all the time we calculate the rewards. We feel good when we do good because we believe that god will reward us. The leaders tell us how to live, what we need, what will make us beautiful and happy. Animals don't listen to advice.

Animals are dying out while people multiply.

And kill each other.

There is no right or wrong way, but you are done to, as you do to others, mum told me. Perhaps I didn't do good enough to others.

Talk to god and everything else will fall in place by itself, said mum.

Maybe mum didn't really have all the answers. She sometimes cried. Maybe mum only knew how things were, not how they should be. She would have told me if there was another way.

I left mum to follow Tom. I appointed Tom my judge and he gradually learned the appropriate behaviours. He scolds and criticises, I apologise and cringe.

The only group I vaguely belong to in Lightning Ridge, are Catholics. A group of about thirty people out of ten thousand, we, practising Catholics, meet in a tiny wooden church every Sunday and exchange greetings and news. Aborigines, Italians, Filipinos, Irish, Scottish, Croatian, Slovenian, Australian, we all talk about the various degrees of luck and glorious weather and naughty children and high prices. We exchange news from home because we feel more or less homeless here.

I go to church to atone for the lack of faith. If I had more faith I would have more love and love would give the meaning to it all and nothing would be too difficult if I had a purpose. Solid faith would banish fear, anguish, anger and guilt forever. Faith would set me free. If only I could believe with all my heart and mind.

If only I had the unwavering faith of my mother. But I am also my father's daughter and behind his fatherly exterior danced the smiling fairy tales teller who left his legacy in me.

Just pray, says Susan. One day a miracle will happen for you. Since I found my faith I sleep well, I never worry, I never get upset, and life is beautiful.

The beauty is in the eye of the beholder, I try to escape.

The beauty is not a sight but a feeling, says Susan.

I go to church.

Church has nothing to do with it. Jesus lives in your heart.

I am afraid to abandon my mother's religion.

Fear stops you from loving Jesus. You must not be afraid because there is nothing to be afraid of. Jesus lives in every heart.

I am never sure if god is at all pleased with me. I pray for my husband and for forgiveness of sins. Maybe god doesn't really care what I pray for. Maybe he finds my torments fascinating? I pray to god to take blasphemous thoughts like that out of my heart. Where do thoughts come from anyway if not from god himself?

From the devil, of course. He is constantly trying to tempt us, mum told me.

I believe that we, the church goers are good people because god holds us accountable for our every thought. We are all more or less scared.

You make your bed and you lie in it, dad said.

Oh, talk not to me of a name great in story;
the days of our youth are the days of our glory;
Byron

My becoming.

I reason that the voices from my past have no right to follow me, because I moved on. But they whisper into my aloneness. I carry the experiences of my ancestors like a relay runner carries the baton, looking for the next in line to pass it to. My children are getting their inheritance. All the children get theirs. I am only a link in the chain of life.

Sometimes in my silent moments I return to the enchanted kingdom of my childhood.

My pious mother told me that life is a valley of tears. She read me stories about saints and I wanted to be a saint, a heroic suffering martyr. I waited for the virgin Mary to appear to me and tell me that god had chosen me to be a saint.

I wished to believe in something totally and follow some ritual with complete surrender. Maybe I was destined to be a nun. I wanted to be a nun but after communist liberation things changed.

My father told me about the birds and showed me their courtship in the spring. He made me flutes to imitate birds' calls and he showed me all the spring flowers and baby animals of the forest. He told me fairy tales as we walked in the fields.

I can still hear dad telling me about Cinderella and the Snow White. I began to believe in prince charming and the happiness ever after.

Sometimes dad disappeared to have a smoke and mum scolded him with a warning that god sees all. I became careful in my thoughts and in my words and in my actions. Mum told me that we sin when we do wrong and when we fail to do good.

In my thoughts I travel to my hometown to find witnesses of my childhood. I know that children I knew became old people and some died. The roads and the playgrounds disappeared. Images that touched me, mean nothing to people that live there now.

Maybe there is an old man who remembers me kneeling on the steps of my home at the age of four. There was a group of soldiers with guns in front of me. In the house were my little brother and sister. I begged the soldiers to shoot me but spare the babies. I can still see the young men laughing at me as they left. My heroic deed is vividly pictured in my memory.

Most nights partisans rattled our windows. They wanted food. Mum looked after the babies and dad carried me around as the soldiers emptied the cupboards.

As the war ended, there was an air of excitement.

Communism promised bread and equality to downtrodden. My teachers told me that there is no god and no saints, and no fairies, only people. Everything my parents taught me was a lie after all. The government said so and if you refused to believe the communist government, they made life unpleasant for you. I wanted to become a communist.

At the age of ten a big, respected hero of the revolution took me into the woods and made me lay on the moss. He took his pocket knife out and told me to take my panties down. I didn't even have any panties yet. We were all poor after the war. He spread my legs and looked at the parts mum told me I must always hide. He held me down and opened the shameful part in the middle with his fingers. I had no idea what he wanted and then he let me go and he laughed loud into the woods as I ran home ashamed. The shame followed me like god. I began to believe that I am not very good or clever or popular or worthy. I became afraid of big powerful men.

Later a boy from school chased me into the woods, he pulled down my pants and stuck his finger into the opening between my legs. He also ran away laughing and I cried utterly ashamed.

I began to hate the parts I had to hide between my legs. I hoped that when I grow up nobody would ever again force me to expose these parts.

Since the war mum wore black and dad became silent. The Red Army murdered their two first born teenage sons, who refused to believe in communism. The whole village grew silent. Every house had someone who had to be punished because they failed the revolution.

People glanced around and whispered.

Death is always the greatest beginning, said my grandfather. He was put in the chair in the morning and was taken to bed in the evening. His legs gave up but he was the only person who didn't seem afraid to talk.

The nations are reborn through destruction and suffering. New life begins, he said. He saw it all before.

It is scary when you realise that there are no answers to questions young people ask, said my grandmother.

I began school just as the Red Army liberated the world. Or so we were told at school. The teacher told us the communist plan for a glorious future. I learned the slogans and the songs of the revolution. I adored my beautiful, kind, young teacher who was herself a glorious heroine of the revolution still wearing an army cap to school.

What can you tell me about the Red Army? the teacher asked.

They are the heroes of the revolution who liberated us from the Nazis, Fascists and the rotten imperialistic capitalist West, chanted the boy in a big clear voice. We learned this litany every day.

And who are the traitors?

We all knew that the traitors were shameful collaborators that betrayed the communist revolution.

The boy hesitated and the teacher urged him on. Do you know any traitors?

Yes, miss, my dad, my brother and our neighbours were traitors, said the boy with his eyes to the floor.

When the teacher inspected our books she noticed a page torn out of my reader. It was the first page under the hard cover and it had Stalin's picture on it. I was kept back after school and was questioned by the principal. I didn't know who tore out the picture but I suspected my father. Afraid for him I lied that I tore the picture because I spilled ink on it by accident. The principal was writing something in his book and looked at me with suspicion.

I remember that first autumn after the war well because other frightening things were happening. One cold morning on my way to school I saw Jesus lying in the mud. A few hundred metres from my home on the edge of the forest was a tiny chapel with Jesus statue. People made a cross as they passed it, some stopped and said a prayer. I sometimes looked into the eyes of Jesus and talked to him in my heart. Now my friend had a head broken and his body was splattered with mud on the footpath near the chapel. The gaping crack in the head made him look ridiculous, the exposed red heart on his chest was covered by a cow-pad. He was ripped off the cross and his legs remained crossed in the puddle. Scared, I fled, I did not know why, but I ran all the way to school and did not tell anyone about it. The image of broken Jesus remained in front of me.

It is our Jesus, said mum simply as she washed the life size clay figure.

My grandfather built the chapel when his son returned from the first war, said Dad as he repaired Jesus' head.

Dad made a wooden pedestal in the corner of the main room and carefully placed the statue on it. Mum placed a flower pot near its feet.

They know not what they are doing, mum muttered to herself like a prayer.

I became scared of the statue, I never again talked to it or made the cross. The unknown power of the night made the almighty Jesus powerless. He became one of us, frightened and silent, he was a fugitive

in the corner of our room. I became afraid that someone would discover him and tell THEM. I would have no chance to become a communist then. But nobody ever mentioned the empty chapel or the broken Jesus and I almost believed that it never happened. Much later someone placed a little statue of Mary on the floor of the chapel.

Most of the crosses and the holy statues were destroyed and the pictures of Stalin replaced the icons of the past. The confused words of those I liked stuck in my memory.

Religion is only a superstition for backward peasants, my lovely young teacher said.

Communists are afraid of God. They know that people need God. They want to destroy God but God will destroy them. Communists turned Stalin into God but time will come when Stalin's name will be mud and people will turn to God again.

I gradually became ashamed of my superstitious parents. I realised that I was a traitors' child. It became clear to everybody that the children of the communist revolutionaries were somehow better and smarter. They received all the privileges at school, they had opportunities.

It bothered me that my parents failed to believe in Stalin. They did not dare actually say so but I knew. They went to church which was clearly against Stalin's teachings. I read in my first reader that Lenin was our greatest teacher and leader. Like children everywhere I wanted to belong but I knew that my parents did not approve or belong.

My parents never approved of what I chose to do.

I felt punished for their sins. I was taken away into the boarding school to escape the bad influence of my parents. Maybe my beautiful heroic teacher recommended me because she knew that I wanted to become a communist.

The words Hitler and Stalin, the symbols of good and bad, are imprinted on my mind. I never learned in history lessons that Stalin and Hitler were allies who destroyed Poland. Stalin of my childhood was noble, pure, good and heroic. Hitler, a cruel murderer, later became synonymous with the rotten foreign West that enticed people into slavery.

When I was sixteen I begged god to save me from temptations, because there were so many beautiful temptations in spring and so much love

and hope and such a brilliant future ahead of me. The world was a magic place and there was an open road in front of me.

When I was seventeen Tom told me that he loved me. He was a grown up man and he brought me flowers and gifts. I was delighted by his attention. I finally grew up and became desirable. Tom said that I had to prove it to him that I loved him by letting him make love. I had no idea what love was and why I was driving him insane. I had no right to make Tom suffer because he was kind to me.

Mum found out that Tom is married, she cried and dad told me never to see Tom again. Tom told me that everything will be all right after he gets a divorce and we get married and have children of our own. I was only a little girl and he was a big man who knew how things are. He was a communist leader then and my father was an old disappointed man.

Mum told me that I should be ashamed of myself taking a married man for a husband. God will punish me in the end, she promised. Tom said that divorce wasn't a big deal in the communist society.

I left god and stopped praying. But god follows me into the dark sleepless nights with the words of my mother.

Even the communists could not stop god reminding me that I am going the wrong way. We escaped and came to the end of the world.

I remember that first summer in Lightning Ridge. The cockatoos in flight impressed me. Loud and unafraid they screeched over me. I lay on the prickly, scented ground, eyes shut, open to the sounds and smells. My heartbeat became synchronised with the pulse of the Earth and the screeching of the birds. I had no words for all I felt but the joy of it brought tears to my eyes. Reborn into the land and less lonely I began to long for the solitude to re-live my intimacy with the land. The new life, the growth and the mating calls of the birds overwhelmed me.

In those early days in Lightning Ridge I dreamed that one day I would show my dad the big colourful Australian birds and the soft grey-pink colours of the Australian bush. I could almost hear my father say that birds at home sing better. In the fields before the sunrise he told me to listen to the larks announcing the day. He pointed out nightingales and blackbirds. He told me to listen to the cuckoo in spring. If you carried a coin when you first heard the cuckoo call you would have a prosperous year. My father always put a coin in my pocket at the right time.

The tune of a song mingles in the breeze. Long forgotten tunes echo in me. The longing makes me feel hungry for the far away and unattainable. There is a huge well inside of me and it wants to be filled.

We are not creatures of circumstance; we are creators of circumstance.
Benjamin Disraeli

LIGHTNING RIDGE POSTMISTRESS

The postmistress made a big splash into the small pond of Lightning Ridge. She derived her name Lana from some other Russian name but few people ever call her anything but a postmistress. She came in June 1966 and at the end of 1966 she donated the end of year school prizes and made a speech on the presentation night. She also made a speech for each individual child she presented and she kissed every child. She promised every child that she will monitor his or her progress and would have more prizes to offer in the future if he or she grew up as upstanding and hard working citizen.

The postmistress presented school prizes every year since 1966. Some snarl at the audacity of this foreign post mistress but most are grateful for her generosity. Some also feel less foreign because of her presence.

The post mistress often speaks at funerals. She knows how to make an appropriate speech for every occasion. On behalf of mourners, she praises the dead and to their families she expresses sympathies. Touched by her own words of sadness she sobs openly and her large bosom heaves while her corseted stomach remains as still as steel. In sorrow she touches the hearts of people and most forgive her for knowing all their secrets. Everybody knows that the postmistress knows all the secrets in the Ridge. Some she heard on the phone, some were told to her in strict confidence and many were gleaned from the letters people received from solicitors and other officials. The postmistress holds the people of Lightning Ridge in the palm of her hand, so to speak. Nobody actually knows what the postmistress knows about them but they suspect that she at least knows everything that they get through the mail or the phone. If she didn't know everything there is no telling what she knows and what she doesn't. It is best to be open and honest and on good terms with the postmistress.

If anybody needs cash she lends money freely. Most of those needing money are on social security and she deducts their debt plus interest with their fortnights' payment. People accuse her of robbing them but they still come to her and ask for the loan and she lends willingly. Many people are forever indebted to the post mistress. She told me about the ones that never paid back.

In 1968 Lightning Ridge post mistress asked me to see her in her office. Lightning Ridge is one of the rare post offices that remained private and so our post mistress, as a proprietor, remained an important person. The post mistress told me that I could work for her as a manual phone operator because she trusted me. I was new in the Ridge and my English was poor but she promised to teach me everything I needed to know. She needed someone whom she could trust absolutely. She gave me a long sermon on how it was illegal and highly immoral to listen in to people's private conversations. The postmistress explained that if you listened to people's private conversations you'd know all about new opal rushes, opal buyers, divorces, thieving and other scandals. You would know more about the coming court cases than the prosecution and the defence put together.

I never regretted my decision to work at the post office.

With three children at the local school and Tom mining I had my hands full at home as well so there was little time for wandering what life is all about.

The post mistress knows more about people than anybody else in town because she speaks most languages. I could only glean snippets of German, Italian, Russian, the mixture of Yugoslav languages and English. The post mistress isn't an ordinary woman. She wears high heels and stockings and sometimes gloves even during the long summer when other Ridge women live in long T shirts and men pull their beer bellies over their boxer shorts. Her breasts are bigger and better supported than any other Lightning Ridge breasts. She wears a body suit that pushes her breasts towards her neck and flattens her stomach. I once heard a Bosnian man say to his mate: if I could suck on those. Some of the men here have weird tastes.

Once I saw a man coming from her bedroom and he had a shirt over his trousers. I was astonished that the postmistress let a man with a shirt out come anywhere near her. She is a big, matronly, middle aged woman in a shiny polyester, silk like, outfit with frills on top. The post mistress confided to me that a burly looking miner offered her a big beautiful opal ring, but she told him straight out, that she wasn't one of the town's cheap prostitutes. She offered me chocolates the man left. I never associated her with sex but I was only very young then. The

post mistress had black circles under her eyes. Some whispered that this was a sign that she had a lot of sex but her husband told my husband that she has a stomach ulcer.

People in distress often want to see our post mistress privately and I hear them sobbing in her office.

They are so grateful to you, I said to the postmistress.

Gratitude is a lively expectation of favours to come, said our postmistress to me once at the beginning. I had no understanding of the words then but they sounded prophetic.

Most people feel intimidated by the post mistress but they never reach the limit of their tolerance because she redeems herself with unexplained generosity and sensitivity. I newspaper proprietor, a woman of influence, once said that the postmistress is a Dracula one minute and the next she is Mother Teresa.

Our postmistress grew rich and people suspect her of some evil source of income. They have nothing tangible that would stand in court. She is a foreigner but that means little in town where the majority of people are foreigners. She presents herself as compassionate, righteous, dignified and tolerant but who could be rich and righteous at the same time.

A club manager once said: She is none of the things she wants us to believe she is.

Lawyers and judges and politicians stop at her place to have a cup of coffee and delicious cakes. The postmistress and judiciary understand each other, they have many long evenings together eating delicacies she cooks. Her cakes are legendary. Even Tom likes her cooking.

She has police and solicitors and judges in her pocket, complains Peter. They are all eating out of her hand literally, agrees Tom.

Under the skin all people have digestive systems, says a newspaper woman who hates postmistress' guts.

The postmistress helps the illiterate and those otherwise inadequate with all their administration. Some accuse her of taking money from the poor but nobody knows for sure if she ever took any money from anybody. Maybe she is Mother Teresa.

She speaks in court, she is a character witness for those who have no one else to witness for them, and she translates in most languages.

The post mistress gives me presents when I least expect them, because she is grateful that she can trust me explicitly. She told me things which I

wouldn't dream of repeating. She knows me better than my friends know me and I don't want anyone to know me as well as the postmistress does. She has a way of finding out things and she isn't afraid of telling the things she knows. What she doesn't know isn't worth knowing. People know that she knows so they treat her with reverence like Catholics threaten the priests to whom they confess their sins. The postmistress gives lots of presents to lots of people though, and many people speak glowingly about her generosity.

The rumours that she steals money and valuables from the mail, were never proven. Nobody wants to make a formal complaint because we all feel at the mercy of the post mistress. And we have no evidence that she ever did anything wrong. She is a friend of the judiciary, after all.

I am scared that people would make formal complaints about me since I am only an employee and I never learned to bake cakes for the judiciary. The post mistress told me that being a phone operator is a responsible position which she wouldn't trust to someone who is not totally respectable and honest. My appointment was very important for my family right from the start. I became a provider while Tom searched for a fortune in opal. I became a nurturer and comforter, a cradle and the door mat and the warm cloak for my family. My family depended on me. I became respectable and sensible almost instantly as I was put in charge of our ship, so to speak.

The postmistress revealed to me, in strict confidence, of course, that she is really a Russian princess. She never knew her mother. During the war she was taken as a child to Switzerland for safety and was only reunited with her father after the war. Her father took her to Italy for two years and they lived in a small castle there. Eventually he left with his mistress and put his daughter in a convent. Later she married a Swiss industrialist and had two children with him before she discovered that he was still married to his first wife. They sent him to prison as a bigamist and she came to Australia and became a postmistress. She told me that nobody else knew who she is. She told me because she trusted me and I wouldn't dream of telling anyone.

The postmistress married a quiet Hungarian man before they came to Lightning Ridge but nobody ever knew him well either. They often visit her children in Sydney but I never met them because they never come up.

A Russian man once told me in strict confidence that our post mistress isn't Russian at all but Jewish. I couldn't understand why she would rather be Russian. I told him that I would rather be Jewish than Russian

and he could not understand that. Being either Jewish or Russian makes no difference to me really. Maybe it should. I just wanted to spite the Russian who was telling tales about my boss.

I wondered if the post mistress was testing my trustworthiness by telling me her deepest secrets but I never told anyone about it because I wanted to save my reputation and the job at the post office.

Soon after I started working as the phone operator, Gilgandra farmers discovered the new opal field at Glengarry. Opal was found in a big way fifty kilometres out of town. Millionaires were made over night. I heard the farmers from Gilgandra talking on the phone about closing the roads and camouflaging their equipment and camps so other miners would not hear about the new rush they discovered.

I never told anyone about it because I know that it is illegal and highly immoral to listen on other people's conversations and even more so to tell. Except to my husband Tom, of course. He got a couple of friends and they took a small plane to find the field and then they pegged. The news spread overnight and everybody moved to Glengarry. Just shows that you can't keep a secret in Lightning Ridge for long.

They made a small fortune. There was great rejoicing in Glengarry and the parties were on most nights. People still trusted each other in those good, respectable old days in the sixties. Opal was passed from hand to hand to be licked and admired. You could tell by the dirt around men's mouths if they found opal. These days they spit on opal and rub the dirt away with their hands because they don't trust each other's spit any more since they heard about AIDS. But the colour shone better when licked with tongues and wiped with lips. In those days nobody would spit on opal to see the colour. It would be most disrespectful.

Glengarry miners became rich and many fell in love under the stars with the stars in their eyes and pockets full of opal or opal dirt. They fell in love with each other's wives and husbands. The old marital resentments and new attractions blossomed around the camp fires. Cash money from opal was easier to split than insurance, registrations and mortgages of ordinary life.

Most Glengarry couples divorced or parted during the first year. Not to be in the wife swapping situation was almost like being out of the newly rich Glengarry society. A woman with two children went to a man whose wife went with their two children to live with another man whose wife went with her children. It was an epidemic, a chain reaction or something and people speculated who will catch the love bug next.

I only heard about it all on the phone from people who were really disgusted by the whole stupidity. They were unanimous in the opinion that the money is the root of all evil. There was one murder and one suicide as a result of the Glengarry rush.

Both Tom's partners were divorced eventually after they stopped mining in Glengarry. Tom said that they never had money before and the money made them mad.

Easy come easy go, said Tom. Their heads are spinning with money and they don't know what to do.

Money never changed Tom. He only became more confident. He told me that the money I earned was peanuts, that the work I did at home could be done in an hour, that my cooking wasn't so great, that my hair was a mess, and that I sounded silly. Things like that, regularly. He said that he was working for the family and that we should be united in bringing up children and that they should do as he tells them while they are eating his bread and live under his roof. He said that there have to be rules and that we all better respect them. I joined the ranks of children and nothing ever changed much in our family.

It never even occurred to me that part of the roof could be considered mine or a slice of the bread was paid for out of my wages. Maybe I should have said so.

People said that Tom was the only one that kept his head while others lost theirs. He became a well respected man, he found good opal and the money never changed him.

Tom told me about women who would have liked to sleep with him and I was grateful that Tom remained faithful to me. Tom grew more and more confident and I was more and more grateful for his faithfulness as I persevered in saving our marriage. Our family was Tom's greatest possession so we all had to be careful with it. I learned to turn myself into anything he wanted me to be. I became a soft, cuddly toy that he could bend into any shape. But he became annoyed with me more and more and I searched for new ways to please him.

Glengarry was the first major milestone in the life of Lightning Ridge. Overnight most Ridge people emigrated fifty kilometres west into the bush.

Nobody ever knew how many people lived on opal fields. Most came so they could hide from those who wanted to know. Eight hundred people

were on the council electoral roll but everybody knew that there were around three thousand people for many years until Glengarry opened. Miners rang their city friends and relations about the good new rush at Glengarry and people kept on coming to live in the bush, cook on the open fire and feel the excitement of opal fever. The stories around camp fires grew bigger and better all the time. Whoever retold the story of someone's find had to add a considerable amount to satisfy his own desire for adventure. Everybody learned all about everybody's traces, their flaws and cracks and slides.

A Bosnian woman came to see me one day and she glanced at the bucket full of potch and colour. Tom and his partners have already taken out what was good enough for cutting and they later sold the bucket of potch and colour for five hundred dollars to an opal buyer to use in his lapidary shop. But when the woman saw the shiny bits of colour she told her husband that she saw with her own eyes opal worth one million in only one bucket. There were several buckets. Her husband told his partner and the partner told his friends and the buyer heard about it. The buyer was a reputable man and people believed him. The rest of the miners quoted this reliable source.

That's how we became known as millionaires. Tom never denied or confirmed the story, I think he liked being known as a millionaire. Nobody was ever sure how much he found because one could not ask Tom straight out. They asked me, but they knew that I was not allowed to tell. They knew who wore pants in our house.

Glengarry did not last long and opal became scarce again. Tom told me to keep my ears open for news of a new rush. I kept my ears open on the manual telephone exchange and sometimes the callers yelled for me to get off the line or else. Some were very rude to me but I couldn't say anything because I knew how illegal and highly immoral it was to listen in the first place. Their conversations were often boring but they helped me pass the time in the lonely exchange. Once a man called my name and told me to get off the line. But I am not on it, I yelled back, before I had time to think. Calling me by name like that made me respond without thinking.

During the seventies the phone became automatic and I got a job in the post office, where you could hear most conversations repeated openly. Post office is much like a doctor's surgery or hairdressers, people feel free to tell the snippets of the events. In our spare time the staff of the post office put the snippets into a jigsaw and we make a fair picture of what is going on.

Tom missed out on most of the other rushes so he decided that the way to go was meeting other miners at the pub. He goes every day to keep in touch and hear about new developments.

Like most women I have to stay home with the kids. Tom said that women aren't interested in mining anyway. Women work in the local services to provide bread and fuel while our husbands are out to bring home bacon.

Many miners live on bread alone for many years. Some even go hungry. Men without working wives go away periodically to earn some cash on seasonal employment so they could have another go at opal mining.

After years of not finding opal Tom became irritable. I feel guilty because I earn money and he doesn't. He complains that they don't pay me enough and that I spend too much and that I am shopping too long. I feel more and more guilty and I try to compensate for my negligence by being more submissive. I don't want Tom to be irritable with our young children so I try harder and harder to please him. I keep all the surfaces of our house constantly shiny. Tom rewards me with lovemaking but he still yells at the children when he is irritable. He has to vent his anger somewhere. I try to protect the children but he becomes annoyed with me and then I have to make it up to him so he is again talking to the children. He says that we are all against him, the four of us. Only Helena can cheer him up. She crawls into his lap to kiss him despite his grumpiness.

I first met Lisa when her husband Peter lost the tips of his fingers. His hand got caught in the hoist. The tiny Indian doctor took pliers and tried to trim off the bones of his fingers. She couldn't snip the big bones so Peter helped her. She had no anaesthetics or painkillers to give him. It was during the flood and nobody could get in or out of town to get supplies. Lisa couldn't drive, so Tom brought both to stay with us for a few days. Peter cried all night with pain. He rang the doctor and she told him to take the aspirin. Peter never forgot the agony and he cursed all Pakistani and Indian doctors since then.

In 1972 Lisa had terrible pains in the stomach. Peter was glad that we finally had a proper white doctor. The doctor said that it was just a wog and that he had it as well. He fell asleep next to Lisa. When Peter returned he kicked the doctor out and took Lisa to hospital for an emergency operation. Soon after, this good white doctor died from an overdose. Nobody suspected that he was a drug addict.

We never had a really good doctor until this pretty young white boy came to town and opened a private surgery. The prominent families invited him to their home in the hope that he would marry one of their

daughters but he soon married a pretty local boy. People were appalled at first but they soon began to like and respect him and his wife-husband man.

The next major milestone for Lightning Ridge came in the eighties when Aborigines got town housing. Aboriginal land Council was formed and the government allocated money to buy accommodation for Aboriginal families. Miners never properly understood the importance of skin colour before, they were only interested in the colour of opal. Now they suddenly looked around and realised that some of their fellow miners are Aborigines and that authorities treat them differently, because the government wants to correct some things the governments have done wrong in the past. Aborigines were never again totally equal in Lightning Ridge. Jealousy and resentment made some miners turn away from them. The new government initiative didn't bring happiness to people who mined and drank together for years.

The Ridge changed again when in the eighties unemployment benefits became available to miners who did not find opal. In the past Lightning Ridge people couldn't claim that they were looking for work if they chose to live on the opal field, but now it didn't seem to matter any more. Unemployment benefit brought many unemployed because here they have a chance to live cheaply on the field and have a hope to become rich overnight while on social security.

Most old timers resent the introduction of social security. Some of their pride and the spirit of pioneering were taken away. They can't boast that they are self reliant and self sufficient. It would be stupid though if they did not take what social security offered.

The price of opal plummeted when dole bludgers started selling it for next to nothing, says Tom.

I hate these blow ins, they are no miners, says Bill, an old timer.

The population swelled. Those on the dole don't mind to reveal all their secrets to the social security. The power of the bureaucracy became greater every day.

We at the post office know everybody who is on the dole. People are suspicious of our knowledge and careful not to reveal anything that would jeopardise their entitlements. Dole bludgers aren't considered real miners so people hide the fact that they are on social security. They

also hide the fact that they found opal because social security could hear about it.

Nobody trusts nobody any more. There is no honesty, you can't leave anything unattended. There are thieves among us and you never know who is who, complains Tom.

If you are forced to lie to the social security and to your friends, you can't be trusted to tell the truth to anybody, says Peter.

A liar soon becomes a thief, says Tom.

In my time girls were scared to become pregnant but now they want as many kids as possible because they get more money and the new house from the government, says Peter.

The stupid multiply uncontrollably, says Tom.

They have nothing else to do.

We all look after the poor and stupid.

The old chums ignore the scum new comers and hope that they will go away. Some of them are ratters, they mine other people's claims at night and are known only by their nicknames.

The latest milestone came in the nineties when Coocoran opal field was found fifty kilometres to the north of town. Tom and Marty pegged a prospecting lease and they bottomed on colour. All our friends pegged around and they made cash.

Lightning Ridge population rose to fifteen thousand but there are still only twelve hundred on the electoral roll.

Coocoran made quite a number of people temporarily rich but easy come, easy go attitude helped most of them get rid of their wealth and only few invested some of their cash.

In 1996 Coocoran dried out and the prices fell but old miners know that this is only temporary. They have seen it all before.

Chinese buyers come from Coober Pedy and buy buckets of uncut opal, potch and colour, from the miners and sent it to Asia to be cut cheaply. Cheap stones that sustained miners during hard times are impossible to get rid off since then. People who saved good stones for a rainy day sell these stones for half the price to pay for the fuel and machinery.

One can hear the heartbeat of Lightning Ridge at the post office. The only thing that never changed is the hope that the next load may be pay dirt.

The town's many elites formed. Art societies, sporting bodies, charitable organisations and historical society offer positions of leadership for those that want to become leaders. Ethnic groups are made aware of their uniqueness by Neighbourhood services.

It became increasingly important who you know and what connections you have.

Every community needs an elite, says Lisa. They are there to tell us what is good for us.

The soroptomists, a group of town ladies who think that they are a bit better than the rest, organise charity events. My boss, the postmistress, is a Soroptomist but nobody invited me because I am only an employee and not at all prominent or important.

There are also the novae rich who aren't at liberty to disclose their wealth because they cheated someone somewhere.

Most people belong to Lightning Ridge Bowling club which is one of the biggest clubs in Australia. Poker machines work all the time for the benefit of the club members and the thirst is ever present in the dusty hot town.

We have more creative geniuses and more of the world's royalty in the Ridge than any other town, says my friend Melanie. Russian princess, German countesses, Hungarian baronesses, Indian maharajas and Arab sheikhs became opal miners and dealers.

Diggers Rest which was the centre of social activity when we first came in the sixties, is now the drinking hole for Aborigines and those that feel comfortable in their company.

About a quarter of population pray with either Church of England, Catholic Church, Jehovah, Born again Christians and Seven day Adventists, but most people are buried by one church leader or the other.

Doctors do their best to keep the undertaker away but during the last thirty years the cemetery became a resting place of many post war migrants from all over the world. Marble monuments and plastic flowers cover the graves and miners remember that part of their lives that had to do with opal.

I don't know if the postmistress has a best friends but she seems intimately friendly with lots of people. Maybe she considers me her best friend. She told me things about herself and I am afraid that she already knows too much about me.

We are all in the gutter
but some of us are looking at the stars
Wilde.

The Second Robinson Crusoe

I have known Anton since we both came to the Ridge in the sixties. We meet at the post office almost daily. We never became friends but knowing someone for decades creates a kind of intimacy.

Nobody knows Anton's real name, he calls himself the second Robinson Crusoe, because he wants to forget his past and the name he had.

Sometimes I fill in the money orders for him to send with his book orders. Anton spends lots of money on books. I ask him what sort of books he is buying and if they are in Polish. He mumbles something about science but his English is atrocious. He smiles with his mouth open so I notice that his teeth like his hands and clothes need attention. I'd like to buy some Vaseline and soften his hands so the ingrained dirt and cement could be washed out of the cracks in the skin. Why does a scruffy middle aged migrant pay so much money for science books and neglect his hygiene and health. He is not handsome, he actually has no beautiful features except perhaps his green eyes that sort of dance like little elves as he talks. Maybe his thoughts are beautiful. He probably can't read and understand those books anyway.

Sometimes when the post office is empty Anton stops to explain to me about relativity and the black hole and the big bang and Copernicus and god and the universe. I never had a real appreciation of astronomy but I feel sorry for Anton and when I have nothing else to do I listen to him. For me universe ends exactly where my perception of it ends and the rest is a pleasant mystery. I don't want anyone to explain rationally the pictures in the clouds or the magic of the starry night or the full moon madness. I believe in the falling stars and the man in the moon. I like mystery. I think that people want to know more than is good for them.

Despite my ignorance and despite his rotten teeth I became one of Anton's few lady friends and he tells me things about his life he can't tell to other people. I suppose my ignorance allows him to feel significant and even a little superior. Sometimes we stand talking on the street corners, this shabbily dressed Polish astronomer and I, the post office girl. He invites me to view his observatory. His wife, Edna, left him and his partner, Bill, died so he is rather lonely. It isn't right for a married woman to visit a man on his own but Anton is not considered much of a

man or a threat so I take our visitors to his observatory sometimes. Most people can't properly appreciate Anton's astronomical towers but they are impressed by Anton's hard work, eccentricity, dedication and knowledge and specially by the tons of concrete he set into pillars and rooms. Anton wrote his story in the concrete wall and people read it and laugh at his peculiar English.

Anton likes to talk and the more he rushes to explain to people the traumas of the past astronomers, the more ridiculous he looks.

Anton is a son of a peasant family. In Poland he grew up acutely aware of his poverty . One of five children he was often hungry and waiting for his mother to bring home food for her family. She worked on the fields for other peasants and when she returned, tired, in the evening, she triumphantly spread her apron full of goodies. Kids scrounged over her like hungry bird babies. They thought only of their hunger and blamed mum if she didn't bring enough or if she came late. They never even considered how mum felt. Anton told me, that, as the oldest, he should have helped mum.

Anton's father worked in the vineyard and often came home drunk, singing through the forest. He chased mum through the house and sometimes he caught her in an embrace to dance with him to his song. Mum often ran out of the house to feed pigs or chooks, so he chased the kids. He hugged them and bounced them on his knees and they laughed delighted because that was the only nice thing that happened to them. Dad sang silly songs and the tears rolled down his eyes and they asked for more. Mum was always busy, she nagged them to help her but dad told her that kids should have fun.

As he grew up, Anton heard the whispers about his father and another woman, a pretty gypsy. They were heard singing in the vineyard's storage room. Kids teased Anton about that but Anton was strong and he hit them to shut them up. He became aware that people avoided his parents. They crossed the road to avoid meeting Anton's dad.

Anton became ashamed of his parents. One day he went to the vineyard to get some grapes for mum. He heard the laughter from the press storage room above the vineyard. He saw a fancy basket full of grapes and red peaches under the peach tree outside. He realised that the basket belonged to a woman who laughed with his dad inside. He grabbed the basket and ran home to his mother with it. His mother ran to the vineyard and abused the gypsy who was drunk with her husband's wine. They yelled at each other and other wine growers came out of

their places to listen. Anton hated mum's loud shrieks, but she quickly got rid of the other woman who was much younger and prettier in her colourful skirt. Mum kept the basket and whenever Anton saw it he remembered and was sorry for bringing it home.

Anton began to swear and went out of his way to annoy people who seemed to stare at him. He got in trouble at home and at school. Some kids were afraid of him and followed him obediently, others even saw him as their hero, but Anton always wanted to be with kids that avoided him.

At seventeen Anton left home. In Warsaw he found a night job in the textile factory and during the day he enrolled at school. It was impossible to find accommodation so he caught some sleep on the railway station's bench or in the park during summer. He met Alenka from his village on the street but she had lots of friends around her and he was alone. She lived in a fancy house and he slept on the railway station's bench.

Sometimes Alenka walked with him under the spring blossoms and they remembered their childhood and the people they grew up with. The scents and the growth of the spring brought them closer and their hands met and they never let go. Everything they once were was far away and therefore beautiful. Their romance made Anton forget the unpleasantness of his childhood. The spring flowers carried the hope of the rosy future for them. They spent every spare moment together right through the summer. The love made them both feel brave and ready to overcome any obstacles.

In the autumn when it became too cold to sleep on the bench the police chased Anton away. It wouldn't do to have him freeze in the night. Anton and Alenka decided to get married and move in with Alenka's aunt on the outskirts of the city. That's where problems started; her family tried to turn Alenka against him. They blamed him for Alenka's failure at school, they called Anton a born loser. Their son Martin was born soon after and Anton felt trapped. He wanted to be somebody, live in his own house, and make his son proud and Alenka happy.

Anton escaped. Austria transported the able bodied people further out to other countries. Anton arrived to Australia by Qantas aeroplane and met migrants of many nationalities coming on the same plane. He landed in Sydney on his twenty second birthday. On the long bus journey from Sydney to a migrant camp in Bonegilla, he sat next to Nikola. This Croatian migrant told him that his cousin Stipe will pick him up and take

him to Queensland to make some quick money on the sugar cane. Anton joined them and became a cane cutter in the same gang as Pista, a Hungarian migrant and his Australian girlfriend Gladys. Anton had bleeding blisters most evenings but he kept on cutting the bloody cane. One day towards the end of sugar cane season Anton came home and found Gladys dead in his bed. Pista was gone and nobody ever heard of him again. Anton called the police. They charged Anton with murder. Stipe stuck by him and tried to prove his innocence but neither of them could speak English and both were seen as young itinerant males who could not be trusted. Nobody knew Pista's proper name or address.

Anton was pardoned after eight years in jail. A young journalist took an interest in Anton's story and had proven that there was no evidence for murder.

Stipe picked Anton up from the jail.

I am going to Lightning Ridge. There is money, lots of money in opal if you are lucky, said Stipe. Anton learned that black opal from Lightning Ridge is the most precious and beautiful gem in the world so he joined Stipe believing that he was due for some luck.

The road to Lightning Ridge seemed endless, but Anton was happy because the monotonous scenery took him away from everything he wanted to forget. The trees ahead promised to turn into forests although they were just scattered clumps of shade for the thousands of sheep. The country side had no landmarks that he could remember but he welcomed the distance, the monotony, and the aloneness. The mirages on the flat country encircled everything within into a pretend ocean. The trees in the distance seemed to grow out of the glistening water. As he came closer the water turned into dry parched, cracked dirt. Everything seemed unreal and vast and flat. The country was a virginal outback.

The dirt road brought them to a small dusty settlement with mullock heaps of white opal dirt around the miner's camps. Cut away from the ghosts of the past, Anton was determined to make a go of it. The old miners told him that in Lightning Ridge everyone has an equal chance and fortunes are made overnight. People who are nobodies one day become millionaires the next.

Anton wandered around opal fields and spotted an unusual stone and concrete structure. He stopped next to the sign saying: Welcome to Bill's

place. Bill's camp was on top of the ridge covered with the huge red boulders.

Welcome to Indian Lookout, said Bill. This is the original Walungalla village popularly known as Lightning Ridge. An Indian hawker established the first shop here and the original town grew around it. They moved the town down on the flat now but I don't want to move. I am building a Bush Observatory, laughed Bill and the two men established an instant rapport.

What are these unusual rocks? You could build a house with them. This red boulders are the ironstones attracting lightning and we surely see lots of lightning here. Even in Aboriginal language this ridge was known as a Lightning bolt. Before the turn of the century a shepherd grazed his sheep on the spot where the town stands now. Being the highest spot for hundreds of miles a lightning once struck it and killed a shepherd, his dog and six hundred sheep. The place became known as Lightning Ridge.

Anton and Bill sat in front of the camp drinking tea until the sky was lit like a Christmas tree and they began talking about god, the stars and philosophers, astronomers and scientists. Anton explained that he was wrongfully accused of murder and spent eight years in jail. He told Bill that he never wanted to join the city human race again. Bill explained that he once worked for NASA and that's why he wanted to build the observatory. Anton wanted to ask why Bill left NASA but he sensed that he shouldn't. People in Lightning Ridge tell you what they want you to know about themselves.

Bill and Anton became friends and partners. After Bill died, Anton continued building the observatory as a monument to Bill and to their friendship.

Anton felt that Bill was the only person who ever understood and respected him. He liked the old man and decided to work with him on percentage because Bill had his own equipment.

Since he left home Anton never felt a part of any community. Afraid of the rejection he chose to live in the safety of self-imposed isolation. He looked at Australian strange silly ways, he tasted their tasteless food, listened to their loud music, dressed in their casual clothes, adopted their casual words but he was never one of them.

Gradually Anton realised that Australians didn't invent their strange ways and laws and customs just to annoy him and make him different.

Their ways weren't there to shame his ways. They weren't different on purpose, they believed that they were right. Their customs were here before me, Anton realised. They may think that I deliberately behave differently. They don't know that I don't know how to behave and look like them. I am what I am, there are many of them so it is easier for me to learn their ways. My ways are unknown to them, they know only what I show them of my ways and they don't understand why I behave as I do. I am a minority, there is no safety in numbers for me. There is no need for anyone to learn about my ways.

People come to the Ridge to get away and gamble with fortunes of life, said Bill reading Anton's mind.

So mining is gambling, muttered Anton.

Make no mistake, mining for opal is like any other gambling only one gets respectfully dirty and tired and broke doing it.

Mining was just a hobby to Bill, something to do when they weren't talking about the meaning of life and universe. Money wasn't important to Bill either, he lived cheaply and spent most of his money on books, steel and cement.

I wouldn't be here if I worried about getting rich. All sorts, many educated and famous hide under the bushes. There is a story behind every man in the bush, said Bill with a twinkle in his eye.

The camps of bush-men stretched into the virgin bush-land and Anton suddenly rejoiced in being a bush-man. The men accepted each other's anonymity and shared of themselves what they wanted to share. The anxieties and fears of the past were replaced with dreams for the future. Anton felt equal to all his fellow men for the first time in his life. He could pretend to be who he wanted to be. Diversity was a welcome distraction in the bush. Anton became one of the boys. The events from the past could be recalled at random and leisure.

You never presume to know who the miner next to you is, said Bill. The master and the servant look the same. Aborigines and Europeans, doctors and illiterates, policemen and criminals camp next to each other. They brought their picks and shovels, ladders, and candles. We all look for the colourful silica imbedded in the clay beneath the sandstone of Lightning Ridge.

In the making for millions of years the rainbow stone only made its debut in the early sixties, when Anton came to look for it. The world recognised its unique beauty and paid for it. The shells impregnated with specks of colour were proof that there was an ocean here long time ago. The skeletons of dinosaurs dug with the opal dirt also told about the

timeless history of the life in Lightning Ridge. Bones of animals, shells and fish and plants turned into opal during millions of years

Opal mining used to be a one man operation, couldn't be any other way, said Bill.

Why?

You simply couldn't trust anyone well enough to let him chip away in your mine. You can't watch a bloke for a year non-stop. You work your trench, he works his. There might be a pocket, it might be the only pocket you'll ever find and your partner might take it. There is always fear and suspicion. There might be one solitary nobby that could change your life and you don't know if your partner would be able to resist the temptation to put it in his pocket.

You wouldn't do that to your friend, said Anton.

You don't know what you would do until you are tested, said Bill.

These days it's different, most people work with machinery in partnership. They dig without looking, the blower sucks the dirt on a truck and it's unloaded into the agitator. You only watch the tailings.

There is still plenty of room for disputes. People are careful who they pick to work with. Their life and their livelihood depends on that.

In the company of individuals who are all different you stop being different. You become an appropriate part of the mosaic.

You have an equal chance regardless of your language or religion, the shape of your nose or the colour of your hair, laughed Bill.

Only a small percentage of miners made a fortune in opals, most had to supplement their income with casual work on the nearby properties. Many went to work in the city, saved and returned. The lure of opal is strong. Men persuaded their wives to come with them and to work for fuel and necessities.

A Swiss psychiatrist-turned miner, said that Lightning Ridge is much like the mental hospital he used to work in. The only difference is that people here walk free and do their own cooking.

You really think that we are all mad? Anton asked a little uncertain.

It helps, said the doctor with a twinkle in his eye. He knew that he was mad to stay with these illiterate beer guzzlers and talk about opal. The opal was the only leveller.

Nobody has any idea what an opal miner should look like or how he should properly behave. Like opals, we remain unique.

Miners in the pub compare their finds. The stones are passed around, they lick it and spit on it to make it shine better in its unpolished state. They predict the weight of the polished stone and the price per carat. When a miner finds a stone, he invites everybody to a BBQ.

Anton was amazed at the pleasant simplicity.

Miners look after their mates. They know how unpredictable their livelihood is, said Bill.

Sometimes Anton watched the sunsets and realised that only the glorious colourful sunsets of Lightning Ridge could ever compete with the beauty of opal. In the peaceful end of the day he remembered the home he ran away from and he remembered his wife and his son, his mother and father and brothers and sisters and the people who laughed at him when he was a boy. The bitter sweet memories almost made him cry. A great wave of nostalgia swept over him at night. He sometimes dreamed about his wife Alenka and his son Martin waiting for him to return. Alenka re-married, of course, but in his dreams she was where he left her with tears in her eyes and more beautiful every year.

Anton learned the mining vocabulary fast because it did not require too many words and all were related to opal. Tourists often enquired about the meanings of the local expressions. Anton explained to them about angel stones, gouging, china heads, fossiking, puddling, specking, propping, about the biscuit bend and shin-cracker and tailings and bottoming. He gradually learned about the importance of colour play and transparency, about matrix mixed in the backing or in the face, about the crystals, solids, doublets and triplets. He told them that under shin-cracker sandstone roof was a clay-shale carrying opal nodules commonly known as nobbies. .

To forget the past and the loneliness Anton began to study astronomy with Bill. He identified with the tragic lives of Copernicus and Galileo.

This place is only suitable for cactus, drifters, gamblers and loners, said Bill. Shepherds and boundary riders found colourful silica flushed out by erosion and washed by floods. Fascinated by the shiny stones the shepherds sunk the first shafts in 1901. The first miners came soon after. They were obstructed and persecuted by pastoralists who wanted to stop these vagabonds trespassing on their land. When the graziers could

not break the miners' spirit they fenced off the water and then poisoned it with an excuse that they wanted to exterminate the rabbits. Without the water and with their horses impounded, the miners paid heavy tolls on food supplies. Those men really had a lot more grit than we have today, remembered Bill. But the serious mining only started in the sixties. New machinery was invented from old bits of steel often found on the city tips. Every miner became an inventor of the tools he used.

Lightning Ridge was still a good town in the late sixties. Nobody locked their camps, there was no stealing or thieving, miners could leave their opal and equipment on the field and it would not be touched.

Touched by the miracle of the stone, writers were moved to tell their theories about the way to find opal. Stories were written coloured by an individual experience to weave a rainbow of truth and fiction, secrets and myths. They called opal a sun kissed beauty, a wondrous rainbow, the joy to the spirit, the peace to the mind. They said that the splendour in the palette of opal colours caused the grown men to cry, tremble and shout with joy.

Miners chose and surveyed their fifty by fifty metres claim, drew a map and paid a small fee to register it in their name.

The experts agreed that there was no way to tell where opal deposits were hiding, yet some still tried to divine opal by holding two wires in front of them. They marched into the bush and the wires sometimes crossed in front of them. The diviners assured the miners that opal was underneath. Most old miners laughed at diviners because the diviners never found opal for themselves.

Some miners looked for the signs above ground, they tried to guess the spot by the vegetation or the stars above them. Wild orange tree was said to grow roots ninety feet into the ground looking for water. Where underground water was, opal could also be. Other trees are known to look for sub-moisture in the fault line where opal may form. The sand stone and stones and sediments also tell a story to those that want to believe but there is no sure sign. There is the faith and the hope. That is all life is.

People like to peg their claims next to those who found opal and most seem to be right next to the big guys who found millions. It is like standing in line for lady luck, right next in line to be touched by providence.

They dug shafts by pick and shovel at the beginning, later they used jack hammers, and in the eighties everybody hired the drilling rig to drill the holes for them. In the nineties they sunk little mechanised diggers and loaders into the shaft to do the manual work.

In Diggers Rest hotel the music and the happy yarns keep miner's hopes alive.

Single men and men again single meet in the pub with married men whose wives curse them at home for going to the pub. The single men tell jokes about married men and try to convince themselves how lucky they are because they have no one waiting for them at home, no one cursing them for being late or for drinking. They come to the pub or the club night after night in the hope to find a girl of their dreams and their dreams turn into an intimacy with their drinking buddies and gradually they forget why they came and just come to have a drink in a familiar crowd. Gradually they feel compelled to come to the pub like husbands are compelled to come to their families night after night.

Sometimes miners bottom on opal dirt but often it is a false level and all the work is in vain. Even if the level is good, more often than not, it does not carry opal.

You don't really know what you've got until you cut it, warned Bill. And you don't know what's it worth until you sell it.

People hold their breath while their opal is cut. Sometimes the surprise under the potch is excitingly pleasant but more often a flaw kills the stone. Sand is often imbedded in the middle of the brightly coloured stone and it reduces the value of it drastically. One theory says that opal is formed where there was a fault in the earth formation and the water pierced the ground and continually sipped through the sand stone.

The bush around the tiny township is surrounded by camps. Some are made from old tin and hessian, lime and iron stone make stronger homes, log huts are pretty. Some miners chisel the sand stone bricks, others use clay for walls. In the eighties many brought their caravans and built shacks around them. Most have dirt floors and candle lights, many brought water in large containers and used it sparingly.

The rain water tanks often run dry in hot summers and only few miners can afford to run a generator for electricity.

The dust doesn't worry miners as much as the floods that turn the black soil into a greasy mess impossible to drive through. They have to abandon mining and many go specking. They look over the field if the rain that washed the dirt away had uncovered a spec of colour. The

stories are told of the tourists who found a fortune specking after the rain, everybody knows someone lucky and the stories became the legends.

Thousands of hopeful tourists descend on Lightning Ridge every school holiday or long weekend and many return regularly or stay until they run out of money.

Stipe introduced Anton to pig chasing. The flood waters brought hundreds of pigs from the farms up North. The pigs became feral and, hiding in the huge wheat paddocks, they are hard to spot except when they venture along the bore drain to get a drink. Farmers welcome hunters who got rid of the menace as long as they keep the gates shut and don't disturb other stock.

Showing off his exuberance and skills Stipe drove his old truck into the bush over the logs and drains. The boys and the pig dogs tried to hold on at the back. He didn't want the sows because they were always pregnant so he directed the dogs towards the chosen boars. When they mustered the pig, the dog jumped out and caught it by the ear and then the men followed. They pulled the pig's tail, kicked his hind legs in to make it fall on its back before they put it in a cage. They brought home eight wild boars one evening. At home Stipe grabbed the tail of the one at the cage door and pulled it out and onto his back. Grab the back legs, he yelled. They pushed the boar, head first, into the steel frame, so it couldn't move. Stipe quickly cut into the flesh and castrated the pig. Catch, he yelled. Nikola wanted to have a go next, he wielded a knife towards the other men asking them if he could perhaps practice first on either of them since they had no use for their balls here in the bush.

You would have a go if it was whiskey we washed you with, laughed Stipe pouring the antiseptic over the pig's wound. Now comes the bath, he said as he poured kerosene over the bleeding boar to kill the lice before he released it into the sty. In a couple of days they'll want to eat again and then I'll clean their guts out with the de-wormer. Once on grain they'll grow fat in no time.

Anton pretended to enjoy the sport and grabbed the tail of the boar. Stipe spread its legs to let Nikola get the balls. Anton made a mistake and patted the boar's ear. Like a flash of lightning the boar twisted its head and slashed Anton's hand with its protruding tusk. He let go and the pig bolted with half his manhood intact. Get him, yelled Nikola and Stipe joined him chasing the pig into the scrub.

Terrified, Anton poured detol over his gaping wound and wrapped the hand into his shirt. That's the last of cutting balls for me, he said to himself. At least he had an excuse because he couldn't tell them that he felt sorry for the animals and couldn't cut them.

In the middle of winter we'll kill them, said Stipe. In July many Yugoslavs in Lightning Ridge came to Stipe's place. They brought cartons of beer and bottles of whiskey to recreate their memories. Anton was the only Pole among them but Slavs mixed easily. They all spoke Serbo-Croatian as directed by their Yugoslav government at home. They needed the unity, a dozen or so men lost in the bush among strangers. Later Anton learned that Serbs and Croats, united by language, really hated each other and the Yugoslav unity. They escaped so they could be Croats and Serbs rather than Yugoslavs.

Aboriginal girls came and drank with them. They didn't mind the men's boisterous sexual advances and they enjoyed the jokes.

They killed eight fat boars and selected pieces for smoking. The rest they minced for sausages, arguing all the time about the recipes used in their homes. Girls followed men's instructions for the cuisine they were unaccustomed to.

Yugoslavs preferred pork to lamb and mutton. They even liked rabbits better than sheep. Like the wild rabbit, domestic animals introduced to Australia also adopted to warm conditions quickly. Without natural predators they easily competed with the native fauna for natural resources. There were no fences in the early days and many pigs, horses and buffaloes escaped into the bush where they bred uncontrollably. The graziers were afraid that ferals would bring foot and mouth disease to the continent. They spread the poison because the rabbits dug into the ground and spread the obnoxious weeds into the waterways and so into the outback.

The farmers who cleared and ploughed miles of land were afraid that pigs would destroy their crops. The golden grain paddocks swayed in the wind as far as the eye could see during the wet season but during the drought the land was bare and the feral animals dug for roots into the scorched ground. As the wind came it lifted the precious soil and made enormous dust-bowls out of the country. The thin layer of the soil was becoming thinner and the desert was spreading.

Flies bothered Anton as he cooked on the camp fire. Millions of them descended on any spot touched by food. The newly introduced cattle,

sheep and pigs produced tons of manure for flies to breed on in the hot summers. Flies had no natural enemy in Australia. They brought the African beetle to digest the piles of manure scattered in the bush. But the flies persisted and Australians tried to cope with them. They invented hats with fly screens and corks bobbing down around their faces. Gradually they sprayed the flies dead with Mortein. Now flies only appear in spring and autumn unable to resist the warmth and the dung smell. There are no flies in the heat of summer or in the cold of winter.

During the working day Bill spoke in rare monosyllabic words but as they sat around the camp-fire in the evening he talked about Greek philosophers and famous astronomers as he looked at the sky sprinkled with most brilliant stars. On dry hot summer nights most miners slept outside on makeshift beds to catch the breeze but during wet periods voracious hordes of mosquitoes forced them inside.

Bill dawned a woollen balaclava on his head as he rushed to his small camp-fire to get the billy to make tea.

At first Anton worked hard and saved the money because he planned to go home and bring Alenka with him. She sent him a photo of his son Martin holding a puppy. Alenka wrote that his son started to say daddy. Anton looked at the photo of his wife and his son often and the image of them waiting had imprinted itself into his mind like a colourful rainbow.

Gradually Anton built a camp next to Bill out of bits of materials found at the local tip. He met Edna at Stipe's place. Exciting, willing and beautiful Aboriginal girl welcomed him into her large family. He told her about Alenka and his son and Edna seemed pleased to share in Anton's fertility with the white woman in Poland.

Anton put off going home, Edna had a baby daughter whom Anton named Maria after his mother. So began an easy undemanding mateship with Edna's family. They all tried to please Anton. The children kept coming and they needed so many things.

Bill and Anton were lucky, they sold some nice stones from a patch they dug together in the first year. Being new on the field, Anton knew nothing about opal but he always remembered Bill's words: It is easier to find opal than to find a partner. As long as you are not after the same thing you can trust your friend or your brother, but on opal everybody is greedy for the same thing. Many friendships are broken on account of opal. People start off trusting each other, they couldn't be bothered with contracts, they work happily until they find money, but then most look again at their vague verbal agreement and try to get more for themselves out of the partnership. Bill sometimes told the yarns in the Diggers rest hotel about the gems he found and saw.

Many years ago I was there on my own in a trench when I dug my best stone, told Bill. I could have put it in my pocket, it would never hurt anyone, because nobody would ever know. I could have made a fortune but in the end I decided to share it with my partner. I would always know that I wasn't honest if I didn't. We were so happy and we drank all night. Everybody heard about the find and somebody suggested to my partner that I must have filled my pockets with the best I found before I showed him the stone. The suspicion was like a spear in his heart and we both felt the pain of it. I was sorry that I have shown that stone to him. The word got around and I was so angry because I felt that nobody believed me any more.

You need a mate, working with a partner is safer, you combine the machinery and money and knowledge and work but it is hard to trust the man you share your life with, said Bill.

Every year miners invent new machinery and every year there are more expenses and it is harder for a small bloke to have a go on his own.

Rogues, rascals and visionaries came to Lightning Ridge and they all seemed redeemed under the clean opal dirt using their brawn and their cunning in the pursuit of the elusive colourful gem.

When others argued about the power of politics and religion Bill insisted that the power of man's greed wins hands down every time. Greed for dominance and control. The weaker one is, the hungrier he is for power, muttered Bill to himself relating his words more to the memories of his misspent life than to Anton.

We all fight for what we haven't got, laughed Anton.

He told the yarn about the soldier who told his friends that he fought to have bread for his family.. His two friends boasted that they fought for honour. The first soldier shrugged his shoulders saying: Everybody fights for what he hasn't got.

As long as you have one person under you, you can suck up that person's energy, said Bill but Anton had no idea what the old man was on about.

Anton and Bill found a huge nobby of opal weighing almost a kilo. Bill showed it in the pub and it passed from hand to hand and from lips to lips as his mates licked it to examine it for traces of colour. A bluish-green lines were noticed on the grey background but there was no commercial value in the colour. It was an interesting specimen and Bill's fellow drinker offered a hundred pounds for it. That was a lot of money in those days for a colourless stone. He wanted it as a birthday present for a friend. His friend, a local shopkeeper, used it as a paper-weight on the counter of his shop.

A local opal buyer spotted the nobby some months later and paid two hundred pounds for it. He took it to Japan to use it as the background piece for his opal exhibition. His Japanese business partner was fascinated by the large ugly looking blob of grey potch. He wanted to buy the piece to contrast with his colourful opal collection. As the nobby was passed into his hands for inspection, it fell on the marble floor of the exhibition hall and it chipped at the end. The opal buyer knelt on the floor to pick it up and his face changed as he slowly covered the stone with both hands. The heart of the paper-weight nobby was a pure red on black gem. Scooping the broken stone he excused himself and went into his room where he looked into the mass of red fire, where purple, violet and green flames moved like flamenco dancers.

This is, this is, he stuttered as he searched for the name that would be able to portray some of the beauty the stone carried. This is a bleeding broken heart, he named the stone. He made a booking for the first plane to take him back to Lightning Ridge.

The local cutter quietly locked the workshop after he glanced at the nobby. He took out a bottle of whiskey and they sipped it slowly as the nobby passed again and again from hand to hand. They held it to the eye, under the table, far away, under the light and magnifying glass and finally they left it on the table to look at them.

What are we going to do with it, asked the cutter as the daylight faded.

We'll decide tomorrow, said the buyer exhausted from the admiration.

The next day they talked and decided. One large heart shaped stone to keep and enough little ones to make the man rich. The cutter got a generous commission and both men agreed to keep the story of the stone a secret. But no story of this proportion could be kept secret for long in Lightning Ridge. You can't hide a fire, there will be smoke and the heat and rumours. Nobody knows how it got out, it just boiled over, and people simply had to share their knowledge of that rare beauty. When Anton finally heard about it he felt sad and let down by Bill.

You should have known, You had been in the Ridge for ages, you know everything about opal, he accused

Sometimes you have to break the heart to see what's in it, said Bill almost unconcerned.

Go and see the buyer, said Edna. He might give you a share.

But Anton was too sick at heart for the beauty he had and lost. You can't be that lucky twice, he said.

A group of singers came from Poland at that time. They toured Australia and they wanted to see the bush. Anton was happy to show them underground, he took them all over dirt roads in the opal field. He told them about the big million dollar stone he found and lost. The story about his lost opal fascinated Poles. Busy amateur film maker heard the part about Anton finding the stone worth millions of dollars. He narrated the story into the camera about Anton who became a multi-millionaire overnight. Anton never saw the film which was taken to Poland and was shown on Warsaw television.

A few months later Anton received letters from people who claimed to be his distant relatives. Neighbours and friends wrote and wished him well. They all wanted to hear from him. Pleasantly surprised, Anton planned his trip home. His son Martin also wrote the first letter to his father. He told Anton that he loved him and that he was hoping for a motor bike. Anton wanted to go home and surprise Alenka and Martin with a new motor bike.

A few weeks later his mother wrote and she told Anton that everybody was talking about him and how selfish he was for not sending money to his family. They all saw him on television and knew about his millions. Anton was bitterly disappointed. He realised that all the well wishers were after the millions he never had. He never wrote a single letter home since.

Old Bill died soon after.

Anton decided that the only people worth knowing were those who stopped with him while he had nothing. People like Edna. Deep down Anton knew that poor only stopped with the poor because the rich did not want them.

Edna volunteered to go mining with Anton and they began to share their fortunes and the old camp which Bill left to Anton. Anton bought his own compressor and jack-pick. They dug a thirty metre trench without finding a trace. Edna filled the wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow and tipped the dirt into the bucket to be lifted out by the hoist. When the truck was full they took the clay dirt to the puddler to wash. As they waited, they sat in the dirt, drank beer and smoked in expectation. Going through the tailings was always exciting as the colourful silica shone in the clay mud. But they found nothing.

That's it, said Anton one day and climbed out of the mine to switch off the compressor. Edna wanted to see how hard jacking was, she lifted the jack pick and pressed it into the grey dirt on the side of the dead trench just before Anton climbed out to switch off the compressor. The glassy sound told Edna that she drilled into the opal even before she saw the rainbow coloured chips on the dirt floor. Dropping the jack she yelled for Anton. Tears were in their eyes as they embraced.

There is more, must be more, whispered Anton in awe. But there wasn't. They cut a few tiny red stones from the chips on the ground and feverishly followed the direction of the trace for another twenty metres. The red stone, only centimetres from the surface was the only stone but the story of it spread like stories do in Lightning Ridge.

It could have been a twenty carat of red on black, if she didn't break it, they said. You could ask any money for a stone like that. And there were lots of little ones.

Twice unlucky, Anton expected the third chance but it never came. As his family grew he relied on odd jobs to provide for them and only mined to pursue his dream. He found insignificant green and blue stones but never again anything that would warm his heart.

Edna and Anton had seven children in ten years. The oldest boy Kevin often came with Anton on the field and played there with his dogs. He picked lumps of dirt and threw them for the dogs to fetch. Once a dog returned a fair sized lump of dirt and, wet from the dog's saliva, it exposed a speck of red colour through the dusty surface. Kevin showed it to his dad and they went to the cutter to see what was inside. To their amazement they found a stone which sold for two thousand dollars. Anton banked the money for Kevin. A few days later he heard in the pub about a boy who found a ten thousand dollar stone just like that on top. Kevin's story spread and became bigger and better with every telling. Anton's family didn't mind, they became a celebrity.

One day Anton heard a miner telling a story to some tourists: This little black bastard found a fifty thousand dollar stone on top of the mine and threw it to a dog to lick. People laughed in amazement. Neither the story teller nor his audience associated Anton with the little black bastard. Anton ignored them, he knew that they said things about his kids behind his back anyway. What's the use protesting.

The opal became scarce so Anton had to look for work on the nearby farms. There was no unemployment benefit in Lightning Ridge in those

days; you couldn't say that you were looking for work if you lived in Lightning Ridge because there was no work other than mining. You were there on your own with your luck.

Anton took a gang of Aborigines into the bush fencing, shearing and grid making. They camped, cooked on the open fire, boiled their billy, baked their damper, and barbecued the meat farmers provided. They used bore water for everything.

Anton often told how he had to fill his hat with water and put it under the tree to cool before he could drink it. But at least water was available since the farmers drilled the artesian bore. Trenches were made through the nearby farms so the stock had permanent water. Hot water from almost thousand metres deep Artesian Basin provided also the free water for the bore bath where people of Lightning Ridge met after work to soak their tired bodies and exchange the news.

Everything changed since they drilled the bore in 1963. The strong sulphur smell of the water was strong and all the food and drinks smelled of it. Grateful locals got used to it quickly but tourists preferred rain water or they brought their own from the city.

Anton never told anyone how he hated the dust and the dirt and the flies of the Australian bush. Often all the family joined him as he went cotton chipping and stick picking at Wee Waa. That wasn't too bad but Anton hated to work with animals. When he first went mulesing, he held the sheep while Edna's cousin cut the skin off the sheep's bum, spread the mulesing powder on the bleeding wound and let go. Anton almost passed out. Have to be cruel to be kind, said the grazier. We cut the skin off their bum so the wool won't grow and the shit won't stick to it and flies won't lay maggots. Anton also hated de-horning. Young calves cried as he cut their horns and Anton felt a hollow pain in his stomach.

They get caught in the fences if the horns are left growing, they fight and damage their skin, the flies attack the wounds, explained the grazier. It had to be done.

Anton hated inflicting pain on dumb animals but he had to cut their tails and balls. The others showed him how to put the sheep down with its front legs opened wide around Anton's neck while he cut the balls and then the purse. He held the open purse with two fingers and pulled the balls out with his teeth and spat them out. He splashed a bit of disinfectant dip on the wound and let the animal go.

Anton kept repeating to himself that they all did it this way and it had to be done, To do a calf you needed two blokes, one to hold the head and the other to throw it on the ground from the back.

People know nothing of the back-breaking jobs with animals, thought Anton. He heard how people on the land had it easy in Australia, that

they just let the sheep loose in the paddock and let the wool and meat grow.

Anton didn't mind shearing, crutching, drenching. He talked to sheep as he shaved their faces and feet so the burrs didn't stick in the wool.

Anton caught himself talking Polish sometimes as he walked alone in the bush. He started by humming familiar tunes of love songs he sang to girls at home. Later he checked that nobody was within an earshot and then he sang out at the top of his voice. Talking out came gradually. First he felt weird saying things out loud to sheep and kangaroos and stupid galahs but lately he said things to fences and bushes. His words were the only Polish words he heard for years. The half forgotten language brought back the chosen memories from his childhood and the longing for familiar people and places. There was no need for embarrassment since no one knew or cared that he even existed within the vastness of the outback.

Anton realised that farmers around Lightning Ridge were just as much gamblers as the opal miners. Farmers were taking a gamble on the weather. They hoped that the right amount of rain would fall at least once in every four years so they could get a crop. But nothing was certain on the land. Dry spells sometimes lasted for years and the land cracked and not a blade of grass could be found. The farmer once said that it was a season of shear and shoot. They sheared the sheep and shot and buried it afterwards. Sometimes a wet followed and the water covered the farms for months. The animals drowned or got bogged in the dirt.

Anton was out in the scrub mending the fence one hot afternoon when he saw the head of the half born lamb hanging behind the ewe, which was restlessly baaing for relief. Anton often watched as the head between the lamb's legs came out in a gentle glorious swoosh. Anton wanted to end the ewe's agony with a hard hit on the head, but he couldn't. The eyes of the ewe followed him with a dumb tearless sadness and he just couldn't walk away. The memory would haunt him. Anton reasoned that they were not his sheep and not his problem. But there was just a suffering ewe and the dying lamb and him and he had to do it. He chased the baaing ewe begging her gently to stop and let him help her. The flies were all over the sticky bloody mess protruding from the sheep's bum and Anton was covered in burrs as he chased the poor creature into a fence and grabbed her for the wool with all his strength. I should be in the pub with my mates, he told the future mother. It's forty five bloody degrees hell here. He talked to the ewe to remain sane and

think of something to do. He closed his eyes as he pushed the bloody head into the ewe and began searching inside for its legs. As he started pulling out the legs the ewe gave a tired pelvic push and the lamb came sliding out. Staggering on the ground, tripping over itself, it slowly found its way to the mother's head and they became acquainted and sniffed over.

Anton, exhausted from the birth, wiped the blood of his hands but the flies followed him as he stumbled home. The tears washed the blood and sweat off his face as he looked back to see the lamb finding its mother's milk. Suddenly he felt so alone and so close to God that he cried openly and loudly for the first time since he was a little boy. He was there and the bush offered him a chance to be God. But he felt so alone and out of control.

The time stood still in the bush. The seasons were barely noticed by the slight change of temperature. People in Lightning Ridge remembered the times of droughts and the times of floods. In their eternity things happened either before or after that DRY or that WET.

Anton looked at the dry parched land. The crops were dead, the farmers were sad watching the stock die and the land crack. They stopped scrub cutting long ago. There was only so much scrub. The sheep and cattle held onto the meagre growth along the road, the trees were grey with dust. The willie-willie rose and, unsure of its path, it darted this way and that. Rollie pollies, blown by the dry hot air, wrapped themselves on trees. In the remote aloneness of the bush Anton cried for himself and his children.

Anton learned enough English to make the deals with the farmers, so he became the boss of his Aboriginal gang. Farmers and graziers called on him and he gave quotes for miles of fencing, or water tank building or whatever needed doing. He brought out workers, collected the pay, and checked the job. Aborigines complained about the hard work, they threatened to leave Anton as soon as they got paid but on a pay-day Anton brought a truck full of drinks and smokes and food to the bush. They all celebrated, spent their money and had no option but to stay. If they had any money left they lost it at night as they played cards around the fire.

The law designed to protect Aborigines, prohibited whites to consort with them even during the sixties. The alcohol and tobacco introduced by whites was killing Aborigines. The government officials tried to smooth the pillow for the dying natives. They established the Aboriginal

Protection Board to monitor their movements and record their behaviour. They rounded up the dispersed groups of unrelated Aborigines and brought them into the settlements called Aboriginal reserves. Missionaries tried to save the wretched nomads so they gathered them into missions for their protection. They wanted to teach them about the mercy of God and the justice of British judicial system. They also taught Aborigines to live and work like whites.

Until 1967 referendum Aborigines existed as half hunters-gatherers, half farm labourers. Most of the Australians have never seen an Aborigine until they first saw the nomadic tribes on TV.

Whites weren't allowed on the mission, except for people like Anton who lived with them. Anton often took his family to Wilcannia, Brewarrina and Walgett missions where Edna had relations. They took drinks and food to make Edna's relations happy. Aborigines loved to have a beer and Anton liked to please people. He always had a carton in the boot.

Soon after the first settlement the farmers took Aboriginal boys to teach them how to work on the land and look after the animals, girls were taught to cook and keep the house. Once they learned to live and work like Europeans they became valuable workers in the outback where the labour was scarce. During the gold rush towards the end of the nineteenth century the labour was particularly scarce. Everybody rushed towards the riches gold diggings promised.

Many Aborigines lived with whites in small country towns or on the fringes of towns. Lightning Ridge in the sixties was just such a place, a place of bush camps with a mixture of adventurers from all over the world.

The government became keen to help Aborigines. They spent money on housing, education and health. Anton could have moved into a town house in Lightning Ridge because he had an Aboriginal wife but he was too proud, the mateship and equality with other miners was more important to him than a new house. Soon he realised that the mateship with Aborigines had gone forever. The new policy made Aborigines different from other miners. White miners began to resent the government and Aborigines. When they built houses in town for Aborigines they gave a message to the rest of the miners, that the way they all chose to live wasn't good enough.

Anton did not want to live in Aboriginal house but kids and Edna moved to town because she wanted to give the children a better chance, she

said. She became involved with Aboriginal programs and politics. Anton didn't mind. They remained friends and kept in touch and helped each other out even when Edna moved in with Rodney, a respectable Aboriginal man.

Always try to rub up against money, for if you rub up against money long enough, some of it may rub off on you.
Runyon

STEPHANIE

In the seventies Black Opal motel was built opposite the Diggers Rest Hotel in the middle of the town. Opal buyers from all over the world come to the motel and we queue up and share opal stories during the long waiting hours.

A miner retells a story about a seven carat opal he tried to sell for nine hundred bucks. Chaplain, the buyer, offered four hundred. The miner said no. Chaplain looked through magnifying glass again from all angles and concluded that he couldn't pay more than five hundred a carat. The miner was stunned, he only wanted nine hundred for a whole seven carat stone. He was willing to go as low as seven hundred for the stone. After a quick silent calculation he realised that five hundred a carat brought him three thousand five hundred.

OK, he conceded carefully.

Just shows that nobody can really put a price on opal, says another miner.

Chaplain is the oldest buyer, says a man amazed at the possibilities.

Maybe he is losing his eyesight, tries another.

Buyers rely on the miner never to ask an unreasonable price. The buyer would not insult a miner by offering less than two thirds. They argue about the top third of the price and they know that they'll settle somewhere in the middle. The buyer knows that the miner will only go down ten to twenty percent of the price.

I came to the Ridge in seventy two and asked a thousand for my stone, says an old chum. I meant thousand dollars but the buyer was used to miners still counting in pounds so he paid two thousand dollars. The currency changed in the 1966 but Lightning Ridge still operated in pounds ten years later.

Stories are like threads binding miners and separating them from their common masters the buyers.

Sometimes we wait half a day to see a buyer so we exchange the news and the knowledge of what the buyers are buying, how well they are paying and whose partnership is on the rocks. Family and mining partnerships brake up regularly and the breaking up injects fresh vitality into our gatherings.

In a small town nothing can be considered private and gossip is not spreading anywhere as fast as it does when you sit in front of the buyers room for hours doing nothing.

I rarely wait for the opal buyers so I miss out on bits of gossip but people bring the news as they came to collect their mail. Gossip could be considered one of the fringe benefits of the post office employees, specially with a post mistress who has a keen sense of propriety and can smell a rat a long distance away.

It's my turn to go in to see the Japanese buyer. A woman steps out from his room red eyed and sniffing noisily. At the door she wipes her face and smiles at those waiting.

Poor thing has four children and her husband deserted her. I wouldn't bother with mugs like these otherwise, apologises the buyer while clearing the table of little milky stones with faint streaks of colour.

The poor woman is pretty and in her early thirties. Her name is Stephanie and the stories about her easy crying in every buyer's room, became legendary. She could have been an actress, people say. They give her their mug stones to sell on the commission because that is the only way they can get rid of them. Buyers just haven't got the heart to refuse Stephanie's stones and deprive her children of bread and milk. By the end of her first year in Lightning Ridge, Stephanie began to buy potch and colour to cut her own stones. She bought buckets of potch and colour from Tom. Obviously well satisfied with what she found in those buckets Stephanie kept coming for more. One day she told me how silly I was working at the post office when I could make some real cash with her. She was buying, cutting, polishing and selling. Maybe I should have joined her but I doubt that I would ever be as successful as she turned out to be.

Stephanie's brother had a fish and chips shop and Stephanie made a little corner for herself in his shop to cut and buy and sell opal. Stephanie's family came from Greece when she was only a little girl. The rest of her family cooked fish and chips and pizzas but Stephanie soon realised that there was real money to be made in opal.

Stephanie became more and more successful in her opal business so she bought a home with a shop front for herself to establish the main tourist outlet in town. Miners come and leave stones on consignment in her shop.

Stephanie told me about her useless Italian husband Marty, who could never find enough to provide for his family.

He brags about his luck in front of other people while we have no money for bread and milk, she says.

Stephanie's family came from Cooper Pedy opal field in the seventies. Tom and Marty worked together in Glengarry.

George, a handsome Serb, brought lots of opal for Stephanie to sell. She could be trusted not to tell where the opal came from. Stephanie never again cried in the opal buyer's rooms.

Marty moved out of their home in 1990 and built himself a camp on the field. He would have gone away, he said, but he wanted to keep an eye on his children.

George is seen coming from Stephanie's house in early hours of the morning. There are rumours that George organised a gang of ratters, who go into other people's claims during the night and steal opal.

People call Stephanie a rich bitch. She is often seen red eyed and blue swollen bruises are visible under her makeup sometimes. Marty told Tom that he took Stephanie to hospital when George bashed her. Stephanie is the mother of his children after all. She bought houses for all their children.

Stephanie looks unhappy. Maybe she is scared of the taxation office or of the ratters. Maybe it bothers her that her children know how she made the money to buy their houses. Maybe they hear people say things about their mother. She knows that she can trust Marty because he would never do anything to jeopardise her safety or the future of their children. They both know that what she does is for their children. Marty loves his children.

Don't forget that her clients are thieves and that she slept with them in order to get into business, says Melanie.

Other people would cheat and steal and prostitute themselves for opal, but Stephanie succeeded, says Lisa.

She claims that she only knows her clients by their nick names, I reason.

And by their dicks, says Melanie. It annoys Melanie that Marty never fails to defend his ex-wife. When she calls him an idiot he tells others that she doesn't mean it.

Where there is marriage without love, there will be love without marriage.
Fourier

Michael

I never mix fantasies and dreams with reality. I do not even hope for my dreams and fantasies to turn into reality.

In my real life I try to make people happy but in my fantasies I punish people who are hurting me. I imagine Tom being unfaithful and this sad fantasy allows me to punish him. He is begging for my forgiveness but I don't forgive easily.

You must suffer for those you love, mum's words echo from my childhood. Jesus died on the cross, because he loved us.

In my childhood Jesus became the fantasy of suffering and goodness, of violence and humility. I needed a hero like that to love me unconditionally.

I think of Jesus smothered with precious oil and scent by beautiful, sinful Magdalena, who repented and sinned no more.

Tom sometimes dies in my fantasy and people suddenly recognise my beauty, wisdom and virtuousness. Tom is no longer my judge, I do not need his approval, and he has no control over me. I am fine, not perfect but good enough.

At the end of my every fantasy Tom comes home and we walk in our garden and admire the sunset and the flowers, calm and at peace, at home where we belong. In reality I need Tom to approve of me and love my children. Tom and I carry the memories of our real life.

For a long time I fantasised about Ben whom I loved and left at eighteen. I prepared a million scripts of our reunion. I played and replayed the scenes to create enough romance in my life to survive the reality. The only perfect thing in my life was Ben and our love. I had to nurture that perfection like one nurtures a delicate flower or a sick child.

Gradually Ben's image faded. Even the colour of plastic flowers that people place on graves, fades in time. To survive I developed fantasies about men who have no idea I exist. Maybe there are men having

fantasies about me like that. Often it is hard to separate the faulty reality from the powerful image created in my mind.

I had a dream about the young man trying to kiss me. I woke up before he came in contact with my lips. I embraced the thing that was almost a kiss before I went to sleep again to have another chance, another dream. My hands felt white and smooth from the memory. My face shone with the freshness of a morning dew and there was a tingling sensation all over my body.

The dream fades as I meet my face in the mirror. I brush my teeth and remember a dental appointment and the mammogram, I have to have. I shudder thinking about it.

I have to go to work to earn my keep, my prestige, respect and love. I pull my stomach in and tighten my buttocks at the thought of my dream. My face creates an impression of a smile that improves my appearance more than all the cream I spread over the lines. I paid more for that cream, than I am willing to admit. It guaranteed the younger smoother appearance. Younger and smoother than what, I wonder.

I have to work harder if I am going to keep buying that type of cosmetics. If I want to keep my job, I have to tighten the pores and smooth the lines and tone the muscles.

I wonder if the man would come into my dream and try to kiss me again.

I miss you when you are not here, says the man. Alarmed I look into his cool blue eyes as he collects the mail. I am scared that he can see my dream but he is only here to collect his mail.

You must've been here for years, you know the ropes, and he assures me. We are on familiar grounds again. I am an older woman with experience.

It might rain, I touch the reality and there we are looking through the window at clouds travelling in their path.

Will you be in town tomorrow, he says with such normality that nobody could read anything into it.

Have to go to the library at four.

Might see you there, he says walking away. I wonder if we just made a date.

In the privacy of my bed I wonder if he ever said I love you to me in his dream. I don't go to the library. I am afraid to temper with the fantasy.

I met the man at the post office where I meet everybody else. We exchange words, looks, touch of fingers, opinions. We like something in each other.

I take a long service leave. I experiment with thoughts of retirement and charity work. Magda has to have a useful role in the community. Since

our children left home Lena becomes more prominent and I am prone to get myself into mischief following her wanderings.

A lady from our Neighbourhood centre takes me on a fact finding tour through Lightning Ridge. She is assessing community needs. I am a volunteer. I give a little of my time to the unemployed who have all the time they need. I realise that time is a useless commodity to unemployed, time for them is often filled with rejection.

It'll keep you out of mischief, the lady promises.

The community options person likes me because I know the community. Actually I only know peoples' names. She is comfortably old and indifferent. Maybe she thinks that I am like her.

You meet all kinds at the Ridge, most of them have no proper families, observes community person.

I need my proper family, I say. I can say anything to the community woman because she will go away as soon as she finds out our needs and she will never remember my words.

When you take the straight and narrow road you never discover the dangers hiding on the sideways, says the woman.

I have invested everything in my family.

Sometimes one puts all the eggs in the one basket and then discovers that they are rotten and will never hatch, smiles the woman.

I can't lay more eggs, I have to keep my shells warm, I joke.

You feel secure when nobody wants to take away the smelly mess you sit on, says the woman. I feel insulted.

It's my mess and I can do with it what I want, I start to laugh but I feel tears stinging my eyes.

One could die from the fear of flying like that sparrow who fell into a warm cow dung..

I choose my own dung.

I haven't cried for a long time.

We neglect things that work and try to make unworkable work. I do it all the time. I am waiting for my sons to stop drinking and for my husband to grow up. I know it will never happen. But, like you say, you feel you have to make things work.

So the woman has life somewhere. She is telling her story, she isn't prying into mine.

I left my rotten eggs and came here to sort out other people's mess, she laughs at herself and I am again only an observer.

I am a community options person, the lady introduces herself with the confidence of an official. She is sixty and seems contented with her community role as she probes into the weaknesses of our existence.

You spoke to me after the meeting for social security recipients. You had some ideas, I'd like to talk about them, says the lady, freshly buoyant in her job security.

My name is Michael, he introduces himself to both of us formally for the first time. Won't you sit down.

He built himself a little hut among the trees and in the shade at the front are two old stools. We knew each other's names before, of course, but now we become officially acquainted. I am in his home.

I wonder if Michael is thirty or forty or fifty. I search his face for a tale tell signs of his age and of the problems that the lady could solve for him. She remembers the guidelines and tries to establish a mutual trust and respect.

I conclude that he is about forty. I try not to look fifty.

What do you do, says Michael looking at the official lady.

This might prove difficult. He should not be asking questions, I think.

I am looking for needs in the community, the lady sounds professional. Michael looks directly into my eyes without shame or hesitation.

You indicated that I may be able to do something for you, says the lady.

What sort of thing?

Education, health, housing. There are endless training opportunities for unemployed. The present government likes everybody to do something.

Michael looks less and less needy and more desirable.

I'd like to study etymology, are you familiar with etymology?

Should I know the word, I wonder if it is about butterflies or insects, but the lady nods.

I think the powers to be change the meaning of the words for their own ends. I'd like to challenge them, says Michael.

What level of education did you reach? asks the lady.

I studied theology but I am an engineer.

Where did you come from?

Sydney.

Sydney seems a big, safe place to come from.

I'll see what I can do, says the lady.

When alone I check the word etymology in the dictionary. Michael has this amazing blue eyes that reach to the deepest part of my being. For one moment we looked into each others eyes for no reason at all. It might have lasted a second but it changed me.

I am not in love. I do not plan an affair, I never had an affair. We just allowed our eyes to meet for a moment. It left us speechless.

I have a desire to love a perfect man but the men around me seem branded by experience, marked by sadness and disappointment, damaged by rejection. Miners sometimes say that they will bring a young girl from their hometown when they find opal. Maybe we all long for someone undamaged by life. I know that there are no perfect men, young or old. That's why I need a fantasy.

I look at faces of men around me to see what irreparable damage they hide underneath the brave exterior. Some grow singular long eyebrows and sometimes the hair from their nostrils protrudes. Others have hair protruding from their ears. Most of them neglect their teeth. Their skin is sagging and their stomachs are hanging over the elastic in their boxer shorts. Men in Lightning Ridge take pride in dressing for comfort rather than looks. I see men in suits occasionally at the funeral and even then the suit seems out of place.

Miners are proud of their drinking and belching and of the dirt behind their finger nails, says Lisa.

I am slightly damaged myself. I feel like a worn, old shoe that leaned to the side because the person who wore it was bent a little. There was nothing wrong with the shoe to start with, when it was new on display it was shiny and sturdy. The wear told on the shoe and it could never be new again. It could not even be totally reshaped to fit another person perfectly. Could someone rub out the memory of the person who made it bend to the side day after day? The damage is in the sole. I could get used to the faded shine and torn shoe laces could be replaced, but the bend would stay.

I imagine Michael being a perfect man.

I meet Michael again on the road one day and he asks me for the address of a man. Michael is new in town. We stand in the hot sun and he suggests that we move into the shade. He touches my elbow as he guides me towards the tree on the side of the road and the shiver goes through me. Startled I look at him and our eyes meet. We smile and I excuse myself.

Later in the safety of my car I rest my head on the steering wheel. I know that I am burnt, deliciously burnt, and that there will be nothing but a scar left when the pain stops. The pain is so deliciously sweet. I begin to look for Michael as I drive through town. Michael walks, he has no car. A man without a car is not much of a man.

I pass his camp on the opal field. I see him washing under the tree, splashing water from the basin over his naked top and then rubbing it with the towel. He only has army disposal trousers on. I remember Lady Chatterley's lover as I watch hidden by the trees. I imagine rubbing his body dry for him.

I return home breathless, lay on the bed, close my eyes and rearrange the scene. I make love to the man I know nothing about. I relive the moment our eyes met, I feel the shiver going through my body when his skin touches mine. I lay there with a smile on my face like an idiot. I weave a fantasy about him that couldn't be tempered with reality or knowing. I make love with him in so many delicious ways that any way he knew how to make love, would barely be adequate.

Michael writes me a letter. He says that he is enchanted by my beauty and my wisdom and that he wants to spend time with me and get to know me.

Of course I wouldn't write letters to a stranger. I am a respected married woman. And older than he is. I didn't get a love letter for the last thirty years and it feels deliciously funny. Is it a love letter? When we meet again, he asks me if I received his letter and I tell him that I will not write back.

I often meet Michael in front of the post office. He usually wears greenish ex army pants, a shirt and a hat. I have a good look at him from the counter of the post office before he sees me.

Finished for the day, he asks casually as he walks a little way with me to my car.

How was your day, I ask in a friendly detached manner.

I found a good trace on Green Acres. I started on a new field. Want to see the colour?

I can't refuse because he already has his hand with the opal in front of my eyes.

Nice colour, I say.

It's not much but it's a solid claim.

I wish you luck.

Maybe Michael wants to impress me. He probably fantasises about finding opal which will bring him admiration and love. Maybe he wouldn't want my admiration if he found opal.

What do you do after work? he asks.

Not much. I just watch the merry go around, go around. Why do I say a silly thing like that? Why do I laugh nervously at the same time? I should tell him that I cook dinner for my husband, of course, entertain his friends and clean the house. I feel shy and nervous like my life depended on what I say. I want to hold Michael's attention.

Elections tomorrow, he looks for a topic.

The joy of democracy, I say to keep him talking.

I half open the car and we both lean over the door.

Under democracy one party always devotes its energies to trying to prove that the other party is unfit to rule. Both succeed and in the end are right.

Democracy makes it possible for us to be what we choose to be, I definitely want to sound clever. His face is almost touching my hair. Later I remember his words and know how wrong I am.

Democracy gives us the right to elect powerful people and we confer on them all the powers we should keep for ourselves. They keep writing regulations for us and we become dependent on what they say. We stop thinking for ourselves.

Michael keeps being smart and I like his face so close to mine. He couldn't impress me with his clothes or his camp or the colour of his opal. I am impressed by his wish to impress me. I am something to him.

Democracy gives you equal opportunity, I try to match his thoughts.

Equality may be fine all things being equal, only all things are never equal.

I wonder if he feels equal. He is unemployed after all, I remember. But so are most of the opal miners in Lightning Ridge. They are on social security but they aren't really unemployed. They are penniless one day and millionaires the next.

Do you believe in the equal rights for women? No idea why I want to know that?

You only get power by fighting for it. Men grew strong as protectors of their child bearing females. They are not likely to give up power willingly.

If we remove the threats to a child bearing females, will the men lose their power? I try to confuse him.

Men like to be in control. It's only natural. Men want women to pleasure them, he looks at me mischievously.

Women like to be pleased, I am shamelessly brave.

Some men and some women will always be more equal than others.

We should have more women in parliament, I step on the safe political platform to save myself from leaning towards his face.

Do you really believe that women by virtue of being females are more just, loyal and fair? Do women really want a better deal for all women? Maybe they are only interested in number one, like men.

Women care, I say.

Care about what, he wants to know and I am afraid to say that women love more. Women are not satisfied with just a physical side of things, I want to say. What do I want from Michael? Total commitment? What do I offer him? Nothing. Gratitude for his total commitment but no thank you. I only want to make love with him in the safety of my own bed. Alone.

Men taught women to obey but women are quickly unlearning that. They will soon be the same as men, says Michael.

I like equality, freedom and democracy, I say imagining his fingers on my skin.

Freedom, equality and democracy are totally incompatible. Democracy gives you the right to be different not equal, it gives you freedom to choose your lifestyle but your lifestyle may breach other people's freedoms. You may choose to do as you like but in the end you will not be equal. Nobody was born equal.

There must be a way, I say annoyed with his seriousness. I'd like him to look into my eyes and form kisses with his lips.

Communism was one experiment to make everybody equal but people abused communism. Communism essentially wanted to establish the common good but individuality emerged and everybody is concerned about the number one. Greed for individual survival and power, the survival of the fittest seems to be the only natural law. People are even proud when they say that they don't care what others do or think or feel. Nobody cares. This not caring makes us feel isolated and unloved.

What can we do to change the system, I ask.

I chose to step out of the system, he says.

So did I in a way, I say awkwardly because our eyes play tricks. I don't know why I am lying. I am firmly installed in Tom's system for all times.

I believe that everybody should have a fair go, I try to sound sensible.

Do you feel equal?

I do, I rush on.

Equal to who? He is in control and I feel vulnerable. Unemployed haven't got an equal chance to succeed because they are not doing anything. They have no financial or vested power. The only power they have is in numbers. Like women. He tries to be smart.

You have an equal opportunity to get a job, I try to outsmart him.

Those that had an equal chance, have taken it, unless they are lazy or stupid and, therefore, not equal to those employed.

Why aren't you employed? I try to pin him down.

I told you, I stepped out of the system.

You are still in the social security system. Maybe I want to hurt his pride.

You have to live, he doesn't seem hurt.

Government is trying to please every little minority, I say. Tom said that constantly.

Politicians need every minority at the election. That's democracy for you.

You don't like democracy, I guess.

Politicians buy votes in democracy. They only worry about votes.

Are you a communist, I laugh.

Communists don't have to worry about pleasing any particular group because they don't have to buy votes. Votes count for nothing in communism, like people count for nothing in any totalitarian system.

What are you then?

I hope politicians never make a word for what I am. Does he want to sound mysterious? We are moving further away from the real reason why we are here.

Why would you like to study etymology? I ask evenly.

I would like to see how systems changed the meaning of words to stay in power.

What do you mean?

For example, in the old English a word MAN stood for men and women. St Paul said: no woe man will teach the man. A woe man was a man who was disobedient to God. St. Paul wanted to say that a teacher must be a good person to be an example to his students. The Greek philosophers insisted that a person must become a better person after they spent time with their teacher. Men stuck a prefix wo onto females and you read it in the Bible now that St Paul said: no woman should teach a man, explains Michael. Woman was made into a bad person by men who wanted to hold onto power. Men held onto power for millenniums.

Men still blame Eve, I agree. Poor Adam couldn't resist the wicked woman. He took a bite of the apple and cried: O, god, she made me do it.

Women always make men bite of whatever they choose, says Michael half amused half serious.

A poor little woman makes a man do it every time.

They blamed the woman for the first sin and that made it easier to make every woman pay for the sins of men ever since.

Michael seems visibly marked by disappointment. His happiness was short-lived, if it indeed ever lived.

Michael and I meet on predictable corners at predictable times to have most unpredictable little conversations because we don't know each other well enough to talk about ordinary things.

You studied theology, I say to Michael one day because I have nothing else to say.

I am fascinated with god.

You don't go to church.

I am not religious.

Do you believe in god, I ask.

Only god knows the real story about god. The rest of us only guess and believe what we learn to believe.

They say that god is love, I say carelessly and at the word love our eyes meet.

All the armies in the history prayed to their personal god to help them kill the enemies, says Michael. Even today most government assemblies pray to god for their nation. Croatians say: god and Croatians while Serbs call on their god to help them kill Croatians.

Is Michael a Croatian, I wonder. He sounds a bit foreign but then everybody in the Ridge does.

We want god to favour us because we favour him.

We like our idea about god.

How do you explain life?

I accept it, says Michael.

You have no doubts?

God wrote a role for each of us. We change his script sometimes but it's never right at the end, says Michael.

How do I know the script?

Your story is written on your heart, smiles Michael and touches my hand by accident.

There is always more to it than meets the eye, I return to reality. I know that Michael and I do not have what we both want from each other.

Everything you do is everything you are, says Michael just playing with words. Every step you take brings you a little closer to where you are heading. Everybody you meet tells you a little about who you are.

I close my eyes to life's imperfections and only see the blue of Michael's eyes. The sweet pain in my chest is the same as it was at sixteen. I imagine him saying beautiful words. I could never imagine as well at sixteen.

People smile at sixteen years olds in love knowing that they will soon grow up. They would laugh at fifty years old in love. It is hard to love the wilting, rejected flowers on their way to the rubbish tip. Just as well I am not in love. Love has always been a fantasy.

I begin to write a diary. Much safer to talk to Michael in my mind and play with the words nobody else can hear. The diary helps me keep things in perspective. Michael becomes a fictitious character and my words to him are harmless.

Lena writes the pretend letters to Michael. She has to put into words the feelings that flood over me. I will never say these words to Michael or anybody else. They are a mirror of my soul.

5.6.86

We dream about giving it all we got
although we know that we have not
what we want from each other.

Are you the one who will love me despite the wrinkles that came to
stay?

Can you see that inside my shapeless body I am more beautiful every
day.

Did you come to set me free?

I am afraid to love the liberty.

When our skin and our thoughts touch will we still want to be free?

Will we still want what we give each other, when we have nothing new
to give?

Will we survive when we have nothing more to long for?

I used to make the words for you to say to me, but the words you said
have touched me so much more.

1.7.86

I can not write you a letter, I am afraid of the ridiculous words that would tell you what I would never want anyone to know. I will not even close my eyes to see you peering into my confusion. My sensible face laughs at me in the mirror. Without glasses I see no lines of historical events written on my face. Your name sits on my lips like over ripe cherry ready to fall into an uplifted skirt. My heart hangs on my sleeve dangerously. Your embrace would never be enough. I want to merge with you and be one for ever but even forever would never be long enough. I will hide my heart in a safe warm place, I will not let it talk to you any more. It keeps waking me in the quiet of the night with longing for your arms. I don't remember longing like that for any other silly arms. Is loving like riding a bike, once learned never forgotten? I don't, I know, I don't love you. How could I, I don't even know you. But then I don't even know myself.

5.7.86

We shared words about our loved ones today. You told me that somewhere in Sydney you left a wife. You didn't want to hang around. You wanted to make a clean break. I know you a little more, alone I can hear your heart-beats in my heart.

6.7.86

Caught in your light I burn for you.
If any words of love are ever true
I will now say these words
but not to you.
It isn't first
but it may certainly be last
as gifts of gods are passed to us
without the guarantees.
Like sun and stars
the seasons pass,
they come and go,
enjoy or pass,
we choose,
refuse the gifts of love
or love.

7.7 86

I have given my soul to you to do with it
what pleases you.
I promise you,
all promises to me will be erased from memory,
just promise me to love me now most tenderly.
Like morning dew your promises will die quite painlessly.

8.7 86

I walk through the rest of my life missing you,
the rest of my life an amazing maze of twisted allies and walls.
Like a moth I search for the way out.
I search for you.
Like a perpetual light you shine in me,
a candle of hope keeping me alive.
I lived today with you, searching the depths of us.
Are my thought of you
keeping you awake?
Are you searching for me,

am I in your heart now saying things
you want to hear.

10.7 86

I want to forget the sweet pain of our meeting
that wasn't a meeting but a glance of you
in the speed of passing through life.
I ran, afraid, that knowing you, may spoil my fantasy.
We have nothing to share or embrace,
our fantasy has no place in our reality.

12.7.86

You made me aware of my loose skin, my split ends and the middle age
spread. Before I met you I never worried about those things. I smile
gently not to show my age because your age seems much less and your
body more athletic. Was the hair on your face out of neglect? I have no
idea what colour is your hair or if you have any. All I remember is the
glow within me. Maybe you aren't even aware that I carry a light and
search for you. Does the lob sided smile come from some defect on your
teeth? You are a ridiculously pathetic figure chasing an old woman, if
you are. In your prime, when you should build a future and a family.
What do you expect from me? If you do at all. Forget it! What do you
have to offer? Your youth to make me look old? Ah, no harm done, we
are both sensible, I am sensible because I have much to lose. Have you
anything to lose, have you anything but that awkward pathetic smile.

25.7 86

Loving you is never ever going to be enough for me,
so let us begin forgetting it.
You are coming with the night
you are here with sunrise,
you I see,
when nobody is with me.

28.7

What will I see behind the shadows of my fantasy,
what will we tell each other
what would we hear,
when so near kissing get our lips
and tips of fingers touch.

29.7 86

Did you forget to be where I expected you to be?
Did you not think about it every moment of your day?
Did you not stay awake to make up words for me?

31.7 86

What is this irrational feeling we share?
Where does it come from?
Do we share anything at all?
Do we want to share anything?
The glow of fire in our eyes
the words unsaid
the fear that passions hot will scar like fires do.
Scared of clouds
scared of emptiness,
I long for you.

10.8. 86

My hands and lips call out to you.
I say the words I never meant to say.
Please let me know,
that you too feel the way I do.

11.8.86

I am searching the street corners for you,
I don't want to know you or touch you
or even talk to you.
I must not let you spoil the dreams I dream of you.
We can not touch what isn't true.

21.8 86

I don't like the way you live or walk or look.
I don't know how you feel and think and dream.
Why do I compose the words for you to say to me
to tell me how you think of me.

26.8.86

It's my birthday today. Thank you for being sensible. I suppose some
people are born sensible while others are scared into it. We created
illusions that evaporated like morning mists. We see each other for what
we are and not for what we both want to be. Birthdays are more and
more sobering.

11.9.86

Knowing you reminds me that I am alive.
I can never lose the gift you gave me,
the memory of you will always delight me,
there was no compromise or shame
or dishonesty or disappointment.

17.10.86

I will never know about your past or your future,
about your habits
and about your struggles to get ahead of me.
I will never inflict upon you my uncontrollable temper,
I will not spoil your days with my constant irritability,
I will let you fool yourself into believing that I am cheerfully waiting to
dedicate my whole life to you.

Thank you for letting me love you so perfectly.
Life, after all, is an illusion.

1.11.86

The air was so electric and the hearts so close.
I imagined the touch of your hand but I went away.
Who knows what you imagined.
Maybe the fear of rejection stopped us.
Maybe its just as well.

6.11.86

I can't exist without a fantasy,
you started the illicit string of words,

the agony of empty place in place of ecstasy.
Have you forgotten me.
We know that we can never be,
the knowing should restore sanity
but there is an apple on forbidden tree.

7.11.86
What do you want from me?
You said that I am wise and pretty.
I want to run my fingers over your spine
and predict your future.

28.11.86
We know that we haven't got what we are looking for.
We don't know how to love perfectly.

17.1.87
We talk about the things eternity away
from our wanting to be in each other's arms.
I know we do,
we both know that we never will,
we know that we will always want to be
all things to each other.

23.1.87
I'd like to hear the words you keep from me
like I keep the words from you.
I want to know you so well
that I could forget you.

1.2.87
I want to be intimate with you,
I would like to touch your every thought,
feel your every emotion,
I want to touch every detail of your body.
I know that one life time is not enough to get so close
to anybody.
Not even to myself.

13.3.87
You will never know the words I whispered to that silly moon,
the promises I made to the stars, have nothing whatsoever to do with
you.

I wrote a poem after years of abstaining.

I will not miss what I never had.
We will forget if there is nothing to remember.

25.3.87
I developed an enormous capacity for ignoring obstacles. I see blooming
flowers in the desert. I know its an illusion but life is a pretence. It is
amazing how a pair of hands can get a new meaning and how eyes tell
the story louder than an earthquake. There is a tremendous fear that
what I see in your eyes is only a reflection of my wish that you love me.

26.3.87

It isn't fair to stash all love in one uninsured basket that may walk away.
It isn't fair to you to become my whole life. Others would be happy to
share a part of us. I can not love you a little bit. There is no room for
anything else since you came.
Just as well you are going.

27.3.87

I am suffering from a strange sickness. The symptoms include severe
chest pain, delusions and illusions, disorientation, diminished mental
ability, lack of concentration, dizziness, light headedness, forgetfulness,
sleeplessness, the tendency to stare into space, and the compulsion to
whisper Michael.

I ignore friends and loved ones.

I dwell on the memory of the little fire in our eyes
as we first began this dangerous game.

I should know better. I know better.

There is a boogie man in the scrub,

I have to go home.

I have a job to do and life to live.

A fish has to swim,

so if you please, unhook me,

I am not your fish.

30.3.87

I climbed the mountain,
the heaven was close.

I am afraid of coming down

but I know my way back

I return unharmed

grateful for the lights and delights

and the memories.

I still love you.

31.3.87

In my dreams you do what I want you to do,
you are as powerful and resourceful as I want you to be
and just as vulnerable as I like you.

Your picture is fading.

9.4.87

I waste my time but I love the time I waste on you.

I love the pain the memories cause me.

Maybe it's just as well that you went away.

21.4.87

A part of me calls back the moments when we were so aware of each
other that nothing else mattered. What joy, what exquisite, divine,
crystal clear moments of ecstasy we used to share.

30.4.87

Just as well we never promised anything to each other.

Now you have gone and I have to finish the life I began before you
interrupted.

11.5.87

Gradually I will forget,

forgetting should be easy at my age.

26.5.87

I know that no man can possess the virtues and qualities, strength and knowledge, gentleness and sincerity and love that I imagined you to possess. How could I endow you with all these characteristics? I only tried them on you, you never had them, you were never really expected to have and exercise them because I knew that I would never let you close enough to show me who you really are. I don't even love myself as I would have you love me. We felt each other in our minds and hearts like one feels few people. I am richer for knowing you.

27.5.87

I remember your raised hand as you plodded along. That wave told me that I am as alive for you as you are for me. You trod the streets, a forlorn man with the spark in the eyes that lights up my life. I think of god and I pray for you. I love you like I could never love a real person. Even my god approves of you, even he tells me that I am a better person for knowing you.

The sweet pain of that glimpse, that minute meeting of the eyes. We know that against the odds and reason, outside matter and reason we are, we simply are.

1.6.87

I saw you in passing a moment not long enough to lift a hand in greeting but we met in our whole being, we knew we met.

4.6.87

We never once said that we love each other. I once told you that you distract me. We talked about god but our eyes were saying intimate love things.

6.6. 87

I'd like to know who made the cross stitch over the hole of your trousers so neatly and ironed it over. Who was the lady walking next to you, your mother, sister, wife, lover. What do you buy at the butchers and bakers. Are your eyes blue or do I just remember the sky from the day we once looked at each other for two seconds. What do you eat for dinner and who sleeps next to you. What did you dream last night or day. What would you like from me, if anything. Are you aware of my existence every moment of your life. Have you been to jail or to the brothel or in the war. What is your god telling you to do? Are there dark secrets to be uncovered or just sad events you couldn't prevent? Are you a victim or a criminal, a hunter or the hunted. Have you potions or black magic to bewitch. Where did you come from and where are you going. Do you know anything about me, do you want to know?

15.7.87

You were the light, only an insignificant light, but you were the highlight of my every day for over a year. You shone into the days of my life because I pretended that you loved me. Even the pretence of an unwanted love was better than no love at all. I was special to you and only that made you special to me. I was delighted by being thought of by another person and desired by a man who could not possibly have me.

I used to drive past your little camp on the opal field and peered into your windows. If I caught a glimpse of you I drove away quickly.

I rubbed out all your imperfections, the missing front tooth, the patched up shirt, lopsided grin.

In my fantasy you smell like a fresh pine forest, we lay in the scented grass and see eternity from up close. In a great orgasmic union we find peace, tranquillity and the meaning of life. There is nothing beyond that. We rest and know each other in every possible way and there is nothing beyond knowing. We are Adam and Eve all over again, we are sad and sorry because there is nothing beyond knowing. For a glorious moment we are god and the truth and the way is with us. We are part of the Earth and the universe and the love that is called god.

There is only one forbidden apple to bite into and we did it many times over and over again in our imagination. We wanted to know god and be like god and be god. Like Adam and Eve we were born to search for the unity with god and had to die through the pain of knowing our sinfulness. God lets us play with our longing until he calls us home, to be united with him.

We long to unite and we are afraid that knowing each other we would discover our imperfections like Adam and Eve did.

The forbidden fruit is with us always. Eating the fruit would take away the rose coloured glasses and we would look for a fig leaf.

The last time we met, you asked me what does my husband do. I know you wanted to know if I have a husband. You wanted to know where we stand. We have no ground to stand on.

You are just a fantasy. I need to serve my master. I wanted to change you into my master but you could never scare me like Tom does. I wanted to leave my kingdom to find a better king, a more worthy and noble king but I realise that kings are not noble but powerful.

Michael left for Christmas 1987 without saying goodbye.

I would like to stay with you, I remember him saying before he left.

I wonder where he would have liked to stay with me, in my house, my country, my job, my bedroom, my dining room, my bathroom, my car, under my umbrella. Where would he like to be?

I try to reconcile myself with my mirror image. Could Michael really love my face? Or my body. What would we see after we exhausted ourselves with lovemaking. Maybe we don't want to know.

What exactly do I love about Michael? I searched the streets to catch a glimpse of him. I believe that he searched for me.

I am going away, he says as we meet for the last time in front of the super-market. As he opens his mouth, I see a gaping hole where his front tooth used to be.

I had a bit of an infection and the dentist, Michael is saying. I remind myself that I am only platonically attached to him, that I love his soul, the spirit, the inner man, the person he is. His cheekbones sagged and the reflection of my horror is written in his eyes.

I'll get a bridge when the gum heals, he explains.

I can't cope with one missing tooth. I know his looks will be restored but a cold sobering fear shakes me. What if my gums develop this kind of infection. Quite possible at my age. Dentures are in order but not this romantic, down to socks stupid notion of love.

You are so good with your hands, I say to Lisa as I enter the reality.

While I count the stitches of my tapestry I can't possibly have any higher thoughts.

What sort of higher thoughts, I ask surprised.

Oh, you know, of what might have been. It's best to accept that what is, was meant to be. I believe that even what's yet to come has been arranged by some higher power. Like the colours of these sunflowers I am sowing on my picture.

One can not shut one's eyes to things not seen by eyes.

Morgan

DEPRESSION

In 1988 I told the post mistress that I will retire so she found my replacement.

My doctor warns that I am too young to retire. My doctor knows that I need a duty. I know then that there is so much to life beside work. I could read, travel and entertain friends.

I will spend time with the family, I tell the doctor.

It might be hard to adjust, warns the doctor.

You have to make room, sooner or later one has to get used to old age, says Lisa.

It's not like you need the money, says Melanie.

Lisa, Melanie, and Ema laugh about themselves. Maybe deep down somewhere in the non-pretend world we are all the same and a part of one and the same. There is no need for fancy clothes and words and false mannerisms. We don't have to worry about the impressions. There is comfort in knowing. Like Adam and Eve, we are comfortable in our nakedness. Maybe my friends are aware of my dreams and fears on some deeper level.

I cut a chicken for lunch and the thought strikes me that I never tasted the white meat of the chicken breast. Tom likes the white meat so I carefully reserve the breast for him every time. Boys have a leg each and Helena has the wings. I claim that I like the meat on the bones of the carcass best because that is all that is left. I clean the bones so no meat is wasted because Tom hates waste. I never even considered liking the white breast meat of the chicken.

Tom is served first, he picks the chair to sit on and the clothes and the towels and the colour of the fruit. I take what is left. Our children have to be happy with what they get. They don't even deserve all the good things the Lord and their father provide.

You have to get used to being a housewife, laughs Lisa.

I don't want my dreams to come true. King Midas was so unhappy when his dreams came true and everything he touched turned into gold. If all my dreams came true, I would have nothing to dream. The fantasies shine inside me like the stars in the silence of the night. What would I do with a star in my lap? I need the wonderland of wishing for the star.

Like a drowning person I hold on the straw but the straw and I obey the current and float down the stream, a part of the current, a drop in the ocean.

I wonder why I comb my hair and put the lipstick on. Is looking pretty a primeval duty of a woman? Is heroism part of man's fate? Do we dance for each other's attention in our own predetermined ways all our lives? Is this all there is?

I am grieving for the loss of a job that kept me occupied for twenty years. Everybody knew me as an employee of the post office. People don't even recognise me on the street because I don't belong on the street.

I play solitary games like crying, eating and smoking behind the shed. It's not easy to laugh alone, you look mad, but crying alone is OK. Talking to myself is OK as long as no one can hear me. No words are really needed between best friends but I doubt that I am my own best friend. I do things that hurt me.

Tom and god see all my imperfections. I try to hide but they know. I puff quickly. I throw away a half smoked cigarette and then decide to have one more deep puff so I pick it up just as Tom comes around the corner. I stub the smoke and wipe my eyes. You can't hide, I can smell you a mile away, says Tom. A litany of criticism and abuse follows. I know he will punish me with silence and I will have to beg forgiveness and promise never to do it again. He drives away. I need another smoke to overcome the guilt, the shame and the fear of cancer.

I constantly suck on lollies but he smells my fingers and the hair and the clothes and the air around me. He has a keen sense of smell and knows when I try to disguise one smell with the other. I wish there was a place somewhere where I could occasionally put up my feet, have a cup of coffee and a smoke without looking out for Tom. My furtive, hungry puffing makes me feel dirty and worthless.

Tom calls me whenever bad effects of smoking are discussed on TV. I listen to please him and then I hide behind the shed for a quick puff because I can't cope with the guilt. I am a bad example to my children.

I am an obvious proof that Tom is not totally in control. This is as annoying to Tom as having smaller fruit than our neighbours or as troublesome as losing a ball game with our friends.

Our friends know that I go to the toilet sometimes to smoke when in restaurants. They don't understand what a big deal smoking is but then they don't really know much about Tom and me.

Some men tell Tom that they would not allow their wives to smoke. He says that he allows me to do what I like. He is bigger than bigots that way. Some women feel jealous because Tom is so concerned about my health.

My doctor prescribed Prozac to help me overcome anxiety. It is nice to be on Prozac because I have no thoughts or desires or anxiety. I sleep well. I rest in peace like people do in the cemetery.

Memories never come in any chronological order. I remember Kim flashing her dazzling smile after she had her teeth capped.

My tongue keeps examining the new edges in my mouth and it is painful. My dentist says that I must keep my tongue still but my tongue can't stop searching for my old teeth. My husband told me that whisky would numb the tongue and stop it rubbing on the sharp edge of the new porcelain covering, said Kim.

As we went home from Kim's funeral people talked about poor Kim who died of cancer.

And she didn't even smoke, I say relieved.

It started in her mouth and spread, I think, someone says.

She had problems with her teeth, the bridge wasn't fitted properly.

She drank, someone whispered.

Silly memory. Why do I keep on delving into the crevices of my life where pain is? I probably cause my own pain.

I look at the poor orange tree withering away slowly under the shade of the mulberry bush. The stunted citrus neither lives nor dies without the sun. It's fruit is a few bitterly sour, tiny oranges nobody wants.

I am going to dig that orange out and end its misery, I say to Tom.

Oh, let it fight it's way out of the shade. It's the law of nature to fight for survival, says Tom.

Weekends come and go unnoticed, it feels like someone just cancelled Christmas. Saturday means nothing without plans for the following week.

When you are down, there is only one way to go, comforts Lisa.

I wonder if I am dead, dying or sleeping, I try to laugh.

You'll get used to it, says Melanie.

I am scared of fading away.

You must snap out of this, advises Mel.

Praying is good for the soul. Happy are those that know how to pray. Happy are those who do not need to succeed and achieve and struggle and compete, says Susan.

You are not finished when you are beaten, you are finished when you quit, that's my motto, encouraged Marty. He never quits.

I walk past the bowling club. The white uniforms of the bowlers sprinkle the green like snowflakes. Dazzling white of the uniform makes them one people, they belong to the team, they are members. They forgot who they were before they put the uniform on. Their possessions and knowledge, thoughts and feelings, experiences and failures are rubbed out, only the white uniform remains and the skill of getting the ball close. They have an equal chance. But not for me, not yet.

I watch the bees buzzing in the garden and feel as unnecessary as a barren tree. Everybody else is busy but I only have to spend time. I am afraid because the time is spent whether I watch it or not. Night comes whether I admired the sunset or not. And day comes if I greet the rising sun or not. I can not save a single minute. I must spend my time whether I want to or not. I feel old, unproductive, undeserving, unloved and not at all clever. I want to stop the time to decide what I want to do. I comfort myself with the thought that I will die not so far from now and that everything is less important than I think.

Life seemed important when I did useful, clever things, I say to Melanie.

One thing is no more important than the other. If the world blows up all the important things will go up in the smoke, says Melanie who has an important job.

When you have no vision for the future, the future disappears, I try to joke about my future.

Nobody takes any notice of my wanderings, I am not fooling myself any more, I know how little it matters one way or the other. I am learning to align my dreams with my reality.

I was contented while I worked and saved for the rainy day. The rainy day must come one day. The teachings of past generations couldn't all be wrong. I will put to good use all that I saved while I was suitably tired and prudent. Now I have a better future and there is nothing more to wait for. Nobody cares if I sit down and die now.

I am sitting in the garden under the influence of the full moon. I am asking god to give me a new start, a clean piece of paper to paint without mistakes of the past. God must be resting. There is no snow that could cover all my wanderings.

Caring people suggest that I may need a change and I wonder if my needs are so obvious. They are bored with me and I owe it to them to cheer up.

A new interest would perk you up, says a grocery shop assistant. How does she know that I need perking up.

I enrol in the computer course as the shop assistant suggested. I want to get away from the reality and do the database and the spreadsheet. Everything lost lustre. The days became grey reflections of roads and buildings and dresses and smiles and greetings. I remind myself that I have to think positive. I practise that piercing interested look, I hum a song and smile to fool others that I am alive.

We gather at the local school for database. An old teacher informs us benevolently that we can all call him Patrick. The class of young shop assistants giggles gratefully, they also giggle about getting married and about having babies and a new career and a car maybe.

The figures jumping around on the computer screen seem to have the same frivolous gaiety. A little startled, the girls squeal 'shit' and apologise. Shit gradually echoes from every corner as the lesson continues. A sharper less noisier fuck emerges occasionally. I am too old to say fuck and giggle. I decide that I am better. Being better is almost worse than being worse. Being better makes you hate others because they are so many and, they are so strong because of their numbers, yet they are not worth joining. I am a minority of good people who plod on without fail. I have to accept this peculiar differentness, because that is all I am. I make things work, I make them look right. Tom expects me to. It is not worth pretending even at the price of belonging. I know that I can not belong even if I tried. Their calculating little eyes have a real future and database has a meaning for them while it has none for me.

For being better I pay by being lonely, but I choose to be lonely rather than be one of them.

I know that I am always a step ahead of them only I don't know where I am going. Maybe they follow me, maybe someone somewhere made a conscious decision to follow me. Maybe we all follow each other simply because we don't know the way. Frightening thoughts run through my head.

I become disillusioned and sick of database and spreadsheet. I am tired of drab ordinariness of shopkeepers and shop assistants. I am angry because I am afraid of leading and more afraid of following. I refuse to be happy and I blame the teacher because he looks old and at the end of the road yet he pretends to be alive with those young girls who have the future in which they will achieve a proper status of a shop assistant.

I assume that Patrick does not take notice of me, because I am as old as he is. He looks afraid of his tired old age and not at all wise.

I wonder if he goes home to make love to his tired worn out wife or if he gave up and looks for something old and fresh on the street of life. I wonder if he wanders if there is or should be more to it all.

Patrick sticks with the job that pays him thirty miserable dollars an hour. He draws the bars of the monitor on the blackboard and looks at his watch occasionally. Maybe he is dreaming that away from the reality of the blackboard and database there is another dimension, an invisible virtual reality produced by the computer in his heart.

Patrick needs thirty dollars an hour to support his reality, without thirty dollars an hour he can't chase another dimension. Most people did not yet realise the reality of that dimension and did not give that dimension a proper recognition.

The money is good and Patrick remains prancing all his life in front of the blackboard lifelessly like a racing horse in a stable. He is waiting for the bell to tell him that the lesson ended and the bell to tell him to begin and in between he rests and becomes more and more afraid of wanting the virtual other dimension. Would it help if I told him that most of us spent our lives in this same cycle.

I am annoyed because Patrick is more unmistakably me than my mirror image. I think he knows that, because he refuses to come and lean over my shoulder. Patrick leans over young shop assistants' shoulders to peer at their keyboards and they giggle delightedly because the teacher takes notice. The words shit and fuck become a little louder. They pretend to understand the figures and look knowingly at the configurations appearing in a clever succession with their own invisible will.

My school mates pretend to be smart although they know that I am smarter and better. They giggle when I dare to look ridiculous and ask why the columns don't move as I want them. They don't dare look ignorant. Being better is definitely more painful than being worse. Having a little knowledge makes you aware of the vast universe of your ignorance. Without knowledge there is no ignorance.

With my little knowledge I could never again aspire to be a shop assistant. I could never again aspire.

I become scared and a little ashamed of being better because this sets me apart and makes me vulnerable. The more knowledge I accumulate, the more I stick out like a sore thumb among the group of hopeful aspiring shop assistants. I feel weak and lonely and I want to run away from myself. I don't want to watch myself prancing in front of the blackboard in the old worn out body of my teacher. I leave my computer course for good.

I hate Patrick for not paying me attention.

It is exciting that nobody even dreams of why I left. The little secret makes me feel good. It is the only benefit I got for the money spent on database. Maybe nobody even noticed that I left. Or cared. Patrick cares, he rings and tries to convince himself that a lower course of computer awareness might give me more satisfaction. He tries to put the blame for his failure on me. He didn't try and he didn't succeed to teach me anything and he feels the pangs of failure. What if they all left, he panics. If they all left, his thirty dollars an hour would not be there any more. What would happen to his existence. I try to reassure him, that I will try and he is grateful that I have forgiven him for not taking any notice of me. Patrick finally likes me because I absolve him of his failure and take the blame upon myself. I am good at that.

I need to cry. I am acutely aware of the sameness and the desire for the uniqueness. I want to belong and stand out at the same time. Is this the primordial good and bad in me tearing at each other?

I read about NEC, virtual reality, cyber space, wall street, and ball games. There are the same ball games in every corner of the world.

The communication devices are cheaper but there are no people to communicate with. People became involved with communication devices. There are instructions on how to feel and think and act but there is no one to share the feelings and thoughts with. Everybody understands how everybody else feels and why. Life became a series of thinking processes to be followed by a series of action. All consequences are predictable if you take empirical view of things. I want to communicate with someone uniquely special, I want to be significant to someone.

One has to keep up with technology in order not to be left behind, says Peter.

Internet is the thing of the future, says Tom.

Men are so practical, they have to catch up with others on the Net, says Melanie.

At the end of the day I know in every corner of my being that there is no future. My allocated time is growing smaller, I am in fact going backwards into nothingness. Every time I lay down at night I try harder to imagine the future. I can no longer conjure lovers to bring everlasting happiness.

If you persevere you will succeed in the end, advised mum. I persevered.

I miss something that comes between television shows and sleep. I speak to people to remind myself that I am still alive. I am not really interested in people. Someone somewhere once described depression simply as a loss of interest.

I annoy people like a hit and run mosquito. I whinge about the weather, government, neighbours and specially about my loved ones. I keep reminding myself that I am lucky, fairly pretty, intelligent, healthy, wealthy and wise. I admit that I am also greedy, bitchy, crooked, self centred, inconsiderate. I tell myself that everything is as it should be.

I am out of control surfing the ocean. The waves hold me high one moment and then they push me under and I struggle up to be taken where they would take me. I am a rolly polly in a cyclone. I grasp for love, the need to be needed is overwhelming. I need Tom to tell me what to do.

The empty nest syndrome, helps Melanie.

Maybe you should get a pet, says Lisa.

There is nothing to save myself for.

Its the change of life, says Melanie.

I am counting my blessings one moment and cry the next.

You need hormone replacement, says Lisa.

You should definitely come with me to arts classes, says Melanie.

I don't know if Tom would let me go, I say.

You will never know if you don't go, says Melanie.

He might get mad, I say.

Now is your chance to be what you were meant to be, laughs Melanie.

Maybe I'll be sorry.

It's better to be sorry for what you did than being sorry for what you never dared to do.

I go reluctantly. Whoever heard of an old woman starting a painting career. Stupid. I am no painter.

Tom hums a tune to show me that he doesn't care what I do. I try to get along, avoid tripping, falling over, hurting. I try to find some pleasure in flowers, friends and children. I avoid fire as I skirt the edges of hell. I close my eyes as I jump over obstacles, I close my ears to thunder, my heart is closed to everything.

I make love with my husband. I wonder what would others call what we do under the blanket.

I spread paint with the artistic group. I paint the rainbow colours. I have a fine day painting, but I don't like to temper with happiness. It won't last. I measure my steps, I look before I leap. I paint for hours. My garden needs me, I remember the only tie with my reality. And my family, I correct myself.

I ask our post mistress to let me work part time. I need something to stop me from going insane.

You are just on time because Mrs T is leaving, says the postmistress. You can replace Mrs T part time because you know how to work the wretched computers.

Mrs T, like myself, worked at the post office for years and years. Mrs T told me that computers frighten her more than old age. We both know that we are out of date.

Penny, the girl that replaced me, is a bright young Australian born girl out of college. She has to follow Mrs T's instructions because Mrs. T is in charge, has more experience and is thirty years older. Penny keeps telling Mrs T about the keyboard.

I am sorry Mrs T. I didn't mean to upset you, says Penny. Like everybody else, Penny has a problem pronouncing Mrs T's name. She tries to help the poor, old, migrant woman.

Not a problem, says Mrs T who suddenly feels old, tired and unwanted. She is tired of having to prove herself. She feels ignorant again after she believed that she learned everything she needed to know. She knows that Penny knows all one needs to know.

Mrs T's hands are wet from perspiration and her accent becomes more obvious.

It's so hot, says Mrs. T.

It must be dreadful to go through the hot flushes. I'd shoot myself rather than suffer a menopause, says Penny noticing Mrs P's perspiration. If I live that long, adds Penny because she wants to apologise. She knows that Mrs. T is upset about something.

Mrs T turns and tosses all night and her husband wants to know what is wrong but there is nothing to tell without feeling even more miserable.

It feels good to stay home, she says to me. It is Sunday morning and she doesn't have to face the smart, young Penny in the office tomorrow morning.

Sunday is the Lord's day and everybody is his own lord on Sunday, she tries to cheer herself. But it is an empty day, a day when she can not prove anything to anybody. Mrs T is much like me.

I wish I could make my children happy, I want to leave them something to make them happy, I say to Melanie.

You can only leave what you have, says Melanie.

Will they inherit my anxiety and my unhappy longings instead of the money I keep saving for that rainy day. Maybe like all people, they dream of achieving and making money. Maybe my money will take away their dreams. Money doesn't bring happiness? But what does?

I am glad you talked me into painting. It keeps me out of mischief, I say to Melanie.

You never know what you can do if you never try, smiles Melanie.

Here I am, fifty, depressed and standing at the cross-roads and you turned me into an artist. I was astonished that Tom didn't mind.

Now you know what you can do, says Melanie.

I never told anyone what I want to do. I forgot if I want anything at all.

You always find an interesting angle, beams my art teacher.

I get preoccupied with an angle, I apologise.

Don't be sorry. Life is like that. Little things can mean a lot.

You should try to be more balanced, teases Melanie.

Maybe disproportion is a reflection of how she feels, corrects the art teacher.

You have an angle there, laughs Melanie.

You are developing a unique style, affirms the teacher. I like your shadows and light. There is much activity in the shadow.

At our age one looks better away from a direct light, explains Melanie.

You have to be a little mad to be in Lightning Ridge and a bit more mad to begin painting it, laughs one of the ladies at the art course.

In a great romance, each person basically plays a part that the other really likes.

Elizabeth Ashley

MELANIE

I first met Melanie at the Bore Bath where most Lightning Ridge people meet. For those living in the camps on the field, Bore Bath is the bath.

Melanie came from Sydney to look after our mental health. She is softly plumb and she tells me that nurses better be big and strong because they often have to lift heavy patients. When Melanie is amused, her body vibrates with a contagious unrestricted laughter. She has a way of making most problems look funny and insignificant. Her long curly, red hair is blown by the wind and half covers her face. Men turn as she passes.

You are always so cheerful, I compliment her.

People take life too seriously, she says.

Melanie never pretends to be smarter than she is and she laughs about her faults, stupidities, embarrassments and fears. In her company I don't have to pretend to be happy, clever or good. I love Melanie because she is so imperfect.

You are so tolerant, I say.

When you work with infirm and volatile and weird, you learn to take people as they come. I took a couple of months off after the operation to work on my mental and physical fitness, she laughs.

What operation?

It's nothing, really. I developed adhesions from a previous operation.

Did you have to stay in hospital long?

I don't mind hospitals. You get chocolates and flowers and visitors. The nurse checks if the room is too bright or too dark or too cold, that's what we're here for, you know, they say. In hospital people get paid to keep you clean and fed and comfortable. You don't have to be rich or clever or beautiful to deserve their kindness.

How nice, I laugh.

They praised me for passing the wind and for emptying the bowels and the bladder after the operation. Outside you do all these things and hope that nobody ever notices. The nurse helped me into a wheelchair and took me into the garden. Wonderful.

You provided work for her.

I had to do something.

We sit on the edge of the hot pool to cool off. The steam rises into the autumn coolness.

On the wall of the shower facilities is written in big red letters: Tito's Yugoslavs. Someone crossed it and wrote Serb ratters next to it. Fuck off, wogs, someone added in another colour.

Across from the Bore Bath is a fenced off area where Serbs have Serb Orthodox church.

The Balkan war united Serbs, I observe.

The bastards work out strategies for ratting right in front of everybody here, says Melanie.

Do you understand their lingo, I ask.

Enough to know that they are up to no good.

I wander why Melanie doesn't like Serbs.

They are all the same in my book, says Melanie.

Serbs on the other side of the pool look around suspiciously.

Nada just told Toni to be careful. She knows that I understand, whispers Mel.

What other languages do you understand?

I get by with any Slavic language but I also know a bit of French and German because I lived there for awhile before we came to Australia. And Hungarian and English of course.

My mother is Croatian. She was sent to relatives in Hungary when Serb Cetniks killed her parents. She later married a Hungarian man and after a few years we escaped to Austria and then came to Australia. I went to school in Sydney.

I thought you were Hungarian.

Even my father is not really Hungarian, he escaped to Hungary from Romania but that's another story, laughs Melanie.

You are prejudiced against Serbs.

I don't like ratters. As a matter of fact I may have inherited some prejudices from my mother.

How come you applied for a job here.

It's a long story. I first came to Lightning Ridge as a child with my parents. I remember it so well. There was a bus load of us tourists from Sydney swarming around the bore bath after breakfast. Mum suffered from rheumatism and she heard about the therapeutic hot springs. Most European migrants swear by the hot springs, explains Melanie.

I remember a man sitting on the edge of the pool with his feet dangling in the water. The tourists asked him about mining and where he came from and if he found opal. The man smiled and pointed at himself saying: Bonegilla. I don't know if Bonegilla was his name or nationality or a place. I still don't know to this day what Bonegilla means.

I do, I explain. Bonegilla was migrant camp near Aulbury. Most of us migrants in the fifties and sixties came to Bonegilla to be sorted out and sent where work and accommodation was arranged for us. It was our touchdown, a new hometown, a birth place in our chosen country. The birthplace is always a magic place and we were all reborn in Bonegilla. We all carry the name Bonegilla written on our hearts and that was probably the only identification with Australia the man had. Bonegilla is the place where we slept that first night in Australia, where we first smelled the dripping and crunched the corn flakes. Bonegilla was our introduction to mutton and gravy and boiled veggies and flies and foreigners and heat. I will never forget the flies. People perpetually waved their hands in front of them to shoo the flies.

My family came straight to Sydney. We had relations, says Melanie.

I experienced an enormous surge of optimism and hope. It was a birth one is fully aware of. We left behind the terror and the anxiety, the relations and the regimes, we were free.

Did you speak English?

Nobody in Bonegilla spoke English except officials who looked after us and decided where we will live and work.

Over 300 000 migrants passed through Bonegilla between 1947 and 1971. Thousands of them settled around Aulbury-Wodonga. others spread all over Australia.

I remember the tiny corrugated tin rooms. At night I was afraid of the noises wind made.

Tom couldn't believe that anyone could spoil the food the way Australian cooks did. He complained bitterly about soggy vegetable floating in lukewarm water, greasy mutton, grey gravy, strange smelling custard, spongy bread, overcooked eggs, burnt toast, lumpy porridge.

I can still see the poor Bonegilla man sitting on the edge of the pool there, remembers Melanie.

I wonder who he was.

Bloody wog, someone said, tells Melanie. The first word my mum learned in Australia was bloody. Everything was bloody in those days. She didn't know what the word meant but she used it for years thinking that bloody was something enhancing and loveable. When she heard of a bloody accident on the road she was horrified at the word and never used it again.

We must have sounded weird to English speaking Australians.

I worked as a barmaid for a while and someone ordered a screwdriver so I gave it to him. The whole pub broke in laughter. Why didn't the stupid man ask for vodka and orange? I spoke proper English. I thought he had a few screws loose, laughs Melanie.

Tom wanted to buy a deer skin jacket and the salesman said: yes it is dear. Tom looked at the label and said: Yes, it says so here. The label said Dear customer.

Isn't he pathetic, says Melanie looking at the man holding a sheep dog on the leash.

You know him?

It's my suffering ex husband Michael, says Melanie.

Michael tries to get his dog to drink at the tap unaware of us.

I haven't seen Michael in years.

I wish I could love that man, says Melanie.

Tell me about him, I say before I can stop myself.

There is nothing to tell. When we first met he seemed lost and in need of direction.

I want her to go on.

I was married at the time and had two children. Michael's mum, a good Christian lady, wanted to save her son for priesthood. She told her older son Sam to look after Michael. I suppose Michael always hated Sam. After their father left, Sam became a head of the family and he often had to lecture Michael. Their mother trusted Sam to bring up Michael properly. She prayed every day to save him from temptation. Sam is respectfully married with three children. Michael was thirty when we met.

Sam said that Michael will be ruined with a slut like me. Michael punched Sam. Their mother came in between and she was pushed to the ground in the struggle. Both blamed Michael. He left his brother and his mother and his religion. I had to nurse his guilt and he kissed me gratefully and finally we made love. I left my husband, but that's another story, which has nothing to do with Michael.

You had a family? I try to hold the conversation.

Michael leaves without a sign of recognition.

I was married to a well respected bank manager, says Melanie with a smile that reveals nothing.

And you left him to go with Michael, I say. I couldn't ask if her husband left her.

I wanted to punish my husband for not making me happy. I was stupid enough to think that somebody is actually out there waiting to make me happy. After twelve years of marriage I left the house we built. I lost the custody of my two children. I needed to fill the void with something.

You found Michael.

I suppose I loved Michael. I wanted to make those blue eyes smile but they remained as sad as ever.

Why did you leave Michael?

I just couldn't bare to look at Michael's face anymore, explains Melanie. He kept asking me what I was doing, what I was feeling and thinking and what I wanted to do. He was following me like a shadow, he was everywhere. I wanted to punch his face when he caressed my hand.

Why?

I suppose I had to hit someone.

Michael didn't bring out the best in you?

He tried.

When did you divorce him.

I left in 1985. He disappeared soon after. I have never seen him again until we met at the post office a few days ago.

Fancy us meeting here, he said and we hugged like nothing happened. Maybe we felt a little sad and sorry, says Melanie. He told me that he was actually here at the Ridge for a couple of years after we parted.

I vaguely remember him, I lie.

When I left my first husband I felt vulnerable, old and redundant. I wanted to be loved.

It must have been painful going through two divorces, I say.

People come to the Ridge to recover from the damage they suffered in some other place, smiles Melanie.

Did Michael love you?

I suppose so.

The magic and the mystery of Michael is gone. My Michael is Melanie's ex- husband. Nobody will ever know that somewhere in the remote corner of my consciousness Michael and I still hold the promise of love. I can never stay in this hot water for long like some do.

Let's go to the cool pool. The change will tone the muscles and settle the soul a little, says Melanie.

It's cold, I protest.

You mustn't think about it, just jump in, it's much easier that way, says Melanie.

I have to rehearse my contact with the cold.

You don't get scared and pimply all over if you jump in quickly. The water is warm really, it's only the change. Our bodies become so hot that they get shocked. It's the only way, you jump in and then you don't want to get out again.

A little voice keeps saying: think before you leap.

You'll never know if you never try, says Melanie swimming in the cool blue water.

I don't like to rush things. People rush too much. I like to take time.

You are a procrastinator and a dreamer.

I know.

Melanie and I listen to arguments on TV about the new pro euthanasia law.

Jehovah's witnesses came the other day. They insist that, according to the Bible, a person is guilty of murder if he as much as wants someone dead let alone help him die, says Melanie.

Everybody wants someone dead sometimes, I say.

Everybody is a sinner.

Anybody lusting after someone else's spouse is an adulterer so everybody is an adulterer.

I am against euthanasia, says Mel.

Most people are.

I never told anyone about my abortion.

Lots of women have abortions, I say.

Talking about the baby one murders is not sociable.

You thought of it as murder.

Something in me died with that baby.

Why did you do it?

My husband arranged it with a friend from the club whose wife had an abortion. He spoke to him before we even talked about not having the baby. He mentioned casually that he knows of a doctor who does abortions and that's how I knew that he did not want to have another child. Of course we had two children and that was enough. I asked him if he wanted me to have an abortion. He was a regular church goer and I was convinced that he would say no. It's your decision, he said. I stopped loving my husband, then, says Melanie. I guess I wanted to give the bastard more kids to love me more, she smiles through tears.

You wanted the child?

I was stunned. I sat on the lawn all night crying and hoping that he would come and comfort me. He pretended that he was asleep. He said that I didn't have to do it, it was my decision. He should have seen how upset I was. The next morning I agreed to go and they did it. I had an infection after that and I lost my ovaries and my uterus because of it. I was convinced that god was punishing me. I couldn't stand my husband after that and I neglected my two children. He kept saying that it was my decision. I left. That's when I met Michael who looked equally sad, Melanie smiles through tears.

Most women are pro choice, I say.

Pro-choice women make a lot of noise, they make it difficult for those that have no choice or feel that they have no choice. Women have maternal instincts and an abortion interferes with their hormonal balance and emotions. How do you feel about euthanasia, asks Melanie.

I suppose if there was an option to die, many would be expected to choose to die. They wouldn't want to be a burden on a family or the society, I say.

Exactly. Those around you might not want you to feel that way but how would you know. They would all feel guilty.

Women always feel the guilt more, I say.

Women have abortions, give birth, we nurture and provide, we relieve men of the hardest, dirtiest, and most dangerous work but we still feel guilty, Melanie is rarely angry like that.

Maybe men can't help being the way they are, I try to cheer her up.

I never even admitted to myself how guilty I felt, says Melanie. We were married in the church and every Sunday we went to mass with our two children. We were both brought up like that. Then suddenly he found an abortionist and told me that it was my decision to kill my child. Hypocrite is still praying to his god with his new wife but I never stepped inside the church again. He not only killed my child, he took my faith.

What can I say.

I had a nervous breakdown. I couldn't be nice even to my confused kids. They stayed with me every second weekend but they couldn't wait to go away. They informed me that dad's pregnant girlfriend moved in with

them. They were excited about the new baby. He blackmailed me into having an abortion so his girlfriend and I wouldn't have babies at the same time.

I cried buckets of tears that long summer, tells Melanie. I worked hard through the day but my body craved the comfort of intimacy. My fertile imagination spun love stories like they were never written in any of the erotic books I read in the long evenings, she smiles now. I moved in with Michael. I didn't see my children for years. I felt rotten. How could I make anybody happy, let alone my sad Michael.

It was your decision.

I never decided to kill my baby but I decided to please my husband. My whole body and soul wanted to protect that baby yet I denied this baby to live to please my husband. I denied myself the right to please myself. I wanted to please the man I loved, the man, who cheated on me. He wasn't bonded with the baby yet and he didn't know or care how I felt.

Do you see your children now?

I tried to warn my daughter about the man she married. I know that she is heading for a disaster but she told me to butt out and never to bother getting mixed up in her business. I was the one who left her. I chose Michael, when she needed me most.

You needed help then.

I am glad my children don't need me anymore. I have nothing of value to pass on, nothing to connect one generation to another, nothing to carry sentiments and memories from grandparents to grandchildren, says Melanie.

They play with different toys now, I agree.

They keep up with times and others who run alongside.

People want to be there first but in the end it doesn't matter where you are or what you are.

Sometimes I feel so enormously homesick for Europe.

I almost forgot that you are a migrant. You have no accent.

I hardly remember anything from where I came but the seasons of Europe are calling me back. Where did you go from Bonegilla? Asks Melanie.

Tom took us to Queensland. He wanted to make some quick money cutting sugar cane. There were eight Italian sugar cane cutters and an Italian farmer. I spoke a few words of Italian so they assumed that I could cook Italian food for the gang.

Where did you learn to cook Italian?

I never boiled water before, I came from the boarding school. But I ate food before and I knew that it had to be cooked before you eat it. Italian, Spanish or Russian was all the same to me then. The farmer's wife came a couple of times to show me. If the men complained I didn't understand.

You must have learned to improvise.

The farmer's wife said that when life offers you lemons you must learn to make lemonade.

You learned to make lemonade.

I used every lemon since then. We were never short of lemonade, I laugh.

Give me a spark of nature's fire
That's all the learning I desire

Burns

THE OPAL MINERS

Here is to the coalition, says Jack as we gathered to celebrate 1996 election victory.

Men think that conservatives have a magic wand to bring back the past, says Lisa.

And their childhood, says Melanie.

Men like to discuss Hitler and Stalin and Churchill, and the poverty and the heroism of their parents, says Ema.

They talk about partisans and Ustasha and Nazis and communism and democracy like children talk about their childhood toys, says Melanie as we move in to prepare the salads.

None of them is actually old enough to have been in the war, says Lisa.

They missed out on heroism and excitement.

Lightning Ridge is full of men who missed out. There are over a hundred single ageing Croatian men, about as many Serbs, some Germans, some Italians, some Checks and some of every other nationality, some are divorced, some are single and all feel a little misplaced, says Lisa.

They are looking for a perfect match with divorced, disappointed Aboriginal girls, a few single Australian women and divorced migrant women, says Ema.

Someone told me that they used to put mental patients from Bloomfield in Orange on the bus for Lightning Ridge. The route ended here so they had to get off, laughs Melanie.

Poor disenchanting sods, says Lisa.

Nobody considers Melanie disenchanting, she is here professionally.

Men believe that they will be lucky sooner or later and then all their dreams will come true.

It's weird, says Ema. I talked to a Polish woman today and she told me that she buys Serb newspapers twice a week because her Croatian friend comes to read a horoscope to see what her Italian ex-boyfriend is doing with his new Philippine wife.

All these mismatched love-sick people, says Lisa.

The adventurers are always after new thrills.

My grandson unwraps Christmas presents, tosses them over the shoulder and looks for new ones. It gives him a thrill to discover what's yet wrapped, I say.

The urge to undress is greater than the desire to enjoy what we undress, says Ema.

The virginity of life is an unwrapped package. The kids discard the package before the ribbon hits the floor. Covered bodies offer the temptation to uncover and find the mysterious package. As soon as the package is unwrapped though, the mystery is gone forever.

Kids these days watch mummy having the baby, the whole family is on the video watching mummy pushing and cursing. They all know how the baby comes out. It is hard to explain to the innocents how the baby came to be where it was and what daddy did to mummy to make the baby grow. We don't want them to know and rush to unwrap the mystery package and find out that it is all about mummy pushing out the baby and daddy taking the video.

You are supposed to return to proper life from a place like Lightning Ridge, says Melanie.

After Christmas, says Lisa.

Which Christmas?

Men find their drinking buddies in the club and want to spend the rest of their lives with them, says Lisa.

We only came for a holiday, says Ema.

Nobody would make a rational decision to live in Lightning Ridge, says Melanie.

If you see a trailer load on the road heading North it must be a Lightning Ridge miner. Every miner brings loads of rubbish to invent all the mining equipment.

And build his home, says Ema.

Everything gets a second chance in Lightning Ridge, people and machinery.

We join the men under the shade of a huge Moreton Bay fig tree.

I am sick of political correctness, says Jack.

You are still in the election mode, says Ema.

If you are a single mother, a homosexual or black, or poor or all of the above, nobody can touch you, says Peter.

You are safe for the rest of your life.

If you are a juvenile delinquent they will all help you instead of giving you a kick in the arse.

I heard a prisoner interviewed on TV. They asked him if he is missing freedom.

What's that? says the man.

You know, to go out, tries the interviewer.

What's outside, says the prisoner. I have everything I need right here inside. I have nothing to worry about. All my friends are here, I have three good meals, sport and recreation and my own room.

We work for the lazy bastards, says Tom.

Sometimes I wonder why anyone bothers to work, says Peter.

One could always join the dole queue but those on the dole can't join us, says Jack. We have a choice, they haven't.

I couldn't afford to live in my own home but I am renting it to a family on social security because they get rent assistance. I need the rent to make the repayments on the house. It's not right. I camp among the bloody addicts at three mile. They grow marihuana around the dam, says Allen.

Can't you get the coppers on them?

My camp may end up in smoke.

If Howard doesn't do something pretty quick, smart, we'll all go down the tube. They need shooting, the politicians and the bludgers. says Allan.

Bureaucracy replaced common sense and common decency with regulations. They control something they don't understand, says Tom.

They revived working conditions. You are supposed to work forty hours in your claim. You are allowed two claims. Your partner is also allowed two claims and so is his wife and your wife and everybody's kids, who all depend on opal. Which claim will you work in for forty hours? Says Peter.

Big blokes have people working for them on percentage. If you don't abide by the working conditions they hassle you and sometimes they cancel your claim so one of theirs can register it and have it worked out on percentage.

They make the rules to suit their personal agenda, says Tom.

Miners are too bloody lazy to think for themselves. They let Mining Association decide and write the rules, says Jack.

Everybody is protecting their social security. Nobody tells you when they find cash, says Tom. It gives you a buzz to see a good stone occasionally.

The blow-ins sell good opal for drinking money. They live off social security, says Jack.

You don't dare show a stone to your mate. You never know who is listening and watching or who he will talk to. If they find out that you are on opal, they'll be there at night and dig it out, says Tom.

In the olden days, reminisced Allan, every time someone found a stone, there was a party and the stone was passed around.

They fucked up everything, excuse me for swearing, says Charlie. Fuck could hardly be classed as swearing any more. Everything is fucked up, manners included.

They are searching for the needs of migrants in Lightning Ridge to bring more services, continues Jack.

If we wanted services we'd stay in the rat race, says Tom.

The Mafia has to squeeze their wages out of miners, says Peter.

The Mining Association and the Mining Registrar are the first to know where opal is found. As soon as you register a new rush, their buddies peg around you.

They get their cut for information.

Short of going to court, you can do nothing.

You can never tell how it will go in court. The magistrate and the mining Registrar drink together.

You need millions to change anything.

They are all on the take, says Allan.

I registered a claim last week. I've done everything to the letter and when I got into the office they informed me that somebody registered it before me. I argued that there were no posts or markings and they said they'll check after lunch and sure enough after lunch this other mysterious fictitious name was on my claim, says Charlie.

It's best if you have a solicitor with you when you peg, says Allan.

Bastards, concludes Tom.

Sorry I am late, says Marty coming up the driveway. I brought some stuff from Sydney late last night.

What sort of stuff?

Name it. A friend of a friend demolished shops.

What have you got?

I picked a couple of ready mix drums and a diesel motor on the way home. I have a stack of aluminium pipes you could use for ladders. Loads of walls and partitions.

Worn out ready mix cement drums are a treasure find because miners turn them into agitators to wash their opal dirt.

Did you hear about the ratters being smoked out of the mine on Coocoran T-bone rush, asks Peter.

Whose mine, asks Marty.

The owner is apparently in Sydney. Nobody knows who poured the petrol down the shaft in the middle of the night.

I wonder how he managed to get to the shaft unobserved. The ratters would have seen him light the petrol. They have surveillance, they have armed guards with night vision binoculars.

And guns.

Maybe they have fallen asleep.

Too much grog, I suppose.

There will be a hell to pay, whoever is responsible, says Peter.

The ratters will probably retaliate but we'll never know how. Nobody would want it known, there is danger and there is shame.

The bastards were terrified, says Peter. They had no idea how much petrol was coming down.

Everybody knows who the thieving bastards are.

It's a warning.

They collapsed as they coughed to the top. Someone says that a snake sneaked out just ahead of them.

I'd buy a beer for the bloke who smoked them out, says Tom.

Everybody would.

The person setting fire would be scared to testify who the ratters are. He'd be too scared of what police and the ratters would do to him.

The ratters are not likely to make a complaint either.

I wish Mick was back. He kept law and order and looked after opal mining, court matters, claims and traffic single handedly.

If he told a miner to leave the opal fields and never to return, his word was law. Now they want a legislation for every detail.

No legislation no court, no punishment, no protection.

The word of an honest miner stands for nothing.

They are preparing a legislation to ban ratters off the field.

Mike, a friend of mine, says Melanie, called the police when he caught the ratters in his claim. Police arrested them, took the opal as evidence and let the ratters go on bail, awaiting the trial. Mike valued the stolen opal as a quarter of a million. When the evidence came to the court the opal was only worth about ten thousands.

I bet there is a lot of exaggeration, says Tom.

Sure, but who was handling the shiny evidence?

Police is right there with them, attending Serb church fund raising and parties, says Melanie.

It is dangerous to accuse police. You could get in a lot of trouble accusing anyone without evidence.

The judge asked the thief to identify the opal in court. He agreed that the evidence was correct. The ratter was happy to be charged with stealing ten thousand rather than being charged with a theft of a quarter of a million. He agreed with the police. But he couldn't keep his mouth shut and he told his friends. Everybody knows that he was lying in court but nothing happened. He got off with trespass fine and the opal was returned to Mike. What they didn't want, of course.

Ratting started in the late eighties when Coober Pedy opal fields finished and South Australian opal miners came to the Ridge. It is easier to rat a claim of someone you don't know.

Police and ratters work together. There is no honour among thieves.

They are not all like that.

No, not all of them. There is not enough opal for all of them or they haven't got the chance to get their hands on it. Some are innocent until given a chance to be guilty, says Melanie.

You have no faith in police.

The judiciary system lives from crime. Criminals are their clients. What good had an honest worker ever done for judiciary? How much have you ever spent on solicitors and court?

Judges are old wily solicitors. They need criminals not us honest nobodies, agrees Peter.

There is a lot in the media about corrupt police. If the corrupt police exists it is natural that they would exist in the cash industry like opal mining.

What better place to be corrupt in. No miner wants to go to court or declare what is in his mine or in his safe.

Nobody ever proved any police impropriety in Lightning Ridge, I say.

Nobody wants to draw attention to themselves.

Somebody blasted Miro's house with gelignite so they had to bring Dubbo police over. They found a bucket of opal in the rubble but they could not prove that it was ratted.

It's scary, all migrants cop some of the blame because of Serbs, says Melanie.

Why wasn't anybody arrested.

Nobody wants to get involved. The place is full of them, Muslims and Serb war refugees who lost all respect for common decency. They are dangerous, says Tom.

It isn't only Serbs, I say.

They started it, says Tom.

A Serb miner was caught in Korea with two millions worth of opal. He claimed on Lloyd's insurance that the opal was stolen. They are not stupid they've been in insurance business too long. After the investigation they reported him to the Korean police.

Whose opal was it?

Most of it was stolen from Coocoran field but also some honest miners gave him their stones on consignment.

Did they ever find the opal, asks Jack.

His wife had it in her beauty case all the time.

Stories about opal millionaires are told to newspapers by people who never found opal. That attracts the criminal element.

Diviners tell amazing tales about their powers to predict where opal is.

I followed the thieving bastards one night. I pretended that my car broke down on the opal field, tells Marty. I saw one ratter on a tree talking on the mobile to his mate watching the road. I walked into the bush and saw two men going down the mine.

Did you report it?

What's the use?

You should have put it on the record, says Tom. Not all police are crooks.

The ratters could take it out on my kids. Stephanie is scared.

She buys from the ratters.

Maybe she doesn't know that the opal is stolen, Marty always protects his ex-wife.

And pigs will fly, says Peter.

She doesn't really know them that well, tries Marty.

Nobody knows anybody that well in Lightning Ridge. Everybody has an English sounding nickname, so you have no idea where people come from.

Marty wants to make it clear that he has nothing to do with his ex-wife's lovers but I know that he is glad that Stephanie bought homes for their children.

She declares every dollar. We still do taxation together and I know, says Marty. The men exchange a knowing look. They have nothing against Marty personally but he is considered risky by association.

Whoever would be so stupid to declare every dollar, says Tom.

You might go without for years and if you ever got some cash you bloody deserve to keep it, says Peter.

You have to declare something, but you have to protect yourself for a rainy day, says Tom.

It's more likely rainy years in opal mining, says Peter.

It was Matt's mine, they ratted, I think, says Marty who wants to steer the conversation away from Stephanie.

Serves him right. Since he found opal, Matt spends all his time in the pub, says Charlie.

Everybody knows the story about Matt, a poor Romanian Gypsy, who built a humpy in the bush. As he dug a hole for a toilet he bottomed on opal and became rich. Miners came to seek Matt's advice, Matt became an expert in everything, overnight, he became well known and respected. The dreams are made of true stories like that.

Matt told his drinking buddies how he had a dream in Romania. In his dream he saw an opal as big as a round loaf of bread his mother baked. It had rainbow colours. Matt came to Lightning Ridge in 1974 to find the opal he saw in his dream. He never doubted that his dream would come true. Nobody took any notice of Matt's dream when Matt first came to the opal field but Matt kept digging. He did some shearing to keep himself in food and clothes and fuel. Years later he built a camp in the bush. As he dug a hole for the toilet he bottomed on opal and became rich. He bought machinery and let his partners work for him while he drinks in the pub and tells stories of his amazing dream.

You should let Matt's partners know, suggests Peter.

I have no sympathy for the bastards. They find loads of stuff and give Matt just enough to keep him drunk, so he wouldn't come to check the tailings, says Marty.

Igor used to work for Matt, tells Tom. The bastard came to hire my compressor. I told him that he can borrow it but to bring in back after a week. After a month a friend told me that Igor said: Tom will get it when

he needs it. I am not going to use my car to pull the compressor out of a bog.

The bastard died soon after, says Peter

He sold his claim to someone who wanted to open cut it. After he got paid, Igor wanted to dig out the pillar where he found opal. He always knew that there was more but he was afraid to touch the pillar. He borrowed the compressor and removed the pillar. The roof collapsed on him. He was one of the first ratters.

And one of the first casualties on the fields.

The first ratter I remember was poor old Steve who worked with Aldo, his friend from school in former Yugoslavia. They came to Australia together and worked for years quite happily until one day they found opal. Steve left Aldo in the pub one evening saying that he was going to the drive in with his girlfriend. He really intended to go to the movies but his girlfriend couldn't come. He remembered the trace of opal almost uncovered in their mine and just wanted to see it again. He went into the shaft with a torch and started chipping away with a screwdriver. There was his chance to make some real cash and go home to bring out a girl from his village and marry her. It took him hours to uncover the trace and tie the opals in the sleeve of his shirt to take out. As he shone the light out of the shaft he couldn't believe his eyes. The ladder was gone. He had no chance of climbing forty feet high shaft. He called out, begged, cried.

Steve knew that Aldo was sitting on top of the mine. He asked Aldo to forgive him, he confessed it all, he pleaded, that he would give him all the opal but Aldo didn't answer. Steve didn't sleep all night. He was scared of snakes and spiders and the dark shaft. He kept calling out for help but nobody answered. By the end of the next day he fell asleep. When he woke up the ladder was in the shaft. He staggered up and found Aldo sitting on the mullock heap with a bottle of beer in his hand. Steve begged for a sip. Take your clothes off, said Aldo. Steve stood naked in front of his friend. Aldo checked Steve's pockets and threw the shorts at him.

Put your shorts on and don't let me see you ever again. Next time I'll kill you.

Aldo never told the story for years because he was sad about losing his only best friend but the story trickled out in drips and drabs like water into the faulty roof above the opal level. One theory says that water dripping onto the shells of an ancient ocean bed, makes opal.

The men went over the old stories and their times of glory.

I get real mad at these new dole bludger miners who don't prop and the mines collapse. The inquiries are made, new regulations are made, inspections and insurance has to be paid, says Peter.

In the olden days everybody watched the roof. I inspected the roof every day. If there was a tiny crack in the roof I'd stick a match in it in the evening. If the match fell on the ground during the night I knew that the roof was moving and it needed propping, says Tom.

Everybody knew their business then.

Potato Joe told me about this big new rush, says Jack.

I know all about Joe, says Tom. Less drills a hole, Joe spreads a bag of potch and colour around it. Then he spreads the rumours about the new rush very confidentially to miners who go and peg around. Less gets the drilling contracts and pays Joe commission.

I helped Joe spread the rumours a few months ago, when he found A dead pig rush. There was just a dead pig on the claim then. Now everybody wants to be on a Dead pig. We met in the pub, tells Jack.

Can't stay, have an early start tomorrow, says Joe.

What's the rush, asks Jack.

I can't tell you, Joe whispers, looking around.

Aren't we mates, tries Jack. Have another beer.

I shouldn't, I have a big day tomorrow, says Joe.

Just one for the road.

I don't want this to go any further, says Joe after another beer. Less found cash. Red on black. Big nobbies. Solid.

Where? asks Jack.

Ah that's what I can't tell you, says Joe. It's more than my life's worth. Might have to go early and stay overnight. Never know.

Have another drink, says Jack.

I know I can trust you but please don't say anything to anybody, says Joe after a third beer.

Of course, says Jack. Joe left and Jack told the story to another miner who told it to his friends. In the morning a couple of cars followed Joe at a discreet distance. Joe pretended not to see them. By the end of the next day the whole field was pegged out and Less had enough work for a couple of months. Everybody talked about the new rush. It turned to be the best one yet.

And you never told me, says Tom.

You wouldn't take any notice of Joe, says Jack.

That's where Gary made his millions.

I should be paid commission for spreading the rumour, says Jack.

It's all a game for Joe, he just wants to outsmart everybody, says Peter.

I had a claim on Dead pig, says Allan. My partner Don and I came on good colour when we noticed that the bastard next door trespassed on our claim. They finished their claim and saw colour leading towards us and they chased it. Don sued them but we have no witnesses.

You come to the Ridge all innocent and naïve and end up a crook.

Remember Steve? He found a bit of opal with his partner, they were mates from Hungary, says Charlie. Some bastard spread a rumour that Steve pinched the big one and never showed it to his partner. They almost killed each other, they are now waiting for court to decide who owns the claim.

You can be friends or you can be partners. It's like either being friends or lovers, says Tom.

Have to go, says Marty.

Once opal fever gets you, you can never escape, Charlie tries to justify the fact that at fifty-six he is living in a camp on the dole. His English is still poor and the employers don't want to know him any more.

Nobody knows Charlie's real name. It begins with F and was turned into Fred before he became Charlie to everybody. Nobody even knows exactly what Eastern European nation Fred comes from, he has been around.

Not long ago Charlie found a stone with his partner. They had an offer of fourteen thousand but his partner wanted more. Charlie borrowed a thousand dollars from Marty's wife Stephanie to keep him going. He put the stone in Stephanie's safe, because he was scared to keep it in his shack. Stephanie told him one day that she sold the stone for ten thousand dollars. Charlie had to give his partner seven thousand and he repaid Stephanie a thousand. The rest went into fuel.

I found out later that she got twenty five thousand for the stone. She made more than my partner and I together. The bitch told me to look her in the eye to see that she spoke the truth.

Charlie does jobs for Tom and is grateful to be invited to our barbecue. He brought the timber and cut it. He feels a part of our family.

I had a beautiful home all paid for and established but my misus got the lot when she left with her boyfriend. The bitches get you every time, says Charlie.

Tom told me that Charlie boasts about the women who come with him after the pub closes, sometimes there are two or three all after him. Those bitches go with anyone for a glass of beer, says Tom.

Tom would never have a woman like that. He has to have what others can't get.

With Marty gone Stephanie became the main topic again.

A ratter brought a stone worth one hundred thousand for Stephanie to sell. She gave it to her runner Toni to go to opal buyers with it. Soon after an Aboriginal boy apparently brought that same stone to sell to Stephanie for five thousand. Stephanie asked the boy to wait while she got the money but she called the coppers. When they arrived the boy disappeared never to be seen again, tells Charlie.

What a bull story, says Tom. Any Aboriginal boy would know what the stone is worth.

And Stephanie knows all Aboriginal boys.

She arranged it with Toni to split the money. They are still scheming together. For bloody sure, says Peter.

Toni says that he left the stone on the table while he went to get milk from the Foodland.

What a load of bull, says Tom.

We have two loads in the agitator and one to go before we go through the tailings tomorrow. I have a feeling that we have a big one in, says Peter.

If you ladies are there by two with a carton of cold stubbies, you can be the first to lick the lovely colours clean.

Beer will help us forget that there is only dirt like usual, says Lisa.

Where is your sense of adventure, says Tom.

Didn't you see those lovely traces in the last load. And black potch with china cap. I tell you, we are not far from it.

If the colour got onto one of those nobbies, we'd have it made.

Let's just wait for the tailings, I say.

And then for cutting, says Lisa.

And for the market, smiles Ema.

Funny how women always count the obstacles, says Peter.

I suppose we are realists, I contribute.

We'll be millionaires one day soon, mark my word, assured Peter.

What of soul was left I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?
Browning.

Heaven

I received the invitation to tour Europe. The co-ordinators organised everything.

We are open cutting, says Tom. I can't possibly go with you.

I am sorry, I say relieved and grateful for the first of the many happy coincidences.

I am alone so unexpectedly and so gloriously free. Magda is forgotten and Lena wants to find her spot in the jigsaw puzzle.

I always knew that it was only a matter of time before Ben and I would meet again. I just have to hear his voice, maybe my whole reason for going is to come near him. Maybe my reason for living is Ben.

I find Ben's name in a phone book. A lady says hello and I ask for him.

He remembers me.

Just wanted to see if you are still alive, I lie. For thirty-eight years I prepared magnificent dialogues but it is hard to choose the words for the reality.

I am still alive, he confirms in a high pitched voice.

That's good then, I affirm wisely before the silence. We have nothing to say.

How are you? I am grateful that Ben opens the door to a dialogue.

Good. I affirm after a pause.

Nice to hear from you. Ben is holding the thread.

Nice to hear your voice again, I conclude sensibly.

Will we see each other while you are here? I am enormously grateful that Ben thinks of something so smart.

If you like, I say. As if the thought never entered my mind.

When and where?

We are leaving tomorrow afternoon. I have half an hour before we go.

The enormity of reunion overwhelms me. The past and the future become a distant blur as Ben's voice echoes in my mind.

I never seriously contemplated meeting Ben again. I met with him like people meet with god in their evening prayer. Maybe I should have prayed to Jesus like that. Maybe I should have loved Jesus like that. But

isn't all love one love. I met with Ben in the silence of the night without disturbing anybody. I prepared all the beautiful words famous lovers ever uttered in the most intense moments of loving. And all the time we remained eighteen and had stars dancing in our eyes.

I suddenly realise that he has no memory of my growing old. He doesn't know the roads I travelled. I wonder if Ben ever dreamt the dreams I dreamt.

Ben became the prince charming of my fairy tales. Ben was never an ordinary man, I was never disillusioned with him because I never knew him apart from being totally in love with him. He has no flaws, no irritating habits, no imperfections. The only obstacle to our everlasting happiness is Tom.

Ben and I sit at the tiny table of my hotel room without speaking or touching. I take his flowers and put them in a vase on the table. I notice tiny sparks in his eyes as we shake hands and say hello. We search each others face. For a moment I feel that I am in a church. You look well, I try to neutralise the electric tension that fills the room.

I am married. For the second time, Ben blurts out like a fish out of water.

I wonder if that is good or bad or important? Are you afraid that I will come between you and your wife. Are you afraid that I will take you away?

That's nice. Are you happy? I inquire.

I live from day to day, Ben reveals.

Still writing? I blurt out thoughtlessly.

No, he shuts the door on me. He wrote poems for me in that other life.

The girl answering a phone was my daughter. I have a twelve years old daughter with my second wife. I love my little girl, he blabbers on defiantly as I search for the stars in his eyes. I am grateful that he killed the silence with his story.

The obvious youth and motherhood of his second wife stares me in the face. I smile and nod unable to find the appropriate words.

My wife is in the same business, Ben says.

Maybe he wants to impress me, maybe he wants to tell me that his wife is a young mother. Maybe he doesn't dare say the words we both want to say and hear. We both smoke. His long, white fingers are stained with nicotine.

You smoke a lot, I say to remove the silence.

I started in the last year of school, when you left. We lower our eyes to accept the sweet pain of memory.

I am glad we met, I get up and we move to the door. We stand in front of the elevator. I have to go, I hold out my hand.

I will never know who kissed who. A small thought flutters around, it tells me to hold on and never to let go. People kiss the side of each other's head to say goodbye but our lips touch. The motionless coming together is so right that no thinking or moving is needed.

The phone rings in my room telling me that the group is ready to go. I can't let go.

The phone rings again. I have to attend to real life. Even after thirty eight years, the real life stops us.

Nothing changed, he whispers when our lips finally part.

Nothing changed, I repeat his words.

Did you sometimes think of me?

Always, I say. The words were not in my script. My voice is barely audible. Where did all the pre-rehearsed speeches go? Our hands caress each other for a silent moment without intent.

There was no holding back, we belong together, Ben whispers. We are shaken by our first kiss after thirty eight years. What happened had to happen and it feels right.

We'll see each other again, you open the door to the future.

We have no idea why we are where we are but we feel at home. My whole life is transformed. Everybody loves me because I love everybody. I know that I do not deserve so much love but it makes no difference. I feel immersed in love. There is a tremendous brightness and optimism and a sense of well-being. Like spring flower, innocent and hopeful our love came from the deep where it must have always been. Would it survive? I realise that everything conceived is destined to die. The love that was perfect at the beginning never changed. We are perfect in that part of our being that united us forever. We are tremendously happy. We are as we were at eighteen when we first met.

I can not understand why all the people do not see Ben as I see him.

The artists and the poets express the invisible and divine, said Melanie as we painted in that other life in Lightning Ridge.

One can know love and believe in it but it can not be explained.

Love is an invisible dimension like god.

No two people ever see the picture with the same eyes, said Melanie.

I wonder what others see in my pictures.

They see some reflection of themselves.

But the picture remains the same.

If visible reality was our only world, we could photograph things, we would not need art.

Nothing visible is perfect only our ideas are.

At night I close my eyes and touch my lips and the tears of unbelievable joy come. The words: I love you, dance on my lips as I hold my chest. My whole life is contained in these tiny words. I keep repeating them until reality and fantasy and dreams become one. I am home. I am part of the same sunshine and part of the same ocean with Ben.

Is our love real, would it survive the meeting of our bodies, the struggle of daily life. Would I be able to give him what I want to get from him or would he run from my weaknesses and from my hunger to be loved and cherished and possessed. Could Ben and I heal all the heartaches we suffered? Will we cringe from the fear of the pain or rejoice knowing that there is nothing more to fear.

I am in a Paris hotel and my phone rings.

I am thinking of you, I am thinking about you a lot, he ventures. Ben is excited but I can barely say hello. The vibration of his voice resonates within me.

The words disappear. I feel his closeness and the tears sting my eyes.

I will be waiting for you, he says and the intimacy of his words make me weak.

How did you find me, I ask sensibly.

When you want to find somebody, nothing stops you.

Nothing stopped me, I say.

We meet a few days later and hold hands in a car. Touching hands is enough, He keeps telling me about his family and work. Maybe he feels that he has to entertain me. He drives aimlessly through the city and then he asks me where I would like to go.

It doesn't matter, I barely whisper. I want him to stop and hold me. We can't embrace or kiss on a street. I wonder if he hired a room where we could make love. Making love in a room would be so ordinary compared with holding hands. We are both shy so we play with each others fingers. He stops at the intersection and we kiss. It must look comical to the people peering in to see an elderly couple kissing.

Why did you leave?

He doesn't say 'Why did you leave me?' He knows that I never left him. I want to say that I love him. I don't want to tell him that I left because I felt safe and secure with Tom, that Tom wanted me more. Tom said that he can't live without me.

I don't know, is all I can say.

I never knew why you left, Ben tries to reason.

Why did I go with Tom while I was so desperately in love with Ben? I wanted to run away with Ben. Only I wasn't sure if our love was strong enough to run with us to the end of the world.

Ben wanted to finish school, do the right thing. I also did what I thought was right for me. I married Tom who had plans for us. Tom was older and he expected me to obey and follow and be grateful. Maybe I needed a leader because I am a follower.

It seemed a sensible thing at the time, to marry Tom. I slept with him even before I met Ben. If a girl doesn't marry as a virgin the next best thing is to marry the man who took her virginity. Tom was a successful businessman and he promised to take care of me.

Tom knew how things were. He often changed the rules and I followed the rules he made because he always knew what was right. People obey and follow Tom, because he knows how things are.

It took me almost forty years to realise that Tom is not god. Now I know that his judgements are not perfect, his memories are faulty, his decisions are often selfish. He is a bully. I lost faith in Tom but I still try to please him. It was easier while I believed that he knew how things ought to be.

I never knew why you left, Ben says again like he is expecting a logical explanation.

I don't want to bother Ben with details of my sordid life. I don't want to admit that I craved a secure ordinary life. Tom said that his love will be enough for two. I knew nothing about love then. It never occurred to me to tell Tom that love wasn't enough to hold his first marriage together. Why should his love for me be enough? I really didn't know anything about love then.

Ben and I died a little when I left. It was the end of the childhood for both of us.

To love and to be loved is the greatest happiness in life, Ben quotes someone else's words about love.

The silence bothers Ben so he keeps on talking.

I told my wife that I was meeting an old school friend, a woman my age, he corrects. I know we both hear the word old and become a little afraid of it. I don't want to ask if his young wife doesn't mind him seeing an old friend from his past. Young wife can not be threatened by an old woman he didn't see for thirty eight years. Maybe his wife wasn't even born then.

My son from the first marriage is the only blacksmith in the country, Ben says.

Maybe Ben wants to share something of himself. The real life is all around us. We both have responsibility to be a sensible role model for our children and grandchildren. We have to have our clothes ready for work and our cars running and there is our pension and retirement, insurance and registration. We have to attend to chores and functions and lovemaking in our own warm beds. We have to be sensible.

I am glad our love isn't just a temporary thing, he says.

Everything is temporary. Life is.

Our love never changed.

A man can never step in the same water twice, I say to Ben the ancient words of wisdom.

I am trying to make some sense of it, says Ben.

Nothing stays the same, nothing stays true forever, I remind him.

We feel the same.

I wonder if we do, if it is possible to do. I went to the village where I grew up. I spent all my dreaming on the riverbank there. I wanted to embrace that river but the river does not know me.

We know each other, says Ben. I want to believe him. Everything he says is brilliantly perfect but we lived so many other lives.

This moment is an island in the sea of life, says Ben.

We both love the words of love. Does our longing have anything at all to do with us being a man and a woman? Would the longing go away if we slept together? Are we afraid that the bitter sweet desire would die.

Over the last thirty-eight years we crystallised each other's image in our hearts but in our minds we know that neither of us can measure up to that image. Neither of us feels good enough for the other. We expect to be mutually admired and loved but we know our imperfections and failures. We don't dare destroy the memory. We don't want to extinguish the light on top of the hill.

The idea of our love became flawless and has no place in our flawed reality. The fruit of this forbidden tree is so ripe and ready but we are afraid to test the depth of our love. We will never know if we passed or failed.

I never told Ben about my life and the people I share it with. I wish that people would be agreeable and understand how we feel but I realise that if people were like that I would not need to abandon them. I know that Tom would never understand. I don't know what people in Ben's life are like. Would he abandon them? They have nothing to do with me. If our love is real, we will follow it, I reason, if it isn't, we will search for it elsewhere. Love is just a promise, it is a light that never dies. You never know love until you lived it. Maybe you never know love until you've lost it. Maybe some people never know it. It shines so much better from the distance.

We'll see each other again, Ben whispers and his lips are close and our hands touch and there are tears in our eyes.

Why should we see each other again? And again? If we are only to see each other one more time why not make it less painful and say goodbye now. But we both want another time and another time so badly that reason can not even enter our minds. We didn't plan that kiss, it was there ready to happen. Neither of us knows what we should do next.

Maybe I loved you too much, I become reckless with the past tense as we meet for the last time at the airport. I want to tell him that nothing changed but he already said that a couple of times. This isn't the time for decisions and reasoning. We are saying goodbye and deep down I know that it is for the last time. We stand in the departure lounge at the airport kissing like teenagers do.

We spent three quarters of our life away from each other, he reasons.

We never know what part is spent and what is left.

Thirty eight years.

We might be dead tomorrow, I volunteer a morbid thought. We shiver a bit, so we have to hold hands more tightly and kiss again.

The heart knows no reasons, just love, he says looking away. It sounds like an excuse or explanation. I smile.

We owe it to ourselves to be happy, he says. He doesn't explain how he intends to be happy. I never ask.

At best we live a hundred years. If we don't enjoy love while we are here we will never have lived a full life, he plays with the abstract images of love. So he doesn't count on god to fix things in heaven.

We'll probably never see each other again, I say sensibly as we hold hands to shake them for a final good bye.

Don't say that. You never know what the future will bring, he says leaving it to destiny. I smile sadly.

We will write, he tells me.

OK, I answer wisely.

We kiss before he walks away without turning back. I smile at custom people who check my bags. I board the plane wandering if he is watching the plane take off. Maybe he is glad that a little complication in his life disappeared into the blue sky.

Normal people in love make love but the love we made was so intense that we probably could not cope with another dimension of it. We just looked at each other, kissed and held hands like teenagers did in that other life when we first met, when men seemed complete, young, strong and masterful.

Nothing changed, I remember Ben's words.

What was the thing that never changed. Our love was just a memory of lost love, of a perfect flower that never bloomed, it was the memory of the awakening, of coming home. Is that unchangeable the only real thing? Was everything else just a background for the love we never could or wanted to fulfil. Was love meant to live like that in hope and longing?

The past, the present and the future are in a promise of that kiss.

Ben makes little cardboard boxes for the pharmacies, he tends his garden and teaches his children how to be industrious, faithful and polite and virtuous. In his head he writes verses for me and I wait for this senseless poetry nobody else wants to read or publish. Poems remind us of when we were eighteen and they make us deliciously sad.

Ben said that nothing changed, but we know that we changed. We live on different continents, we live in two families, two communities, have two sets of commitments. We became damaged by two sets of circumstances.

Why pretend that we are eighteen again? We had no respect for love then, we believed that love was waiting for us around every corner.

I foolishly crave breathless teenage love, the kind I felt when I first met Ben but I am wise enough to realise that he lived for almost forty years after that and probably became as sensible as I am. I fear his annoying ordinariness would spoil our romantic expectations and I fear my ordinariness even more. I am afraid that he would reject me if he really knew me as I am in my every day.

Maybe we didn't make love because we were afraid to spoil the perfection of our dream. Neither of us wanted to abandon the dream because we both survived on it for years.

I imagine Ben begging me to go with him and I know that I would always say no. I know that he will never ask, we both know that we can't just walk off chasing a dream. We feel responsible for the happiness of people who don't approve of our love.

Men in Lightning Ridge say that opal mining gives you a second chance. It is only their wishful thinking. Nobody gets a second chance ever. There is no such thing as a second chance for us, not at our age.

We will never forget each other, you are a part of me and I love you, I remember Ben saying.

I love you, I say knowing that it is true and it held no promise that could be broken. We part believing that we loved like nobody ever loved. We don't want to know what stopped us from sharing our lives.

I need this exclusive unconditional love because I am only a half of something and need the matching half to feel complete.

Tom told me long ago that I do not need to fly because with him I have everything I need. I can only watch men fly after their own dreams. I can hold them up as they circle the sky above me.

I am happy that our love lasted for ever, writes Ben. We both know that it only lasted because we lived other lives but we don't say so.

Ben writes that he always thought of me as being strong. Maybe he doesn't know that I need Tom, because he is strong. I never had a relationship with any other person but Tom.

Ben writes about the lovers he sees greeting the spring and he is sad that we never loved each other in spring. I often relive our only new year's eve. He said that he wanted to take me home in spring to see the cherry trees in his garden. There were only the frozen flowers on the window panes in the winter of our loving.

I want to hold onto the moment when we danced our last dance. I want the music to go on, writes Ben.

You give me a will to live and the energy to survive, he writes. So we met for a reason.

I speak to Ben in my thoughts like I spoke to him since we were eighteen. The reality can be ignored while I keep rearranging my ideal life with Ben, that shiny moment that knows no time or distance.

Do you ever wake up in the morning with a sweet picture of me and you and spring all young and full of promise? Do you refuse to open your eyes until you have to start your day, to spend another few minutes with me?

How many times did you kiss me for the first time since we parted, how many times did you rearrange the scenery and words? Did you ever wait for me with wild flowers dying in your hand? Did you ever say my name silently as you looked at the moon and the stars? Thank you for travelling with me all the years of my life. I would like you to know that you made me happy. I would like you to be happy. There was no one like you in my life ever again because I was never the same, we were never the same since we parted. There in our other life we were eighteen and all we knew was each other.

Those whom god wishes to destroy, he first makes mad.
Euripides.

Hell

I have learned long ago that happiness comes at the price, I always paid a price, the greater the happiness, the more terrible the price. I understand that there is no free lunch. You pay for what you get. I always think of the price. That's why I was always afraid to be happy. I have been paying for Tom's faithfulness and kindness for almost forty years. I know the cost. People live ordinary useful lives because ordinariness comes cheap. I was always practical and grateful for little cheap things. I saved the big things for a rainy day.

With Ben I tried for real happiness before I realised that the price is too high.

Ben writes that he hopes to see me soon again. I write to him all the words I made up in all the years I waited for him. I beg Ben to destroy my letters because I believe that, like me, he would carry them around and re-read them and someone is bound to find them. I am scared of my own words. I keep my last letter in my bag, afraid to send the romantic expressions of love to Ben.

Tom finds the letter.

Slut, you are the biggest dirtiest slut. They fucked you, they all fucked you, whoever wanted to, fucked you, he raves. I allowed you to go and you betrayed me. You wrecked my life, I'll tell everybody what a whore you are. I'll tell our children what sort of mother they have.

It is no use denying, I practically said it all in that letter.

I am sorry, I say. I loved him, I still do, but I haven't slept with him.

How could Tom understand that we were happy just being close to each other. Nobody would understand that. We had the opportunity and we loved each other, why wouldn't we make love. How could he know that a touch of Ben's hand made me happier than any vigorous lovemaking ever did. Maybe if I slept with Ben I could forget him.

Don't even try to deny it. He fucked you all the time you were with him. I will never trust you again, raves Tom.

Nothing will ever be the same between us.

I wonder why Tom wants to reduce the enormity of my love into a simple fuck. Sex had never left any lasting impression on me, it was an event in time that had to be endured sometimes and at other times it brought warmth and contentment. It was a short physical encounter that I quickly forgot, like an itch that was relieved. I put up with sex, I had a lot of that and sometimes I liked it but it had nothing to do with Ben.

I remember my jealous raving for Tom's love when I suspected that he still slept with his first wife. The pain of jealousy twisted me inside and I hoped that Tom would one day feel the pain I felt. I wanted him to be knotted inside with insane pain of uncertainty. He laughed at my pain

then, he refused to discuss my torment, he called me stupid and unreasonable and unfair because I wanted more love than he could give. I suspected that he was holding his love for his other family. I wanted to eradicate that family and the memory of it forever. Only the memory was there always haunting me in the stillness of the night. Now Tom knows how I felt. I wish I could remind him of my pain but now is not the right time.

I'll tell everybody, threatens Tom.

I don't care, I say but I hate to complicate the lives of our children. Tom and I are all the family they have. The myth of a happy family was all we had, we both gave away everything else. We owe it to ourselves to keep going.

Tom couldn't stand it if his friends knew that his wife betrayed him. He'd rather die. He realises that he has nobody but our family. He dedicated his life to his family and I failed to show appreciation.

Maybe Ben touched that part of me nobody ever knew or wanted to touch. He loved me as I am, I say defiantly.

You wrecked my whole life, you bitch, you fucking cow. Everything I've ever done was for you. Everything. I worked for my family, now you destroyed it.

I feel guilty, but there is a little voice in me, a little cheer, a bit of glory and grateful wonder, I have something that is mine alone. I left my love but now I know how it feels and that it is real. Lena feels triumphant. She prays for Ben in church because as long as Ben is alive there is a reason for her to live.

Magda promises Tom that she will stop this nonsense once and for all. She will not think about Ben, she will never ever again contact him or answer his letters or wish to read them.

Promise that you will not open the letter if he writes again. You will bring a letter to me and we will burn it together unopened.

OK.

A few days later Ben's letter arrives. I carry it home unopened, feeling noble and honest. I look at it again and again and it is barely sealed. Nobody will know that I read it. Ben is sad and he loves me. He tells me to do what I think is right. He will not love me any less what ever decision I make.

I want to reseal the letter and give it to Tom, but I promised to tell the truth and I tell him that I read it. I wish I lied. It isn't wise to make confessions to your husband.

Now I know that I should never have trusted you. You betrayed me again. You couldn't resist it, Tom shouts.

I could have resealed the letter or denied receiving it. I could have lied in any number of ways but I wanted to be honest.

I am going to kill us both and destroy everything we worked for. But before that I will tell Ben's wife and his children.

I don't care who you tell.

When you said that you will bring me his letters, I began to believe you again.

Maybe I wanted to prove it to Tom, that Ben really loved me, maybe subconsciously I wanted to hurt him.

Tom takes a bottle of brandy and locks himself in a room with the gun. I beg him to let me in.

We had a good life and he destroyed it, yells Tom.

You had a good life. I never wanted this good life. You always reminded me that I should be grateful to you because you earned more money than I did and more than my father and my family.

So the bastard offered you a better life, Tom yells.

I can't mend our marriage like I can't mend the plates and glasses and toys and promises Tom broke. The will of the stronger wins every-time and Tom is stronger and we both know it. I promised so many times that I will not cause him to brake things and be angry, but I broke all the promises and he broke many things.

Tom was ten when his family returned from the concentration camp in Germany. They found their house burnt down and there was no food. The children were forever hungry. Tom's father began to drink and smoke.

Tom's mother sent Tom to scripture lessons and the priest told Tom that Jesus loved everybody and that god was the best father. But the priest always hit the poor boys. Tom figured that if god was anything like his father or the priest, he wasn't any good.

Tom's dad worked hard to feed six young children. When he got paid he went to the hotel and shouted drinks for everybody. He wanted to forget for a few hours that he was poor and that his children were perpetually hungry. He and his friends sang old love songs and everybody was happy. He staggered home and Tom's mum emptied his pockets and cried. He sometimes hit her for it. Mum bought food for the money she rescued and everybody was quiet for a few days. Tom was the oldest of the children and he comforted his brothers and sisters when mum cried.

When dad ran out of smokes he yelled at children. Mum went out to clean houses for rich people to buy smokes for him. She also brought the left over food from the rich.

Tom was determined to become rich and gain respect of those around him. He became a president of the young communist group by the age of seventeen. Communists helped him finish school, they accepted him into the ranks of leaders.

Tom married the prettiest girl in town and he worked tirelessly. His son was an extension of himself and in that extension Tom was determined to live happily ever after.

Tom's neighbour, a pimply young member of the party, boasted to other party members that he fucked Tom's wife. The neighbour was a son of the shire president. Tom's mum used to clean their home.

Tom's wife protested that she never slept with the man, that he tried but didn't succeed. Why didn't she tell Tom? How come he tried, did she lead him on? She probably wanted it. She wasn't a virgin when he married her, who knows who she slept with. Tom wanted to rub out the past, he wanted to escape the shame, the poverty and the inferiority. He left his family.

Tom cried for his wife and his son when I first met him. He kissed me and I wiped his tears. I was a brand new version of his wife and I was a virgin. I remember the day I lost my virginity. We dropped coins in the wishing well next to the lovely hotel where we stayed. Tom asked what I wished for. I said that the wish would not come true if I told him.

We can make all the wishes come true if we love each other, he promised. I was thinking of his wife and wished to be dead as I dropped the coins in the well.

Tom said that a man has a very special love for a virgin. Nobody ever discussed virginity with me before, so I believed him. I remembered old women whispering about the importance of purity. I have given my virginity to Tom and I was lucky that he still wanted to marry me. Was there something in my collective subconscious that made me believe in the importance of marrying a man who took my virginity? Did I inherit my mother's biblical warnings?

Tom had to prove to his friends and family, that he was a man worthy of a young virgin. I thought that he loved me, maybe he did, maybe he didn't. I had no experience in loving. Even now I am not sure what exactly love is.

Nothing felt right after Tom took my virginity. His family and my family rejected us. What others call lovemaking was an act of shame and guilt for me. Tom told me that everything will be right once we got married. I had never been married so I believed in the magic that was marriage. We would be relaxed and we would know that it is forever and we would prove to each other in the registry office that we really, really loved each other. We cried a lot. He missed his children and I missed my parents and I was scared because god wasn't happy with what we were doing.

I have been jealous of your first wife because you never wanted to talk about her. You never talked about your son, I say to Tom.

You called him a bastard, says Tom.

I called him a bastard once and I have been sorry all my life.

You have never been sorry for anything. You always called him a bastard.

You should never have stayed with the woman who called your little son a bastard. We weren't even married yet. I begged you to go back to your family, I wanted you to leave.

I remember the day Tom took me to meet his son. He arranged a dinner with his friends in a pleasant little inn at the bottom of the mountain near his home. Everybody knew Tom. I was smiling and exchanging pleasant little conversations during the endless evening but the pain spread through my body like poison. I kept looking at the clock hoping that somebody would rescue me. Tom's little boy climbed on Tom's knees and played with his face.

He is so happy with his father, said a wife of Tom's friend looking at me for reaction.

Isn't he gorgeous, said another mother.

He is a spitting image of Tom, said Tom's friend.

I felt utterly alone, in the wrong place doing the wrong thing. When we left his son children with his wife, he waved and blew kisses for his father. I saw tears running down Tom's face. I burst out crying that the bastard mean more to him than I.

I was eighteen and frightened, I was a child rejected by everybody because I went with the man who had a family. Nobody knew that I did not want to be with you, I tell Tom.

This is my girl, Tom introduced me to his mother.

Your girl is at home with your son, said the old woman.

I began to see that they were all right and I was all wrong.

I went to another school in another town and I met Ben. I wanted to dance with joy when Ben first kissed me. I wanted to tell the whole world that I was in love. I wanted to tell my mother that I loved a boy, that I was going to get married in a local church. I became consumed with the wish to make mum and dad happy. I hoped that finally I was going to make my parents rejoice, that my mother will sing like she sang when I was very young. I wanted to make everybody happy because I was happy. Ben loved me. There was never any doubt that we loved each other.

A few months later Tom arrived. He told me that he accepted the blame for the divorce. He did not want to wait for the court to decide, because he was afraid to lose me. I owed it to him to marry him because he divorced his wife.

I can't live without you, he said and I was impressed with his love. At eighteen tragic, unconditional devotion seemed so romantic. Maybe I wanted my cake and ate it as well.

You never loved me, Tom says now. I know that I should tell him how wrong he is but maybe he is not. Ben saw me going with Tom, he walked behind us without protesting, we looked at each other like two frightened children hoping that someone would rescue us. Nobody ever did.

I had to understand and appreciate the fact that Tom left his wife and son for me. I owed him. I was scared of what he did and of what more he could do. I comforted him the best I knew how. I think I conceived in one

of those moments. The pregnancy sealed our union. My parents and his mother refused to be at our wedding. We were totally alone ever since.

We will have to talk about your son, I say now.

You always hated him.

I went to see him when I was in Europe. He is an ordinary man. He doesn't hate me, he knows that it wasn't my duty to love him or visit him. It was yours. He doesn't blame me.

I wanted to prove it to everybody, Tom starts again and knows immediately that this should never have been the reason for leaving his son.

I begged you to let me go.

If you really wanted to go, you would have left. You were old enough to know what you wanted.

I was eighteen. Even at fifty five I don't know what I want, I blurt out.

You will never know.

You threatened to kill yourself, I remind.

You wouldn't care if I killed myself if you didn't love me, he says.

Tom and I never fully forgave each other for giving up everything to be together.

You can divorce me if you like, I puff and cough and choke on the cigarette.

Divorce is what you always wanted. Everything has always been my fault, he yells. The pain is intolerable. I don't know if I am the offender or the victim now. Is the pain of the offender less than that of the victim?

Maybe I should have left you when you yelled and belittled me in front of everybody. You made me cry, you made me laugh, I stopped to think for myself. You made sure that they all knew that I am your property. And all the time I was scared that you will leave us like you left your other family.

You just want to blame me for your fucking, shouts Tom.

Tom now knows that what I experienced was more than a mere fuck, so he has to make it look like a fuck, a dirty slut fuck to make me look dirty. He has to smear it with dirt and squash it again and again like one squashed a cockroach to make sure it was dead.

It is my fault to let you bully me, I admit. You wouldn't do it if I didn't let you. I let you do it because I didn't know what else to do, I let you bully me for the sake of our babies who needed a peaceful home.

There should be a logical solution to this, we are not the first or the last couple to separate. Others survived. We allowed ourselves to be too close, we strangled each other with devotion. I don't want to cause pain

to Tom, because he is part of the only life I have. I want him to remember me with some affection.

I love you, I say. I love so much about Tom, I feel so safe and warm and secure and strong with him most of the time.

I'll wreck his marriage like he wrecked mine.

I am sorry I ever went to see Ben, I lie. I know that life would be so much more simple if I never went to see Ben, but I do not regret it. Seeing him was one thing I did for myself.

You are not sorry, Tom can see that I don't cry and that annoys him. My tears dried up.

I will find him, I will smash everything if I don't, he threatens.

I left him when we were eighteen and I left him now. I don't want to hurt him any more because he has never hurt me.

A few hours with him mean more to you than forty years with me. We had a happy family until he wrecked it, Tom yells.

I called him, remember. Don't blame him, it's between you and me. Ben has nothing to do with us.

Tom has to re-establish his control. We cling to each other and I can't resist the desire to comfort him. I belong in his arms, we both know that I am a part of him.

Come to bed, I invite like I invited hundreds of times before. His warm skin feels good on my cool legs and his hands begin to caress my body. We desperately need to be comforted. Tom and I cry and make love. That's how we always mended our family.

I want to return into what I used to know as normal life. There are so many facets of love and Ben is probably the most unrealistic one. There is a need in me for dreams, impossible dreams, there is a part in me that wants to seek something more. But there is a greater part that wants to enjoy the safety and security of my family.

How could a casual meeting like that hurt so much? We met and a few days later we kissed goodbye never to see each other again. The time stopped as we reached into the time tunnel to finish that kiss we never had to say goodbye almost forty years ago when Tom told me to come with him. I told Tom that I loved Ben but Tom carried my suitcase down the hill and I followed. The snow was sparkling in the sun, the crunching of the snow under our feet was the only sound I remember. I waved to Ben from the train then and the next day Tom married me. It was clean and final.

Tom announced that he wanted to escape to Germany and from there we went to Australia. Helena was born a few weeks after our arrival. Leon and Edie followed soon after. When they all started school I started to work at the post office. I am amazed how quickly my whole life passed, the moments of it were much greater and more terrible than the years in between. Years disappeared and were quickly forgotten but

moments lingered on, re-lived, re-dreamed and regretted. There may have been twenty moments altogether worth remembering.

I remember times when my children were born. Those were the days of glory when life had a clear purpose. There was a great obstacle race in front of me and I had to win. I gave it all I had to win for my children.

I remember Tom coming to the hospital when Helena was born. He told his work-mates that his day old daughter smiled at him when he first saw her in the hospital. I was overwhelmed by the enormity of feelings. I wanted Tom to love the baby like he loved his mother Helena. I wanted to please Tom by suggesting that we call our first child after his mother. I desperately wanted Tom to forget all other people in his life.

Tom took our new family for outings along the rivers into the valleys and up to the mountains. He pointed out birds and fish and wild flowers to the delighted baby. Sometimes he carried Helena around his neck. She was chirping on his shoulders like a little sparrow. Exhausted from the fresh air and vigorous exercise we lay in the shade with our child and the food spread between us on the grass. We watched the clouds go by and felt at peace with the world.

When Tom was at work Helena and I prepared for daddy's return. I told Helena about all the wonderful things we would do when daddy came home.

Now I experienced the madness of romance but deep down I know that it was only a dream.

I am grateful that Ben remembers when we were young. We were both a little stunned by an enormous wanting to be what we once were for each other. He writes how he will never stop loving me and how he will keep on writing. I know he does not mean what he writes. All of us romantics want to hear these words even though none of us believe them. We are far too wise and old to believe our own words, let alone the words of other romantics.

Ben and I made love by saying nice words to each other, words that we couldn't say to people we slept with. Our words sounded grand and we liked them to sound grand because that gave a meaning to our existence. We were Romeo and Juliet, eager to write our own story, the scenario fit for the book or the screen but most unsuitable for real life. We had this great, sad, last farewell from the childhood. Our grand affair made us aware of who we are.

In so many ways Tom and I are so right for each other, we grew into each other and we don't know where one ends and the other begins. I got used to him taking the lead and forgot how to live without him leading. He does not forgive me for the times when I am not as he thinks I should be.

Maybe my life's story was written long ago and I just have to live it one step at the time. It is a short story and close to the end. It isn't even an important story. It is just a little story among billions of other stories. It had a beginning so it must have the end written for it.

I am sorry, I say again. Wasn't I sorry all my life? Am I altogether a bad woman? Is Tom so good that he never needs to say sorry?

You blamed me for smoking all your life. Now I know that you smoked because you missed him. At least it wasn't my fault.

I light another smoke. My chest feels congested. I am scared of cancer. Nothing in life is certain not even the kind of death one dies.

You can blame everything on drink, all drunks do, Tom finds a new angle.

I never drink, you know that I never drink, I say.

What about Queensland?

You want to talk about Queensland. Let's talk about Queensland, I say.

You'd like that, you whore. They all fucked you there, Tom spits the words as one would spit a grub.

The sleazy, dirty Italian dagoes all fucked you.

Tell me about Queensland, I say.

I found you all fucked up drunk in the car on the side of the road, that's what happened. But I forgave you. I always forgave you and we were happy ninety percent of the time this last forty years.

Maybe you were happy but I was scared, I was dodging your anger and your punishment. Every time I began to relax and feel safe you punished me with sulking. You needed to punish someone for being hungry as a child and for having an alcoholic father and an unfaithful wife. You don't know how to forgive, you never forgave your father or your wife, I say. You hate smoking because your father hit your mother when he didn't have smokes.

I forgave you. You are the only person I always forgive. I never mentioned Queensland for years he says, anger and accusation hidden in the blade of the voice.

Let's talk about Queensland.

You'd like to talk about the fucking dagoes. He wants me broken down, that's the only way he wants me, humiliated and broken down and crawling for forgiveness.

I want to hear the whole story.

It was always hinted that he would mention Queensland if he wanted to or if he was really trying to hurt me or if he was a bad man or if he didn't forgive and forget. He mentioned that time in Queensland many times when I was hurting during the last thirty five years but I never knew

what happened in Queensland. I never knew why I was bashed, imprisoned, abused, shamed and thrown into a mental hospital.

Tom wanted to make some quick money when we first came to Australia. He heard that sugar cane cutting paid well. The gang of Italian cutters took Tom into the gang. We didn't understand each other because neither spoke English.

At the end of the week we all went to the hotel for a drink.

Tell me about Queensland, I say calmly. The last thing I remember was sitting next to you at the table in the pub with your work mates. The next thing I remember was when you were hitting my head into the concrete floor of our shack. Helena was crying: mummy, mummy. The police and the doctor came the next morning but neither you nor I understood English or what was happening or what we should have done. When they left, you ordered me to retaliate and smash the car you found me in. I had no idea which car I was in or which man had done me anything wrong. You showed me the car, I took a jack and smashed the windows. The police put me in jail. You held Helena but her hands were reaching for me and she cried mummy, mummy. Those were the only words I understood and heard before they locked me up. They forgot to remove the cord belt weaved into my cardigan. I hung myself off the jail door jam. When I woke up from unconsciousness there were people around me again. They escorted me to the mental hospital to lock me up until I proved it to them that I was a properly happy little wife and mother again. I found my first friends in that hospital, first Australian, mad, English speaking women. They were the first people that liked me in Australia.

I stop to swallow the .

You were only a few days in that hospital, he says to minimise my pain. Is he shocked that I want to talk about Queensland?

I was there for two months because I cried a lot. It was my fault, I should not have cried. I had no one to comfort me. I left my family, my friends, my job, and my home because you wanted to escape. I had no quarrel with anyone. They condemned me because I went with you. I ran from you and you threatened to kill yourself. You told me so only now. I must have suppressed that knowledge, I must have wanted to refuse to believe that you blackmailed me into marrying you.

I rubbed out Queensland long time ago like I rubbed out my first wife and my father. They are out of my life, says Tom. Maybe he senses that he should have kept this last trump un-played.

I want to rub Queensland out of my life but first I have to know what happened. I light another smoke, I became a chain smoker in the last few days.

We have finally mentioned your father, your first wife, your son, why should Queensland remain a taboo. Go on, tell me, I brave the words and hope that coming out now they would for ever clear one corner of the dark heavy bag I am carrying. We never talk about things that upset Tom. When Tom is upset he refuses to be touched or to speak or eat or sleep.

They all fucked you and left you for me in the car. You were drunk, of course, that is your excuse, everything is forgiven if you are drunk and don't know what you are doing. You were probably drunk with Ben as well. Can't remember if he fucked you.

Where were you when they fucked me? I try to stop the tears and the trembling.

I was looking for you. They were gone by the time I found you asleep on the back seat of the car.

I have no recollection of anything but I know that it was my fault, of course, that I was unconsciously drunk. I never drank alcohol before, I hated alcohol, I never touched a drop of alcohol since Queensland, yet there I was, a twenty years old mother, unconsciously drunk with some sugar cane cutters starved for sex in the hot sugar cane fields of Queensland.

I don't know if anyone had sex with me while I was unconscious, I tell. I don't know if I was drugged or drunk, if I went of my free will or was kidnapped, abducted or forced. I will never know if I was in that car for a minute or for hours. I will never know what you were doing when I went in the car. It was too painful for you to talk about it so I never dared ask. You only ever hinted at my unforgivable sin to keep me in obedience.

You promised there and then to be my slave for the rest of your life if I would forgive you and take you back, says Tom.

You threatened to write to my parents and tell them about me. After they died you threatened to tell our children. I accepted all the guilt, nobody else was guilty but myself and I promised there and then that I would never rebel, that I will follow and obey you. I had to be properly punished for being young and attractive to some young Italian boys while my husband was too drunk to notice what was happening.

Blame me, you blame me for everything, says Tom.

We were all drunk. Maybe I was raped after all and so I had to take everybody's guilt. I became the only guilty party. I should have known better, I know. I should have known better all my life, only I didn't. I had no-one in the whole world to help me or to tell me how to be better. I must have felt worthless to beg for slavery, I say.

I wish I was dead, says Tom.

I wanted to die so sincerely in that prison, I say and stop to swallow the tears and light a smoke. I must not stop now.

I wish you'd let me go when I begged you to let me go right at the beginning before we got married, I say. You followed me from town to town as I ran away, you followed me with flowers and tears and threats and promises. You made me believe that I had to marry you.

I promised myself never to be divorced again. One bad marriage was enough.

You would rather die than let go. We were not even married yet.

I will never let go and as long as I am alive you will not have anybody else.

You never loved me, you simply don't know how to lose. I was rather stupid not to see it before. I should have known better but you took me away from everybody who could tell how to know better.

I forgave you every time but you will pay for this, Tom threatens.

I was always scared of what you might do. Your faithfulness has nothing to do with love.

I never lied to you but you were always a liar. I could tell you things about you.

Maybe I didn't dare tell the truth. You have things to tell, please tell.

I wonder what else he can add after Queensland and I want him to add it. The bullets are rattling in his pockets, his eyes are glazed from tranquillisers, his breath smells on brandy. I want to cuddle him and be happy and safe with him.

I want to forget but you are always bringing it up, he says.

I love you, I say.

Admit that you were drunk, he tries. He wants to believe that I didn't know what I was doing.

You know that I don't drink.

You did it in Queensland.

You still want to talk about Queensland, I say bravely. Something in me is rejoicing because I am no longer afraid. He can kill us both. So what? I want to talk about Queensland.

My new insane friends offered me my first smokes, I tell. I started to smoke in that hospital. Criminally insane inmates offered me friendship and smokes and they cheered me up. We smoked together and talked and cried. They were the only people that cared for me. I had no-one else.

Cigarettes helped me more than those pink tablets the nurses brought around every few hours. Doctors said that I wasn't stable. If they sent me home I might kill myself and they would be to blame. It would have helped if I understood English, they might have been able to explain. It wasn't their fault that I was ignorant. I cried because I had no words to tell the doctor that I felt sad, lonely and guilty. I am no good, was all I could say. I want to be dead because I am no good. The doctor didn't want to be blamed if I killed myself, so he decided to keep me longer. He had no words to communicate to me that it was OK to feel sad and hurt and scared. He prescribed tablets that made me quiet and sleepy. My doctor and I weren't even looking at each other, I had no understanding of what he wanted to tell me. The safest thing was to keep me in, sedated.

You will never know how much I suffered knowing that you were unfaithful to me, says Tom.

I was never unfaithful to you. I did not do anything, I don't know if anything was done to me. I was just convicted and punished. Nobody ever said that what happened in Queensland wasn't my fault, that it should not have happened, that I was a victim, that you all abused and abandoned me. Only criminally insane girls in the hospital understood. They comforted me the only way they knew how.

I had to be punished for trying to take my life in a prison cell. I cried for my mother. I cried for you. I cried to see my baby Helena, but they had to make me happy first. I was considered suicidal and had to stay. I would be more cheerful if I could see you and my baby but nobody knew that. Nobody told me that I should be cheerful before they let me go home. I wish I knew better.

The psychiatrist pointed Rorschach ink blot cards at me trying to gather some evidence about the state of my mind. I guessed that they tested me, that I was supposed to know what the pictures were. All I could see were symmetrical ink-blot on the white background but I tried to guess the right answer, convinced that there is the right answer which they knew and I didn't. I felt powerless not knowing. Why was it so important to know? I was scared to guess wrongly and they didn't know how to interpret my silence. Seeing their frustration, I tried again and again to respond. They forgot that I could not even say what I managed to imagine seeing. I could only speak a few words of English and none of those words related to the picture. They kept me in, just in case, for my own good, sedated until I settled down.

Left to myself for the first time I wailed like a baby twisted into a ball with my head hidden in my lap. The emptiness inside me and the loneliness poured out in the flood of tears. I cried for my baby and for my own childhood, I cried out for love and protection, for my dreams and freedom.

The nurse placed two pink tablets in my hand while she talked to the doctor. I obediently swallowed them and the doctor and the nurse left, their duty done.

Lea, a girl with a blond pony tail then sat on the wooden bench next to me and put her hand on my hair. I surrendered into the girl's lap and sobbed uncontrollably. The girl's own tears were splashing on my neck until she too bent her head and our tears sipped through our fingers.

Lea helped me more than the doctor because she stroked my hair and patted my back until the tranquillisers took over. I looked up and thanked her with a weak smile before I was taken to bed.

Hours later I returned and looked out for Lea. With hands extended we came together and the girl said: Lea, pointing to herself and I eagerly learned new words from Lea because she kept on talking all the time. We often cried huddled together, the two grieving, mad mothers understanding each other's pain. Clinging to each other the two frightened little girls who ran away from life, cried for their babies and for themselves. When our tears dried, we smiled and later sometimes giggled holding hands as I learned to speak English. Lea became my first and only friend in Australia. I met others in the mental hospital, friendly patients taught me English, they told me their sad stories and hearing them I felt less sad.

Lea tried to kill herself because her baby drowned in the bath while she answered the phone. Lea swallowed a bottle of pills and they brought her here unconscious. She is talking about her only dead child and about her husband who never came to see her because he blamed her.

Lea patiently taught me to put into English words and sentences the events that brought me to the hospital. We smoked together and felt better.

After two months I said goodbye to my new friends and promised to visit. But I was afraid to go back or to ever mention the hospital again. I wanted to forget that I suffered from madness. I never saw Lea again. She gave me something and I felt that I should give her something back but I didn't. Maybe Lea understood. Maybe she was happy to know me. I hoped that one day we could meet and become real true friends in the free outside world. Yet I was afraid of meeting Lea because she carries the memories I didn't want to remember.

When I packed to go home, a nurse said to me: You'll be back. They all come back, sooner or later. I never forgot those words. I lived never to go back. Madness frightened me. Tom never mentioned the hospital again, maybe he was afraid or ashamed of the memory as well. We left Queensland.

You promised never to betray me again, says Tom.

You promised to forgive me after I promised to be your slave for the rest of my life.

I rubbed out Queensland out long time ago, says Tom.

You never allowed me to rub out Queensland. You carried Queensland like a loaded gun. First you threatened to tell my parents, then our friends then our children. If I ever disobeyed you, you would tell. It was your ultimate weapon for thirty five years. Talk about Queensland now.

You are proud of yourself, he accuses. You are not an angel.

You needed an angel but I never even wanted to be one.

I realise that for once I am stronger than he is and that even the gun in his hands does not scare me.

I'd rather die naturally than kill myself, he says reasonably and I feel sorry for the harshness of my words.

Living is not an easy job, I say. We die by degrees every day. I wanted to die many times, I think that perhaps everybody at one time or another wants to die.

I cried many nights alone in the garden thinking about death and nobody came to comfort me and I never knew how to make right whatever made you angry. You never told me, you just stopped talking and pushed me away.

There is nothing for me without you, he says as he takes me into his arms. We go to bed. We just put a band-aide on, to make the hurting tolerable. Maybe that is all there is to life, making things tolerable. Wounds are not to be open, they hurt and Tom does not like it. I have to comfort him.

You hurt me so many times, he says.

I never meant to hurt you.

Why are you doing things that hurt me?

You always told me how stupid I am. Maybe I don't know how to be any other way. Others think that I am OK, I say thinking of Ben who loves me just as I am.

Others don't have to live with you.

You don't have to live with me.

You want a divorce to go to him.

Tom's voice is sharp. I have to be careful. Being careful became my trade.

I chose to stay with you but you are free to do as you like.

Tom and I are exhausted from crying, arguing and lovemaking. I tell him how afraid and lonely I was all my life. He comforts me, he knows me better now than he ever knew me. For forty years I pretended to be the person he wanted me to be so my love was a false, pretend love. I lied. Tom and I never opened up like we opened up now. He only became vulnerable when he realised that I might leave him.

Tom and Magda settle down. I am afraid that Lena will get me in trouble again. She still wants to punish Tom. Magda tells Lena that Tom has to be forgiven because he never had all the answers, we both only do our best and sometimes our best is not good enough. We are as we are.

I banished all my shameful Queensland secrets into my subconscious until I met Melanie who took me to painting classes. I read about Vincent van Gogh who was also mad and the prediction of the nurse in the mental hospital gradually became less scary.

The memory of Ben helped me survive. I wanted to see if Ben really existed, if it was true that he always knew that I was alive if he remembered me all the years while I spent my life with my husband chasing opal in Lightning Ridge.

I went back to see if there really was a beginning. Ben and I touched it for a moment, we lived for the moment when we weren't yet damaged by life.

Tom and I are scared to lose each other because there is nobody else for either of us and we are getting old and we still need love. We feel vulnerable with wounds all fresh and open and waiting to heal. We feel each other's skin warm and loving wrapped around us as we go to sleep. But the demons never rest. During the night they come to torment us. I wake up in a sweat and feel the emptiness in me so acutely that I begin to shiver. The old sadness is gone but the pain follows. Tom will find another minor detail of the love I denied him. I am his wife and I am never to love another man because Tom is my husband and he is a jealous man.

I am your god, I am a jealous god, the words echo from the bible.

I know that Tom will find new ways to torment me in the future and that it won't be long before he will destroy the closeness we enjoy. Fear sits firmly in the emptiness where love should be.

Ben's letters stopped coming long ago, I am relieved but sad. If we were right for each other we would be together going through the ordinariness of life. We never knew how to be ordinary together.

Something good comes out of every pain, says Melanie sensing my confusion.

In my sadness I become indifferent. One thing is just the same as the other as I go through the motions of living. Every time Ben's letter does not come I die a little. I write to Ben again and again and again, I beg him to keep writing to me. I tear up the letters because I promised Tom that I will not write again. I always knew that you loved me, Ben said once. I am not boasting, he apologised. I just feel so loved by you. We both had tears in our eyes because we both felt so unconditionally loved. Did Ben change his mind? But our love has nothing to do with the mind. Did he find someone else to love? Did Tom threaten him and he is afraid? The reasoning doesn't help, the reason for joy and gladness died and I am dull and lifeless.

Months after Ben stopped writing I went away for a day. When I return I find Tom drunk with a gun in his hands. He had time to think and he is convinced that I still love Ben. He senses the growing emptiness in me. I pull the copy of the letter out of his hand and tear it into bits. I will never know how many copies of my letter to Ben did he make. Tom is going to shoot himself. He loves me, I know he loves me but he is holding the gun. It doesn't matter if he shoots me or himself. He has the gun. He does not trust me. He never will.

I can't love Tom while I am afraid of him.

Tired and sad we promise again to erase the past and not to be afraid. He believes that as long as he has a gun I will keep my promises.

I promise Tom that I will tell him my every thought, my every wish. I promise that I will rub out all the little hiding places in my heart and hold no place to escape into. I promise to fill my heart with love for him and have no sadness or happiness apart from him. I do not want to shatter our children's lives. Maybe they wouldn't care, maybe they forgot that they have parents. I know that nobody can ever forget their parents, the words from our childhood follow us.

Survival is all there is, mum warned long ago. You might pretend that there is more but sooner or later you will realise that that is all there is. If you have someone to lean on and grow old with, the survival is easier. You are lucky if you find a strong person you can trust.

Tom is my strength. Ben is a face of my innocence and I don't want to know how much damage was done to his innocence since we parted. I just wanted to pretend for a few moments that I was back at the beginning, all white and pure and hopeful and trusting. I wanted to forget, that we were two very bruised, old people.

Ben's letters are magic words he himself wants to hear. I wrote back those same words and there was harmony of words that was safe in the distance like a melody brought over to my garden from an unknown place. One could never feel the same for the music in the room as one feels about the music that steals its way into one's existence. I would never love Ben so dearly if we lived together. Love we have is something one does not make, it is a music you never turn on. It lingers in the wind for as long as it wants and when it is gone it leaves a memory. The memory of Ben comes and goes without footprints on my reality. The words are like whispers of the melody we listened to in ourselves.

In the letter Tom found I wrote to Ben that I didn't want my happiness to depend on him. Now I know that I will always depend for my happiness on the words I wrote. I will have to pretend.

I will be on probation for the rest of my life.

Tom began to drink. He is not happy without a few drinks. He drinks more every day, I tell Melanie.

Nobody is happy or unhappy all the time. Life just isn't like that, says Melanie.

I am happy that our love lasted forever, said Ben.

We both know that only the things we never use last forever, forgotten in some remote corner of life.

I could not live through this again, says Tom solemnly. If you ever betrayed me again, I would never again trust you and if I haven't got that, life means nothing to me, says Tom.

I can't expect Tom to forget, not yet. I try to please him so I stop smoking. My moods will have to look excellent even when I suffer withdrawal symptoms. I will have to be appropriately excited and happy. I can not expect anyone to help me quit. People don't care about my addiction. Smoking remains my vulnerable spot, my Achilles heel and Tom keeps poking into this weakness until I feel guilty and small and unable to resist it. It is one thing he isn't able to control.

There always lurks the opportunity for an argument. I get upset and reach for a smoke. I have to prepare for crisis. Tom and I will have to deal with ghosts of the past, his and mine while I will have to keep permanently evenly cheerful.

I must not show a trace of irritability or anger or sadness or anxiety. He would blame my moods on Ben and on my lack of responsibility and love for the family. I will have to pretend convincingly.

Maybe if I gave Tom all my love he would become more loving. But I gave him all I had. Neither of us feels loved enough, we both want more and we both blame each other for not getting more. A cigarette helps me cope with so many complicated issues.

Go and have a smoke, says Tom as soon as I am not happy. He wants me to smoke, I realise. Smoking makes me small and vulnerable. He knows how hard I try to stop.

I realise that I will die of cancer or heart attack soon if I don't quit. I almost welcome the certainty of death.

Tom tells me that he is worried for my health because my father died of cancer. He sounds noble and strong.

You complained about smoking before my father had cancer, I remind him to take away some of his righteousness. You never forgave your father who hit you, when he had no smokes.

Are you looking for an argument? Go and pump yourself with nicotine.

There is hardly an opportunity when one could smoke socially. Only stupid people still smoke, I try to laugh at myself. Other smokers try to keep me in their numbers. They hope that they will be all right if other, apparently sane, people also smoke. Smokers and drunks are hard to resist.

Tom says that Ben is the only reason why we could not be completely happy. Running away after forty years of a happy marriage would be foolish, irresponsible and ridiculous.

If you can dream -
and not make dreams your master.
Kipling

Purgatory

What are you painting? asks Melanie.

I am trying to recreate my dream.

Jenny had this fascinating course on dreams, says Melanie.

I actually have nightmares. I struggle up the mountain and the mountain becomes steeper and rockier and I can not reach the top.

You should talk to Jenny, says Melanie.

I'll think about it.

Do you want to go over the mountain, asks Melanie.

What mountain, I ask.

The mountain you are climbing? Did you ever climb a mountain as a child?

As a child I always looked towards the distant hills and dreamed of things on the other side. I walked to the top of the mountain and there was another mountain. I looked back and the valley was beautiful but I wanted to see what was behind the next mountain. I knew the way back and I knew that I will return but I just had to go a little further over the next mountain.

How many mountains are there in your country.

Mountains stretch from one end to the other, there is always another mountain to climb.

Maybe a part of you is still on the other side of the mountain.

I had a dream that I drove with two men in a car up the mountain. The road became so steep that I couldn't reach the accelerator. Suddenly I noticed that a goat was pulling us up on a rope. The goat gave up just before we reached the top, it rolled down and landed next to my car. One man went out of the car and said that he did not want to come with me anymore. The goat then stretched and became huge and I woke up.

Jenny said that only the dreamer can explain the dreams because dreams are part of your subconscious.

Big help she is.

Who do you think the two men were?

I don't know, I lie. I don't know the road or the car either.

What does the dream mean to you?

I never had a goat.

The vehicle usually represents a level of your energy, the mountains are the obstacles.

I couldn't decide if I should go out of the car or continue with the goat up the mountain.

Only you know why there are two men and why one gave up.

I woke up crushed, there was a bottomless emptiness inside me. I panicked.

You sound troubled.

In the middle of the night I went into the garden for a smoke, I laugh.

Dreams are trying to tell you something.

I often can't find the way out. I keep opening the doors but there are more doors to open.

There is an answer in your subconscious, advises Melanie.

I sometimes try to sleep with my eyes open. In my dreams I am never good enough, nobody likes me, I can't find the way or do what I want to.

Maybe you are not acknowledging a part of you that wants to surface.

I can't tell Melanie how separated I feel from the rest of the creation. This aloneness frightens me. I can't say that I travel with Ben on an imaginary road, that I am afraid to break away from Tom and the reality where people know me. The closer I come to Ben the more desperately I search for the way back. In my dreams Magda and Lena, my two selves become one and I wake up frightened and confused.

The houses on the hill are alluringly white and the grass is deep green and the creek beside it is clear blue. I walk towards the place but when I come near, nobody knows me, it seems that people don't even see me, they walk past me as I try to ask them for direction. I search for the sign on the road or some kind of writing but there is none. I become frightened and want to go home but I can't find the way. The fear wakes me up and half of me feels relieved and the other half sad. The beautiful place is gone but I am safe in my own bed.

Sometimes the dream changes. My husband and my children are waiting in a tiny hut next to the railway. I want to find the way out so I leave my family and keep on running through the paddock. I come to a village but nobody wants to know me. I can't find any signs on the road so I don't

know where I am and nobody wants to speak to me. I come to the mountain, I know that my home is over the mountain but I don't know how to cross it. Others go ahead but nobody is willing to show me the way. I am aching for my family.

Sometimes I drive fast and end on a rough gravel road which leads nowhere. Sometimes I go up the steep road and can't reach the top.

Did you ever climb a real mountain?

Tom and I escaped over the mountain. I couldn't go up anymore and I told him to go on his own but he wouldn't.

Did you want him to go on his own?

Maybe I did.

You didn't want to reach the top and go to the other side.

My family was on this side, I say but I know that the dream has nothing to do with my family. Ben was left behind and even then I knew that I will never be completely happy without Ben.

But you followed Tom to the top and lived happily ever after, smiles Melanie. Her eyes are on me, maybe she knows that I can not tell her about the other side of the mountain.

Of course, I assure her.

Maybe you are now trying to climb the mountain from this side, teases Melanie.

Maybe I am, I concede.

Maybe you should get in touch with your feelings. Painting might be a good therapy.

Often I wake up in a sweat because my children are hurting. There is Tom in a rage punishing them, teaching us a lesson, shouting and breaking things. I have to get up to shake the dream off. I walk into the garden, light a smoke. Feeling better I begin to feel guilty. I suck a mintie before I carefully rearrange myself into Tom's embrace.

He half awakes and we make love.

The images from my unconscious follow me into the day. I perform my conscious tasks while looking into the landscape of my unconscious.

Something happened in your life that you haven't dealt with. You want to do something but you haven't decided what, or how, guesses Melanie.

I love my work, I love painting, I love my family, I have everything I need. What else is there?

You will have to answer that one. It is hard to read your paintings.

I just want to get along. I don't want to change anything. I crave harmony, I try to reason.

The images of your paintings are so distant and faint yet one is compelled to follow them.

I could never use bold, angry colours and textures like Van Gogh. They frighten me, they are much too obvious. I am not as brave as he was.

Your scenery is so ordinary but in it are hidden faces that frighten me, says Melanie.

Tom and I are drifting apart a bit, I venture.

Something made you stand up. It might be painting but it may be something else.

I can feel a cool breeze between Tom and me. It separates us a bit but the freshness also feels good.

You may yet grow up.

Tom always tells me not to pretend because he knows what I am really like, he tells everybody what I am really like, so there is no need for me to pretend. Is there a real me hidden somewhere unbeknown to me? I have been told so many times what I am, why I do things I do, think thoughts I think. I can not tell what is real about me and what is not. I am a mirror of my environment, I am also the dirt behind the mirror and the secrets written on the back of it. The mirror is also hiding the vastness of fear that I am not who I would like to be or who the world wants me to be.

What you are to yourself is more important than what you are to Tom, says Melanie.

Tom believes that all other roles I play are pretend ones.

There are millions of loved ones who like to think that they know their loved ones. In reality most loved ones are longing to escape from their loved ones, they want an open road, they want to feel brave and strong walking on their own a little, smiles Melanie.

There are endless stories of people wanting to get rid of that one loved one they chose to live with, I say without knowing why.

There are endless stories about people cheating those people they chose to live with. There is always the longing for that one ideal person, for that unattainable double to unite with, says Melanie.

My mind is so full of remembered images that I can't say where I end and where the reflections of others begin. Sometime I am bigger than the reflections but most of the time my mind is just the pictures of others.

I have a premonition that something awful will happen. I feel danger in my dreams, I can not climb to the top of the mountain or find my way home. I always end up on the dirt road, looking for someone to show me the road.

You are trying to make sense of your dreams but there is no sense in dreams. Parts of your life you did not resolve during daytime get tangled into a mess at night.

The scenery of the night lingers into my consciousness. Before I open my eyes I play with the pictures of sunny hills, of clear waters, of dark terrifying forests, of people manipulating me. I play with the images of my dreams before I become fully awake to the ordinariness of my existence. Some of the images merge into my real life and it is difficult to separate the real from imagined as I paint.

The stillness of the autumn mixed with the silence of the Sunday afternoon makes me feel detached from the world. There is no-one to define who I am so I wander if I am anybody in particular or just a ball of energy people see passing along as they rush to meet their own schedule. People nod in recognition but they rush on. My thoughts and my senses and my feelings need to connect because I suspect that I am only a sum of those connections. I have to explore into the reasons for my existence.

I sit on a Sunday afternoon, gardening done, warm sun on my skin, echoes of far away life barely reaching into my reality. I extend my arms to reach for some other but I am alone.

I change the layers on my worm farm. My silent friends ate through the meagre food scraps and deposited a bottom layer full of potent manure. The worms laid eggs in the mixture with the silent hope that I will do my part and bring them to life. I gratefully spread the mixture around my roses and tomatoes and cover it with mulch. I water the mixture and know that within days new worms will emerge from the eggs. I give them life. The new worms will live in the privacy of the mulch and soil they share with me and with the plants I grow. We depend on each other.

I feel better remembering the worms. The worms and I need each other. I never count them and they probably don't agonise about the thoughts I think but we are essential to each other.

I try not to think of Ben. I need a reason for getting dressed and having my hair combed and for washing the surfaces in my home. I hate wishing for the day to pass quickly because there is no reward at the end of it or at the beginning of the next.

People tried to change me all my life they wanted to fill me with their feelings, thoughts and desires. They wanted to leave the imprints of their hands and minds on me. They wanted me to carry their idea of life long after they were dead.

Now I am old and I try to leave an impression of my hands and mind on others.

The stems of the climbing beans waver as I try to attach them to the stakes but the wind brushes them to sway aimlessly. I select smooth, firm stakes to provide support but the tiny newly grown hooks of the climbing vines just can't catch a hold. Except for the one that got hooked on a thorn and the side of the stem became slashed before it stuck on the thorn and couldn't be swayed by the wind any more. I wonder if it will die from the injury. I grew all twisted around the thorn myself. I didn't die. Or did I? How could I tell if I survived?

Sometimes a fish swallows the hook like that and nobody knows about the pain of its carrying the hook in its body. Only the fish does.

The autumn sun is warm but the threat of winter frost isn't far away. Maybe the beans will survive and ripen just before the frost. Maybe they will need protection. Is it all really worth the bother. Why worry about a couple of kilos of beans when I can afford all the meals in the restaurant. I am only protecting life. Is anything at all worth the bother? Do I really need to clean my finger nails? Or use common sense?

Tom and I keep telling ourselves how lucky we are because we have everything we need. I thank god for our happiness but I am terrified of the emptiness inside me.

Other disunited individuals can not give me a sense of unity and well-being, they only point to the emptiness and loneliness of us all. I try to fill the empty holes in my day, I pass the time. Maybe how I live is the right way to live and I should know better than to fret.

I am searching for that other significant one that would recognise and love me, I need someone whose half I am. Maybe that other person has no name, maybe it is god, maybe there is nothing that could fill the void in my soul. I have to separate myself and stand back to see the rest, to see the world as it really is, if it really is a thing apart from me and my imagination.

Maybe this is purgatory, maybe we are here just to endure our punishment for wanting to be god. Maybe I should just mark my time until I will be taken to heaven.

Ben and Michael were divine lovers of my fantasy, I pretended that they were my perfect match, my mirror image, my soul-mates. In my fantasies they followed my moves, submitted to my desires, said the words I wanted to hear. The two melancholic, dark, cold halves of me waiting to be enlightened and warmed and delighted. We reached to the fire and were burned. We blamed the fire but it was us reaching out to the dazzling light of it, we wanted to feel the scorching heat. My eyes invited them to burn me into ashes so I could be reborn and complete.

Last night I dreamt that I am dying and people refused to notice, I tell Melanie.

We are dying every day, laughs Melanie.

I tried to distribute my wealth but people ignored it, I say. They switched off from my story even before it ended.

New thrills and actors take our place.

Nobody was sad or happy, they just stopped being involved with my existence.

They probably watched a new show.

I was so alone.

You dream a lot.

I dreamt that I was sitting in a car stuck on a rock surrounded by water. Whichever way I moved, the car tipped dangerously. If I tried to step out, the car began to spin. I sat there quietly until I woke up.

You are a mess aren't you.

We watch the sunset colours spread across the horizon. There is a sound of a song in the distance. For a moment I become a part of it, united and in peace.

I travel through time and I stop where I want, to play with memories. I remember the words of Shelly's poem: Music when soft voices die, vibrates in the memory..

I shared events of my life with my Lightning Ridge friends over the last twenty five years, yet I could never tell anyone about the ugly thoughts and angry feelings that sometimes flood over me. I can only tell about my nightmares.

I dream of death, Tom's death and my death but never Ben's death. I fear for Ben's safety. At times the image of Ben changes, the name changes but the longing for that kindred soul remains.

When I was little, we had all sorts of delicious apples and plums and pears but we had no oranges, I tell Melanie. Every Palm Sunday we wished for an orange to place on top of the spring greenery to take to church for a blessing. We had no love or respect for other fruit, an orange was what we wanted.

Why?

The lucky, rich children had an orange so an orange represented happiness. Only the lucky ones had this golden tropical fruit for Easter alleluia. The rest of us carried an apple on top of our offering. We had no need to feel grateful, we weren't the chosen ones. Orange in that European spring had to come from some exotic warm place, where there was no cold.

You have any fruit you like now. Enjoy your oranges, says Melanie.

Maybe the rich children from my childhood didn't like oranges, maybe they wished for apples.

We always want what is out of season, Melanie agrees.

An orange was a romantic symbol of spring, I say.

You are cursed with romantic ideas.

I smuggled a stick of elder tree from Europe, I say pointing at the elder tree near my kitchen window.

I've never seen an elder tree in Australia, says Melanie.

It starts flowering with every change of weather but it's leaves and it's flowers soon shrivel and dry. It flowers in winter because winter in Australia is much like the spring in Europe. In summer it dries to the

trunk and I have often wanted to cut it down just before the rain made it flower again.

It's getting there, says Tom. Every year it feels more at home.

But it will be years before it starts to live a normal life.

It will eventually, says Tom.

Pee wee, a smaller version of Australian magpie, keeps pecking at something incessantly all day long under the elder tree. It moves on and pecks. I wonder if the European tree and the Australian bird relate to each other in some way.

The elder tree's flower lost a pleasant scent it used to have in Europe. It seems as confused as I am. Half of me lives in my European childhood and the other half settled in Australia. I blossom with every ray of love like that silly tree. And then I shrivel and dry up.

Wherever I am, half of me feels homesick for that other half left behind, I say.

Chinese used to carry the bones of their ancestors when they moved, we only carry the memory, says Melanie.

I feel cut off from the rest of the creation. Braking the link separates you.

The world became a small village.

Even god feels strange in Australia.

I should be enjoying the peaceful autumn of my life with Tom and his opal mining friends. I should baby-sit my grandchildren and support my children. I should do community work. I should be happy, I keep convincing myself.

I lack direction, I say to Melanie.

I often feel adrift like that but I don't resist like you, I just let myself drift with the flow, smiles Melanie.

I paint pictures to save myself.

It took me almost forty years to convince god that I did not want to do what I have done, that I never enjoyed things that I've done wrong. I argue that I should not be penalised for what happened against my wishes. For a long time god kept telling me that I was old enough to know what I was doing. I know that I knew what I was doing but I was unhappy doing it, I argued. I had honourable intentions, I wanted to make Tom happy. God kept me wandering in the wilderness for forty years before he gave in and forgave me. I argued that there were forces around me determining my actions. I think god became sick of my arguments so he gave in. Maybe I should be grateful, maybe I should stop nagging god and become responsible for myself. I am old enough to know better.

Life wasn't meant to be easy, smiles Melanie.

But it can be interesting, I finish the old overused cliché.

There are moments like the star in the dark sky.

Part of me died when I was transplanted to Australia, I say.

Part of us lives somewhere else.

I began to grow again, of course, I learned the new language, I began to recognise the smells and sounds in the new environment, but I look back.

That's where we all like to live part time, smiles Melanie.

I look for new horizons but I would really like to get back to the beginning, to when everything meant something.

It's hard to accept that we are getting old.

We began getting old as soon as we were born, I smile.

We also began rubbing out our mistakes right at the beginning, says Melanie. Every child wants a new page. A teacher told me to write neater under all the mistakes I made but I wanted a new page. I hated looking at my mistakes.

The seed dies after it produces new life. In the instant of death the everlasting life begins, the priest says.

Getting old is not so bad. You get used to the dentures and dentures get used to your gums and people get used to the new hair colour and the new dress covers the muscles that sagged. Even sixty years old woman can masquerade as a girl. Masses of young people everywhere are disguised old people. Sensible old people could never look so genuinely foolish and act so perfectly stupid, says Melanie.

Getting old is a state of mind. If you believe something it is real for you. What you feel is real.

The most real things are the invisible things, says Melanie.

Mum told me to look in the mirror every morning and be happy with the way you look because you will never again feel or look so gloriously beautiful and young.

Wise mum.

You have to love your face first and everybody will love it then. Love is like apples. You leave them red and fragrant but in time they rot. Even the ones left on a tree rot away with time.

They should not be revisited.

It's best to remember apples red and ripe and juicy.

An apple is an apple only until you bite into it and eat it. There is no apple on the tree once you've picked and eaten it.

Until next year..

Well, maybe in your next life.

No apple lasts forever. It does not matter really if you pick it or leave it to rot on a tree.

We are so eager to reach the final goal but the final goal is death, says Melanie.

Or the everlasting life, I say. The closer we get to the end the closer we are to almighty who can see over the top of the mountain.

I am waiting for the ripe apple to fall into my lap.

Without shaking the tree you never get anywhere fast.

When we were boarding the plane, people stood in line for an hour just to be first, I say remembering my trip to Europe.

First for what?

I wonder if they knew. They were grown up intelligent looking travellers and yet they wanted to be first to an allocated seat on the plane where they had to stay still for twelve hours while their feet swelled and their necks ached.

People are just grown up kids, says Melanie.

But why rush and push ahead to be in first and out first to wait in another queue at customs or at some other door.

Maybe being first gives us a feeling that we are getting somewhere, says Melanie.

Most people start the trip to travel, not to get somewhere.

Life's like that, we travel in order to get there.

To where we started.

You should live the way nature intended you to live, says Melanie.

How do I know what nature intended for me?

If it feels right, do it.

If it feels good to me it may feel bad for others, I say.

If it feels right, Melanie corrects. I know, I've done things that never felt right.

My life seems like an aimless flight of a butterfly.

The flight of a butterfly is never aimless, corrects Melanie.

When Eve upon the first of Men
the apple pressed with special cant,
Oh! What a thousand pities then
that Adam was not Adamant.

‘For the times they are achanging’

I merge with the scents of honey suckle and herbs and roses and jasmine
into the safe realm of my thoughts as I prepare the tables in the garden.
Melanie is celebrating her fiftieth birthday.

Someone in the neighbourhood is playing Bob Dylan’s song ‘For the
times they are achanging’. I begin to pick the words and hum the tune.

Melanie tells me that she broke up with Mike, her tall black American
boyfriend.

The bastard went to Dubbo with fifteen years old Talia, says Melanie.

When?

Figure it out. Talia had a beautiful black baby last week. She conceived
when she lost her virginity in Dubbo. Mike left town because of the
baby. I feel like the sun went out of my life, sighs Melanie.

You are well rid of him.

Before he went to Dubbo he told me that he would be happy if he could
spend half an hour with me. I don’t want to spend a lifetime with the
bastard but I wanted him to say that he does.

He is too young for you.

He is closer to my age than to Talia’s but the age doesn’t matter since he
doesn’t love either of us.

You knew all along that he cheated on you.

He was cheating on his girlfriend. I was supposed to be the other
woman, Melanie laughs.

He doesn’t deserve you, I say.

Marty was a bastard too, says Melanie. He said that I should not feel
cheap just because I consented to sleep with him on a first date. Why
should I feel cheap when he felt so victorious? I lied that I pick men and
drop them if they are no good. He had that twisted smile as he looked at
me. Are one night stands only meant to be for men?

Men know that women make love while men have sex, I say.

Mike promised to call.

He has you hooked.

I never wanted anything from the cheating bastard.

Once you are in love you become a victim. Tragedies are written about people in love. Men enjoy the thrill of the game and the heartache they cause.

His girlfriend never looked at other men because she was too busy checking where Mike looked.

Forget him.

There is nothing in Lightning Ridge for me without him.

You'll get over him. I feel better because people who made me feel little, grew old and insignificant themselves, I tell Melanie.

I told you that there is no big bad wolf. Tom will grow older and smaller every day.

I always made myself less, so Tom could be more in everything we did. If Tom was happy we were all happy. I simply didn't know how to be happy unless every member of my family was, I smile.

Men are bastards, says Melanie.

Maybe you pick the wrong men.

I married a suitable man, I suitably reproduced and nurtured and prayed in church while my husband screwed his girlfriend, says Melanie.

You were unlucky. I don't know if I was lucky or unlucky. Tom constantly changes the rules for all the games we play. He convinced me that I am wrong and he is right, I say.

He spends most of his life convincing others that he knows best, says Melanie.

Tom does not know how to be wrong, I say.

He chooses friends who can not beat him at anything, says Melanie.

He knows I will take the blame and apologise. During the first twenty years our children made those same apologies because they were blamed for all that was wrong in my husband's life. How come nobody ever begs my forgiveness. I must be wrong all the time.

As a child I learned that I have to love God, my parents and my nearest, says Melanie. I loved everybody, I constantly prayed for all those that I felt I had to pray for to please God and my parents and those nearest

who would eventually all love me endlessly for loving them in the first place. I want to know why nobody loved me to start off with. Didn't they learn the same things I learned?

Maybe somebody does, I say.

We are sentimental fools, laughs Melanie.

Love melts in your hands like a snowflake, I say remembering those snowflakes I shared with Ben.

One only remembers the highs and the lows, the hate and the love, the anger and the tears, the ecstasy and the despair. The rest is insignificance, says Melanie.

That's the way things are, I say. My children and I grew up believing that this was how things are.

I am not prejudiced, but I would never touch a woman who slept with a black man. I have nothing against black men but a white woman must be pretty desperate to sleep with a black man, said Tom before Melanie arrived. Tom believes that Melanie is a bad influence on me.

Tom says that I am cute when I am angry, I don't want to be cute any more, I tell Melanie.

Men are never cute, they shout and punch, says Melanie.

He never hit me, I jump to his defence.

He didn't have to.

He broke things.

Things like your heart and your will and your desires.

It's not that bad.

You are scared of what else he could brake.

He likes me to smile and say sorry.

Stop being cute. Shout.

It is not feminine to shout.

Men can't cope with an angry female.

I take Prozac so I don't cry.

Men invented pills to shut women up.

He would rather have me cry.

Anger should make you explode not cry.

He laughs and pats my head.

You are not cute you are ridiculous. Why don't you grow up.

It's too late.

It has always been too late for you. Tom sucks your energy. If you left him, he'd crumble, says Melanie.

I made Tom into a big bad wolf, I laugh. I made our children obey Tom so he would love me more. I left my parents and friends to please Tom and my children only have the big bad wolf and poor me.

Men like to take their little girls away from all those people who would teach them to stand up for themselves, says Melanie.

Tom tells our children how bad they are and I tell them to say sorry to dad for being bad.

They are also his children, they'll manage.

Tom scolds me for not being more like him but he likes people like me, meek, subservient and obedient. He wants to be seen as a generous man who never calculates costs but he knows that I know that he isn't like that at all. Maybe nobody is like that.

Tom likes Marty because he can order him around, I tell Melanie.

Marty only pretends to be meek and kind and willing because he wants to be admired as the virtuous one, says Melanie.

We want to be good models for our children.

The children vow never to be like their mothers or fathers or teachers but all the time they are becoming the people they decided not to be, says Melanie.

Tom pretends to be extravagantly generous when it pleases him, he stuns people sometimes and confuses them with false generosity. He often says : Where friends are concerned, money means nothing. I never count the cost of friendship. Once a man, an important man told everybody at the dinner table, how Tom once gave him his last few coins when he was broke. Tom ordered drinks for everybody. He felt so gratified, it was all worth it.

Tom asks my opinion only to tell me how wrong I am, I laugh.

He has to prove it over and over that he is all you ever wanted, says Melanie.

Maybe I am his one true love, I laugh.

Is he your one true love, asks Melanie.

Maybe I don't love him enough.

It isn't your fault if you don't love a man. It can be his fault or nobody's fault. It definitely is not your fault.

I remember the times I tried to kill myself to get Tom's attention or pity. I sobbed making deathbed speeches but he was fast asleep. He knew that I was hurting for his comfort. He knew that I cared enough to create all the drama.

You make your bed and you sleep in it, I remember my father's words.

Let's have a drink to forget my age, says Melanie as we join the other guests.

A sobering age. All down the hill from here, teases Marty.

To think that I was in lust with Marty, Melanie whispers to me.

It's easy to be in lust with Marty, I whisper back.

What would you know about lust?

They say that life begins at fifty, says Ema.

Who are they? The fiction writers?

Life is a fiction. You are what you think and feel and dream and these intangible things never age, promises Ema.

In my fictitious existence I remained a teenager into my twenties, thirties and forties. Why not continue into my fifties and sixties and seventies if I happen to live that long, cheers up Melanie.

The real thing may be harmful to our health at our age, I laugh.

I'll live on romantic stories from now, says Mel.

Most women do, permanently, says Tom looking at me.

And soap operas, says Peter looking at Lisa.

Do you want me to have an affair instead, laughs Lisa.

What do you call a man who lost 99% of his brain? A widower, laughs Melanie. The jokes denigrating men are new. People are still laughing at wives and mothers in law, and Jews and Aborigines and Irish. Only feminists laugh at jokes about men.

Feminists are the least attractive people, said Tom. Women who was never loved by a man turn into feminists.

Listen to this one, continues Melanie after a couple of drinks. The pope had a consultation with God. How do you like my administration on earth, Pope asked God. It's running pretty smoothly, but I wanted to ask you about a few things. Seeing that people multiply so much, what do you think about the birth control? asked God. Not while I am pope, says the pope. Seeing that there is a shortage of priests do you think we should allow them to marry, asked God. Not while I am pope, says the pope. Seeing that almost half of marriages break up, do you think we should allow divorce, asked God. Not while I am pope, says the pope. Can I now ask you one question, says the pope. Go ahead, says God. When do you plan to have another Polish pope, asked the pope. Not while I am God, says God.

Susan wouldn't like you to joke about god, I warn.

My god has a sense of humour. He created the universe so he must know what he is doing. If he really wanted us to behave he'd make us.

You have to worship god.

My god gets sick of people who constantly beg. He gives what he wants to give, explains Melanie.

He lets us muddle on, agrees Ema.

In the end there is only god and procreation and sex and power, says Melanie.

When you get old, you realise how desirable you were when young, says Ema. In my childhood most women were toothless by fifty. Toothless went well with long black dresses, flat shoes and rosaries. In my adolescence fifty years old women were fat and had veins sticking out of their legs. These women gradually grew smaller and greyer if they lived long enough.

The fat ones bounced with laughter as they rocked their grandchildren, says Lisa.

Traditionally people showed respect for age, says Melanie.

Everything changed. Men are losing power and women are learning to handle it, says Ema.

The virginity is not a big deal anymore, neither is divorce or single parenthood, says Lisa.

Nobody knows right from wrong any more. everybody is in it for himself.

Alex brings his wife for lunch but she soon leaves to play tennis, she needs to tone her muscles. Alex asks when she is coming back but she isn't sure. Maybe she will go for a drink afterwards with the team.

I never toned my muscles or went for a drink with my team, says Lisa.

When your generation begins to die out, the loneliness hits you, says Melanie.

Young people can not remember things with you, says Lisa.

They send social workers to cheer you up but you can't share your memories with a social worker who is waiting for a transfer to some better location, says Ema.

Even a social worker is better than loneliness for Christmas, says Lisa.

When we came to Australia we were too busy to notice how alone we are without our people, I say.

We built our homes to create an extension of ourselves because we had no extended families, says Ema.

We showed our homes and cars and gardens to people who came with us so they could tell us how important, how beautiful and clever we are. We needed someone to make us feel alive.

Behind each others' backs we criticised and laughed at each other, says Melanie.

Those were the good old times.

Remember how we used to laugh at the Hungarian Joe and his wife Lela. She was the only one he had under him but he behaved as a dictator, says Melanie.

He had to be the boss.

She mixed cement and carried bricks. He yelled and she wiped the tears on her sleeves.

When she fell pregnant she still had to carry bricks and she lost the baby. He called her horrible names because she was barren, I remember.

Even when he couldn't get out of bed to poo he still growled and called her stupid if she didn't warm his potty. She was afraid of being left on her own, says Ema.

I wonder if she was afraid that he would die or that he would live, laughs Melanie.

She had no right to go on living after his death. He wanted her dead with him, says Ema.

He swore because he was afraid of going by himself. He never went anywhere by himself. She cried because he was dying and he swore because the fucking stupid woman would live.

I can swear all I like now, nobody will lock me up. I am already locked up, said Joe.

Lela died a month after Joe one day after she tidied the house and weeded the garden.

She had nothing left to do but die, I suppose.

Many of our people died in the last few years.

Who knows where we will be in a couple of years, says Melanie.

We promised to celebrate the year 2000 together in the club. You can't break the promise.

I went to the club on my own the other night, says Melanie. I watched the couples dancing. I never felt so old and alone. I realised that people around me were firmly attached couples who flirted with other firmly attached people. Nobody flirted with me. Maybe I reminded them of loneliness and death. I just wanted a chat with someone.

It seems easier for men to go alone. They cover up their aloneness and availability by drinking at the bar.

Men drink solo and pee solo. A woman has to have another woman to share her anxieties.

Drunk men feel potent but drunk women look like sluts, says Melanie. I did what Mike does. He sits himself away from everybody and people come to him.

Flee and they will follow, I say.

Nobody followed me. In the end Mike indicated with his finger that he wanted me at the bar, says Melanie.

You tried to hunt. Everybody knows that you should be the hunted, says Lisa.

Men are willing to give you their pay packet but not their freedom. They fulfil family obligations but they live on their own, says Melanie.

Women cling to men like they were never properly separated from their rib cages, says Ema.

Mike says that men make better friends. They argue and fight to clear the air. Women politely pretend. Mike says that women create an image and when you get to know them they are quite different.

Blame women, I say.

I want an equal relationship. I am independent, self sufficient, single and available, says Melanie.

You make men afraid.

Maybe men are just as confused as women.

Maybe the strong, silent, mysterious man never existed.

Maybe he was just a scared little boy afraid to make a fool of himself, says Melanie.

Maybe daddy told him that he must be tough because boys don't cry, I say. Tom said that to our boys when they were scared and sad.

When a man makes a pass, he thinks he is paying you a compliment, says Melanie.

Nobody makes a pass at me.

They wouldn't dare because Tom is more of a man than they feel, says Melanie.

The stiletto is back, says Melanie. The woman is doing business in the 1990s. The lethal looking heel brought the woman eye to eye with the man and she says: I am after everything you got so you better watch out, says Melanie.

Men turn into homosexuals because they don't know how to relate with females, says Ema.

Women in the front line of the feminist movement might know what they are on about but the ordinary housewife trying to be modern, is in the dark. We just play silly games, I say.

The times they are a changing fast. In the fifties virginity and femininity were girl's biggest assets to trade for a successful marriage.

Marriage was an ultimate gift of a man.

Men boasted about the affairs with secretaries and barmaids. They openly lusted for the half naked girls on the beach to tease their wives. They made jokes about the little woman absorbed with peeling potatoes and washing dirty nappies, says Melanie

Men were rich and could afford to sin. Women and children were men's dependants.

It was a mortal sin for women to commit adultery or covet power or worship graven images or other men.

In the sixties bikinis became smaller, skirts shorter, tops more open, nothing was allowed to cover imperfections. Anorexia and bulimia

became wide spread. Women became scared of perfect bodies the men photographed for their magazines.

Men liked women scared, the more imperfect they were made to feel, the more they tried to please and obey.

Men enjoyed sex and women pretended, I say.

It was all right for men to be fat, bold and wrinkled, laughs Lisa.

Leon sings along with Neil Young: Old man this is your life, I am a lot like you were. This verse became his favourite but I wonder how much Leon really is like his old man. Maybe he would have liked to be like Tom but the times they are a changing for both of them. Men like Tom are on their way out.

In the sixties teenagers began boasting about going all the way, girls went on the pill, women went to work. Orgasm became a household word. It was a challenge for a man to bring a woman to an orgasm and men hated to fail in their virility. Women learned to fake orgasms to keep their men happy. Men even began to marry women who were eager to have sex and were readily orgasmic. Finally women became ashamed of saying no to sex. They rushed home from work to prepare meals, bath the children and clean the house. They brought up their children without disturbing Daddy.

Specially migrant women and migrant Daddies, I say.

I got married just when other women got liberated, laughs Melanie. I gave up equality and a secure job to be a wife and mother.

Men went for drinks after work to give the little woman at home time to do things and kids were made ready to be kissed good night by Daddy.

My husband made his girlfriend pregnant while I looked after our children, says Melanie.

To make Tom feel more of a man I changed in so many ways that in the end neither of us knew who I was. I thought he wanted something easy to love, something flexible, pliable, something that registered no pain. I began to automatically side with him against myself and against our children so he wouldn't withhold his love and approval. I kept guessing what I may be doing wrong or where I failed or why he stopped being agreeable. I moved into the back ground and became minutely small and almost invisible so he wouldn't notice my many faults. Only he never failed to notice that something was missing in the food I prepared, in my appearance or in my opinions. Tom never praised without adding

criticism. The meat is tender and the sauce is tasty but you should have added some rosemary, or mint or basil or tomato. Something is definitely missing. I am sorry, will I add it now, I cringed like a wet dog. No, it's too late now, but you will remember it next time.

Tom's favourite question begins with: Who could be so stupid? Usually there is no-one around but myself.

Why don't you tell him that he is the only stupid one.

No wonder Tom doesn't like Melanie's influence. If Melanie knew what is right she would be happy and would have her family around her. I shouldn't listen to Melanie, I decide.

Tom and I hold hands all the time and people admire our affectionate behaviour. I look for Tom's approval. I lean my head on his shoulder, I watch his face for signs of annoyance. Something in his body tells me when I am wrong.

When I drive Tom keeps telling me to go a bit faster, a bit slower, more to the left, more to the right, leave longer distance, get closer to overtake. By the time I get through all his instructions there is no time to do what he wants me to do.

Why don't you tell him to shut up or walk.

He told me to pull over and he took over and he drove on in silence to punish me for disobedience.

You are so faithful and loyal to Tom that you became unfaithful and disloyal to yourself, says Melanie.

I like to please, I absolve Tom of any guilt.

People will walk all over you, if you let them.

I can't tell Melanie that like a snail I lick myself into the invisible walls of my shell where Ben is telling me: Please, don't ever change, because I love you just as you are. Ben and I are what we like to be and we both love what we are. Is Ben only the dream I escape into. I wonder what dreams Tom plays with. He must sometimes think of what it would be like if only.

Is it a gypsy in me that wants to roam free? Is it the call of the wild.

Many women left their husbands in the seventies, they claimed that they'd rather be out than in a bad relationship, says Melanie.

I never seriously considered leaving Tom or living on my own.

I used to sing 'Like the Bridge over troubled waters' along with Simon and Garfunkel, says Melanie.

You changed my life when you made me believe that I can paint.

I had no idea if you can paint.

You persuaded me to have a go.

What you yourself can do, will liberate you, not men or sex, says Melanie. Relationships come and go but you have to remain true to yourself because in the end it is yourself who you meet in the mirror.

I am so glad you are my friend.

Maybe even Tom changed. He never told me that he likes my paintings but I hear him boast to his friends.

He feels even more powerful having a successful wife, laughs Melanie.

Men became more sensitive, I say.

They pretend to be new age sensitive guys but all the time they worry about their performance. They don't forget to ask you how they rated. They expect you to be grateful and perform all sorts of thrills for them in return.

It is confusing for them.

My daughter Ann Marie found a sensitive guy, says Melanie. I watched the fine young couple walking on the lawns beside Lake Burley Griffin in Canberra. The marriage celebrant looked like a flower herself in beautiful pink suit. John, my sensitive son in law wore the lightest blue suit and he was like the clear sky beside my white bride daughter.

Now Ann Marie left John. He has a massage parlour and she found him with the new girl, he hired. The bastard laughed and said that he was only testing the merchandise. She doesn't believe in the sensitive guys anymore.

They said, You have a blue guitar,
You do not play the things as they are.'
The man replied, Things as they are
Are changed upon a blue guitar.
Sterne

The king and his birds

I took Ann Marie's children to help her settle in her job, says Melanie.

Melanie takes her grandchildren to the park most afternoons. They visit the trees.

Nan, make the trees talk, begs six years old Dan.

Nan can make the trees and the birds talk, explains three years old Mish.

Uncle tree first, says Dan.

Poppy tree, says Mish.

Mum tree is sad if we don't come to her first, decides Melanie as Dan and Mish pull her in opposite directions. It is dark under the big old mum tree. Even the sun can't get his dazzling rays through the thick branches to warm the ground.

Mum tree wraps its branch arms around us to let us know how happy she is, says Melanie. She tells a story of long ago when the old tree was a baby tree and naughty children broke its young branches while climbing on it.

Sometimes sad little children cried under my wide branches, says mummy tree.

Tell us about the birds again, says Dan. Melanie made up a story one day as they sat under the tree. Mish and Dan want her to tell it again and again.

Melanie tells a story in a monotonous tree voice.

Once upon the time there was a king who loved birds.

I want my birds to sing for me in my garden, said the king.

The king ordered his cats to catch the birds so he would teach them his favourite songs. The birds scattered to the highest branches when they saw cats coming towards them. Birds were always afraid of cats because cats liked to eat their babies. When the cats pawed their way to the thin branches of the trees the birds flew away.

Some birds escaped into another kingdom where they could fly free and sing any songs they liked. They were sad to leave their brothers and sisters behind.

The king ordered his servants to build a huge fence around his kingdom.

The birds kept on flying high until exhausted they fell to the ground where the cats caught them.

A few colourful small birds pretended to be butterflies and flew with other butterflies from flower to flower.

Some dark little birds pretended to be bats and they hung on trees over the day like bats do. While the cats were asleep they found food and dewdrops to drink. But they were most unhappy because they could not fly.

A few strong, cunning birds offered their services to the king. They sat graciously near the king's feet in his garden and promised to catch all the small birds hiding in his kingdom. They were old bird nest robbers, waiting all the time for the opportunity to kill little birds.

The king's servants brought out huge dishes of food and clear water for the birds so they would sing a happy song for their king.

The birds ate and drank, they chirped their short bird greetings for each other. Often they closed their eyes pretending to be asleep. The cats were still there and the dogs but they didn't disturb the birds.

The nesting time came and the birds looked for a safe place for their chicks.

It's best to build a nest right here in front of the king. The king loves the birds and he will protect us, they taught.

In spring new flowers grew and the trees were so green that the birds forgot about the big fence around them. They were too busy choosing partners, weaving the nests and laying the eggs. The king's servants brought out shiny silk and soft wool from which the birds could build their nests.

All the birds had the same nests and they learned to sing the same song and they drank from the same trough.

When the babies hatched, mother birds and even some father birds wanted to find insects and worms for the babies. The bird parents told their babies about all the dangers of the bush like bird parents always told their babies.

The king ordered that the food be brought out for all the bird babies and nobody was allowed to harm them.

The little birds grew fat because they never had to fly among enemies to find their dinner. They laughed at their mothers and fathers who told them about the good old days when they could fly south for winter and back again in summer.

The young birds laughed when the old birds told them about the bravery and cunning that helped them survive.

The king told the baby birds that the enemies outside his kingdom would torture and kill them.

The young birds learned to be grateful to the king for his protection against the dreaded enemy. They sang beautifully for their king. Outside the net were big flocks of birds calling out for them.

The king ordered his servants to shoot the birds chirping around the fence of his kingdom. The cats patrolled the fence day and night. The king told his cats to kill the disobedient birds who listened to the birds outside the fence. Gradually all the birds learned to keep away from the fence and sit close to their king.

The older birds warned the young ones against the cats and the dogs. They became afraid and their singing became sad.

The servants fell asleep on their towers, cats became so fat they could barely move and the dogs were napping in the shade. Everything was so quiet that the king became bored. He wanted to hear the chirping and meowing and barking again.

The king told the birds that they will not be fed if they didn't sing happy songs. He invited home all the birds that escaped from his kingdom. He wanted to show them how happy and peaceful the birds were at home. He told them that his birds were free to go as they pleased but they chose to stay at his feet.

The birds that escaped were of many different colours. They moved far away through many kingdoms. At home they were flying with their own kind but in foreign countries they were afraid of the foreign birds. The kingdom birds stayed close together and chirped sad songs about their old home.

Gradually they realised that the strange foreign birds wanted to be friends and fly with them. The little red birds flew with other little red birds first and it was all right. Then the big black birds from the kingdom joined the strange big black birds and they were happy.

They began to sing happy songs about the new friends and the new kingdom.

When they received the king's invitation to come home they didn't believe his sweet words. One by one the brave ones flew to have a look. They chirped about the foreign kingdoms where they were allowed to live like birds used to live at home before the king built a fence.

The visiting birds sang about the colourful nests they built and the birds at home first laughed at their silly songs. Some unruly birds longed to choose the materials for their nests. They were afraid to let anyone know about their longing but the wish for freedom spread quickly.

The bold servant birds were the first to protest. They came to the king one day and they almost picked his eyes out. All the little birds joined in and screeched angrily at the king.

The king opened the door of his kingdom and escaped. The cats and the dogs soon discovered that they have lost their jobs since the king left the kingdom. They blamed the birds. Dogs barked and cats meowed loudly in protest.

The birds were frightened of the cats. The cats were scared of the dogs. The birds swarmed on the feeding dish and the water trough but there was no food and no water. They blamed and accused each other for offending their king.

Soon they discovered that it was useless blaming each other because their king wasn't coming back.

Some birds chirped sad songs about the king, some even flew after him. Some died of hunger because there was no food in the dish.

The older birds told their chicks that they will have to scratch for their dinner like birds did in the good old days. They will also have to find the yarns for their nests.

The spring came and there was no time to be sad. They had work to do. They built their nests and laid their eggs in the tops of the trees. When babies were born they had to be fed, so bird parents looked for food from morning till night.

And the birds picked a new king, concludes Dan.

Melanie's story was obviously too long.

And the king loved his birds, helps Mish.

The birds loved the new king, says Dan.

And they lived happily ever after, smiles Melanie.

Drink to me only with thine eyes
and I will pledge with mine,
or leave a kiss but in a cup
and I'll not look for wine
Jordan.

MARTY

Tom met Marty soon after we came to the Ridge. Most miners stayed on the field in Glengarry, some slept on their trucks or trailers, in tents or caravans. When they returned to mine at the Ridge, Marty became a frequent visitor. Some consider Marty our best friend.

Marty is a tall handsome Italian and his big slapping paw like hands keep patting everyone on the back. His movements are large yet elegant. His piercing blue eyes and his sensuous mouth are smiling. His whole body exudes health and well-being. He loves people and finds excuses for any of their behaviours. Marty flirts with everybody. He never shows anger or envy or greed. He likes to dress well and his fingernails are never dirty.

No use getting upset. You have to accept things as they are, he says.

Marty is the light of the party, if there is no party he makes one, he lights up the place, says Melanie. As the only single people in our circle of friends Melanie and Marty present another couple.

He walks like a dancer, teases Lisa.

Marty charms everybody, smiles Melanie.

Typical Italian Romeo, warns Lisa. Women think that he fancies them.

They fancy him, says Melanie.

He is equally attentive to a child, a grandfather or a beautiful woman. The shy, nervous, and rejected naturally gravitate towards Marty. He provides an instant sense of well being, I say.

He never forgets a name or a face.

He makes sure that nobody is neglected.

Marty never tells anyone what he wants, I wonder if he knows, I say.

It is annoying not to know what pleases him, observes Lisa.

There is an ordinariness about him. Nothing surprises him.

He would be enormously desirable if he wasn't so available, says Ema.

It is hard to imagine Marty sick or old or sad or in need of comforting.

While we discuss Marty men discuss politics.

Witch hunting media wants to discredit all leaders, says Tom reading the Sunday paper.

In 1997 child abuse is the main topic and the leaders of the world are under scrutiny. Much of sexual deviance is uncovered and people sue for compensation.

The media is searching for dirt to thrill their readers. People enjoy smut, says Jack.

They discredited the Church of England, now they are trying to destroy Catholic clergy.

Teachers and priests and police are the main targets, says Jack.

There have always been misfits with weird sexual habits but people ignored them. Now they became the big news, says Tom.

They should be looking for real criminals, says Peter.

I think that SOMEONE somewhere has a plan to destroy our values, says Tom.

They want to make Australia an Asian continent. When that happens they will realise what we had. Migrants came to Australia because it had British system, They don't want to join Asia, says Jack.

Rubbish, says Marty. Migrants came because they had nowhere else to go and Australia needed them.

Marty resents British superiority, their monarchy and pomp.

The English speaking countries have a much better standard of living, says Jack.

British stuffed all the nations they invaded. They made India and Philippine slave nations, they killed most of the American and Australian natives. They want to lord over the world.

People like you are trouble, says Jack calmly with the air of superiority. There is an open animosity between Marty and Jack.

There is too much of a racial mix in Australia already, one day it will blow in our faces. The government is making us ashamed of being white, says Tom.

Now it is a crime to be rich. If you work you are likely to get rich, says Jack.

Everybody wants to be equal but they don't want to work or save or go without. There is no authority, people do what they feel like, says Tom.

Politicians want to distract voters with the republicanism, says Jack.

I've done well under the monarchy, says Tom.

Tom would have done well anywhere because he is determined to rise above others.

I'd rather be under British monarchy than under Asians, says Peter.

You don't believe that Australians can govern themselves, says Marty.

We are, says Ema. But it's better to keep friends with your own kind.

British is not your kind, reminds Marty. Ema and Marty come from Northern Italy.

Asians will take over Australia without your help, says Jack with hostility in his voice.

Asians complain against prejudice but they are the most prejudiced people, says Lisa.

They kill our kids with drugs, says Peter.

Bastards come here to claim social security and then they want to bring their family because they are lonely. If they worked like we had to they wouldn't have time to feel lonely, says Tom.

They came for the same reason you did, says Marty.

You vote for your labour mates anyway, says Jack.

Marty is chastised. I wonder if Marty is planning a revenge like most chastised people do.

He comes in to get a drink.

Whatever you are having.

I never know which you prefer, says Melanie, eager to please.

You have to make decisions for yourself, I encourage.

It's all the same to me, says Marty.

Call me anytime you need me, Marty reminds Tom constantly. Why does he like Tom so much? Then again, he probably says that to everybody.

It annoys me that everything is equal and the same to him, people, things, and events. He is not particular about anything, says Melanie as Marty leaves.

Everybody is particular about something, insists Lisa.

Tom is particular about the cups on the shelf. He comes into the kitchen with a worried look and starts to turn the handles so they face in the same direction.

He has to keep you and your kitchen under control, smiles Melanie.

Peter has a thing about toilet paper running from behind and sometimes I forget and sometimes I deliberately make it run from the front just to spite him. We've had some terrific fights originating with the toilet paper. Of course we included all our other grievances into it, says Lisa.

It's amazing how much unhappiness you can recall because the toilet paper runs the wrong way, I say.

Jack likes his parsley chopped into almost invisible thin bits, says Ema.

Marty is so unassuming and available, says Lisa.

Jack feels left out when Marty and I speak Italian so he calls us both Italian Mafia. I call Jack a racist when he does that, says Ema.

He might be jealous.

There is nothing to be jealous about, says Ema.

Men don't like to admit that they are jealous, says Melanie.

Marty never takes offence but I feel embarrassed when Tom tries harder and harder to make Marty feel insignificant, I say.

Marty has an upper hand with his niceness, says Ema.

He seems so genuine, says Melanie.

Seems sums it up, says Ema. Nobody is that genuine or generous, honestly.

Stephanie told him that he is good in bed. That's why he tries to get every woman in bed, laughs Lisa.

Does he? There is a tiny tremor of disappointment in Melanie's voice.

Don't get any ideas, advises Lisa but, of course, her warnings are much too late.

He just shows off, Lisa keeps repairing the damage.

I have never seen Marty cranky, nasty, sad, or angry, says Ema.

He is a challenge, decides Melanie.

Are you speaking professionally? laughs Lisa.

Be careful that you don't become his challenge, warns Ema.

I have a feeling that he knows everything about everybody but nobody knows anything about him, warns Lisa.

Marty plays a role to fit an audience. Maybe he never plays himself, adds Ema..

I don't trust him, says Lisa. Men don't trust him.

He meows like a pussy but he never shows his claws. He could be a snake in the rose bush.

He is nobody in particular, I try to join in the general analysis.

He spreads his nets like a spider and people get caught, says Ema.

He loves himself, says Lisa.

Maybe he likes being loveable, says Mel.

And a centre of attention, I say.

That is good unless you, yourself, want to be a centre of attention, says Lisa.

I think he makes a pass at every woman he comes close to, says Ema.

At every person he meets.

It's his Mediterranean culture, smiles Melanie. Whistling at girls, groping and bottom pinching is supposed to be a compliment where you two come from.

Men don't do this sort of thing even in Italy these days, says Ema.

I am surprised that Marty doesn't make a pass at you, Lisa turns to me.

You are married. He respects that, says Melanie.

Tom and I never caused a scandal, we were never in court and we never slept with anyone else. We are a proof that happy family is possible even in Lightning Ridge. People congratulate us for being happy. Are we what Marty wants his family to be?

My friends don't realise that Marty flirts with me like he flirts with everybody else. Maybe he wants to seduce me to get back at Tom for making fun of him.

On rare occasions I detect pain written in Marty's eyes but he smiles quickly to cover it up.

Why don't you ever go home to Italy to see your people, I say when silence is awkward.

Marty shrugs and smiles but I notice anger in his eyes. What happened before we came to the Ridge is rubbed out. Rubbing out sometimes makes a hole in the heart.

Is your family still there, I keep on thoughtlessly.

My mother died when I was six and my father died soon after. There are half brothers and my step mother.

Do you keep in touch, I keep talking because there is sad closeness between Marty and me.

My stepmother had two children by the time I was ten and I had to look after them. When I was fourteen my father died in a logging accident. She wouldn't let my father be buried next to my mother, Marty says quietly.

She was holding hands with my stepbrothers by the grave side but I went to my mother's grave on the other end of the cemetery. Nobody noticed that I was gone, says Marty.

I want to hold Marty's hand and press his head on my chest to take his pain away.

When we came home she shouted at me. I cried and she pushed me into the chair. She wanted to talk to me but I hit her in the face, Marty tells me.

I ran out of the house and I've never been home since, says Marty. She remarried after six months. She couldn't wait. She had two more children.

I wipe the table and put away cups because I have to do something to stop myself from comforting the little boy before me.

I did everything for my step mother and she hated me. I tried to be perfect and the harder I tried the more she hated me.

I can hear a little boy call mummy.

You must've hated her for being so cruel.

I remember praying every night that she would die.

I shiver. Am I the mother he lost? Maybe I am a kind of wife he wants his wife to be? Does he want to punish me for not being his mother? Does he pray for Tom to die.

I'll tell you something if you promise not to laugh, smiles Marty sheepishly. While mining underground I once saw my mother standing in the trench in front of me. She had her hands up and told me to stop. I wanted to go to the ladder in the shaft when the roof collapsed. I saw my mother so clearly that I didn't even take notice of a collapse. I would be dead if I made that one step but my mother stopped me.

What did she look like?

That's a funny thing. I know that she was big, strong, powerful and gentle. I felt all that so visibly, obviously. I will never forget her vision yet I can not describe her in any other way. We usually identify people by what they wear but I don't know what she wore. She made a step

towards me with her arms outstretched. I remember her tremendous power. I couldn't move.

How do you know that it was your mother?

Every child knows his mother.

Have you seen pictures of your mother?

I have her picture in my mind. I remember her holding me.

Maybe the picture of his mother got mixed up with the picture of his step mother cuddling his stepbrothers.

I was glad when my step mother smacked me, says Marty. I was glad that she included me in the family. She was in charge of everything in our home.

Was Marty's step-mother like his wife Stephanie? He could never win her love and devotion and he hated her for that. The only times she took notice of him was when she scolded him but that was better than nothing.

Stephanie told Marty that he is an idiot, that he can not find opal, and that she does not need him. She usually gave him a severe scolding before they made love.

He is a glutton for punishment, says Lisa when men ridicule Marty.

Does Marty want people to punish him? Does he need to be punished for hitting his stepmother or for not finding opal? Does he need to hurt and be forgiven? Maybe he plans the revenge.

I shouldn't worry about Marty? He is nobody in particular.

Marty tells Tom about women who are eager to sleep with him. He doesn't seem to have a preference for a particular woman so every woman can imagine that she is just what he is waiting for.

We all want to know what makes Marty tick, says Ema. I wish he would act like a man, stand up for himself and speak his mind. It frightens me, how he needs to please.

You are nice to everybody, I try to analyse Marty when we are alone.

I like to be nice, he squeezes through my net.

What was your father like?

I barely knew him, he was a prisoner of war in England. My mother died while he was away. He returned after mum died and then he remarried. He was busy with his new family.

Does Marty hate British because they took his father away when his mum was dying?

I am only staying around to keep an eye on my children, explains Marty.

You would starve waiting for your father to find opal. What did your father ever do for you, Stephanie asked her children in front of everybody when they were still shy and young.

Marty's children love their father in a way a child loves a stray dog.

Stephanie is a terrific worker, says Marty.

Everybody knows that Stephanie's lovers are Lightning Ridge ratters who bring the stolen opal for her to sell, says Melanie.

Nobody can prove it, I say.
Is Stephanie the selfless mother Marty craves for?

Does Marty pretend that he is a little boy looking for his mother because he knows that all women are eager to mother little boys.

Maybe Marty wants to destroy Tom, his best friend, the man he could never be?

Tom does not trust Marty, his subservient obliging helpfulness attracts him but he never trusted him.

Men don't trust Marty because women find him attractive, says Melanie.

Tom constantly belittles Marty but Marty smiles and finds excuses for Tom's attacks, I say.

I would never go back to Stephanie if she was the last woman on Earth, he says.

You bought a house next to her? I tease. Marty recently moved back to town and of all the houses for sale he chose the one next to his ex wife.

Melanie became disenchanted by Marty after their trip to Sydney.

He is a charming thrill seeker and compulsive liar, says Melanie. He has no real feelings for anyone.

Maybe he never learned to love, I try to defend Marty.

His charm is just a gloss covering the dirt. No use looking for something more. The light has gone out of Melanie's eyes.

He must be an unhappy man inside, I try to minimise the guilt.

Some cupboards are better left closed forever, smiles Melanie.

I think he is rather shy.

Shy! He almost raped me in the first five minutes and then he asked if I liked it. He made me feel like a lump of meat. All his love comes from between his legs. I should have known better.

Melanie is an attractive, strong woman. Maybe she made Marty feel like a little boy.

Marty is a rolly polly in the wind, says Lisa.

He is like a shiny white surf, pulling away into the ocean, yet he always stay on the shore, restless and exciting.

How can anyone handle a man like that? asks Melanie grasping for some lure that would keep Marty interested.

Once we were talking about fishing, I tell Melanie.

What are you thinking as you walk along the river all day, I asked Marty.

I am thinking where I would hide if I was a fish, says Marty.

I don't believe you.

I like to catch fish, kiss it and throw it back, he explains.

I can't understand that. You hurt the fish then you kiss it and throw it away?

I don't like to eat fish, I never take it home, said Marty.

Why?

The fish only smells good to me the moment I pull it out of water. I hate cleaning it. I like to see it swim away so I drop it back in the water.

How could anyone not play with fantasies while they perform mindless tasks like fishing, says Melanie.

Marty told me how they all went with dad fishing at weekends and his step mother complained because they wasted time. But dad took them to the river and they came home excited and smelling of fish. Their hands were chaffed and their faces had reddish glow. They remembered the sounds and the smells and the accidents and the fish that got away. Marty noticed that dad packed a flask of rum for his tea.

Marty's dad shared a cup of tea with another fisherman and they talked about the fish that teased them. It was a big fish resting in the deep under the branches of the willows.

What do I need a man for, Melanie tries to reason when we are alone.

Marty asked me to his place and I declined. I tried to provoke some emotion in him but he assured me that he is not in the least unhappy. Makes no difference what you decide to do, he said. That finished it off for me, says Melanie.

You wanted him to be unhappy, I say.

I wanted him to show some emotion, says Melanie.

I thought you two were in love, I say.

He doesn't know what being in love is.

Maybe he is scared of being in love. It took him a lifetime to become what he is.

I haven't got a lifetime to change him, says Mel.

I feel sorry for him, I confess.

You change him, laughs Mel.

Sometimes for brief moments Marty's eyes say: I want to make love. I look into his eyes defiantly. The bolts of electricity offer a pleasant sensation. We are just playing, I assure myself. The harmless flirtation makes it easier not to think of Ben and to abstain from cigarettes, I try to justify and neutralise our playfulness. We both know that we mean nothing to each other and without meaning something we are not going to do anything. We are responsible people.

I feel the aura of his body touching me.

Why should I avoid his eyes piercing into me, I tell myself.

You will just melt into my arms one day, he teases.

When the hell freezes, I laugh.

I can wait, he says like we had twenty lifetimes.

Never, I say looking into his eyes. I don't want this narcissistic playboy to think that I am afraid of him or that I would not be able to resist him when I wanted to. I am not scared to look into his eyes. Two can play this game. I am old enough to know what I am doing.

For the first time I fantasise about having sex. Love has no part of it, I rationalise. I wander what it would be like to become part of Marty in a fiery, festive mating. I imagine myself as a small wave swallowed into a surf and tossed up into the sun on the top of the ocean. I let myself down gently, the waters calm, the warm sun caressing the skin. No damage done. Neither of us would want to deal with the consequences. Tom would make the consequences messy. He would push us into the gutter. Neither of us is strong enough to survive Tom's chastising.

We could move away, a tiny voice is saying but it dies away unbelievably. We are both committed to our families. Marty can't go away, opal mining is the only thing Marty wants to do. Marty knows that I am sensible but being a playboy is all he knows how to be. I never, even in my wildest dreams, imagine us living together. How could I abandon a solid marriage for an unmatchable substance.

I am safe, Tom is never far away and I have a reason to stop at any time. But I like the attention and the excitement. I rarely think of Ben now.

I will not push you, I will wait until you will come to me, says Marty with a promiscuous smile dancing on his lips. He once mockingly kissed my hand and we both knew the intensity of desire.

I will never let you down, he promises.

Or hold me up, I laugh to make the words sound frivolous.

I'll be there, he says.

I am a faithful wife.

I know.

This is just a game.

We'll see.

You have nothing to lose.

Nobody will ever find out.

Find out what?

About us.

There is no us.

But there will be.

Marty doesn't know that I need to be loved enormously before I would even consider having something to hide. For him sexual release may be enough, maybe a conquest gives him some extra joy.

I will make you happy.

How?

When we have a few hours alone I will show you.

Do you really believe that I would plan on being happy for a few hours sometimes somewhere hidden from everyone. I have to share my happiness.

We can avoid the scandal.

I will never have a scandal. This is all hypothetical.

We sigh and stare into each other's eyes pretending that we want each other. The element of danger makes the wanting deliciously daring. When alone we talk sensibly about work and Tom and Melanie, about Stephanie and Marty's kids and mine. We don't want anything from each other really. We are both old enough to realise that.

We are not doing anyone any favours by abstaining.

From what? I want him to name his expectations but his lips just curl into a kiss.

I would do anything you want me to do, he promises.

I don't want you to do anything.

Family is all I have, family is what most people want, most Lightning Ridge people would like to have a family like mine. I am what I am in my family, I keep reminding myself.

The god of our childhood follows both Marty and I. We enjoy the virtue of being there for our families. Maybe Marty and I sit on our own basket of eggs because there are no more eggs to have. Would god and people reject us?

I know we are not very grown up inside and we are desperately aware of the fact that our time is running out and that we didn't get out of life what we longed for. So we keep on searching. It's now or never. Time is an everlasting preparation.

An hour or two or three with Marty would pass and there would be no future to look forward to. Only memory, maybe a bitter memory, maybe guilt and fear and sadness and death. Maybe Marty would feel more rejected, he has been rejected many times before, he thrives on rejection.

Just as well we are only pretending. I realise that I am not as nice or as good as I would like people to believe. Maybe nobody is.

Did Ben and I love each other? If the road to the future would be open for us again, would Ben take it? Would I? Maybe we just loved the snowflakes, the unique, precious stars from heaven that we kissed from our eighteen years old lips. We never saw the snowflakes melt into the mud but we are old enough to know what eventually happens to snowflakes in real life when the sun kisses them in spring.

Tom and I saw it all and our tears washed away much pain and dirt. We thread through snow and mud and wild flowers. We are always there for each other in the end.

Our time will come, says Marty.

Maybe Marty wants to show Stephanie, that he can have any woman he wants. Maybe he just wants to have sex. Why does he have to choose another man's wife if he only wants sex. Is the danger and the challenge making sex more attractive? I could never relax enough to have just sex. Maybe Marty needs love but is afraid to say so. Maybe he wants to punish the woman he has sex with.

We are just having a bit of harmless fun, I rationalise. I would never have done more than that, more than is good or safe.

Would Marty like to show his friends that I love him, that he can have me, that I want him or agree to sleep with him. Would he grow a little taller to see another man betrayed, would he be more manly in the eyes of other men or would he look better in the mirror. Would he leave me like he left Melanie?

He didn't leave me, says Melanie. We never had each other. He would still be willing to sleep with me occasionally but that is just not enough for me.

That is not enough for me either. He will probably punish me in some way to feel vindicated for being rejected. He is investing more and more energy in making me want him and all the time I am more afraid of wanting him.

Is he seeking sanctuary in Tom's cage. Is he clinging on the stability of my marriage.

All Marty has to offer is a healthy appetite for sex, says Melanie.

Poor deprived boy, mocks Lisa.

Depraved more likely, says Ema.

He could get married if he wanted to satisfy his appetite with regular meals, says Lisa.

Once we stood close in the mine, says Ema. He touched my cheek with two fingers going down from my eyes to my neck. I stared into his face as cold as a cucumber and he just stepped aside apologetically frightened.

I imagine Marty looking into my eyes before I fall asleep and the light fills the hollowness of my reality. The danger and the intensity is like a current giving light to the chandelier. I feel the energy pulsating through my body, my senses are sharp, in some remote undiscovered reality Marty and I play like two kittens pulling at the ball of wool. We are a cat and mouse changing the roles. Maybe we missed out on being playful somewhere in time when others played.

No female is safe from Marty, laughs Ema.

People know nothing of the game I play with Marty. They know that I have my sexual life in my warm safe bed and don't need to search for it. I am not in the race.

Maybe both Marty and I want to punish Tom.

Tom would rather die than to be proven wrong so I always admit that I am wrong and I ask forgiveness and promise to behave better. I am as essential to Tom as a question mark is to a question.

Marty makes me feel smart, strong, and loveable. He provides exciting thoughts to play with. Marty is a plaything Lena needs.

Is Eve and the forbidden fruit reborn in every generation?

I remember two five year old boys fighting for the ball, I tell Melanie. They screamed and punched and scratched until one boy kicked the ball onto the road. The other boy rolled into a ball and cried on the ground. The boy looked at the ball on the road and then he looked at his friend crying on the ground. The car flattened the ball and it rolled into the gutter to be swept away by the garbage-man the next day. The boy helped his friend up and they played in the sand. Soon they began to throw sand at each other because one destroyed the other boy's castle. They cried to their mothers and the mothers argued while the boys returned to their sand-pit.

Men are little boys fighting for other men's toys, says Melanie.

People fight for balls on the field but balls on the shelf are dead. Things come alive only when there are two people wanting them badly enough to fight for them. Nobody fights for a pack of cards in the drawer.

When a boy picks a stick another boy wants the same stick and no other stick would do. There are lots of better sticks around.

I silently wonder if I will be just a forgotten ball when Tom and Marty stop wanting me? Would they still need each other when I will be pushed into the gutter?

Is life just toys and sand-castles?

We tell children to share and take turns but we only cheer when our children come first and win. Our children win for us. We are not really interested in sharing. We don't take turns, we want now what others have now.

Would Marty still love me if Tom rejected me? Of course I know that he does not love me, but he loves the way he feels and so do I.

Maybe Marty tries to make up for not being loved by people that were supposed to love him.

No matter how much someone loves you, you have no love unless you love yourself, says Melanie.

To love and be loved is the greatest happiness, I remember Ben's words. I am a love-alcoholic like Marty. And Ben. We make love into something real although we know that there is no such thing.

I wanted to see what Marty thought and dreamt. I soon realised that you never see that. I made the same mistake with Michael. You get to know bits of people when it suits them, says Melanie..

I will never make a mistake Melanie made, I silently promise myself. She gave a part of her heart to Marty and he did not offer anything in return. I am too scared to give my heart to anyone.

Nobody is as perfect as Marty pretends to be, I say.

I suppose I felt sorry for him, says Melanie. Maybe I wanted to show my appreciation because he is nice.

Marty and I sit at the safe distance, and our eyes say: I want you to love me. What's wrong with that? The intoxication of looking into his eyes is harmless. I don't love him. There is no danger that either Marty or I would ever fall in love or that we would ever sleep together. If I was ever to sleep with someone other than Tom, I wanted to love that man. I think before I jump. I am old enough to know better.

Marty makes it possible for me not to think about Ben. I wonder if I serve any useful purpose to Marty. He once planted a kiss on my hair in passing and I tried to push him away but he held my hand and for a second we looked at each other. Tom came and Marty let go. I was grateful to Tom.

I'll be here waiting, says Marty. One day you will come into my arms.

In your dreams, I smile.

I am waiting.

Never.

It will happen naturally, I will never push you.

Never, I laugh.

Nobody loves you like I do.

It's just a game we are playing. Don't forget that.

You will come to me because you will want to.

Not in a million years.

You'll come and sit in my lap, he says indicating his lap and we both know about his erection and I am offended and excited by it.

Tom must sense our delightful playfulness. Tom tells me how hopeless I am, how silly and disorganised while Marty whispers sweet nothings to me to stop me from crying.

Marty breaks your resistance by his persistent cheerfulness, says Melanie.

I wish I could tell her that he will never brake my resistance, I know what I am doing.

He is a buffoon, says Tom.

A town's clown, agrees Jack.

He spends all his time chatting people up, says Peter.

Sometimes Marty and I sigh and touch our own chests simultaneously like there was a heart somewhere in it all but he also touches his groin and we both know that there is lust we enjoy.

You should get married again, I advise Marty like a good mother would.

I would still love you.

He enjoys teasing me.

You get burned if you play with fire-sticks, I warn.

I wonder if he goes to Stephanie or if he has some other woman somewhere. It is none of my business and I feel no jealousy. I have Tom and our life is more agreeable every day. I am less afraid of him now. We picked the pieces of our lives. We cried many tears and made many promises and we decided that the remaining years should be carefree and loving. We have grandchildren and children to rejoice in, we have our health and wealth and friends. We remind ourselves of our blessings and we are never going to jeopardise them.

Marty weaves his web, he catches his prey and swallows what he likes and spews out what he can't digest and then he waits some more, says Melanie.

Someone should teach him a lesson, I say.

There is a little voice saying that Marty is looking for love but the voice is too little, I am fooling myself, there is no such voice. I am happy knowing that I can never love Marty. Is there a remote possibility of him falling in love and being faithful. I am not even remotely interested, of course, but I wonder sometimes.

Tom and I often laugh at Marty and behind Marty's back but if anyone else says anything against Marty Tom defends him. I wonder what each gets out of their friendship.

Marty is like an extra wife to Tom. He jumps as high as Tom wants him to, and Tom likes that. We are a couple of three people.

Does Marty want to destroy my family like other men destroyed his? He says that the family is the only thing worth looking after. It is vital that

mummy and daddy are there for their children and grandchildren, he says. He is there for his children. He refuses to leave town until his children are safely married.

Marty enjoys the cat and mouse game, says Ema.

Cats feed from the tin, they catch mice to play with, warns Melanie.

Every game has a winner and the loser, warns Ema. Did she catch the look between Marty and myself.

Everybody flirts to some extent, I try to minimise the game.

Not you, says Mel.

Of course not me, I am not a woman, I am a wife who wouldn't know another man if she fell over one.

I hope you never.

You know me better than that.

I've been waiting for years. I know that one day you won't be able to resist it, says Marty.

Resist what? I laugh at his false prophecy. I don't want to know the answer.

He looks into my eyes for an answer and he must have found it. Maybe I should be careful.

He looks like a giant puppy dog but he can become a savage hound if cornered, predicts Mel. He doesn't care.

Look at me, Marty says as we are alone for a moment.

I look at him. Does he think that I am afraid of looking at him. I look straight into his eyes.

Just look at me like that.

You like to play with fire.

We are not doing anything wrong. I would never force you to do anything you don't want to do. I heard all that before but then Marty does repeat his lines a lot.

I don't want to do anything with you.

I know.

Our bodies surrender to the overwhelming warmth in our eyes. Our lips are ready to meet, our hands are reaching out.

We are skating on thin ice.

We are not doing anything.

As long as we do not touch each other's skin, we are safe, I keep telling myself. Our game has nothing to do with love. But who knows what love is.

Has anyone ever experienced real love, I say.

Like heaven, love is just an idea, says Melanie.

Susan's warning echoes in my memory: If you as much as look at another man with lust, you are committing adultery.

Susan's warnings cause nightmares.

Marty and I want to remove the tree of knowledge, we want nothing to separate us from god. Eating the apple would take us into the darkness of everyday existence. We will not eat the forbidden fruit.

The look doesn't hurt anybody. Even Eve was allowed to look, god showed her the tree of knowledge and the forbidden apple. He said nothing about looking. I am a wise old woman and I can draw on the experiences of the generations. I grew up on the story of Eve banished from the paradise, destined to suffer and work and procreate until death would release her from the sinful body.

How many generations of Eves did god plan to punish for that stolen apple. Why does he let other creatures procreate without a desire to know why they are doing, what they do.

Susan said that God can punish into seventh generation. I am afraid for my future generations. God and I constantly bargain with each other.

Marty and I tremble for the luscious apple to fall in our laps, this promise of everlasting meaningful unity that would make us one with god.

Those who eat of the forbidden tree, die. Marty and I grew up in Catholic families and we know better than to tempt god. We are only playing.

Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinion, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation.

Wilde

LISA AND PETER

Peter went to see a bloke in the hotel about the claim. They are right next to the bloke who found a pocket. You never know. It's a virgin ground, says Lisa in 1975 when we first met.

Men like Lightning Ridge because most of the business is done in the hotel, I say.

They like it because they are free from work schedule and the boss and the society, the hierarchy, and relations.

You only need luck.

It's not their fault if they are not lucky.

In 1980 Lisa enrolls in the secretarial course with TAFE. Somewhere in the future she wants to have a new start.

I am sick of the camp. I want to live in town in a normal house like normal people, says Lisa.

In 1982 Lisa's daughters went to the boarding school in Sydney and Lisa moved into her new brick home in Lightning Ridge.

I had a delusion that we will be deliciously happy as soon as we moved into town, she says.

You have a beautiful home.

Living in the camp made me feel heroic and adventurous. Foodland saved me boxes of half spoiled fruit and vegetables for the chooks I never had. They gave me yesterday's bread for free. I was probably one of the very rare persons who looked for specials at second hand shops. I enjoyed saving, I was so clever at it.

Now your dreams came true.

Maybe dreams were meant to remain dreams. We are less happy than we were under that canvas. Its the full moon, I think. I don't sleep well.

You miss your daughters. Why did you send them to the boarding school?

Lisa begins to cry. Full moon does funny things.

They couldn't wait to get away.

They'll soon want to come back.

I wanted to show my father that he was wrong about Peter. He begged me not to marry Peter. I went away to get away from my father.

You loved your father.

I didn't even go to his funeral. My father never saw his grandchildren. He never saw my brick home either.

Lisa didn't even tell me that her father died.

Your father meant a lot to you.

I hated him, blurts Lisa.

I see.

Peter had a daughter to a girl back home before we started to go together. Once I accused Peter of thinking about his precious Sandy. The bastard got drunk and cried like a baby. So much of Peter died when he left his first family. I hate that dead part of him. Deep down I must have blamed Sandy and her daughter for living under the canvas. Maybe I was jealous of the child's mother. I even wanted to believe that Peter never remembered his daughter. What sort of a man did I hope he was?

Men are not as emotional as women, I try to reason.

When our oldest daughter was born, I suggested that we go home and show her to our families. I wanted to fix all that was wrong in my life, I suppose.

I am never going back, Peter said. There was something sinister in his other life.

I suggested that we tell our daughters about his other daughter before they will find out from someone else. I wanted to bring the pain of it out in the open. We were in bed at the time. He cursed and turned away. I waited for his breathing to become even and a bit wheezy before I got up to cry. I took a couple of Peter's cigarettes and smoked under the stars. That's how I became hooked on nicotine. I had no-one to talk to.

I know all about smoking.

He thinks that the new house will make me stay with him.

Peter loves you, I say.

I don't love myself. Lisa smiles with tears in her eyes.

When you start questioning life, you are likely to discover that it is not perfect. What looks like love is love.

He is a good man, reasons Lisa.

I know.

He wouldn't let me go to work so he can boast to his friends that he provides for us. I dance to his tune.

Somebody always plays the tune and somebody dances, I laugh. I wonder if playing a tune is better than dancing.

I was punishing my father. Now my father is dead, Lisa whispers.

I don't dare ask why her father needed to be punished.

I was in hospital for three months when I was ten. I still don't know why. I wasn't sick, other kids around me were sick but I wasn't. I asked mum why I was in hospital and she said that I wouldn't eat. I lost weight and the doctor recommended that I be hospitalised. I wish I knew why I stopped eating, says Lisa.

Could you find out now?

I was terrified of my father. I felt like a huge wart on his face. He never noticed me without making a negative remark about me. Maybe that's why I stopped eating. Maybe I was afraid to grow up. Maybe I wanted to die. I was relieved when Peter took me away. It was fine under the canvas.

Now you have a fine family and a beautiful home.

My father is dead.

What about mum?

She is busy looking after dad's grave.

Lisa came in 1988.

I don't know what I am looking for but I know that what I have sure isn't it.

Maybe this is the best there is.

At least I'll know I once had the best. I sure don't feel it.

Mum used to say that when you make a step closer to god, god makes a step backward, I say.

Alcohol has eaten out whatever there was between Peter's ears.

You don't like Peter any more.

Life isn't fair.

You chose to come here.

I was nineteen and pregnant. And stupid. He said that in life you have to go for what you really want. He wanted me.

He loved you.

I want to go home, says Lisa.

Why don't you?

I don't drive, remember.

Where is home?

We both come from a small town near Aulbury. My dad managed a property.

And Peter?

His dad did odd jobs which was a notch lower than managing a property. Peter and his dad did jobs for my dad.

You are ashamed of Peter.

Dad told me that I brought shame on the whole family. I'll never know if the shame came because Peter was poor or because he had a child before we met or because he couldn't read. In our parts during the sixties propriety was a big thing. I should have known better. My father disowned me, he closed the door in my face and told me never to bother coming home. I was an only child.

You must have loved Peter.

Peter brought me flowers and presents every day. It was rather exciting. When I became pregnant he took me to Lightning Ridge. I think he wanted me pregnant.

Why lightning Ridge?

In Lightning Ridge he did not have to pay maintenance for his daughter. It's cash industry and nobody knows how much you earn. He swore that nobody will make him pay the bitch who took everything he worked for. She kept a house and the child.

You lived in a camp.

If you could call it a camp. Peter built a stone wall as a wind break for a fire place and hooked a piece of canvas on a wall and tied it to a tree. We slept under that until our daughter was born. He built a second stone wall then to give an L shape shelter over which he put sheets of corrugated iron. I had a two hundred litres drum of water for a week. We washed at the bore bath like all the rest who live on the field.

But he found opal?

Of course he did. He took us for a holiday on the Gold Coast. Best motels and restaurants.

Why didn't he buy a house instead?

He said that he did not want Sandy to find out that he had money because she would sue for maintenance.

He must have been awfully good to you for you to stay with him.

He tells everybody how he adores us. He tells his mates that he really must go home because his missus is waiting with dinner. He boasts about my cooking and about being an excellent mother. He tells everybody how smart I am but I feel stupid.

We all know how highly he thinks of you.

He stays at the club a lot because it is cooler there and he has to find out about mining. You have to be with mates to hear what is going on. Everybody is listening for news about new rushes.

Maybe we should have joined the men in the pub.

I had my girls to take care of. We had no one, it is hard to make friends when you are dirt poor. Peter used to come home, eat, cuddle the girls and get me into bed. After sex he slept better.

Did you like it?

That was the only pleasant thing. I wanted to hold onto him for as long as I could. I needed him, I needed somebody. Dad told me: It won't take you long before you will come running home. I wasn't going to. I hated dad.

In 1990 we celebrate Lisa's fortieth birthday. Lisa and I reminiscence about the good old days that maybe weren't so good after all.

I remember the annoying little habits of my first boyfriend, tells Lisa. He carried a notebook in which he recorded every cent he spent.

He would make a prudent husband.

Who wants a prudent husband.

We all do. We only dream of extravagant people, I say.

If you love someone you are always scared of losing him, says Lisa.

You only lose something you possess not something you love.

Did you ever love anyone like that? asks Lisa.

Yes, I whisper.

It wasn't your husband, she ventures into the forbidden territory.

One never knows how one would feel if he became my husband, I evade the answer.

Attraction remains when you don't have to live together.

You forget why you didn't marry them in the first place, I say.

Not long ago I went home for the first time. My first boyfriend gave me a lift from the bus stop. He said that he still loves me. He would leave his wife and children for me but they have a mortgage in both names and registration and insurance and it is all too complicated. I remembered why I couldn't stand him in the first place, says Lisa.

The music reaches us mixed with scents of the garden and with the longing we feel. The tune trembles, stealing into our homes and hearts through the open window. Maybe god comes like that, unannounced. Maybe the song about love is love itself.

Peter didn't want an ordinary life. He wanted to do what he felt like. Now I want to do as I like, laughs Lisa.

Don't forget that you are 40.

And at the end of this episode I will most probably be dead. But so will the sensible people. Nobody will remember me because I was sensible.

I am afraid that Lisa will start crying because crying, like laughing, is easier after drinking.

Maybe I should count my blessings like you do, says Lisa looking over our manicured garden.

My aunt once said that I know which side my bread was buttered, I admit.

Tom can fix anything. He digs and prunes and oils and tightens.

Everybody turns to Tom for advise.

He is very generous with advise.

I think you get a partner you need.

Whether you want it or not, I joke.

Mum once told me a story about Jesus walking through the village. He saw a dirty woman singing under the shade of the tree. Next to the tree he found a farmer ploughing the field. Jesus told him to marry the woman. He needed someone to sing for him and she needed someone to work for her. And they lived happily ever after.

Nobody really checks on what happens ever after.

Lisa and her daughters hold onto each other during Peter's funeral in 1997. Nobody cries. Australians don't cry, I remind myself. It isn't civilised. Aborigines and migrants cry at funerals.

Most mining friends are here and drinking buddies and children's friends. There are relations and friends from home staying at Lisa's place.

I visit Lisa after her visitors left.

I wanted so much to cry at the funeral, she shivers as she smiles.

You haven't come to grips with it yet, I try to say the right thing. Isn't that what one does, say the right thing to the bereaved?

People have pity for the person who cries, whatever she cries for, smiles Lisa.

You will cry, when you are ready, I try to comfort her.

People should die while one could still mourn them without an effort, says Lisa.

Maybe we live too long.

We expect others to take us as we are, why can't we do the same for ourselves, says Lisa. I always worried what people will think and say. Specially my parents. Specially my father.

Most children are trying to impress their parents.

I have never done anything for Peter. I tried to make the marriage work. I wanted to be a success. My mother worshipped dad, she got all her pleasure in serving him, says Lisa.

Peter wouldn't want you any other way.

I never made it possible for Peter to tell me what was in his heart. I only let him tell me how he loved me, how happy he was, how good I was. He carried pain in his heart that he could never share with me. I was all he had.

Lisa looks through the window.

Some things can not be shared.

When people sign a marriage contract they agree to care for each other in sickness and in health. I didn't care for Peter in his sickness, says Lisa.

But Peter wasn't sick.

We were both sick of each other, we were dying together. He dulled the pain with alcohol and I dulled it with cigarettes, but we were both dying.

You cope any way you know how.

Sometimes two people become one and the separation is no longer possible. I spent over twenty five years with Peter, she whispers.

It takes time to feel whole again.

I feel that people don't recognise me, they are looking for that other half that was beside me for the last twenty five years.

They don't know how to deal with your loss.

I thought that I would like to be free but Peter was the only person who knew that I was alive.

We all miss Peter.

With others I have to play the appropriate role but with you I don't have to pretend.

I am glad you can be whatever you want to be.

I pretended until I forgot who I am. I try to be myself and don't know how. Peter was there all the time, he annoyed me, but he was there. I wish he was here now. I want to yell out at him and cry.

It's all right to cry and be angry, I say.

A lot of me died with him. The reason for fighting died. We tried to make each other happy. I want to hold Peter and tell him that I love him. I want to put his head on my chest and let him cry. He did love me, however imperfectly.

Love is never perfect and complete.

A month before he died I talked to Sandy. I don't know why I had this urge to go home and find out what we escaped from..

Peter and I lived with my parents, said Sandy. One day I came home and my mum was there with our baby daughter. She told me that she saw Peter through the window. He was naked coming from a bath with our daughter in his arms. He had an erection. Mum came in and slapped his face. She told him to get lost or she would call the cops. He was there naked and pretended that he didn't know what mum was talking about. She told him that they will throw away the key if she had him arrested. I was shocked. It was a month before we were going to be married. We just paid the deposit on a house when he left.

You should have warned me, said Lisa.

As long as I didn't tell anyone he would money for our daughter. And he did. Mum told him that she will go to the police if he ever showed his face near us again. She hated him.

Why are you telling me now, asked Lisa.

He spread rumours that he left me because it wasn't his baby. It's a pay-back time, said Sandy.

I don't need to know now, said Lisa.

I need to tell you, said Sandy. I never told anyone. I didn't want my daughter to find out. You have daughters, you won't tell anyone.

I went home angry because Peter sent Sandy money all those years without telling me. He kept in touch. He cheated. I didn't even consider what she really told me. I should have been worried about my daughters. I confronted Peter.

Lisa puts her face in her hands and sobs.

You went to see the lying bitch, Peter smashed the stubby on the table. He went red in the face, he coughed but couldn't say anything. I hit him in the face to make him speak, to make him deny what Sandy said. I kept screaming and hitting him with my fists. He fell off the chair.

Is that when he had a heart attack?

The doctor says that he warned Peter to stop smoking and drinking if he wanted to stay alive. Peter never told me that he had a slight heart attack months earlier and that he saw the doctor. There was so much lying in our life. He didn't want to change his lifestyle.

He tried to give up smoking.

I always wondered why my daughters wanted to get away from home. I will never know.

Most teenagers want to leave home.

I watched them at the funeral and they never cried. Daughters are supposed to love their fathers.

Will you talk to them?

Sandy came to the funeral. I told her that she had no right to come. You killed him, I said. But she said that I killed him because I took her word against my husband like she took the word of her mother.

I didn't say that he did anything wrong. My mother hated Peter, he was never good enough for me. I loved Peter, said Sandy. You were jealous and you jumped at the chance to throw it in his face. He was a good father, he sent birthday presents to our daughter. He never missed. He couldn't tell you that, because you are a jealous bitch. He loved me and our daughter.

Maybe Sandy enjoyed tormenting me. Maybe it was all a lie. Maybe he never sent any presents, maybe he never molested his daughter. Sandy didn't actually say that he did, her mum hinted. Maybe she wanted to make me miserable. Maybe Sandy is just a bitch, maybe she was sorry that she lost Peter, I will never know. Not knowing is killing me.

You are not going to talk to your daughters?

What good would it do to put suspicion into their minds if nothing happened. They might hate me for it. They might want to pretend that nothing happened even if it did. Maybe they blocked it out, maybe they are protecting me. Would they accuse me of not protecting them if I told them.

There is dirt swept under the carpet in every house, I say.

I was jealous of the secrecy. We all depended on Peter to love us. Now it's too late. Death is terribly final.

You have done well.

I went with Peter to get away from my family. My father molested me, Lisa begins to cry.

How?

Touched me, says Lisa angrily.

Did you ever tell anyone.

I told you now. I have not seen my family for over twenty years.

Go home. People don't care what happened twenty five years ago. Things happened to them, they think about themselves.

My father died and mum looks after his grave. First thing every morning she goes to the church to pray for him then she goes to the cemetery and lights a candle for the man who abused his own daughter.

She doesn't know that.

Maybe my daughters are protecting me like I am protecting mum. Or maybe I am protecting myself. I am still not sure that mum would believe me. I know I would believe my daughters but they don't know that.

It doesn't help to worry.

I worry, says Lisa. I hate Sandy for telling me. I can't even feel sorry for Peter. I just feel angry.

Sandy was probably lying, I try.

Peter had an unhappy childhood, responds Lisa. He was the youngest of nine children when his father left in 1950. I met his sister while I was home. She told me how their father bashed their mother before he left. They lived on social welfare. Mum often couldn't send Peter to school because he had no shoes or clothes or lunch. At fifteen Peter started doing people's gardens. He could barely read or write.

He has done well. He was an intelligent man.

Peter fell in love with Sandy. When Sandy became pregnant she asked Peter to move in with her. Sandy's father was a bank manager. Her mother was the centre of the social life in Aulbury and she tried to arrange an adoption. She just couldn't accept that her daughter would marry their gardener. Peter wanted them to move into a little flat on the outskirts of Aulbury but Sandy's mother wouldn't hear of it. They made it plain to Peter that he wasn't good enough for their daughter. Peter paid a deposit on a house for them but before they moved in it, they separated.

He loved you, You made him happy, he never looked at another women, you must remember that, I say to Lisa. Sounds like the whole world was against him.

He never told his family why he left Sandy. There were rumours that Sandy was pregnant before she slept with Peter. Sandy's daughter doesn't look anything like Peter, said Peter's sister.

Lisa and I go to church because the priest is saying a mass for Peter.

The words from the Bible echo in my subconscious: there are three things that last: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of them is love. Love is kind and forgiving, love brings peace. Without love there is nothing because love makes everything worthwhile.

We silently try to make sense of his words.

I went shopping, says Lisa months after Peter's funeral. I walked through the glitter of pre-Christmas displays looking for something to catch my eye and gladden my heart. I touched the soft silk and caressed the shiny jewels on the stand. I held the diamond ring and the weight of

it was dead on the palm of my hand. I wanted to give a ring to someone to make someone squeal with delight.

It is getting harder to delight people with gifts.

I sat in a café. I never noticed before how people rush. Suddenly I had no-where to rush.

It's nice to watch.

I bought a packet of smokes but I noticed the no smoking sign so I drank my coffee and left. I remembered that I gave up smoking.

I was all right without the smoke when Peter was alive, but now I need the company of a cigarette. I drove for an hour and I began to sing and then I cried.

Why didn't you learn to drive earlier, I say to Lisa.

Peter didn't want me to drive. He admitted that he was scared to let me go.

Was he scared that you'd drive away from him? I joke.

He probably was. He would take me wherever I wanted to go. He turned nasty when I asked him to teach me to drive. He asked if I don't like his driving. Where do you want to go without me? I began to feel that wanting to drive was a mortal sin. He never had time to teach me anyway. He worked all the time and he came home tired and I didn't have the heart to nag. When he found opal I suggested that we should pay someone to teach me but he said that he will find the time himself as soon as I stopped nagging.

The word nagging comes handy to men, I say. Whenever a man doesn't want to give in, he accuses a woman of nagging.

I promised myself not to become a nagging wife. He was coming home from the club later more regularly. He had to have a few drinks with mates to find out what was going on in the opal business. You only heard in the club about new rushes, prices, partnerships and what buyers were after. Peter was on a committee of the Mining Association. He said that he had to be on the game if he was to bring home bacon.

Men are like that.

I think he was going through the middle age crisis.

There comes a dangerous time when men start to search for the meaning of it all.

Old men match with young women to fool themselves that they are young.

But he was faithful.

We were both faithful but in our hearts we knew that we stopped loving and counting on each other.

We all go through middle life crisis, I say.

I think women suffer less because they are more interested in their own generation, says Lisa.

A twenty years old boy would make me feel terribly old, I try to sound light hearted.

Women were brought up like that. I blame mothers who tell their daughters to please their husbands.

Women always blame other women.

We learned to be women from other women. And they learned from their mothers. We kill ourselves trying to be good enough.

We are good enough.

My father messed up my mum's life.

Your mum never knew.

He fucked up my life and I fucked up my children's lives, laughs Lisa through tears, horrified by her own words.

We do what we believe we should do.

Peter was a good man. Maybe I did not appreciate him enough but I must have loved him, Lisa adds defiantly.

No matter what we have, we dream of things we haven't. I try to comfort her.

I grew up in a home when man was god, she says quietly. My mother's rules proved worthless.

Do you really believe that?

Nobody respects them.

Does that make them bad?

I despised my mother but I always respected and admired my father.

Why?

Because my mother did. I wish I had another go.

But the rules might change.

Our thoughts mingle with the autumn leaves. Autumn makes one think of old age and death.

Mum told me that it is easier if you don't marry for love. Mum married for love. Did you marry for love? asks Lisa.

I suppose so. Love has so many faces.

Peter tried to be good enough. At first he tried hard but later he just drank harder and harder. I am sorry for the poor dead bastard.

He was good enough.

My father said that Peter wasn't good enough for me. Sandy's mum said that he wasn't good enough for her.

You made him happy.

I felt ashamed of him like one is ashamed of a second hand dress. Now I am ashamed of myself.

You need a break.

I am leaving Lightning Ridge.

Things happen for a reason.

I want to feel something. Maybe I should fall in love, says Lisa.

Most of us are in love most of the time. That's what makes life bearable.

I spent most of my life following my husband, laughs Lisa.

We all came with our husbands.

Everybody is going somewhere and most of them are going the wrong way.

We follow each other.

Half to forget the wandering and the pain.
Half to remember days that have gone by.
And dream and dream that I am home again.

Elroy

Going home

In 1997 Tom and I decide to go home. Maybe going to the beginning will give us both a second chance.

I know that home is not the house or the place or the time or the people but a jigsaw puzzle with a tiny spot where one fits just right. Home is where everything is a part of everything else. The fragmented parts come together to complete a picture. At home everything is as it was meant to be.

We will go everywhere together, Tom promises.

Maybe Tom is also scared. We believe that our innocence still exists somewhere in the virtual reality of our hometown.

You were such an innocent girl, when I first met you, Tom says. A child squashing a spring flower would say: What a beautiful flower this was.

Tom complains that I am no longer a little innocent girl he married, I tell Melanie.

I certainly hope not.

In his good, prosperous days Tom often teased me, that he could go home and bring back a young girl, who would do his bidding. Finally I told Tom to go and find himself a white lily maiden from his village and bring her here. He wanted a permanent virgin little girl and I tried to be one for him until I became an old unwise woman.

There is hope for you yet, smiles Melanie.

What good would it do now?

Men want to tame whatever is still wild and fresh in the nature of the little girl, says Melanie.

Little girls believe that this is how life is.

You believe anything when you are young and if you are told often enough and if the person telling is a powerful person.

That's why men like younger women.

When girls learn that men tell lies, it is usually too late. They have kids and they better be grateful that they have a roof over their heads and that the man stays with them, says Melanie.

A man wants to be worshipped by all the little girls who were created out of his rib, I laugh.

Tom tamed you because he is scared of wild women, says Melanie.

Little girls sometimes grow up, I say.

Men don't love women who grow up. Men like impressionable young girls who believe what men want them to believe.

Tom is a good provider and a faithful husband. I feel disloyal to Tom and want to repair the damage.

Really, mocks Melanie.

If I am happy, Tom is happy, I defend my husband.

Unhappy women usually have faithful husbands, says Melanie. Maybe faithfulness is not all it is cracked up to be.

After every argument I crawl and beg forgiveness and we make love. Making love after a quarrel excites Tom. It makes everything white until the passion dies. A fresh coat of snow makes the rubbish tip virginally white, like that, until the snow melts.

You trained him well.

Tom still sees it as the ultimate sacrifice for a girl to give herself to a man for the first time. I wonder if the sacredness of the virginity is in the sacrificial blood or in the uniqueness of an untouched hymen. Is the innocence of the first pain what makes one a victim for life. Should every man get a sacrificial lamb.

Men are afraid that a woman will betray them in the end. Beware of a man that has been betrayed. You will always be his secret enemy. He will court you and love you but he will never trust you.

Men know where they stand with a man, but a woman is always a threat.

Dumb virgins are less of a threat.

They are not likely to compete for power.

A man always finds an excuse for another man's behaviour but women blame each other.

Tom and I have this unreasonable hope that the trip will put things right. We tried everything else. We know that things have changed and we need to change but we are too old and the pattern is set.

Tom occasionally tells me that I am a deceitful, rotten liar who wrecked his whole life. He stops talking to me for days and I ache to hear his voice because I have no-one who knows me as well as he does. He is my best and my worst friend. Every day I am more aware of my aloneness.

Tom and I are not as close as we used to be, I tell Melanie.

How come, says Melanie.

I don't hate Tom any more. I don't blame him for being what he is. I know that we grew into what we are. I made it possible for him to be in control and he loved me for it.

Blame yourself, why don't you.

I made sure that sulking worked for him. When he sulked I cooked his special meals, agreed to all his plans, made love to him in all the novel ways I could imagine. The more he sulked or yelled the more I pleaded for love and searched for ways to please him. He boasted to his friends how hard I tried to make him happy. His friends pointed me out to their wives as an example of the perfect wife. I shone in their admiration. Tom vaguely hinted at things happening in our bedroom to make other men jealous. Men made feeble attempts to seduce me to make Tom jealous. Their wives flirted with Tom to make me jealous but it was always obvious to everybody how much Tom and I loved each other.

What a pretender you are.

Maybe we did love each other. Maybe that is how love is. The more Tom yelled and sulked the more I tried to please him. I have no energy or will to please any more.

Why didn't you leave the bastard?

I never had a reason. He is a good man.

You were afraid to leave home.

I never believed that I could make it on my own and keep children under control. I was always one of Tom's naughty children. I couldn't be responsible for our children being homeless and fatherless. Tom wouldn't go away and I had no other home.

He made you impotent.

I was always scared of what he would do. I know he would destroy everything we had rather than share it with me.

You left it too late.

When children were little I tried to keep peace. They had nobody else, they had nowhere to run, they couldn't cry on anybody's shoulder. Every time it took a little longer to make Tom happy.

But your children left years ago.

Tom outbursts became more frequent and more severe, he needed more excitement and loving after they left.

How long are you going to put up with it?

Last week Tom stormed into a spare bedroom. I didn't follow.

What did you do to make him so angry, laughs Melanie.

He watched soccer in the lounge-room and I watched a romantic movie in the bedroom. He didn't like me watching that stupid trash. I said that I

liked it. He slammed the door. I felt exhausted and went to sleep. He is still in shock because I didn't beg forgiveness.

Great.

I don't feel great or victorious or excited.

Enjoy it.

I know what to do to make things better for awhile but I am sick of making false promises.

Carry on as if nothing is wrong.

When Tom rejected me in the past I gave him more love. He never had enough. I have no more to give.

I think its time he realised that.

We don't hold hands or kiss anymore. When Tom sleeps I want to put my head on his chest and let him caress me like he used to. But I would have to surrender and I don't want to.

It's his turn to crawl.

I am terrified of going home.

Why go then?

I want to see what I left, I laugh.

At home there is another dimension of me, an intimacy with my childhood that I want to embrace. There is an expectation of love so immense that nobody could fulfil it. And all the time I know that nobody can return to anything.

I don't belong to the village of my childhood. The village I am talking about is not even there any more. It saddens me that I can not return anywhere. I can only move forward like the kangaroo and emu of the Australian emblem.

I believe that I will blend in with the air and the soil and the sounds and the life at home where I belong, I say.

Hometown is a reality to which no plane ticket can take you, warns Melanie.

My smiling submissiveness became a blanket covering my immense fear and anger and shame and guilt. I am scared that someone will see under the blanket. I take my dreams under the blanket like children take a teddy bear for comfort.

My private life is coming with me to be admired by all the people who once loved me. I am afraid that they will see through the blanket and despise me for clinging to my teddy bear.

Life is so small. It can be disconnected like a light bulb. Nobody is really concerned with your life. They orbit in their own, says Melanie.

Take away love and there is darkness and nothing grows in darkness.
Why bother moving in space that is the same all over.

Social isolation does something to your soul, says Melanie.

I travelled in Canada and a stranger approached me on the street. He apologised because he mistook me for someone else but he spoke in a dialect of my hometown, he recognised the features of my face, somewhere it was written that we belonged to the same tribe. We rejoiced at the meeting because we carried a handful of our childhood.

All migrants are torn between continents, says Melanie.

A friend returning from around the world trip said that after you lived in Australia for awhile you can't live anywhere else.

We are all strangers really in Lightning Ridge. Opal is the only dream we are not afraid to share. How could we become real friends without knowing any of our other dreams?

With a bit of luck, you can become a millionaire over night in Lightning Ridge. You may become a first class citizen. You may bypass all the social restrictions. If you become rich, nobody asks about your background. Maybe foreigners need this short cut to heaven.

We escaped the jealousy and anger and love and guilt but we became lonely without those things.

We tell our children about the hardship of our youth and cry for the beauty of it all.

Lucky are those that have never returned home, says Melanie.

You want to return to something you love.

Love blurs your vision. Love is never fair, democratic, righteous or kind. Love is closely related to hate because people choose to love the wrong people, says Melanie.

I must have loved Tom sometimes. He married me for my innocence so I didn't dare change. I must have craved ordinariness all my life.

People crave for things and then get totally sick of them, says Melanie.

We missed you so much, says my little sister Milica when I finally come home. She was ten when I left at twenty. What did she miss? We want you to enjoy yourself and have all your wishes come true, she chirps.

I wonder why my happiness means so much to her.

I remember how you danced in those white shoes with high heels. You had red dress and when you turned fast the dress was going up and down like waves on the sea, says my little sister Milica.

I have no recollection of that dress or the high heels. I have abandoned high heels long ago.

You were always a bit wild. I remember you dancing. I was seven and you were seventeen then and I can still see you dancing in my mind.

People remember bits of me that touched them but I have no memory of their remembering. I only remember what touched me. We try to find memories that will unite us.

I wonder if you still remember anyone at all, says Milica. Even my little sister grew old and wise.

Damian, the boy next door, was my hero when I was a little girl, I say but Milica is not impressed.

Damian, a barefooted boy next door, seemed to me enormously big and brave and responsible when I was little. We grazed our cows every morning before school. The hay was stored for winter and the cattle got the last growth of the grass.

I followed Damian as the first sun-rays glistened caught in the morning dew on the weeping willows along the river. The ground was still white from the first autumn frost. My feet, bare, muddy and wet, trembled and my hands were blue from cold. I followed my cow and Damian, who carried a tin with burning charcoal in it. He was going to make a fire so we could keep warm and roast chestnuts for breakfast. He gathered twigs from the nearby forest while I looked after the cattle. The twigs dried as Damian and I blew into the red coals to keep them alive until the twigs burst into flames. The meagre smoky warmth blew into our eyes and our faces touched. One morning Damian took my hands and rubbed them between his to warm them. I remember vividly that moment because I suddenly felt grown up and a uniquely separate person. That was the dawn of my awareness.

Mum used to warn me against the evils of the world and the greatest evil seemed to be Damian. He was a big, bad, twelve years old boy and the kids were afraid of him. I was seven or eight then. Mum knew at that early age that Damian was up to no good. Everybody could tell that Damian was bad news like his drunken father and his dirty, argumentative mother. Damian often ran away to live with gypsies in the forest until his mum dragged him home again. But to me Damian could do no wrong. I fantasised about being grown up with him. Later I fantasised about being beautiful and later still about being successful. I wanted to be all those things so people would love me. I wanted my parents to be proud of me.

Your cheeks are hot, Damian smiled once and I blushed. Our hearts responded to the rhythm of the spring but we had no words for love yet. We rolled in the luscious flowery grass where cows were grazing. I looked at the sky and the clouds moved with me. I felt the sweet pain of love in my chest and I held on the grass and almost cried. I wanted to

become a saint and sit there with this god that made the spring that inspired love.

I see Damian in the hotel now. He is standing at the bar with a woman. The huge flower pot separates us. He doesn't know I am watching. Maybe he wouldn't care, maybe he never remembered me. His voice grew harsh. He needs a hair cut. His hands are moving up and down the beer glass. His shoes are muddy.

The woman next to him pulls at his sleeve and says that they have to go. He sounds annoyed, he shakes her off and orders one for the road. Maybe this will be the last time I ever see Damian. The tunnel of sunshine in front of me connects me with the window and there is dust where the light comes in.

This man, this place has nothing to do with what I left behind.

Milica calls out to Damian and he comes to greet me. I want to say something that he could take with him into his heart. No such words come.

It has been a long time, I say.

Nice seeing you again, says Damian.

I smile. I am glad he has to go, we'll see each other later. I have no words to say to that strange man.

Remember Ben, I say to Milica when we get home. She does not remember. I still love Ben, I explain but she is not listening.

I wish I could have a few minutes alone with Ben. I want Milica to listen and say something. She is my own sister and I can say anything I like to her. It feels good to say things without being afraid. She is my only sister, my only close relation, it is wonderful, that I can speak to her from my heart.

Milica stops with her hands half way out of the sink to look at me. The soapy dish water drips onto her stomach tied over with the generous apron.

I love Ben, I offer a cheerful explanation.

You lost your mind. She is a bright girl and she sees madness in my eyes.

It's nothing new, I loved him all my life, I simplify things. It feels so good to say the words I would never dare say to anybody else.

You have been happily married for almost forty years, you have a family, she reasons. You are a grandmother. Soon you will be a great grandmother.

Milica is piling up the responsibilities of the old age. She is a righteous mother who doesn't want a scandal in the family.

I wished to be with Ben all this time, I went to sleep thinking about him most nights, I carry on. I am again a little girl confessing my sins. I feel at home.

Oh, it's just the fantasy then. It must run in the family, my children are also burdened with fantasies, says Milica with a sigh. She found a logical explanation for something that would otherwise be ridiculous.

It's not a fantasy, Ben is the most real thing in my life. Ben and I live in each other.

Oh, act your age, says Milica disgusted with absurdity of love at my age.

Young people in love are forgiven because the nature of human reproduction demands a measure of ridiculous blindness.
I glance in the mirror. Magda stares at me. I laugh.

Don't play with fire, advises Milica. She grasped the seriousness of my predicament. Ben is only a phone call away.

I was only teasing, I smile.

Just as well, sighs Milica.

I visit Andrea. We were sixteen when I last saw her. Every sixteen years old girl needs a best friend. I will never know why Andrea chose me to be her best friend. She was one of the beautiful people admired by other beautiful, rich and talented people. Why did she try to get away from the glamour of her life to be with me in the park reciting poetry. She told me about the boys she dated. She was in love with them like one is in love with spring flowers. They were all one love, one awakening to the beauty that was life.

I never had a best friend after I left Andrea.

Andrea is a part of what lured me home. I visit her, she is pale and thin and her husband tells me that she hasn't long to go.

We try to string the events of our shared past like people string beads to make an ornament. We brake the strings and the beads scatter lost on the floor when our memories become hazy and we lose the connection. Andrea has tears in her eyes and I don't dare ask why she is crying. Is she hiding the secrets that want to wash to the surface? I remember her poem about the weeping willow embracing young lovers in spring. That was the time of our becoming. Andrea lived in the clouds, she was like a tune of the song that came from nowhere and gladdened the heart before it floated away. She was like an unreachable flower in the mountain, like a rainbow in the sky.

Andrea's green eyes are watery now and her hands are trembling. We say good bye like people say good bye to those that died.

Andrea was my best friend, I tell Milica.

I told Milica about the people I loved so she could become my best friend. Everybody needs a best friend. I could not tell anybody else.

We realise how much we loved something when we lose it, says my wise little sister. I am grateful that Milica understands.

You are my best friend, I embrace Milica for the last time. She knows things I could not share with anybody else.

Lisa comes to Lightning Ridge as Tom and I return.

They must have been proud of you at home, says Lisa. You were in all the newspapers. Your paintings sold well. You have done well even in Australia. For a foreigner, that is, she laughs.

I didn't tell them about my painting.

Why on Earth not. Maybe you want to remain enigmatic about it but your relations and friends are entitled to a bit of bragging, says Lisa.

They are not really interested. The young ones don't know me, the old ones are dead or too old to be impressed. I wonder if I really was home.

I am sure there is a bright young niece who would like to be like you, tries Lisa.

If I was an Olympic medallist, a pop star or an actress, well, maybe, but not an artist. I would attract more attention if I caused a scandal.

I am afraid that you would not know how to create a scandal, smiles Lisa.

If I told them that I am wildly in love, they would at least appreciate a joke.

Only you are not in love, concludes Lisa.

Lisa was with me for almost thirty years but she was never my best friend because I did not dare tell her what I told Milica.

I might be, I play with the temptation to tell her but even Lisa would laugh at the idea.

You are the most faithful little wife I ever knew, she tells me. You've been like a mother to me, you know, says Lisa. Her face is tired, her yellowed skin is prematurely speckled with age spots.

Sometimes I feel like you are my mother, I laugh. You are much more sensible.

You always know the right thing to do and say, says Lisa.

Roses need pruning, I say after the silence. I look at the sunset all purple and green and golden and grey. I feel a sweet pain of remembering.

The weeds never stop growing, Lisa joins me at the window.

She has no way of knowing what I am remembering.

I wanted to come home and feel the beginning of spring, the rich ripe summer and the sadness of colourful falling of the autumn leaves but neither the spring nor the autumn knew me.

I was homesick for Lightning Ridge, I say.

Lightning Ridge is the same all year around.

We travel in silence for awhile.

I miss Peter. I need a man.

There is no man who could give you all you want, I warn both of us.

I don't like being alone, tells Lisa. I have to create a new life for myself.

The song about love came from somewhere, the tune trembles half hidden in the unknown.

The words of Ben's last letter echo in my mind: One must know where one will sleep at night and what the family will have for dinner. The other things must wait. I will save my soul for the next life.

Nothing changed because we didn't let it change, we did not let the real life interfere with what was divine in our lives. We never worried about the bed to sleep in or the roof or the food. Our love never came second to other considerations. We just had this tremendous gift of love to cling to.

In the sanctuary of my mind I can have Ben whenever I want him. He is as romantic as he was in that moment when we both discovered love. Neither of us loved before or after with total surrender. I wanted to sing and to embrace the whole world after that first kiss, Ben told me.

Nothing changed. Magda follows Tom while Lena crucifies him. The two parallels of my life follow me like my name. I remain a Siamese twin with one face hidden behind the other.

Melanie lives in a tiny cottage on the edge of town.

I always searched for my El Dora do, says Melanie. I wanted a little house on the edge of real life from where I could look into other people's lives. My cottage now stretches into the sheep paddock on all sides. The neighbours can not peer over the fence into my backyard. They can only see me as I step onto the main street through the front door. I have a nice front door and my front garden is no different to other people's front gardens, she chirps on about the first home she bought for herself.

You are lucky, I say.

I used to live on the main street all my life. I find intimacy in the aloneness, says Melanie.

I want to be like Melanie, I want to let things happen as they were meant to happen.

My friends come to share what they can not share with others. When they leave I go over their words and events at my own pace. It is a luxury to travel like that through other people's lives.

Everybody lives on their own, really, I say.

I might go to Sydney and help Ann Marie with her children. It is time to do something for the family, Melanie brings us back into reality.

Children will love you, I say.

I have nothing to connect one generation to another, nothing to carry sentiments and memories from grandparents to grandchildren. They play with different toys now, says Melanie.

In the end it doesn't matter what you have or what you are or who sleeps next to you, I say.

We try to keep up with times and those who run with us. We are afraid to be left behind. We want to be there first, says Melanie.

The power to take from a man his thought, his will, his personality, is a power of life and death. To enslave a man is to kill him.
Proudhon.

Lightning Ridge murder

Edna's daughter Maria was a pretty little girl who used to play with my children.

Maria later worked with me at the post office before she became the first qualified Aboriginal nurse in Lightning Ridge. She made Edna and Anton proud.

All Edna's children have exquisite Slavic features of their Polish father Anton and the light brown complexion of their mother's Aboriginal ancestors.

They move like wild cats. Dancers learn to move like that if they are talented, Melanie once observed.

Anton and Edna remained friends even after Edna opened a little Aboriginal art centre with her new husband Rodney. Edna asked me to teach painting to a group of young people there.

The children are in and out of her home, her children and grandchildren and Rodney's children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

Rodney changed my whole life, says Edna happily. Rodney is a big, friendly Aboriginal man.

Edna wanted to ask for a government grant to maintain a cultural activity centre but Rodney said no.

We can do without the government, he smiles.

Rodney is himself an artist and a handyman. Their home is a buzz of activity. I feel at ease with the big noisy family. Tom has never been at Edna's house, he doesn't know Anton either.

I was born on the Aboriginal Mission Station in Brewarrina, says Rodney. I clearly remember the day in 1936 when Angledool Aborigines were moved to Brewarrina. Tiboobarra mob moved into the Brewarrina Mission at the same time. There were four dialects spoken on the Mission. Aborigines from Angledool spoke Euraliah, the language of the Marran tribes. The Tiboobarra people spoke their Ngemba tribal language and a lot of them spoke Muruwarri and Ngemba. Muruwarri was also the tribal language of my grandmother who came from the Culgoa river.

Did you get along all right, I ask.

Brewarrina and Angledool Aborigines were much the same and mixed all right but Tibooburra mob were still in their wild state. They didn't wear clothes and didn't speak English. Us, Brewarrina kids, got a hiding if we mixed with Tibooburra kids. My father helped to move some Tibooburra people over in a truck while others came with their donkey teams. They didn't last long, they just drifted back to their traditional grounds back West where they continued to live in their wild state. They still held their corobories. I sneaked out to watch them naked around the fire. They smoked the kids to knock some sense into them.

The life of the wild Aborigine fascinates me.

It seems like yesterday but young people today know nothing about it, says Rodney.

Where did you learn to make artefacts, I ask.

I watched old men. They would sit on the wood heap making weapons and they explained what each weapon was used for. The old men were talking to kids in their lingo. I learned to make a small steel Tommy-axe. They used rasps to file the wood. Broken glass was used as a scraper and gave the wood a nice smooth finish like the sandpaper or a fine electric sanders do today. The old men got us young boys to rub Guthal on the weapons and boomerangs. Guthal is emu or goanna fat.

Rodney likes to talk about the good old days. It seems that any old days are good old days. There was hope in the old days. We all had future ahead of us in the old days of our childhood.

At the mission school we learned about clever white people who discovered Australia. We kids soon became ashamed of our lingo and parents. We learned that a good way to live was a white man's way. Aboriginal way and lingo was considered bad, Aborigines were savages.

Coca cola and chips and meat pie is better, adds Edna.

One can never turn back.

I worked for the farmer, he liked me and sometimes he'd give me a beer and a bit of tobacco after work. Good workers were rewarded like that, says Rodney. I gave up grog and tobacco now, but my kids can't.

Government poisoned our people, says Edna.

They create needs nobody can ever satisfy, adds Rodney. Aborigines never learned to be social drinkers. They had to hide alcohol and drink it quickly.

Our people used to obey old law but now they just try to please governments. Whites took our girls and plied them with alcohol and tobacco until the poor girls sold their souls for it.

Non-English speaking European migrants after the war broke the English domination and the racist attitudes. The white Australia policy finally collapsed, explains Rodney.

Europeans took Aboriginal girls for their wives and they lived with them, says Edna.

English migrants had children with Aboriginal girls but many of these children never stepped inside the big house of their father, says Rodney.

Their mothers became servants in the house but they were rarely inside as wives and mothers to boss's children, adds Edna.

Europeans couldn't speak English. They were far from home and lonely, so they loved Aboriginal girls and their children. They worked hard to keep them in food and clothes. Anton and I always worked together to provide for the kids. Anton organised the work for my mob as well.

We had great fun every pay day when we worked with Anton. He brought drinks and smokes and food. If we had any money left we lost it at night as we played cards around the fire, tells Edna.

Rodney doesn't mind Edna talking about Anton.

Maybe Anton should not have brought drinks to the bush but my relations wouldn't stay with him if he didn't. They'd take their money and find grog in town. They would have stayed on a river bank until the money ran out and then come back looking for work. Who knows. Anton never meant any harm, Edna reasons. Edna and Anton remained loyal friends and if either ever needed a favour they'd come around. Anton was good to us, says Edna. I left him because I wanted to be near the school for my children but Anton loves the bush. He is building himself a monument there.

The kids don't listen to Anton any more, says Edna. He ignores them. They are on the dole and drinking, most of them. I told them never to come near me when they are drunk, says Edna.

Since the fall of Soviet union the racism raised its ugly head again in Australia, says Rodney.

What has Soviet Union got to do with it?

The West tried harder for human rights during the cold war.

But racism is outlawed now, I reason.

You can never legislate in these matters. After the war everybody had hard times but we all worked hard together. We had respect because we worked. Without work you are nothing. You can't even have self respect if you are not looking after yourself, says Rodney.

It's true what this red headed fish and chip parliamentarian girl, Pauline Hanson, says. Aborigines get more benefits than any other group. But we pay with pride. We never chose the government policy. We never chose to be looked after, we looked after ourselves for thousands of years.

Rodney and Edna finish each other's thoughts.

It's a pity that a fish and chips shop girl should voice the opinions she obviously does not understand, says Rodney. She is just fuelling the prejudices. People are sick of the government that is throwing their money away to buy votes.

They are spending millions on Aboriginal Legal Aide. White legal sharks and social workers and police drag us through courts to collect the money that is supposed to be spent for the good of Aborigines.

The money allocated for Aborigines ends up with the English Royal legal society, says Edna.

Aborigines still have no recognition for their part in developing Australia, says Rodney. In the early part they did all the work on the land, they were stockmen, fencers, shearers, housekeepers, servants of all sorts, yard and house builders. Anglo-Saxons got the credit for all that.

Anglo Saxons got credit for all the marvellous work migrants did as well, says Edna realising that I was after all a migrant although I never lived anywhere as long as in Lightning Ridge.

It is estimated that up to one thousand Aborigines served in the second world war, explains Rodney. Twenty Aborigines from this area were in. After the war the returned soldiers got land to work on, but Aborigines were told that they had no experience on the land so they didn't get it. Five of them from this area never returned but others tried to get to the ballot for soldier's blocks on their return but not one got land. Aborigines always lived off the land and they did all the jobs on the land for white settlers, yet they weren't considered experienced enough to hold their own piece of land.

Recognition is given to explorers but their Aboriginal guides are forgotten.

Aborigines are getting much more attention lately, I say.

We get attention because the government needs Aboriginal vote. The greed for power will destroy us all, says Rodney.

We get attention because our kids are in trouble, says Edna.

The government wants to make up for the past mistakes, I reason.

Forget the past, there is too much wrong in the present, says Rodney. Our people became useless. Nobody loves them, respects them or trusts them. This is the worst kind of discrimination. You can't legislate about that kind of discrimination. They made our people so weak, that they have nothing more to offer anybody. They just have needs and the government throws money at them to satisfy these needs. They need to do something, to pay back.

Government took power away from Aboriginal elders and now our kids have no-one to tell them right from wrong, says Edna.

Nobody knows how to behave anymore, whites or blacks, agrees Rodney.

They write new rules and regulations every day but nobody sticks to them.

Edna and her Aboriginal friends went to the local school to demand that kids learn about Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal women came reluctantly with Edna. The women wanted to play Bingo but they left their friends and drinks and gambling because they respect Edna.

What exactly would you like children to learn? asks Alex, a young white teacher who came to the Ridge months ago.

Ema's son Alex quickly became a friend of Aborigines. The word got around that Edna's daughter Tracy knew Alex in Sydney and was friends with him.

Aboriginal women look at Edna. She must know what they need. They only came to show their solidarity. They used to hate Aboriginal studies. Teachers showed films of Aborigines roaming the bush naked and other kids sniggered and stared at Aboriginal nakedness.

We want our children to visit our sacred sites and to learn about their significance, says Edna and the women clap.

Could you make the list of local sacred sites and write down their significance, asks Alex.

Children know nothing about their totems or how Aborigines looked after the land and the animals, says Edna. She wants to tell Alex that for thousands of years Australian continent survived without pollution, ozone black hole and green house effect. Aborigines had no AIDS, obesity, addictions, depressions, suicide, crime and corruption. They knew right from wrong because their elders taught them how to live. How could anybody say all that in a short meeting with a young white teacher.

I treat all children the same, I expect them to behave and learn the same, says Alex in defence of any possible racist attack.

I'd like to take Aboriginal kids into the bush sometime to learn them about the old ways, says Edna.

Have to get principal's permission for an excursion, says Alex, eager to do the right thing.

No white kids, no teachers, just our kids, says Edna.

I'd have to write a program and present it to the principal for approval, says Alex. I would like to come along to learn from you.

How could a young white teacher teach Aboriginal culture? How could one teach a dead person to breathe, a man without legs to walk? Aboriginal elders are broken, they are drunk, they have no say in anything. They just collect the pension cheque. Alex seems nice, mutters Edna.

If you work for the government, you get a house and a car, mate, says Tracy, Edna's aspiring daughter. She knows Alex so he must be alright.

We want self management, says Edna's son Kevin, who became the boss at Skill share. He refused to come and talk to snotty white teachers.

TV reporters come to film our misery, says Edna. Poverty is attractive in a rich country like Australia. TV people are always ready to screen squalor. It makes the viewers feel better off.

My people lost their purpose, reasons Rodney. They sniff petrol and glue if they can't get anything stronger. I've seen them filtering boot polish through a loaf of bread to extract alcohol and drink it.

I saw them injecting vegemite.

Edna invites us to Maria's wedding.

Someone should talk to Maria, says Melanie.

Professional confidentiality prevents Melanie to discuss the matter but everyone knows about Ken. If everybody knows, Maria must know. Maria is a sophisticated young woman.

Maybe Aborigines don't worry about things like that, says Melanie.

As long as there is money. Ken found lots of opal, says Lisa.

Ken's daughter went to the police because her father raped her. Ken's wife tried to commit suicide, so her daughter dropped the charges against her father and left town. Everybody at the health centre knows that it was hushed up. Some say that Ken sexually abused his sons as well. Nobody likes Ken's sons, nobody has sympathy for troublesome mixed up kids.

Boys are on marijuana and dealing, says Lisa.

Melanie knows that boys were regularly sodomised by their father, but they would deny it if it came out in the open.

Shame.

Nobody says anything to Maria because Maria is in love with Ken who is a millionaire. Ken bought a little sports car for Maria and he paid for Edna's new lounge suit. He brings scents, flowers and chocolates for Edna and Maria. Everybody is impressed by the love of the rich white fellow who have chosen a young Aboriginal nurse for his wife. When you have so much money you can pick and choose.

Anton warns Maria but she tells him not to listen to vicious rumours.

It is jealousy, Maria explains. Anton concedes to give his favourite daughter away.

Ken is drunk at the wedding. During the reception he lays Maria on the lawn and puts his leg over her as they kiss.

Does he want to prove that he can still do it, whispers someone. Anton is disgusted and leaves unnoticed.

It's not like its their first time.

Some enjoy the hilarity of the occasion. There are kegs of beer coming nice and cold. Maria is a beautiful bride and the food is extravagant. People like to rub shoulders with those who know how to make their dreams come true. Maria and Ken can do no wrong for the moment. They are invited to all the best and the worst parties in town and on the field.

Maria leaves her job at the health centre after the wedding. Ken bought a camp on the claim where he worked. They turn the camp into a romantic cottage hidden by trees.

A few months later I meet Maria on the street. Her hands are shaking as she lights a cigarette. I am surprised that she started smoking while she is obviously pregnant. I remember how she warned young pregnant Aboriginal girls against smoking. I visit Maria just before her son is born. Her eyes are glazed and she isn't friendly. She doesn't offer me coffee. When she hears a car coming she moves towards the door like she wants me to go. I leave.

Maria's son is born at home. She doesn't want to go to the hospital.

Soon after, a man comes to the post office.

I am renting a house on the coast from an old lady who went to Lightning Ridge with her son. I need to find them, the man from the Gold Coast tells me and shows me the name of the woman.

We have no address of people who live on the field. They collect mail from the post office box. The police may be able to help, I tell the man.

He tells the police that he sent rent money to his landlady's Lightning Ridge address but the cheques keep coming back.

Police promise to make inquiries.

People remember the old lady sitting on top of a claim at Three mile. She was knitting near the shaft where her son mined. Nobody spoke to

the weird couple because they were Russian or something and couldn't speak English. Most remember seeing them.

Peter tells the police that Ken drives the old lady's car and mines in the mine where the old lady used to knit..

Ask Ken, says Peter.

Ken tells the police that he bought everything from the lady and that the old lady and her son left town. The man from the coast refuses to believe that the lady and her son would vanish like that. The man is Russian as well and he is suspicious.

People disappeared like that at home after the war, he tells me. He asks the police to check with the taxis, airport, bus and rail transport if they booked their travel. They could not just walk out of town like that. No trace of them is found.

Police finally realise that the man will not go away until he finds his people. The matter is suspicious. The rumours start, that Ken dumped the couple in an old shaft. Nobody knows the old lady by name but every detail about the woman and her son filters down to the last resident in town. Everybody is talking about it at the post office.

The police arrest Ken and charge him with murder. Detectives question Rose.

Maria tells them that she was feeding her son in a car late one evening when Ken went to check the claim. He took a plastic drum of something from the truck, placed it in a hoist bucket and let it down the shaft. He went down with the torch and returned after half an hour exhausted. He told Maria that he propped the roof because it was unsafe.

Maria shows the police the shaft but the shaft is filled in with dirt. Maria is not quite sure if that is the place, it is so easy to get lost on the field and it was dark. There are hundreds of shafts all around, some are covered others are open.

The police open the shaft and find nothing. Edna tells me that someone rang Maria and warned her that she should not talk to the detectives.

Look after your son and keep your mouth shut, said the caller. When Maria is summoned to testify in court, she can't remember anything.

Maria sells her belongings in a garage sale and leaves town. Nobody knows where Maria is. Ken is acquitted and returns to his camp.

Marty bought some ornaments at the garage sale. The man from the coast said that the ornaments belonged to the old lady. Marty and the man go to the police. Jack bought some jewellery from Ken. The rings belonged to the old lady, says the man from the coast. Everybody knows some detail about the missing Russians and they share the information with the post office staff.

Police finds Maria and charge her with selling stolen property. She tells the court that Ken bought a camp with everything in it from the old lady. Before she left she wanted to get rid of things she did not intend to take with her. She had no idea that she was doing anything wrong. She describes the things, the personal papers, photographs, jewellery, bags, souvenirs, dishes and clothes. She remembers going through the stuff, feeling sad because somebody abandoned what must once have been cherished. She read some letters but most were in a language she could not understand so she burned them. She burned all the things she couldn't sell. There were baby pictures and a wedding photo, crocheted place mats and knitted jumpers and vests. All the things were unusual and easy to remember and nobody wanted to buy them.

The detective asks Maria if she ever used caustic soda. She tells him that she stripped oil paint in the bathroom and that she splashed some down the drain sometimes. How much caustic soda did they have, the prosecutor wants to know, but Maria never checked the shed.

Police checked all the caustic soda suppliers and found out that Ken bought two drums just before the couple disappeared. The containers can not be found. They take Maria on the field again to show them the shaft where Ken took the drum but she can not be certain, it has been over a year and it was dark and she isn't good at remembering places. One mine is much like another mine at three mile opal field and there are thousands of old mines.

Ken is arrested again and the jury finds him guilty of murder.

I feel so angry, Maria tells me.

Why?

I am supposed to be an intelligent person. My father told me that Ken was no good. Everybody knew. I should have known but I didn't want to believe.

You were in love.

He made me feel like a princess. Maria tries to remind herself that perhaps she loved the bastard at some point.

What's done is done, she whispers. I will never be free of Ken. Life sentence means nothing. He could be out in eight to ten years. My son will ask questions. How will I hide? I might as well be dead. I never wanted to testify. The bastard will come hunting for me.

If you love something
set it free.
If it comes back to you
it is yours.
If it doesn't
it never was.

EMA AND JACK

Ema and her husband Jack arrived from Sydney in 1985.

Jack came from England as a child with his parents and he considers Australia home. He sold his business in Sydney and wants to buy and sell opal. He needs a reliable knowledgeable miner to advise him. Jack trusts Tom, he has respect for the determined, hard-working, self made man.

Jack always buys something to make miners feel good. Ema even offers coffee to regulars. They know that it pays to have business associates on their side.

Ema always had an exotic elegance that appealed to men and women. She came from Trieste with her first husband Mario in 1962. She was born in Italy but her people considered themselves Slovenians. The disputed area created confused people. Ema is as international as her home town and finds it hard to identify as either Italian or Slovenian.

Her parents sent Ema to a Catholic girls' school. She fell in love with Mario when they were both sixteen. After Mario finished his electronic apprenticeship they emigrated to Australia and Alex was born soon after. Soon they met Jack and his wife Lore who had a baby Greg the same age as Alex. During the next couple of years, Ema and Lore gave birth to their daughters Sandy and Karen.

Jack and Mario became business partners and their little electronic repair shop grew into a major retail outlet.

The kids were in and out of each others' home and office and they were transported together to their football training and piano lessons. Both boys, Greg and Alex, took each other's sister out and kissed them but they realised that they were more like brothers and sisters than lovers.

Greg and Alex realised early how different they really are but they are intelligent enough to respect and appreciate each other's differentness.

Greg's parents Jack and Lore met at school. Lore was a prudent serious girl of German parents. She hated bad manners and slovenly behaviour. She loved Jack who was pedantic and ambitious, elegant and pompous and denigrating of anyone who was weak. He looked down on the masses as on something that had to be put to proper use.

Lore constantly criticised Alex for dressing like a slob. My dear Alex always felt more comfortable with dropouts and blacks than he did with Lore's posh friends, smiles Ema.

Alex grew in a family that liked to sing and dance and read.

Dad often told me not to take life too seriously. We are only here to do what we can. Never worry about doing more, Alex tells me.

Mario is an easy person to live with and people take him for granted, says Ema.

It was known to most of their friends for a long time that Ema and Jack had an intense attraction for each other but Mario never showed jealousy. He once said that jealousy is a useless emotion. People either love you or they don't. If they do that's fine and if they don't that is just too bad.

I could never cheat on Mario, explains Ema. I had to leave Mario before I could sleep with Jack. I would probably never leave Mario if I could once sleep with Jack. I like Mario but there was this thing between Jack and me for years. We just had to be together. People condemn me for wrecking two happy families. Maybe I was insane, maybe I should not have left Mario, but I was unfaithful to Mario in my heart and if I stayed I would always want Jack. Alex figured it out before I told anyone.

Alex tells me about his mother's affair.

I could always count on mum's sermons and on her sense of propriety. Mum never failed to be shocked at what the world is coming to. I still had secrets with which I occasionally wished to shock my prudent, modest, ignorant, inexperienced, unknowing mother. And then the whole world suddenly stood on its head and seemed irreparable. If my mother was capable to take a lover, anything could happen. Everything suddenly became fragile, nothing was certain. I was in shock. I suddenly felt like my own mother's father. I still couldn't call her silly behaviour a love affair. It sounded ridiculous for any fifty year old, let alone for someone as prudish and shy and introverted as my own mother.

Shocking, I smile.

The earth shook and the ominous clouds were lurking from an absolutely unfamiliar horizon. The sun was setting angrily red into the never, never. Never would I believe that my mother could act like that. At her age. I felt that I had to do something, tells Alex.

What happened?

It would be funny if it wasn't ridiculous. I saw Jack holding mum's hand and mum looked into his eyes. I searched for an explanation. Maybe mum was hypnotised and didn't know what was happening. Maybe she injured her hand and Jack came to her rescue. Maybe mum have given him something and forgot to take her hand back. That night mum told everybody that she was leaving dad and going with Jack. There was nothing anybody could do.

Lore got a high settlement from the business which they sold. Everybody felt sorry for Lore except Lore herself who married a German businessman she knew for years.

Mario went for a holiday to Italy with his daughter.

Jack and Ema went to Lightning Ridge for a holiday and decided to stay. Jack saw an opportunity to do business in the cash opal industry. The mad existence on opal fields attracted both.

A German opal buyer tells me that Lore tried to commit suicide. Apparently she took a bottle of valium.

Lore was always on valium, says Ema. She condemned Jack for smoking and drinking, but nobody could detect her dependence on valium and Prozac. It kept her in control.

Jack persuaded Greg to come to Lightning Ridge in 1987 to take a position as a Mining registrar. Being a Mining registrar is a powerful position, it has gradually become more important even than being a post mistress. Mining office is a first stop for those who find a new opal field. Mining Registrar knows all about the prospecting leases and where prospectors find traces and opal. Everybody wants to be the Mining Registrar's confidant or at least know someone who is on intimate terms with him. Mining registrar has to be extremely careful what information is disclosed and to whom. My husband Tom is Jack's friend and Jack is Greg's father. I am friends with Ema, Jack's second wife, and it is assumed that even I may be privy to some privileged information.

Ema's son Alex became a local chalky. As a teacher he lived in a flat belonging to the Department of Education. As the only male teacher in Lightning Ridge, he is unusually popular in the school community but to an ordinary miner his name doesn't ring a bell. Alex organises town's sporting activities. He also publishes the first Ridge school's magazine. Some don't like his involvement with local Aboriginal community.

He looks like an Aborigine with his olive Italian complexion, says Edna with affection.

Jack's daughter Karen is a teacher like Alex but she works in a posh Sydney suburb. Ema's daughter, Sandy, got a job in advertising and went to work overseas.

Ema adores her son.

He is everything I wanted to be, says Ema. Alex never passes judgement on anyone like the rest of us do.

Alex tells me that his mum came to school to talk about the olden days when she was a child in Slovenia after the war.

I was really proud of her, says Alex. She told my students how lucky she was all her life. She was only a baby when they came with the truck to take her family to Dachau. We were so lucky, she told my class, because our parents were allowed to work on the fields and they brought home turnip and carrots. Sometimes we even got sweet corn and we ate it in the dark while dad was whispering to us Slovenian stories. The magic of it united us as we cuddled together in the dark.

After the war we returned home singing all the way. We found our home burnt and our cattle gone and dad's books burned but dad told us that he read all those book and so he kept all the stories in his head.

We slept in the stable and I will never forget the wonderful smell of the fresh hay, and the magic of the stories dad told. Mum had two more babies before dad rebuilt the house but mum was happily singing to those babies in the stable.

Our hometown near Trieste became an international zone and those Slovenians under Tito's communist regime envied us for being in the free world. My father opened a little shop and Slovenians came to buy nylon stockings and scarves and parkas. We became rich when we started selling jeans, she laughed.

I used to be ashamed of my parents when I started school. I think all migrant kids were made ashamed of their parents, says Alex. Maybe there is a time and a reason for every child to be ashamed of his parents but parents are never ashamed of their children. They say: I am ashamed of what you've done. But they are always proud of their children.

I tell Ema how impressed Alex is with her.

It took me years to really appreciate mum, says Alex.

She told my class how the wind makes the trees tremble and grow. The storms make the trees strong. The trembling causes the vibrations that keep trees alive. The adversity strengthens us all, she said looking at me. If the winds of life don't break you they make you strong. The plants sheltered in the hot house would die out in the open. The sun would burn them and the wind would blow them away, she said.

Mum is such a strong woman. She says that storms are necessary. Storms pull out the weak trees to make room for the strong ones. Some trees are only half broken and stunted and huddled together they provide shade and comfort. Greg loves my mum better than his own mum. He is happy that she married his father, says Alex.

I am delighted that there is a happy ever after.

By education most have been misled;
So they believe,
because they were so bred.
The priest continues what the nurse began,
and thus the child imposes on the man.
Dryden

Alex and Greg

Alex was nine when his Sydney teacher introduced two Aboriginal girls to the class and asked the students to be nice to the strange looking newcomers.

The girls' eyes flicked over the class as they stood at the door, close to each other, forlorn before the white audience. Their dark hair was sunburnt and almost red at the ends, the snot from their noses was visible as was the puss on the inside of their eyes. The skin on their hands was cracked and one girl's colourful dress had a hem undone. They stared at the floor.

The taller of the two girls had green eyes and her name was Tracy. She looked less Aboriginal because of her eyes. Other children looked the girls over during their play lunch, they sniffed at them and put up their noses and rolled their eyes meaningfully.

The class learned in their social studies about Australian savage natives called aborigines. Much later they made a capital A and gradually Aborigines could be seen on TV and in every walk of life.

During their lunch break the girls wanted to kick the ball with the other children but Greg fiercely kicked the ball out of Tracy's hands and out onto the other end of the oval. Alex deliberately ran after the ball and kicked it back to Tracy. Nobody noticed a brief smile Alex and Tracy exchanged but it marked the beginning of their friendship.

Your girlfriend, teased Greg.

Lay off her, said Alex half seriously.

Alex noticed Tracy watching him during lunch time. He looked at her and she asked: what you eating? He offered her half of his salami sandwich and she grabbed it eagerly but she screw her face after tasting the salami. It taste funny, she said and threw it in a bin. Alex got used to Tracy's lunches and to her Aboriginal English. On a pension day she had a hamburger, chips, coke, lollies and ice-cream. She shared it with Alex. For the next week Tracy ordered her lunches from the canteen but for

the last few days of the pension fortnight she went without. Gradually she got used to salami.

Tracy looked down most of the time but her eyes followed Alex, her hero. When kids selected players for a game Alex and Tracy usually ended on the same team.

I'll tell your mum, teased Greg.

What?

If there was a closed circle Alex opened it to let Tracy in, if there was no room on the bench Alex would push others along to make room for Tracy and he would wink at Greg.

Tracy worships the grounds you walk on, teased Greg.

Jealous? Alex shrugged his shoulders.

Tracy tried new ways of pleasing Alex and making him proud. She was the fastest runner and her eyes were on Alex as she neared the finishing line.

Tracy came from Lightning Ridge as a child with her brother Kevin. Their aunt Ruth who lived at Redfern had a daughter Tracy's age and they wanted to be in the same class. Kevin was popular among his own people and respected by whites because he was a state's boxing champion. Lots of Lightning Ridge Aborigines came to his place, people who had nowhere to stay, his friends and relations sometimes stayed for weeks. Kevin was also Tracy's hero. She wanted to succeed like he did.

Alex and Greg were in year three and their sisters Karen and Sandy were in kindergarten. Greg was nicknamed fats.

Sometimes Greg playfully called Alex Alexia. The nickname stuck. Once Alex hit Greg for it, his nose bled and Greg cried into the principals office.

Greg's been teasing me, says Alex looking to the floor.

What did he say? Alex felt too embarrassed to tell.

What did you say to Alex?

Nothing.

Alex was put on detention for a week and the principal told Ema that Alex had behaviour problems.

As they entered their teenage years girls followed Alex. Greg was jealous but he tagged along hoping that some of Alex's popularity would rub off on him. At seventeen Greg grew into a loud pimply thin reddish faced

man and Alex became withdrawn and moody. The girls tried to make Alex happy. He played sport aggressively, he desperately wanted to win something to compensate for his parents not being English like Greg's father.

Alex never forgot the excursion in year four. Kids scrambled on the bus quickly to get the seat they wanted. Alex pushed at the end of the line, scared to be left behind. The bus driver yelled out something but Alex did not hear him. The big man pushed Alex out and yelled: Get the mud off your shoes. Kids laughed. Bloody wog, muttered the driver to himself and the kids giggled some more.

Alex stood there outside the bus, he did not cry or laugh, he did not swear or argue, he just stood still. The man yelled to him: hurry up, get in. But Alex just stood there, he felt that his family was attacked, indeed the whole of his people. He had no idea why it was so, he did not know what he could do about it. He was eight or nine then and he stood there until the driver became impatient and all the kids urged him to get in. The driver wasn't worried about Alex's shoes any more, he had to bring the kids on time. Just get in, he yelled, but Alex did not move. Nobody laughed now, everybody seemed to understand that something more important than muddy shoes was at stake. The driver moved out and took Alex's hand to pull him up, but Alex did not move. The driver then put his arm over Alex's shoulder and said: I am sorry. Alex quietly cleaned his shoes and boarded the bus.

Alex told me that he could never tell his parents about it. They were all attacked because he had muddy shoes, but Alex knew that something was wrong with his parents as well. It was in the words and in the eyes of the bus driver who knew his parents.

I remember the word wog from kindergarten, says Alex. Timmy invited the whole class to his fifth birthday party. It was my first party and I loved Timmy's toys. When other kids were picked up by their parents after the party, I still played happily with the cars. Timmy's father said to Timmy's mother: Get that wog kid home. I never heard the word wog before but it had a sting in it and I knew it so I went home silently and suddenly sad.

Tracy enrolled in Tech and found an evening job in a Greek fish and chips shop. That's how she met Nick, whose father was the owner of the shop. Nick invited her to his eighteenth birthday party. Tracy had never been to a white people's party before. Although whiter than some Greeks, she

felt that everybody stared at her dark skin. She knew that she was different and didn't belong. Nick was busy serving drinks and Tracy accepted a glass of punch like everybody else. Slowly she relaxed and began to enjoy herself. Punch helped to make them all equal.

It was still dark when she woke up with an aching head. People were sleeping on the floor next to her, she stepped over them and straightened her clothes. Sick and scared she ran all the way home. It won't happen again, I will stick with my own mob, she kept saying to herself.

Nick smiled casually at her the next day and she asked no questions. Tracy tried to block out the vague recollection of the evening.

You don't have to work for them wogs no more, you can keep house for me, said Kevin's friend Glen who was also an Aboriginal Liaison officer.

Tracy didn't know what exactly was wrong with wogs or who wogs were but she felt shamed by wogs. She felt that wogs didn't like her and she was scared.

Glen lived with his sister who had a housing commission home with her boyfriend and their four kids. She went to mum's in Bourke when her boyfriend bashed her. Her boyfriend followed after he sobered up. Glen was left alone in a house so Tracy moved in with him and went on a pill. I don't want to end with a bunch of kids and a pension like my mob back home, she said to Glen. She felt comfortable with Glen, he had a job and he was her own kind.

Tracy just woke up one day when the first morning sickness started. She closed her eyes, covered herself with blankets and waited for it to go away. It didn't. She accepted her pregnancy but she didn't tell Glen until she was five months gone.

I thought you didn't want kids, he said unconcerned.

I must've skipped the pill.

Coming home from TAFE one evening she found Glen drunk.

Where is my fucken tucker? he yelled.

You gave me no fucken money, you spent it on grog with your fucken mates. She scared herself with her temper and her words. He hit her.

You fucken cunt, you fucking them wog fellahs. He heard about the party. She was on the floor and he kicked her. She grabbed the legs of a chair and smashed it on his head. In the morning she returned to

Lightning Ridge. She stayed home with her mum Edna until her baby was born.

Alex finished teachers college and came to the Ridge as a teacher. Tracy tells him about the party and the baby.

It's just the grog, Glen would never hit me sober, says Tracy.

As soon as I have this baby I am going back to college. I have to keep away from my mob. I don't want to end like them, she says.

Neither Alex nor Tracy worry too much about the dust settling over Alex's belongings. People drop in all the time, they like the casual atmosphere.

When Greg comes, Alex offers him a cup of coffee but Greg washes the cup first. He scrubs it and pours hot water over it like some dangerous disease is stuck to it. Jack and Ema come to see Alex but they never accept a drink.

Is Tracy going to have a baby? asks Ema. Alex knows that she is afraid that Tracy would disgrace their family. She is probably afraid of what Jack would say.

You'd like to know if it is my baby, Alex teases.

Don't be silly. I know it isn't.

How can you tell, he laughs.

She came from Sydney or wherever she came from, pregnant, didn't she?

A few days earlier Tracy came to Ema's place to pick a photo.

Alex took some photos of my mob, says Tracy.

Ema finds the photo of Tracy's family in the pack of photos Alex left on the table. She looks at it and finds Alex in it.

Is that your mob, she asks. Tracy looks at the photograph unsure: Yes that's the one.

Ema is terrified that her son became involved with a black girl. What would people say? Ema blames herself for coming to Lightning Ridge. Is she becoming Tracy's mob?

My mob drags me down. If you stick to my people you will never own anything. Unless they are all rich, Aborigines remain all poor, says Tracy to Alex.

Where do you get these green eyes? teases Alex

My dad Anton is a white man and he has green eyes. All of us kids have green eyes. Mum has blue eyes. All mum's relations in fact. Her real father was a white fellah, but she never met him. My father has blue eyes really but they turn green when he is angry.

People often wonder why some of you blond green eyed people insist on being Aborigines. It is obvious that you have little Aboriginal blood.

Mum's grandfather was actually a Cherokee Indian. He jumped ship and joined Aborigines at Bateman's Bay. After he died grandmother brought the kids to Brewarrina Mission. Mum was born on the mission.

My other grandfather was German, but I never met him, says Tracy. Our white relations were ashamed of us. Aborigines never reject you no matter what amount of Aboriginal blood you have. If you grow in an Aboriginal home all you ever know is Aboriginal life. Like they say: You feel like an Aborigine and you are accepted as an Aborigine, you must be an Aborigine. Believe me I know what it's like. It costs you. We never turn anyone away. My people depend on each other. You have to be careful not to become a coconut.

What do you mean?

Black outside, white inside. My Cherokee grandfather was accused of being an apple: red outside, white inside. He worked for the American navy. His people rejected him.

Was he a part Indian?

I can no more be a part-Aboriginal than I can be a part human being. One of my more sober uncles once told me that if I sat on the fence I was likely to fall off. I think he wanted me to decide if I was an Aborigine or if I wasn't, says Tracy.

Have you decided?

People who like me, consider me Aboriginal, says Tracy.

I like you, says Alex.

So I am a little white inside, she laughs.

Alex realised that he sat on the fence, most minorities must have felt like that at some time. But it wasn't just minorities, English speaking migrants felt torn between being British or Australian.

Who would you consider the most important Aboriginal person today, asked Alex.

To our mob the alcoholic who died in the gutter is as important as a sober pen-pusher in the office.

Alex was often the only white person at Aboriginal funerals. Everybody cried as they sang their beloved song: The old rugged cross. Alex was touched by their reverence as they, washed and perfumed in their black and white finery, united in their sorrow and shared the mystery of coming home to Jesus. The gods of the past were forgotten.

The boy at school looked at teachers and said to Alex: They dress so flash you'd think it's a funeral.

In 1988 when people celebrated the bi-centenary of Australia, Alex wrote an article in the local paper about prejudice. He told me, that he did not sign his name to protect Ema and Jack. He wrote:

When I was a child I asked my mother and father what the word wog meant but they did not know. Maybe mum and dad had no words to explain the word wog, maybe they were shamed by the word, maybe they were afraid of it. I am sure they tried to protect me from it.

Now everybody condemns the words like wog and abo and coon and nigger and slope. They condemn the words and the prejudice with the sweet pain of passion because they are afraid of their god, but these good people like to read about bad people calling out these words.

I was invited to the meetings to combat prejudice in our community. The mysterious They, who were prejudiced, were never present. I never stood eye to eye with one of Them. They never come right out in the open and tell me which details of my differentness make them feel superior. I concluded that they don't want me to know so I wouldn't attempt to disguise my differences, remove them, change them, or get used to them.

THEY assure me that people aren't prejudiced against the likes of me, because I am almost like them.

I never met a prejudiced person yet. I am almost like Them.

I read in the local paper how much THEY, the charitable organisation did for us, migrants and Aborigines. If poor migrants and Aborigines vanished, They would have no-one to accept their charity, nobody would feel grateful, there would be nobody, who should feel grateful, to make Them look generous in front of Their gods.

THEY explain the effects of prejudice so the poor and those prejudiced against wouldn't miss out on the ill intent. It's a waste of time being prejudiced without being noticed.

They tell how in the olden days Aborigines weren't allowed to eat in Their company, to use the same cups as Them, to sleep in the same quarters. Migrants and Aborigines were praised for their willingness to do anything They refused to do. They make us feel ashamed now of our past meekness and of how we never noticed what They were either doing or thinking.

I would like to tell Them how my people laughed at Them and Their god, at Their food and dance and lingo. But They are still more numerous and powerful.

In 1988 Alex offered to take his Aboriginal friends to see the queen. They hired a Land's Council's bus and went to the opening of the new Parliament house on the Capital Hill in Canberra. Most of Alex's students came and the excursion was deemed a cultural enrichment for them.

Since this Canberra excursion Alex became known in Lightning Ridge as an Aboriginal sympathiser.

The occasion marked the bi-centenary of Australia and the Prime minister Bob Hawke said that Canberra in Aboriginal language means a meeting place. They all met and talked, the queen, her son Charles, enthusiastic parliamentarians, dignitaries, citizens, Aboriginal representatives and Aboriginal protesters.

In his speech the prime Minister Hawke pledged a special place for Aborigines in the maturing Australian nation. He promised a treaty with Aborigines because the promise seemed appropriate to the occasion but he did not say when and how it would be arranged.

The Queen and her son spoke about Captain Cook's discovery of Australia two hundred years ago and about the progress white settlers made.

A little Aboriginal girl presented a posy of flowers to Her Majesty the Queen, wrapped in the unmistakable Aboriginal colours of black, red and gold. Aboriginal protesters chanted: What do we want? Land Rights. When do we want them? Now.

Alex just began to realise that while his parents had another country to call home, Australian natives had no other place.

The Opposition Leader later concluded that the radical Aboriginal protest failed to promote reconciliation.

The word reconciliation became a word of the nineties.

Words become slogans, explains Alex to me. Slogans have a universal appeal although they mean different things to different people.

Ethnic was a word in the eighties. In the popular political jargon the word ethnic clearly separated the new comers from the English speaking people; it drew the line between Anglo Saxons and those whose background was of another culture; it made some people ordinary and others different. Department of Ethnic Affairs was created to deal with the problems of those that were different. It was presumed that ethnics and problems go together like Aborigines and migrants.

Ethnic lumped together all who were less, who had peculiar habits, who couldn't speak English, who were not typical Australians. In the eighties Australians were divided into English speaking Australians, ethnics, and Aborigines. Even Government forms carried the choices of identity: Australian, ethnic background or Aboriginal origins. Department of Aboriginal Affairs was created to deal with Aborigines. Many Aborigines wholeheartedly embraced the new Aboriginal identity. They felt that at last they became a nation in their own country. Gradually the novelty wore off and some wondered why the government chose to separate them.

At the bi-centenary celebration the Prime Minister speaks about the Australian achievements during the twentieth century and he says that half of the Snowy Mountains Scheme workers were ethnics. He praises their endurance and hard work.

White ethnics have since become continental or European which sounds complimentary and special.

Asians are still ethnics and a threat in the nineties. The Japanese buy the choicest pieces of Australian property, Vietnamese gangs are linked with violence and drugs. Koreans are involved in crime.

The children of European ethnics blend in, says Alex. I wonder if we stop being ethnics after a generation?

Alex and Tracy had a pleasant picnic on the grounds of the new centre of Australian politics during the bi-centenary celebration.

Tracy visits Lightning Ridge with her husband Ron in 1990. She brings a boomerang for Alex's birthday. She says that boomerangs were made to come back.

It's been ages, says Alex.

We got married after all, Ron's people persuaded us.

They offered us a honeymoon trip around the world. You can't have a honeymoon without getting married, says Ron.

Oh, we could have managed, laughs Tracy. It's nice to see them happy. They weren't always happy about us getting married. Little Ron and Petra, our twins helped to change their mind.

Ron is a good looking, tall man. He has an earring, a beard and a tattoo on his wrist. Markings of the past, Alex tells me. We all carry them. Some are visible, most are hidden, some we laugh about, some we cry with.

What are you doing these days? asks Alex.

We both work for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Most Aborigines work for the DAA. Government, mate! I did finish college like I promised. Ron is the head of the department, explains Tracy.

Where did you leave the twins?

At Mum's. Aboriginal women always look after their grandchildren. Mum has about ten of them crawling all over her. She is the guardian of my oldest daughter. She has about twenty grandchildren not counting strays.

What are strays?

The kids my brothers made and we don't know about, laughs Tracy.

How's the rest of the family?

On the grog, most of them. I told you I won't be like my mob, laughs Tracy a little nervously. Kids are in courts or in jail most of the time.

Government is paying legal aid, so solicitors are dragging Aborigines through courts, says Ron.

Aborigines run to the police for protection, silly sods, says Tracy.

Lately we've seen many fine Aboriginal speakers on TV, ventures Ema. They learned to talk flash since white government bestowed all these powers on them, says Tracy.

They crawl to whites to get money and power so they can lord over their own people, explains Ron.

You throw a bag of lollies to contented kids and they'll fight each other for them, says Tracy. Money and power goes to their heads. They share with the family what should be for the whole community.

Alex has a beer but both Ron and Tracy choose orange juice. Ema made herself a cappuccino. Somehow their choices speak about the way they want to live or who they want to be.

Government creates temporary jobs for Aborigines, says Ron. Aborigines are on probation while white public servants relax in their jobs for life.

You can spend millions on Aborigines and they will never amount to anything, says Tom after Tracy and Ron leave.

They redefined the word culture as a way of life so Aborigines must have had it, says Jack.

Every bloody living thing has a bloody way of life, laughs Peter.

Everybody wants to help the stupid. Nobody helps the smart kid, says Greg.

THEY can't make the dumb smarter so THEY have to keep the smart ignorant, says Jack.

Why would THEY, the smart white politicians, want to make everyone appear equal, mocks Alex.

Abos became a privileged race, says Jack.

A little Greek boy in kindergarten said to his Aboriginal friend: God didn't like you that's why he made you black. Tommy is the illegitimate son of a deserted Greek mother who peels potatoes in the fish and chips shop. Tommy has poor hearing, he wears thick glasses and suffers from asthma, yet he manages to feel superior to the little Aboriginal boy. How could that Aboriginal boy ever recover?

Everybody is prejudiced against somebody. Italians are prejudiced against Slovenians. Northern Italians are prejudiced against the Southern Italians. Slovenians are prejudiced against Serbs and Croatians. You shouldn't take too much notice of prejudice, says Ema to Alex.

If Aborigines keep multiplying as they do, we will have a real racial problem, says Jack ignoring Ema.

WE will have. Until now only Aborigines had it, says Alex.

If they are ninety percent Irish but have a drop of Aboriginal blood they call themselves Aborigines, because there is no gravy train for Irish, says Jack whose Irish ancestors lived in England.

Alex often visits Edna and Rodney.

Someone once asked me why I call myself an Aborigine when I am not even a half cast, says Rodney. I am a quarter German, a quarter Indian, a quarter Irish and a quarter Aborigine. I have no idea how to be German, Indian or Irish. Take away Aborigine and I am nothing.

When Catholic nuns came they thought us about gentle Jesus, and we happily followed their Jesus. But when Presbyterians came they offered us a cup of tea and sandwiches as well as Jesus, so we attended their prayers and ate their food. Anglicans offered us singing and dancing so we went to sing and dance; we went from one to the other to get all they were offering. Jehovah witnesses came to us and brought us books about Jesus. We forgot our old gods and followed Jesus. Finally in 1967 the government joined the Jesus people. To get our votes they offered us money and grog and tobacco. We smoked and drank and we were happy. But every day we wanted to be more happy so we drank and smoked more. Kids smoke marijuana or sniff glue to be more happy. The government just can't keep up with our needs.

The truth is that no matter how many rights and how much money government gives you, if the people around you don't like you and don't trust you, you have nothing. There is no trust or respect left. They learned me to work and I had plenty of work all my life.

My kids will never have what I had, no matter how much money the government spends on them. We knew our place and what was right and some things just ain't right. We might have been discriminated against but our kids are despised. They have no self respect. The publicans installed the money game machines in the hotels and young mums, hooked on the gambling, forget their children and their husbands. They pull the levers that swallow their pension. Then they beg the charities for support, they have no pride left.

My race is dying and I don't even know who is to blame, says Rodney. Young girls have nothing else to offer their kids but love. Whatever their kids ask for, they get, if they don't want to go to school their mums let them play video games at home or sit in front of the pub and eat their lunch out of a paper bag because they want them to be happy. Mums

dodge the authority best they know how. These young girls never made decisions for themselves, they don't know that it is their duty to decide for their kids.

How do you brake a cycle?

By working, says Rodney. Our people have nothing to do. It's only common sense that government should want something back for all the money they spend on us. The government even takes care of our old people and children. When we lived on the river bank we build our camps. Now the government built houses and the government does the maintenance. Aborigines can't put their hands on anything and say: I built that, I planned that, I planted that. There is nothing there touching their soul. They have no respect for property, it is government property.

Without work you never get anywhere. Keep them on the dole for a couple of years and they'll never find a job again. If parents are on the dole the kids will grow to go on the dole.

Rodney's old illiterate mother has no teeth and her blind eyes are sunken into the holes full of puss. She sits in the sunny spot at the back of the house smoking a pipe.

The soldiers came to our camp, she says. They made the convicts split the rocks, they were spirit rocks. They pissed on the old story rocks. The convicts dug for latrines on our sacred bora ground and the soldiers flogged them while they were digging. They dug on our birthing place where only women were allowed to come. The soldiers flogged the convicts and their blood splattered the place where our children were born. My grandmother thought that the spirit will punish the white man but the white man had guns and Aborigines packed their spears and ran. We let the spirits be pissed on so the spirits left as well.

They call their lifestyle traditional, I wonder what is traditional about drinking beer and playing bingo, says Tom.

To me traditional is full blood, agrees Peter.

Mabo is going to get us all, says Greg.

The High Court of Australia decided in 1991 that Australia was occupied when British claimed it for their king. Eddy Mabo, an Aborigine from Murray Island, claimed that Merrian people traditionally owned the land on that island. The High Court in Canberra decided in his favour.

Aborigines can claim anything now, says Greg.

Every Australian is entitled to inherit from their parents, says Alex. He spoke to Rodney's mother about land claims and she dismissed the issue.

Grabel, all of them from Charlie Perkins down, grabel all of them, she muttered.

What is grabel? asks Alex.

Them never look out for the poor no more they grab all, them white Aborigines. They grab all from the gubernment, says the old woman sitting on the park bench, her blind eyes closed to the sun.

Alex often tells me stories about his students.

Yesterday I left a little Aboriginal girl Nikita in my class while I went to the staff room to fetch a cup of coffee at lunch time. On the way home I discovered that ten dollars was missing out of my bag. One ten dollar bill was left. I confronted Nikita but she denied it. Someone took all my money, I said to her and she quickly looked up: They should have left you some, sir, just in case you got hungry, she said.

The sense of ownership is a bit vague.

They shake things. Shaking means stealing but the word has no shame attached to it. Planting things for later use is quite common as well. Once, when I first started teaching here, Leslie shook a few ten dollar notes from my table drawer. I was going to search the class but kids told me that whoever shook the money would've planted it long ago.

How do you know that Leslie shook your money.

Everybody knew. Much later I found all the notes between the books on the shelves. Leslie forgot about the money, the thrill of shaking and planting was probably enough for him.

Greg's sister Karen comes to Lightning Ridge for a holiday. Alex first kissed Karen after the swimming carnival under the flowering gum. He had a trophy in his hand, she had a ponytail, fiery eyes, flushed cheeks and heart shaped lips. There remained something soft and warm in the memory for both of them. It was the first real kiss for both. The whole world changed, their childhood was over.

Karen's mother Lore suspected that Karen was in love with Alex so she tried to stop her from being alone with him. She also suspected her husband Jack of being in love with Alex's mum Ema so she tried to cool their friendship.

Alex and Greg introduce Karen to Daniel at Lightning Ridge Diggers Rest hotel.

Sorry about the dirt, says Daniel as he shakes hands. It's clean opal dirt. We are going to check the tailings in a minute.

You must be Greek, says Karen.

The things are seldom what they seem, the skim milk passing for a cream, laughs Daniel looking directly into Karen's eyes.

You are certainly not a skim milk, laughs Greg, not with that tan on you.

I am an Aborigine, says Daniel looking at Karen. Maybe there is a shadow of my white English father lurking somewhere in my unconscious but it is subordinate to the black man I am.

You choose to be black rather than English, because your skin is black? teases Greg.

My father never stayed long enough to teach me how to be English but he is still my anima.

What's an anima? asks Karen.

It's the person I decided not to be.

You talk like a white person, says Karen feeling that he was mocking her. Both felt the intensity between them.

Would you like it better if I was a white man, asks Daniel looking into Karen's eyes.

It's all the same to me, she tries to remain calm.

In Lightning Ridge we are only interested in the colour of the opal. Red on black is best, explains Alex.

Part Aborigines call themselves Aborigines, explains Greg.

So nobody would accuse them of being Aborigines, smiles Daniel.

Its not a crime, smiles Karen.

Just a shame, laughs Greg.

Nice meeting you, says Daniel and leaves.

A funny man, says Karen.

He has a university degree, explains Alex.

There is something about him, laughs Karen.

A group of Aborigines passes by and a man yells: Fuck off. He pushes the girl towards the rubbish bin, the bin tips and the rubbish scatters.

Children laugh.

Stop swearing, says the woman, I want to teach my fucking kids some fucking manners.

They all laugh.

They breed like rabbits, drink like fish, fight like there is a war on, says Greg.

They will destroy the planet by over-breeding, says Karen.

Council is forcing Aborigines and us to live side by side, says Greg.

Poverty has never been attractive.

Bullshit. I just want a neighbour who will let me sleep over night so I can work for them. They insist that the land owns them. If the land owned them before, how come it stopped owning them, ridicules Greg.

They are reproducing flagon culture.

A flagon makes it easier to forget how whites went out on a Sunday afternoon shooting kangaroos and Abos along the river, says Alex.

Karen fidgets with the glass.

This abo shooting is a new myth. The poor graziers had to keep the thieving blacks away from sheep and cattle.

Aborigines are cashing on guilt industry, says Karen.

We messed them up, says Alex.

They should be made to scratch for their living like the rest of us, says Greg. Did you see those fruit growers on TV. Millions of dollars worth of grapes rotting because they can't get pickers. Nobody likes picking the bloody fruit, says Greg. The farmers, their wives and kids pick the fruit to earn their living. They also pay taxes so the government can give the money to those who don't like picking bloody fruit because picking bloody fruit is a lemon job. Guess how most of those farmers came to own their farms: by picking bloody fruit for years, that's how. Most of those farmers are wogs who never had time to learn English, Greg added. Most of them are Italians.

A little chill settles over them.

Alex recently spoke to the local unemployed on how Literacy courses will help them, but the unemployed didn't properly understand the value of education. It threatened to expose their ignorance.

Alex sat with the employment officer at the front and smiled slightly embarrassed. Most of the unemployed were young black men. A young

white man had an earring and long, blond, sun bleached hair. The only white girl had long red fingernails. She was very obviously pregnant and smoking.

The employment officer in a grey suit and a tie said that employment officers and the unemployed will look good if the unemployed behaved like they wanted to find a job.

We don't want the employers to bad-mouth us in the pubs and specially in the media, he stressed making himself look like he belonged to the unemployed.

Unemployed wore wrinkled shirts and shorts and thongs. One well groomed middle aged white man sat close to the official table leaning towards employment officer pretending that he wasn't one of the unemployed.

Aborigines giggled belligerently. Huddled together with heads forward like conspirators they barely looked at Alex as they smoked in short quick puffs. Some carried a bottle of coke, others clutched their cigarette packet like the worn teddy bears.

There were no unemployed girls. Girls became unmarried mothers with single parent supporting pensions.

No wonder Aboriginal women feel stronger, they have jobs, Alex tells me. Men are redundant. The incidence of suicide in young men has doubled in the last decade.

Alex tells me about the story he saw on TV about the roof of the toilet that was blown away in the storm. The camera was poised on the broken down tin toilet away from the neglected tin sheds where children played in the dust half naked. The new houses with flush inside toilets weren't in the picture. Nobody mentioned that residents wanted to use the outside toilet because the sewage pump, that pumped the effluent from their inside flush toilets, broke down. They waited for Aboriginal Land Council to repair the sewage pump. The Council claimed that they had no money for maintenance because Aborigines refused to pay rent.

Aboriginal Land Council spend the rent money on grog and our kids have to run in the bush because no toilet, said an old Aborigine.

Reporters looked shocked seeing the neglected Aboriginal people and most white Australians became a little ashamed of their good fortune.

Education and training for the unemployed became a big issue in the nineties. DEET spent millions on Aboriginal education. Aborigines learned to decorate cakes, make ornaments, play guitar and the games on computers, type, make pottery and silk-screen print.

Nobody learned them to put a roof on the toilet or repair the sewage pump, said Rodney to Alex. In the olden days farmers learned us to do everything that needed doing.

Edna's mother told me in her broken English that her son was picked up again by the police the night before, says Alex and imitates the old woman's Aboriginal English.

They is watching us like hawks, they the police, is. Howard and Mervin would never hurt each other, they are best mates, they are, she punctuated every word. When kids is down with grog they fight and them police pounce on kids like hawks on dead meat, they do. They is after their jobs they is, they pick them up instead giving them a boot in their arse and take them home. They have to go to court regular like. Couldn't they just lock them up to sober up and give them talking to.

April and her cousin Samantha come from out of town every fortnight to collect their pension cheques and have a few drinks, says Alex. The alcohol makes the girls courageous and angry. An argument usually follows about the boys they like and it ends with a fist fight. When the police was called for to end their fight, the girls called policemen fucking cunts. They hurled abuse on the frustrated policemen who tried to remain calm and in control. The crowd cheered the girls. Enjoying the high moment of bravado, they pushed and scratched and punched and spat and swore. Overpowered by police, they were charged with assault and offensive language before they were allowed to go home.

I sometimes give the girls a lift the next day to answer the judge, says Alex. The two cousins are firm, sober friends once more. I asked them why they drank and they said that there was nothing else to do and everybody had a drink on a pension day.

Sitting on the lawn in front of the court house with their friends, social workers, counsellors, probation officers and solicitors, they laugh remembering the pension day. The boys they fought for are long forgotten and their sexual urges and anger subsided. The government provides legal representation because everybody is equal before the law. Their families come and buy hamburgers and coke for a picnic on

the lawn. They wait for the judge to suitably punish them like all the other Aborigines who were drunk on the pension day.

Solicitors work overtime, judges are busy, social workers, probation officers, warrant officers, they can all rely on Aborigines to get drunk, to swear, upturn the street rubbish bins and to resist arrest as long as there are pension days and grog. They are valuable clients for solicitors and government officials who earn thousands of dollars waiting there on the lawn with them.

I sometimes watch the people in front of the court house and feel sorry for them, I say. Somehow the poor and inadequate always end in court.

The judge in his wisdom doesn't like sending Aborigines to jail because a disproportionate number of natives in jail doesn't look good for the justice system. Some Aborigines hang themselves in jails and cause Royal Commissions inquiring into their death. Australia doesn't look good internationally. The judiciary has to carefully look for alternative options. Community work is organised. The girls have hundreds of hours of community work due, so a few more don't hurt. They are told to pick the broken glass around their home. They have nothing else to do anyway. On the pension day they go to town again, become drunk, depressed and courageous.

Alex tells me that Rodney's brother Reuben preaches that Aborigines are the people from the garden of Eden.

We took from the land what we needed for the day, we did not package things, save, sell, profit. We lived with nature waiting to be enlightened by Christianity.

What did Jesus say to Aborigines before he died, I tell Alex a joke I heard. Don't do anything until I come back.

They just picked their manna from day to day.

Rodney's father came with me to see the explosion where opal miners blasted the ground to built a dam, says Alex. We watched the small mountain hiccup and stir a storm of dust before settling into a dam wall.

You bugger that up pretty good, boss, said the old Aborigine.

We are pretty good at bugging up, says Alex.

Call no man happy
until he is dead
but only lucky.

Solon.

BROKEN HEARTS

In 1997 Greg tells his father, Jack, about the new rush at Cocaine. Tom and Jack peg a claim each. On Saturday they take a drilling rig to test the ground.

Ema takes lunch to the men on the field. The boys come along to see what the drill will bring up.

On the way home they talk excitedly about the colour they found. One stone looks like it has a rare harlequin pattern. One can not be sure before its face is rubbed down on the cutting wheel.

Ema drives from the field road onto the highway, the setting sun blinds her, she does not see the semi-trailer full of sheep. The truck hit the back of her car. Alex never knew what hit him.

Ema and Greg are fighting for their lives in Sydney hospital.

Shaken to the core most of Lightning Ridge gathers at Alex's funeral. Many travel from other places. They came out of sadness and respect and some out of curiosity. Solemn, sober faces fill the church and the church yard before they spill into the street.

Something dies in all of us. Fragile and changed we cling to each other. Life isn't to be taken for granted anymore.

We must die to rise up in perfection, says the priest.

But Alex was perfect, I argue with god.

God took this young man in all his perfection so Alex will never know the sadness of growing old, concludes the priest.

Death makes us remember that we are at the mercy of god. We acknowledge our weaknesses and sins. We are sorry that we are not perfect and that our lives are less than perfect.

The post mistress speaks about the mysterious ways in which god operates. She says that after every tragedy something good will happen. I hope that reverent closeness we share in the tragedy will remain with us to give us strength and comfort. We are a family of mourners now but we should meet more often to share in the joys of living, says the postmistress.

We shake hands and listen to the silence within us. Every funeral makes us more aware of the aloneness. We are scared of the emptiness.

Nothing unites the living and the dead like the funeral. We shake hands and the energy, passing from hand to hand, makes us stronger as we come closer and closer to death ourselves.

Ema once told me how all Italians in Sydney come to Italian funerals. All ethnic groups count on their own people in times of joy and sadness. In Lightning Ridge our people are miners from all over the world.

Stephanie sobs on Marty's shoulder. Their daughters cling to them. They are still a family. We all try to mend the things we dented or broke.

Tom is clutching my hand. Contrite I put my hand into his and pray for all who need a prayer. I remember how Tom whispered words of love to me long time ago. He held me tenderly, afraid to hurt or frighten me. I wish I could love Tom more.

I remember my mother's parting words: In the end you will just have each other. Children grow up and go. All you have is each other when you get old.

Our stories reverberate within each one of us like little pebbles dropped into the ocean. We become a part of each other like tiny waves of the ocean become one in the ocean of life. We travel from the beginning to the end within the cycle of birth and death. This is the way, there is no wrong way, there are just short cuts and straight roads and side tracks, coming and going and returning as we are coming home.

There are no mistakes in life, just experiences, my dad used to say.

God of many colours and nations is with us at the graveside as we unite in prayer. Maybe we travel to the same god, maybe we all long to get home to our father in heaven. Faith makes it so much easier to overcome pain and fear of pain. Faith gives you strength when everything is changing and nothing stays the same.

Tom once told me about his confirmation. He was twelve years old and he had a white lily in his hands. His mother made a cross on his forehead saying: Son, live every day like it was your last. One day you'll be right.

Tom warns our children to be prudent, honest and hardworking and to save for the rainy day.

Our children will probably repeat his warnings to their children.

Despite our warnings we want to experience the exquisite pain and pleasure of life, the intensity and passion of being young and reckless before we prepare to cross the darkness of death. All anybody ever gets is moments within the eternity.

I silently say goodbye to Ben. We had our moments. We saw the stars brighten our sky.

The liturgy of transfiguration was read at the funeral. The disciples saw Jesus for the first time as he always was, perfect in his white innocence. Suddenly an ordinary man they knew became a symbol of love and compassion. They believed that Jesus changed on the mountain but it was them that were transfigured, their own souls were cleansed of hate and fear and jealousy. They saw for the first time what had always been in front of them.

The resurrection of Jesus means coming home to god, it has nothing to do with the battered body of Jesus nailed on the cross, says the priest.

Ema wakes up in the hospital. Her wrists are connected to tubes, her legs are in plaster, her face is bandaged. She can not move or speak but she knows that something dreadful happened, there is a premonition, a deep fear, an ache.

Mario's face is glued to the glass partition. Ema closes her eyes but when she opens them again Mario's face is still there. She can not move a finger or her lips so it must be a dream. But why is she dreaming of Mario. His face is grave. A nurse tells Mario something and he smiles a tiny smile. Mario is not a dream.

The nurse returns and says something to Ema but Ema can not respond or hear. The nurse takes a needle and gives Ema a little prick. Ema wants to ask what is happening but she can not move her lips.

When Ema next wakes up there is Jack's face on the glass. Ema tries to smile.

Karen and Sandy are crying, other visitors hide tears but their faces are sad and horrified.

I visit Ema a few days after the funeral. Her eyes are closed, head high on the pillows of a hospital bed.

The angel appeared to me in my sleep, Ema whispers.

It is Alex telling you, that he is happy, I try to comfort her.

The angel told me that we get a part to play in god's mysterious drama.

You are a splendid actress, I caress her white, cold hand.

You can get an Oscar for your part or mess it up. I messed it up. I can never change all the things that went wrong in my life.

You played your part in good faith.

I can not silence the voices of the night telling me that I am guilty. I told my angel that I wish I was dead.

Ema's lips have a trace of a smile.

Your wish will be granted, said the angel. You will die and reunite with Alex. Only god knows when. Life is just an interlude. A life of an elephant

or a life of a fly, just a moment in eternity. Ema speaks quietly like she is still talking to the angel.

It will get better in time, I try to comfort her.

I killed my son. I looked back for a split second. That's all I remember.

You can't change what happened.

Lore cried with me. She cried with my husband who was her husband. They all hate me.

Remember what the angel said. You play your part. Maybe the weaker actors get easier parts but you got a major role in a major tragedy. People are watching you.

I became a curiosity. People come to see me, to dip their fingers in the blood of my pain. Susan came all the way to Sydney to prepare the way for the lord, says Ema.

I remember Susan's words.

The past catches up with us eventually, said Susan. You can't run away from god.

Susan means well, she did not intend to hurt me but she believes in god who will punish into the seventh generation.

It was a senseless accident, I try to comfort Ema.

Some say that it serves me right, says Ema.

Nobody could wish anything like that on anybody else, I say.

I want to go away.

Where? I ask.

Into nothingness, where I will stop feeling the pain. I can not be happy ever again.

You are not the first and only one playing a tragic role.

I don't want this role.

Jesus said that he would prefer not to play the role he was born to play. He did not want to go through the pain. Some roles are tough.

I remember Susan and my mother and the church. In despair we always turn to god, to blame him, to beg him to fix things up, to cry for his mercy.

You make people look at themselves and count their blessings. Without your pain they would never know how happy they are. They love you for it. You are playing your role well.

I want my son.

He wasn't yours to have. Children are given to us and taken from us.

Alex will never talk to me again.

In your heart you must return Alex to God. When you accept God's plan, he will get you a new role. Maybe it will be a comedy this time. The audience is waiting.

They want to laugh at the scars on my face. Nobody would ever love a scarred face.

Your face will make other people's faces beautiful but your smile will warm their hearts. They will say: If she can smile with a face like that, how much more can we smile. They will love you because you will show them what love really is.

I only feel fear and pain and specially guilt. People say that there was an argument. Only there wasn't. We liked each other.

You keep blaming yourself?

I told the angel that I should have stayed with my husband. I was in love with my friend's husband. The attraction hit me harder than it ever did when I was a teenager. The angels must have taken a holiday. I never heard an angel tell me what to do.

You didn't hear the angels because Jack was in your head and in your heart.

Was it love or lust. Maybe I only wanted to sleep with Jack.

Does that make a difference?

It does somehow. Love is something else but lust is sinful.

But natural.

Do you think I am guilty?

No.

Why am I being punished then?

Leave it to god, he knows what he is doing. Let him take the blame.

Everybody blames me.

They don't.

I feel so guilty for marrying Jack.

You feel guilty because you married your friend's husband not because you had an accident.

Nobody blames him. It's so unfair. I hope I don't return from the operating table. I have nothing to come back to. He will redeem himself. People will feel sorry for him.

Months later Lisa comes to the Ridge with her new husband.

How is Ema, asks Lisa.

She is in Italy with Mario.

I show Lisa Ema's post card from Italy.

Life is like love, all reason is against it, and all healthy instincts for it, writes Ema.

She finds the verse for every occasion.

I always knew that Mario and Ema will get back together, says Lisa.

They love each other.

Life goes on, says Tom.

Lisa's new husband is older. Maybe he looks older because I never knew him as a young man like I knew Peter.

Tom and Marty show him around.

Where is Jack?

He sold out and left.

Marty still hangs around, observes Lisa.

He is always there, I smile.

Though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains,
and have not charity, I am nothing.

Corinthians

Susan

The accident changed us beyond recognition. The children at the local school cried at the assembly, the miners speak in whispers out of respect for Ema's family.

God never forgets, that's what I always say. God never forgets even into the seventh generation. You can not hide from god, Susan keeps repeating piously.

God wouldn't do that, I say because Susan's words scare me.

Susan is a valuable and well respected employee in the accountant's office in Lightning Ridge. People ask her advice about their financial transactions, they trust her judgement and her sincerity.

Susan talks about Armageddon. She trusts the Lord and those who wrote the pamphlets she distributes. I tell her that I am still bound by the catechism of my youth and do not want to become a born again Christian. I count on the god of my parents to tell me what I am supposed to do. Somewhere deep down I believe that I live in sin and that I am guilty in the eyes of god.

Trust in the Lord, Susan keeps assuring, happily confident.

People dread Susan knocking on their doors, but she knocks on, because she knows that she will reap a rich harvest in the days of the final judgement.

Give yourself to Jesus, he will take the guilt from your shoulders, says Susan.

I go to church every Sunday, what more does Jesus want?

You have to accept Jesus with your own mouth, you have to love him with all your heart, says Susan.

I don't know how to do that, I try to minimise my guilt.

You have to pray for the gift of faith.

I missed out on the gift.

The gift is waiting.

I will light a candle. I know I am being flippant which is almost as bad as being blasphemous.

The signs of the end are clear, says Susan.

What signs?

The world became an evil place. Look at catholic priests and religious molesting children. Its an abomination, says Susan.

Sexual perverts are nothing new. Ordinary men hide weird sexual practices, I try to minimise the damage done by my priests.

There is fornication everywhere, it's in the films and the books, says Susan. Sodom and Gomorra are here and god will punish us.

The old Testament is full of sex, corruption and violence, I remind Susan.

There are homeless and poor, says Susan.

Jesus said that we will always have poor amongst us, I mix reality with the words from the Bible.

We have to bring the Word of Jesus to the poor on the streets, says Susan. You do believe in the power of the Word? She probes into my conscience.

A little terrified of biblical god I remain silent.

Do you? Presses Susan.

I don't understand it, I try to avoid blasphemy and eternal damnation.

You have to open your heart to it. Bible is God's letter to you. You have to learn to listen to the word. Come with me to our meetings and you will understand.

I go with Susan. Maybe I will have a second chance at the gift.

The believers speak in tongues and the sick are instantly healed. They fall back as their leader touches them in the name of Jesus. Alleluia, praise the Lord, people chant as miracles happen.

A man tells me: pray my sister, pray for the blessing. I fail to pray properly and do not fall and the miracle does not happen.

You can't properly fall in love with Jesus because you are in love with yourself, Susan accuses me.

Surely god will be good to me if I do nothing bad, I plead with Susan for the love of Jesus. She does not know that I can't concentrate on Jesus because whenever love is mentioned I think of Ben. I am looking for an eternal love with the mortal man, that's my problem. I have always been in love with a man. I know I am stubborn but I don't know how to stop being what I am.

What you do or not do makes no difference. Only god can give you the saving grace so you must praise god who has chosen you. All the angels and saints in heaven have put their trust in god. Accept Jesus as your saviour and you will be saved.

You are lucky to believe so easily. You are a better person than I am, I admit.

We are building a new church, we need people, says Susan. It says in the Bible that we have to build a house of god.

You pay ten percent of your income for the church. It's an expensive membership. Tom would never part with his ten per cent and my ten percent does not mean much any more. I would not even dare suggest to Tom to give money to Susan's people

We give willingly. It's the ticket to heaven, beams Susan.

Maybe god doesn't want me to join, I try to put a blame on the almighty.

You have to pray constantly and he will give you grace, says Susan.

I want to believe, I say sincerely.

Your whole life changes if you believe. You have no more worries, you leave all your cares to god, advises Susan.

We are like Adam and Eve, we want to know what god knows, I say because there is the devil in me.

You have to say no to the devil and god will enter your heart, says Susan. So she knows that devil is at work in my heart.

Forbidden fruit is still most enticing, I try to joke. We all want what we must not have.

And pay the price. Look at Ema. You can't have your cake and eat it. You have to deny yourself. When you do it with Jesus in your heart, it is easy.

I denied myself all those things I really wanted but maybe they were the wrong denials. I don't know what to believe?

Jesus says: I am the way and the truth and the life, no-one comes to the father except through me. You will never be contented until you say yes to Jesus.

He loved the world and he forgave sinners, I try to get Jesus on my side.

He told them to sin no more, warns Susan.

I think of the beautiful biblical Magdalena who promised to sin no more after she met her hero and began to love him.

Is it a sin to love? Love is love, I try to slip my love for Ben through heavenly door.

People like Ema confuse love with selfish lust. God says: your sins have separated you from god, your iniquities have hidden his face from you and he can't hear you. Ema is sorry now but it is too late.

What is she sorry for?

She broke god's law.

Ema didn't mean to hurt anyone.

She took what was not hers to have.

She did no harm.

She disobeyed god.

Pandora opened the forbidden box of woes?

Who is Pandora? Asks Susan.

Never mind, there are many legends about the forbidden fruit.

I think about gentle, loving Ema. She couldn't resist Jack. Maybe she should have cheated. Maybe she should have stayed with Mario and fantasised about Jack, maybe she should have slept with Jack and lived with Mario and her family. Maybe she should have prayed to Jesus.

She paid the prize, says Susan.

A terrible prize.

God never forgets, even into the seventh generation, says Susan.

But why punish the Alex for Ema's actions, I plead with Susan.

God didn't punish Alex, he only punished Ema, explains Susan.

Susan tried to make her husband understand that his salvation depended on his giving his heart to Jesus but her husband laughed at her so she left him.

If your right hand leads you into sin you cut your right hand and praise god with your left, explains Susan.

I am so sorry for Ema, I say because I don't know what else to say to minimise the wrath of god.

We are all sorry for Ema but she was old enough to know better.

Susan considers me a decent person who knows better. She hates women who behave like whores.

God punished her for destroying two happy families.

God wouldn't do that. I try to absolve the almighty of the terrible deed.

Serves her right. Cold, cruel words frighten us both.

She had a good husband but she took her own friend's husband out of lust. She should have known better. God never forgets, that's what I always say.

Serves her right is Suzan's favourite phrase.

Poor Ema.

Jack's first wife lost a husband to a woman who almost killed her son, Susan reminds me.

Ema is barely alive.

She put herself in that position. It would probably be better if she died.

There but for the grace of god could go anyone of us, I warn Susan.

Yes, only the grace of god could save us.

I would have wanted to die. I bet she does too.

People would forgive her if she died, explains Susan.

What about god? I wonder.

Greg may never walk again, not properly anyway.

Ema will never fully recover. How could she?

She will probably get away with a fine for negligent driving, says Susan.

How did you find your new religion, I ask for an explanation of god that was so cruel to punish into the seventh generation?

My father was a Jewish doctor in Hungary before the war. My mother was his receptionist and devout Catholic. They fell in love and got married. Dad was taken into the concentration camp before I was born in 1942. Mum left me with the nuns in a nearby convent. She came to get me at the end of the war after she was married again and pregnant. Her husband was an important member of the party. I never liked my step father, the touch of his skin gave me shivers.

I got mixed up with a group of teenagers who rebelled against communism in 1956. My friends were arrested but my step father intervened and they let me go. After the revolution in 1958 my step father was arrested and he told mum to escape with the children. He knew the group of people that would help her. She took us to Austria.

I remember how we crossed the river in late autumn. There were six young children in the group and I crossed the freezing water again and again to bring the children across. At sixteen I was the oldest of the children.

We went into the refugee camp in Vienna to wait for a willing country to take us. In 1959 Qantas offered a free flight to Australia for a group of Catholic refugees as a Christmas present. They warned us, that no Jewish people were allowed aboard because the plane would stop in the Middle East. We could all be killed if they had a Jewish person on board. Mum assured them that we are all Catholics. She wanted to have my little half brother baptised but her husband would not let her. As we landed in Sydney, the Catholic priest came to welcome us. He told us if anyone was Jewish to go with the rabbi because Jews could help them more than the Catholics could. Most families went with the rabbi but mum refused. Mum sold what jewellery she had and found a place to live. My brother and I were placed in a Catholic school. Mum found a job with a Hungarian doctor, she knew from home. She never heard about her husband again so she married a Hungarian man she met at the Hungarian club. My new step dad had a son Steve from his first marriage. Steve was two years older than me. When I was twenty two I finished accountancy course and married Steve.

We had no children, Susan tells. Steve started to drink, he blamed me for not having children. He said that he had no-one to work for. I just felt so empty, I felt the cold river running through me and I began drinking with Steve to warm myself up, to fill the emptiness. I ate a lot, became fat and I began to hate myself. I needed a drink. I couldn't live without a drink. Mum told me, how I was destroying my life, how old and ugly I looked, so I tried to slim down and stop drinking. I started to take Valium, diet pills, headache tablets, murex, aropax. I took more and more of the pills because they helped me fill the emptiness inside me for a little while. Steve was drunk most of the time.

I felt really down one day so I took a handful of Valium and went to bed. Mum found me and called an ambulance. In the hospital I met Ana.

Ana suddenly made me realise that I was chosen by the Holy Spirit to become a member of the chosen people called Born Again Christians. Ana invited me to a quiet little meeting where people placed their hands on me and prayed. I could feel the Holy spirit enter my body. I know that in that moment I was born again. They told me that I am special and greatly loved by them and by Jesus.

Susan poured out her life story to the group and they encouraged her to empty all the sorrows of the past to make room for the Holy spirit. They presented her with the Bible in which they marked the chapters she should read to discover that by the Word of God the Born Again Christians indeed hold the salvation of her soul in their hands. They held Susan's hand and called on her frequently.

For the first time Susan felt significant, wanted and needed.

Overwhelmed by her new status she felt the urgency to comply with the wishes of her new friends in order to gain even greater significance and love. Like an addict she wanted to consume more of the substance that elated her and elevated her life, she wanted to spread the Gospel wherever she went.

I wish to experience what made Susan so happy.

Praise to the Lord who brought the light into the life of Susan, says the leader of the group with tears in his eyes as he places his hands on Susan.

When God touched me I cried all night because the Holy Spirit made me clean and full of mercy, continues the leader and his tears fall unchecked on the table as the rest of the group hold hands and chant: Glory, glory to God.

Many cry with the leader. Mesmerised by the words and the tears Susan falls to the ground and they all kneel around her and place hands on her and call the Holy spirit. They chant words during the prolonged

baptismal gathering. They hold hands to keep the intensity of the emotion, their bodies vibrate until the sounds of the words brake into an orchestra of individual syllabuses. They finally speak in tongues. The experience leaves everybody drained, tired, purified and fulfilled. After baptismal ceremony they go home where many cry fervently grateful for the god's mercy and acceptance.

Susan is baptised by the immersion in water and she speaks the words they dictate to her with which she accepts Jesus as her Saviour.

Susan is grateful for the recognition of her life on Earth and for the promise of everlasting life with her chosen friends. The words: praise the Lord are always on her lips. She exudes an aura of blissful contentment. People can't fault Susan's behaviour.

Tom objects when Susan calls Catholic church a harlot serving devil. Jack ridicules her.

Impassioned by her new beliefs Susan attempted to convert her husband Steve but he dismissed her new faith as utter stupidity. Her Born Again Christians assure her that with constant prayer God will help Steve see the light and they continue to pray to remedy his soul. They tell Susan that suffering for her faith will bring her great rewards.

Steve objects bitterly to Susan's obsession. She is studying and preaching the Bible every day, he never knows where she is or when she will return. Once he locked her out at night and found her on her knees in the garden in the early hours of the morning. One day he came home after work and there was no dinner. He saw her religious friends leaving his home. He hit Susan, she fell to the floor and praised the lord for the suffering.

Susan knows that some ridicule her faith and laugh behind her back but suffering for Jesus is her salvation. She learned the friendly mannerisms as she spreads the message of the Christ's imminent coming. Steve made it clear to his friends from the start that he has nothing to do with Susan's madness.

Susan shows me a booklet about Doctor Percy Collett, a member of her church, who is a living testimony of the living God. Collett wrote about his five and a half day stay in heaven where he met God and spoke to Jesus who was there preparing the dwelling place for the believers. Collett describes in minute detail his trip, all heavenly people, the angels and the buildings, the food they eat and the clothing they wear. He tells about the glorious beauty of God's throne. Collett describes the rooms

and the activities in heaven, he repeats the conversations he had with God and Jesus, he cries as he remembers the sweetness and charm of the everlasting life. One wouldn't want to miss out on such gifts just because one stubbornly refused to be baptised again.

Susan believes that God heard her call of despair and chose her for heaven where the golden streets are paved with diamonds and other precious stones, where there is no conflict or sadness or loneliness. The end of the world is coming and Susan accepts the time of waiting on Earth as preparation. The bigger the hurdles of her daily life the greater the rewards in heaven. She tells her friends that soon the bodies of the believers will change and live for evermore, while others will suffer and die before the judgement day on the New Year 2000.

Susan does not watch TV since her immersion in the baptismal water in 1987. She is too busy reading the Bible and every verse and chapter underlined in the book proclaims what Born Again Christians tell her.

I was deaf and blind, I did not know Jesus until he turned on the light in my heart, says Susan enormously grateful and relieved that she now indeed can see and hear the God's message.

Only the chosen ones will be spared, she says to Tom.

Nobody knows the day or the hour, Tom quotes from the Bible.

Just read the Bible carefully, says Susan.

You keep repeating a handful of verses of the bible to baffle poor people. Every word of the Bible is equally sacred, says Tom.

They are making a proper circus out of god, says Melanie.

The end of the world will come by the year 2000. Be warned, miracles are happening every day, tells Susan.

Miracles are for people who have no faith. You are asking god to come and give you a sign that he exists. You are like Satan who tempted Jesus to jump off the mountain and change stone into bread to prove that he is a son of god, says Melanie seriously.

Why would god, who is our father want to punish us? I ask.

We challenge Susan because maybe we would like to challenge god to provide the answers.

Suffering is our punishment for disobedience, says Susan.

When have babies disobeyed.

It's the sins of their fathers.

Susan never gives up, she knows that in the end she will be proven right. We are all a little scared of her prophesies.

It says in the bible that looking back turns you into a pillar of salt. We have to look where we are going, says Susan.

Is there nothing else but the road, no-one to turn to, but God. The voices of the night become the voices of the heart. The head is silent and the longing takes over.

Our job so uncertain and the road so mysteriously hidden, I say and we are all sad.

Ema's accident is ever present on our minds. It reminds us how fragile life is.

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
and time future contained in time past.
Eliot.

History is the thing of the past.

During 1997 we learn about Australian history whether we want to or not. Aborigines are telling their story, they emerged like wood-worms when you cut the solid looking log through the middle.

Two hundred years ago Aborigines still lived in a stone age. English settlers considered themselves the most civilised nation, obliged to conquer, civilise and Christianise the savages they invaded. The instructions given to Arthur Philip before he departed from England to establish the first British settlement in Australia were that Aborigines in New South Wales were immediately to be regarded as British citizens and so come under the protection of British law. This protection rarely reached Aborigines in the outback. The brutality of invasion did. British convicts and illiterate poor came face to face with Aborigines and were terrified of each other while their masters stayed in the relative comfort of the new city. The settlers had guns and Aborigines had boomerangs and spears. Even if and when Aborigines learned a limited English, they did not understand each other.

It's only natural that they have to assimilate before they can properly communicate with the rest of Australians, says Jack.

We'd have a war if we didn't find the middle road, says Tom.

Everybody has to become English simply because English are in charge, says Marty.

English brought Aborigines together to have decent housing, running water and electricity but they complain that we displaced them. Did they want us to bring water and electricity to their camps in the bush? asks Tom.

Until they accept the same responsibilities there will be no end of trouble, says Jack.

In 1997 Aborigines and whites eat the same pies and hamburgers and KFC's, we drink the same coke or beer, smoke the same cigarettes, watch the same soapies on television, swear with the same words, wear the same brand runners. The whole world is assimilating, we all play the same ball games, same poker machines, same computer games, we curse the same law and politicians, agrees Tom.

We are almost as good as British, mocks Marty.

It's easy to condemn past generations but there were always good people and bad people. Many Aborigines, who were fit and useful for work on the station, remained on their traditional grounds while others were moved to the reserves and missions where they were fed and looked after. People who looked after Aborigines sometimes tried to absorb the natives into their own, white group, other times they segregated them for their own good and for the good of those neighbours who didn't want them near. Some smoothed their dying pillow others shot them, some found them a nuisance others found them fascinating, says Jack.

The anti-discrimination act made it illegal to dispossess someone on racial grounds. In 1992 High Court decided that the notion of Australia being terra nullius before British settlement, was a lie. The fight for Australian land was on.

In 1996 the Governor General says that there must be a mutual goodwill to identify and make right the wrongs of the past. He says that it has to be acknowledged that much has already been done and that much has still to be done to overcome the consequences of the past wrongs.

People will always want more than they need and more than others have, laughs Jack.

Someone is always the top dog, says Tom.

When the cake is cut most people believe that they deserve a bigger piece, says Jack.

The land Wik family claimed was a pastoral lease. The High Court decided 4 to 3 majority in 1997 that it was not impossible for any native title rights to have survived the granting of the pastoral lease. The High Court ruled on Native title generally. The claimants have to go to court to show that they maintained a traditional connection to their land and that their native title rights have not been extinguished by the pastoral leases.

Nobody wants to share what they already have, says Tom.

The high profile Aboriginal leaders advocating Native title claims are inspired by white opportunist lawyers, says Jack.

The likes of Kerry Packer rule Australia, why should I try to make them richer, says Marty. Pecker owns more of Australia than all Aborigines.

Dixon family, the native title claimants for our area, represented by Michael Anderson, arrive to Lightning Ridge on 15.3.97. Everybody drops whatever they are doing and rallies to the meeting. The new broom is sweeping the streets of Lightning Ridge, the fresh breeze puts colour into the cheeks of miners.

Aborigines come from as far as Melbourne, Sydney and Armidale. There is drinking and vandalism and violence over the weekend. Lightning Ridge, which prided itself on its multiculturalism, is openly split on racial grounds.

It will cost billions, says Jack. They spent millions of dollars on a report about Aboriginal Death in Custody but nobody read it. Aborigines get drunk and they kill themselves sometimes. Whites do that too but nobody takes any notice of whites.

The common law gives Aborigines the right to inherit land from their ancestors, says Marty.

We managed to ignore this law for two hundred years. They should let the sleeping dogs lie, says Jack.

The Crown will have to pay compensation, says Marty.

Haven't we been paying compensation ever since a white man first stepped on the continent? What more do they want?

Who is in a position to say where Native Title exists and where it had not survived? Asks Tom.

A lawyer wrote for the local paper:

Tribal customary law recognises Native Title rights to reside only in persons born to a tribally initiated father and mother and nobody else. People of mixed races have no right to the native title.

Anybody with a drop of Aboriginal blood wants to be called Aborigine now, says Jack.

Michael Anderson arranges his Dixon clan and other black speakers in a semi-circle around the tables in front of the ever growing crowd of white miners. Lightning Ridge Bowling club auditorium has never been so packed.

Aborigines sit in the first lines. It is their show. Television cameras are pointing at the Aboriginal panel and the journalists have their notes and tape-recorders ready. The atmosphere is electric. Nobody speaks above a whisper.

Michael says that grinding stones and middens found on this land proved that Aborigines lived here for 75 000 years. Narran lake was a communal area for seven groups of Aborigines. Most of those present are impressed by Michael's knowledge and by the calm, pleading way he asked the audience to consider his claim.

We educated the bastards so they can screw us now, says Jack.

Michael narrates the sad Aboriginal history to the silent audience. He points out that it is time for national reconciliation and that no reconciliation can be reached without talking.

Until 1967 Aborigines didn't count as people, they couldn't buy land, let alone claim it or inherit it, says Michael.

We lived here for up to one hundred thousand years and we are not allowed to say: this is my land.

It took another twenty five years before a Native Title Act was passed. Mabo decision of the High Court recognised an Aboriginal family as traditional owners of the land they lived on.

In 1997 Wik case, High Court decided that Mining and Pastoral Leases co-exist with Native Title.

We started talking and we will not stop. It doesn't matter if I end down a mine shaft and someone buries me, our claim will go on. Someone else will be stepping in my place. We are here to stay. We have no other country to go to, this is our home. We were fighting to get our land back, right from the beginning but we were overpowered. At one stage we were almost wiped out. We are getting stronger, our numbers are growing.

They breed like rabbits, whispers Jack.

Since 1967 Aborigines gradually regained some pride and identity. Our culture gained international recognition.

Governments in the past dispersed our people, they shifted them around like cattle, Aborigines had no say about their fate. They could not stay on their traditional land even if they wanted to, says Michael.

We'll take the matter to the prime minister, decide miners.

If the prime minister had the authority to change the current situation, he would not have procrastinated, warns Michael. The only thing the federal government can do is pay compensation

Why don't you buy land like the rest of us, called out Jack.

After the war the returned soldiers put their names in a hat to draw the lots of land. Aboriginal soldiers put their names in a hat and when they brought their number to the police station, they were told to piss off. Under the Statutes of NSW Aborigines could not own land until 1969. A bloke accused me that I wanted to bring in apartheid like in south Africa. In Australia until 1969 there existed apartheid, there was one law for whites and another for blacks. Until 1972 it was illegal for Aboriginal children to be in white schools if the whites objected. We have gone through an oppressive history. Some of you don't give a shit about that but if you think like that then there is a long road to a settlement and we will still have to negotiate. We will have to talk whether you like it or

not. It does not matter how this meeting goes, the process will continue and continue and nothing in the world will stop it, says Michael.

We now have a Western lease, a pastoral lease, mining lease and native title all on the same land and nobody can say what anyone title holder can rightfully do, reasons a farmer.

Tom stepped forward: I have never seen any of these Aborigines in town during the last thirty years. An Aboriginal elder told me that opal was a taboo to Aborigines, that traditionally Aborigines were not allowed on the ridges.

The only reason why there were no Aborigines in Lightning Ridge is that they took a blitz trucks to Angledool area in 1936, rounded all local Aborigines and shifted them to Brewarrina to be educated, explains Michael.

Aborigines lived along the rivers, there is no river in Lightning Ridge, says Jack.

Every inch of land from Camborah, Lightning Ridge, Angledool to Goodooga belongs to my people, says Michael.

Edna and I clap looking at each other. We keep on clapping for all the white and black speakers. I know that I should not clap for Aborigines who want to take our livelihood away. I hope Tom doesn't see me. The thought must have passed Edna's mind as well that she should not clap for white speakers. Sitting on the fence with Edna is uncomfortable. We just happen to sit between the white and the black crowd. The fence we sit on is becoming higher.

We will look at legalities of mining. There are claims that nobody works, there are illegal camps, and we know them all. They are contravening the mining act, says Michael.

That is a direct threat.

Lightning Ridge people were never interested in the colour of the skin, we are here to find the colour in the opal, says Tom.

I propose that we give nothing, no land, no compensation, no privileges, says Jack and miners clap.

We have been paying millions and millions of dollars for Aborigines since day one. Isn't that compensation, asks Tom.

A line of white speakers cue behind the microphone.

I am over eighty and I have been in three wars fighting for Australia, says Jack Pick. You get the land you fight for. We would all perish if Japanese were allowed to invade Australia.

Everybody respects Jack and whites clap.

Aboriginal tribes dispossessed and killed each other before white men came. Who was paying compensation then? asks Jack.

You say that Aborigines were on this continent for a hundred thousand years. When white settlers came there were less than a half million Aborigines. How come they didn't multiply like other nations. They multiplied ten fold in the last fifty years. Does that mean that their conditions are getting worse. Aborigines make children because government provides for them, says a man who claimed to be a scientist.

Lightning Ridge is full of people who have no other home to go to, because someone invaded their country and took away the land they grew up on. We are all refugees. We want to make a honest living in this land. We also lost our culture and language and homes and heritage, says Boris a Russian speaker.

The line of white speakers became longer.

Changes will happen, says Michael. I wanted to talk to you first but, really, our claim has nothing to do with you people. We will all be affected by the government decision but it will be government who will make a decision.

They are our representatives, yells Jack.

I know we are still a minority, says Michael.

You will always be, yells someone.

Our mothers were raped by white men, yells an Aboriginal woman.

They were raped by your fathers not by me, yells a white man.
It might have been your father or your grandfather as well, shouts a black woman.
And yours, laugh some whites.
Why don't youse go home, yells an Aboriginal woman and Michael tries to restrain her.
Tell us what you want in case you win, asks Jack.
We are just listening to your concerns for the time being, says Michael.
What will you do if you get the title?
Let's wait and see what the court will decide, says Michael.
Why did you call the meeting if you don't know what you want?
He says that he wants a revolution, yells someone. He wants a bloodshed.
Revolution means change and no change can happen without casualties.
That does not necessarily mean bloodshed. I had death threats that's why I mentioned bloodshed. I said that if they have a go at me, they better not miss, because I will not miss.
He wants a thousand dollars for every claim we register.
Yes, you will have to negotiate with us before you register a claim, says Michael.
Bullshit, yelled a miner. Bullshit was the strongest term used.
It is right to give millions, indeed billions to Aborigines. It is right to give them new homes, pensions, spending money and good cars. But on top of that they want back all the land. Is that right? Jack looks like Mark Anthony in his hour of speech. Are we going to give them all that? He tries to engage the audience.
Jerry, the opal buyer and Bob, the grazier, try to outsmart each other. Both eventually want to be seen as fair-minded and in favour of Aborigines.
They will get on TV, mark my word, says Jack.
My ancestors came from England unwillingly in chains below the decks. They had no choice and they had just as hard time then as Aborigines, says a farmer.
The greatest thing the NSW government ever did for Aborigines was to tell the police to watch Aborigines, says Michael. They carefully recorded every movement of every Aboriginal family. The hospitals recorded all the births and unfortunately the records show that a lot of cockies played up. They don't like the information of what children they had with Aboriginal women.

We will prove that we are the right owners of this land and we will do that through government documentation.

Tell us what will you do with the land if you get the title, yells Tom.

Grow kangaroos, Michael laughs. No, seriously, we haven't got a clue what we are going to do with it.

Michael's mob doesn't live here. They don't even recognise my family which has lived here all the time, says Edna.

I am not interested in those Aboriginal families that want to live like white people. I am only interested in what is right for my family, says Michael.

This man is inciting racial hatred, he is driving a wedge between black and white and between black and black, says Jack.

Nobody knows you, Michael. There are fifteen local Aboriginal families not being recognised by the claim. We are going to make a contra claim, says Edna.

You took our Aboriginal Land council money to pay for your expenses but you never asked us to join you, says Rodney.

You say that Aboriginal Housing organisation means nothing, that ATSIC is a heap of shit, that Aboriginal Land councils are not involved, who are you then, Michael, yelled Kevin.

I represent my family. Michael's position became weaker and the women on his panel become abusive. Michael tries to close the meeting in an orderly manner, but there are more concerns miners want cleared. You may be allowed to use the surface of the land but not underground, tries Tom.

Native Title gives us the right to minerals as well, advises Michael.

We live in camps on the field and work in the dirt to provide new homes in town for Aborigines. Isn't that compensation? We only hope that one day we may find enough opal to make a home for ourselves as well, says Fred.

You wouldn't know what to do with the land. For thousands of years you haven't done anything with it. You have to work to produce the goods. You only want money, says Jack.

Don't you think that after we have been dispossessed we have the right to claim part of what was once ours, pleads Michael.

It is now painfully clear that a lifeblood of this area of the Barwon-Darling river which travels through thousands of kilometres of semi arid land, has been severely affected by overgrazing and over extraction of water for irrigation. The cotton spraying wrecked the rivers and the trees. It should be remembered that Barwon Darling have a lot of Aboriginal residents whose forefathers survived in this land for thousands of years without disturbing what sustained them. If we do nothing to the land for awhile, the land may recover, says Michael.

While we starve, yells a grazier.

You can take your boomerang and go kangaroo hunting but don't expect us to buy you a cold beer and air-conditioned home, interjects a miner. My land was taken by communists and I have no right to it, says Tom. Everybody is fighting for compensation, why is it so wrong for Aborigines to do the same? Says Michael.

There is always a danger that the law that had gone wrong in so many things lately will be used foolishly again to appease a little noisy minority, says Jack.

The local newspapers cash on the news. The national spotlight is on Lightning Ridge.

Deputy prime minister informs us that three quarters of Australia is up for grabs if Aborigines want to claim.

There is an ominous atmosphere in the Ridge. Michael is saying that bloodshed is a price of the revolution. Aborigines claim Lightning Ridge, lock, stock and barrel and there is no way the smart white miners would allow it.

Scientists, politicians, philosophers and judiciary unite their skills against Michael. White people who never said hello to each other begin talking on the street about the common enemy.

Lightning Ridge was known as a functioning multi-cultural community. The swaggie, the bagman, the drover, the people who saw a chance to make an honest dollar for an honest day's work, all these people made a town, says the editor of the local paper.

Michael says that he will shut Lightning Ridge down. People who never experienced war are aching for the violence and the heroism of it. The leaders emerge. Their solemn speeches are designed for history. Their knowledge and wisdom are finally recognised and applauded. Their whole being becomes known to others.

In the absence of Michael Anderson there is dissent among miners, Aborigines and farmers. The sympathy is felt and expressed for local Aborigines, who have nothing to do with the common enemy, which is Michael. The old local residents remember times of friendship and trust with their Aboriginal friends and neighbours but some new residents blame all Aborigines for all the problems in the Ridge. Old sympathies and old hatreds resurface. The speakers accuse each other of bias, weakness, harshness and stupidity.

Edna is upset by the hatred felt in the Bowling club auditorium. She believed that she lives among friends in Lightning Ridge. She blames Michael Anderson for stirring up trouble. She remembers hard times. She gave birth to seven children under the tin roof of a one room log shed. She worked with Anton and she went without but she is happy with her life now.

Michael never worked hard like we used to, says Edna.

The fax was sent to the prime minister: We fear for the future of our town and livelihood. We are concerned that this is causing racial tension where there it hasn't previously existed. We ask you to act speedily and decisively on this crucial issue before we see the disintegration of our town, land values, tourist industry and most importantly our chosen way of life.

The country will go broke in lawyers' fees. Government will not be capable to sustain the process. The system will gridlock. Eight thousand mining claims being negotiated case by case, says Jack.

It doesn't matter how long the process take, it will not stop until it is over. Precedents will be set. Lightning Ridge will set a precedent for the rest of the state, says Michael.

In principle we agree that Aborigines were messed up by the successive white governments and that they, as original inhabitants, deserve some consideration but people are not ready to surrender without a good fight anything that was at present theirs.

The government is squeezing poor miner, graziers want their money and now Aborigines, says Jack.

The National party is under the pressure of farmers and graziers and miners to fight for the extinguishment of the Native title so the prime minister is under pressure of the National party and he has to find the way not to let the primary producers of the country down.

Pauline Hanson's One Nation party put pressure on the National party leadership to fight harder. National voters threaten to defect to One Nation if something wasn't done about securing the pasture and mining leases.

Graziers everywhere talk about Native Title.

The complaints about the treatment of Aborigines will never end, says a farmer. I am sick of their privileged status. They lecture me about past failures and injustices. What can I do about it?

With all our know how and money we can not keep Aborigines healthy and happy if they are not compelled to work and obey the same laws we have to obey, says Jack.

The history condemned us for taking Aboriginal kids to give them decent upbringing. Aborigines wanted to be equal so we made them equal but they turned around and want to be better, says Tom.

Extinguishment of Native title is the only common sense solution, says a farmer.

For most white Australians reconciliation means that Aborigines should finally acknowledge and thank the rest of Australians for the wonderful progress and comfort and technology. They are in turn prepared to say, that, with the hind sight, perhaps the invasion could have been done

more humanely. Maybe the British lot didn't have to shoot so many Aborigines or to poison their water or flour.

People on the land will become unemployed if Aborigines get the land. There will be no exports. There will be ten thousand Lightning Ridge miners without a job, no opal will be sold overseas, says Tom.

Aborigines want a referendum because they are counting on international pressure. Olympic games are coming and most Australians are more concerned with sport than with the land. Millions don't care who owns the land. They live in the land of plenty. But not for long. Suddenly it will hit them. City folk keep saying that their precious freehold backyards are safe. What do the backyards produce, what will they live on, says Jack.

Edna invites me for a cup of coffee.

Michael wants to buy us now. He offered every local Aboriginal family to be a party of the claim. He is afraid that he will lose without us. But it's too late, he spoke against every Aboriginal organisation and against every local Aboriginal family, says Edna. The whole thing will drag through courts for years and years and there will never be a final solution.

It's amazing what sentiments the fear of the unknown generates, says Rodney. Why couldn't the High Court decide in a language we could all understand.

In 1967 over 90% of people voted for Aboriginal citizenship. I think if there was a vote taken now we would be rejected. Despite their own racial and ethnic tensions, people all over the world now know about Aborigines. Australians are afraid that the world's sympathy will go to Aborigines.

Rich Australians are kind to Aborigines, they already have everything they want. They don't mind if a little wealth trickles down to Aborigines. It makes them happy and it makes Aborigines happy. You can only drive one Rolls Royce after all at one time. But poor class discriminates against us, discrimination is based on property, we are competing for the same goods.

When European migrants came they really brought Australia to its feet. Lots of our girls married Europeans and some men took them to see their country in Europe. Lots of Aboriginal girls had children to Anglo-Saxons whites, who never took them even inside their homes.

I would still like to see national referendum on Native title to settle once and for all this issue of land ownership. If Australian people reject Native title, that is just too bad for our people.

They can sort it out later on what Native title means. Now you have to ask farmer if you can gather wood or go fishing or dig a hole on his land for mining. It's only right that you should ask Aborigines for permission as well. Miners pay graziers and farmers compensation for registering the mining claim. We even have to ask permission of a farmer to go to Narran lake which was original gathering place for Aborigines. We can't go to Dungalear where Aboriginal cemetery is or where middens could be found. Why can't this permission be given through native title..

The word Aborigine should be a sweet, good word but they made it into a dirty word. The word Aborigine means belonging to a place, being there from the beginning, being at home. Everybody is an aborigine from some place, belonging to some land.

Rodney does not expect me to say anything, he is sorting out his feelings and ideas.

We were brainwashed that Abo was a terrible thing to be. It was better to be anything else. Many Aborigines tried to pass themselves as Chinese or Indian in the past.

Aborigines aren't a perfect race of people. There are good whites, don't get me wrong, and there are Aborigines I wouldn't let into my backyard like you probably wouldn't let some whites. But when a horrendous crime is committed by one Aborigine, they take it out on all our people. They single out blacks and we become all guilty and paying for it. This did not happen before European contact. Aborigines maintained law and order. They pulled the bad ones in line. People who did wrong, were put down and existed no more.

Aborigines had wars in the past. When you live in this harsh environment and you get no rain for months and through no fault of their own your children are starving, you see good tucker on other people's territory, you go for it. Pouching caused wars, it wasn't territorial war, it was just survival. It's a human nature that if you have

an orange grove across the road and my children are hungry, I'll jump the fence to get those oranges.

Aboriginal people, like Europeans, have never been united the same as Europeans were never the same or united.

It would be a terrible place for the world if it was all green or purple or whatever.

People are asking what Aborigines are going to do with the land once they get it. Aborigines need not do anything, they can do as they like, the land has been exploited enough. They don't have to produce a single potato if they don't want to. What little land they get, they can use for whatever they well like. They won't be idle.

Twenty percent of Australians produce enough food for all Australians and for export.

The land is a place where you can do what you like. There was an uproar when Ularoo was given to Aborigines but since then more people than ever came to see it. With a bit of land and a bit of money Aborigines can survive.

Australia gets about one hundred billions dollars in its budget and a lot comes from the land resources exported from Aboriginal land.

Aborigines are entitled to some of that money.

All the money in China won't pay for the loss of Aboriginal culture. It can be done in a different way. If a little land is given and with a little money some Aborigines may penetrate into the business world.

Australians embraced Aboriginal culture but Aborigines remained downtrodden. We know that millions and millions were spent on Aborigines but that got us nowhere.

Six thousand Australians died during the last three wars and we remember them on ANZAC day but nobody remembers Aborigines who died defending their country against invasion, Edna helps Rodney. They travel on the same road and understand what each is saying.

Nobody knows how many Aborigines were there when Cook came but our population dropped down to an all time low of fifty to sixty thousand by 1938. Thirty thousand Aborigines were slaughtered before the federation and that war is not even mentioned in the history books.

They died for Australia, they are our veterans, they died defending their culture and land, they spilt their blood for their homeland. If they were white the forested monuments would be erected for them. If we are to have a reconciliation we have to give our dead a decent burial.

Australian soldiers fought around the world in other people's wars where other nations exploited each other.

Aborigines get no recognition for their contribution in developing Australia. Until thirty years ago Aborigines worked hard. They did most of the work on the land. They were stockmen, fencers, shearers, women were domestics. Not working is new to Aborigines. It isn't right to call Aborigines lazy.

They say that there is a billion and a half provided for the acquisition of the land for Aborigines. But this is not the same as Native title.

Taxpayers money is being used to buy Land Council's blocks of land and Barriekneal properties but if the land goes down into liquidation, if the rates are not paid, the government can take it back and sell again.

Reserves and missions are specifically gazetted for Aboriginal purposes. Aborigines can go and do what they like there. That's Native title.

Nobody today exists on his own, doesn't matter how successful people are, they must have help from somewhere. Nobody is self-sufficient, adds Edna.

In other countries they signed the peace treaty but they never signed the treaty with Aborigines. We don't want to dwell on the past, we don't want to say that we want sympathy, live and let live, I say, says Rodney. Much of the Aboriginal culture vanished when Aborigines became institutionalised on the mission by the end of the century. By 1880's seventy five percent of Aborigines died. Complete tribes disappeared. We were scared to speak in lingo even after the world war, says Edna.

There is a general view in the white community that all Aborigines get loads of money from the government, that they get drunk and neglect their health, their homes and their children. The view is that all Aboriginal ill mental and physical health is self inflicted, promoted by the government and paid for by the poor taxpayer.

Rodney keeps on talking as if he is talking to himself.

There are families who have high ambitions for their children. They work extremely hard, live honest and clean lifestyle but they still suffer the discrimination directed towards all Aborigines, says Edna.

Aborigines grew up as an inferior race dependent on handouts and alcohol. They lost a sense of belonging and purpose, says Edna.

Determined to civilise Aborigines, missionaries took the children and educated them in the mission schools away from the bad influence of their pagan parents. These children grew up alienated from their culture. Aboriginal language, law and custom were disregarded as inferior. They learned to be ashamed of being Aborigines.

Family remained the strongest part of Aboriginal culture to this day. History, and blood links are our main support system, says Edna.

Governor Husluck's version of assimilation during the seventies was a single society in which racial emphasis were rejected and social issues addressed. In the nineties the sympathies of white Australians are vanishing, people became tired of multi culture. People see Aborigines as lazy and hopeless.

Governor Sir William Deane warns in 1997 that it is plainly wrong to claim that Aborigines, the underprivileged and those suffering racial abuse, are on the government gravy train.

Deane was one of the High Court judges in the Mabo case and he says that the dispossession of Aboriginal lands by Europeans was the darkest aspect of the history of this nation and amounted to an unutterable shame, helps Edna.

Historian Geoffrey Blainey says that accusing Europeans of wiping out Aborigines by mass murder was wrong. Most Aborigines died of disease unintentionally introduced into Australia.

The vices of Europeans caused the starvation, venereal disease and despair, says Rodney.

The independent member of parliament, Pauline Hanson, in 1996 says that Aborigines enjoyed more privileges than white Australians. Like Sir Husluck she wants Australia to be one nation with equal set of opportunities and duties. She wants Aborigines treated like any other Australians.

They can say anything they like in their ivory towers. Everything depends on how a man on the street will behave, says Rodney.

Aborigines are calling on black nations to boycott our Olympics. They want to shame us across the world, says Jack.

Aborigines should look at African black nations to see what real suffering is, says Tom.

They should compare with India or Brazil or Philippine and they would appreciate how lucky they are. They have every service imaginable, they have new homes and full bellies. That's more than the other half has, agrees Jack.

Wik delivered to Aborigines more than even they ever expected, says the prime minister. I always knew I had to bring the pendulum more to the centre and make farmers secure. At the same time I have to do the right thing for Aborigines. Farmers have a reason to worry. My ten point plan is painstakingly designed to be fair to both groups.

People don't think it right that big land owners be given a freehold title for nothing. On the other hand, if the Native title was to co-exist with the Lease title Aborigines would be able to negotiate for any mineral rights on the land where the Native title would be established. People are angry because they are likely to foot the bill for whatever happen. They will pay either to make the rich whites richer or to give more power to Aborigines.

The likes of Kerry Packer own and rule Australia, why should I try to make them richer, says Marty.

Some Aborigines intentionally live in appalling conditions so that they can prove it to the world how badly they are treated. Surely they could keep their backyards clean and grow some fruit and vegetables for their kids. That has nothing to do with the money or the land or the politics, says Tom.

Since Jack left and Peter died Marty and Tom spent more time together.

Aboriginal spokesman on SBS television says: Older whites want war, younger whites want peace. Older Aborigines want peace and younger Aborigines want war.

There are some brilliant Aboriginal negotiators and speakers and they won't be silenced, I say.

Older Aborigines are reconciled with their status. The older whites have given to them what they were willing to give. Young whites are idealistic and want to give and young Aborigines are willing to take, reasons Marty.

Prominent Australians apologise to Aborigines for mistreatments of the past, specially for the stolen generation. The Labour leader cries: For those things that we are responsible for, I apologise, as a leader of the Australian Labour Party.

The Prime minister extends personal regrets and sorrow for the mistakes of the past governments but he refuses to apologise in the name of the nation. He claims that he has no right to pass a judgement on what the governments of the past have seen as the right thing to do.

I have always been fair to Aborigines, I have never caused them any harm, I was not in Australia when separations occurred and neither were my ancestors, says Tom. If we begin apologising we should go right back to Roman times and Turkish invasion and the burning of the witches, slave trade and Korean war and Vietnam. Perhaps we should apologise for Cain killing Abel.

No money can pay for anything we make extinct but that is life, says Jack. Every day we lose either an animal or a plant or a language, a custom, a river, a way of life. The world is a global village and this village is becoming one culture whether we like it or not. English language is becoming an official language, multinationals are dictating what we get and the way we do things.

Native Title destroyed Lightning Ridge, says Tom. People are leaving. Most houses are for sale, no new fields are found, nobody finds opal, you can't sell what you have.

Our way of life is gone forever, says Marty.

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
by each let this be heard,
some do it by a bitter look
some with a flattering word
the coward does it with a kiss
the brave man with a sword.
Oscar Wilde

GOODBYE LIGHTNING RIDGE

With Tom in jail there is no-one I wish to see in Lightning Ridge. I sit on the bus going to Bathurst and a group of children sing:
There is a hole in a bucket, dear Lisa.
Then mend it, dear Henry
With what shall I mend it, dear Lisa?
With a straw, dear Henry.
But with what shall I cut it, dear Lisa.
With a knife, dear Henry.
But the knife is so blunt, dear Lisa.
Then sharpen it, dear Henry.
But the stone is so dry, dear Lisa.
Then wet it, dear Henry.
With what shall I wet it, dear Lisa.
With the water, dear Henry.
With what shall I fetch it, dear Lisa.
With a bucket, dear Henry.
But there is a hole in my bucket, dear Lisa.

The monotonous chanting goes on and on. The hole in the bucket reaches into my consciousness. I hold on the bucket because without the bucket I can not even hope to mend it. Tom is the only person that can fix things for me, he has to help me mend it. Tom is all I have. Our marriage has to hold water. Tom and I never gave up and people liked us for that.

An awareness of aloneness envelopes me.

Maybe I am the one who never gave up, maybe I was never strong enough to accept failure and aloneness.

Our children will want to return as soon as Tom and I mend our family. The longing for home will bring them back. They will travel in their dreams towards their beginning, no matter how far they go. There is only one road for each of us and we travel back and forth on it forever. They will come home to mend what needs mending.

I can not even think of other people while my family is hurting. Everybody needs a family, said Melanie once. You would have to fight with strangers if you had no family. We laughed but we both know how important families are.

Marty insulated himself against hurt by accepting whatever life offered. Anything you like is OK with me, he said. Nobody ever knew when he felt sad or rejected.

Stephanie married Paulos, a respectable Greek opal buyer who came from Coober Pedy. Marty and his children were invited to the wedding.

I am happy that she left George, said Marty. He was a crook. I don't have to worry about the children any more, with Paulos around, they will be safe.

Paulos was a widower with two sons who are also opal exporters. He took Stephanie to Japan to introduce her to opal dealers there. On the way home they decided to marry. They were both born near Athens and they remembered the same places.

Stephanie and Paulos became a major opal buyer and people feel honoured to be seen with them.

I never intended to hurt Marty.

I know it's no use saying sorry now. Marty and I were only playing but Tom said long ago that one thing leads to another and you never know where you end up if you play with fire. Now we all know.

Tom will probably spend the turn of the millennium behind bars. I hope he will let me visit him by then.

Melanie left to baby sit her grandchildren in Sydney since her daughter's marriage broke up. Melanie also works part time in the hospital there. Ann Marie and Melanie are like sisters really, they share so much.

Lisa went home to Aulbury and remarried. She doesn't want to be reminded of Lightning Ridge at the beginning of her new life. Perhaps her children will visit Peter's grave. Or maybe not. Australians soon forget their dead, said Tom long ago.

Ema and her ex-husband Mario went to Italy for the wedding of their daughter. Sandy married an Italian from Sydney but they wanted to get married in the church Ema and Mario were married in. I suspect that Ema's daughter would like to see her parents remarried. Ema and Mario may return to Lightning Ridge sometimes to visit their son's grave and face the tragic memories that brought them together again.

My oldest friend, the post mistress, retired to the coast. She bought a beautiful home on the beach but she kept coming back. She was sad because she means little to the town she knew so well. Nobody is irreplaceable after all.

There is nothing in the Ridge for me anymore, she once said. I could have told her before that going back is never a good idea.

Susan told me that she saw the postmistress on TV crying. Someone stole one million dollars worth of opal, jewellery, and money from her safe.

The rumours went around that the postmistress arranged a robbery to collect the insurance and that she got a four years prison sentence for it. People like to spread vicious rumours about those that have a million in the safe.

The postmistress doesn't need the money, she is comfortably retired, I said.

The greed never retires, said Susan.

Jack is in Japan most of the time. Or America or somewhere overseas. I never felt close to Jack, I don't think anybody ever did. Tom and Jack discussed things but they never shared intimacies. Jack has never been to see Tom in jail. He considers our whole circus ridiculous. People should be more mature, according to Jack.

When Tom and I returned from Europe I went to see Anton. His observatory stands in the bush and the little flags on top of the towers blow in the wind but Anton is not there any more. His gas fridge blew up one night and he died in the fire. I looked through half burnt books I helped him order long ago. There are half burnt pictures of him and his children. The rooms he dedicated to Copernicus and Galileo are untouched. The maps of the sky and the pictures of those that liked to explore it, are still there. Anton's story is written in the concrete. I feel his spirit hovering in the air. I place a toy telescope on his grave. The bush observatory will be his monument long after we are all forgotten.

Edna and Rodney are still in Lightning Ridge, but they were never really our friends. Tom never invited them to our home. They weren't migrants or miners or Catholics, so what was there for him to talk about.

Lightning Ridge is not the same since Aborigines made a Native Claim over it in 1997. Half of the homes are for sale, nobody is prospecting, bureaucracy is trying to manipulate the remaining miners. Opal is not being found or sold. Maybe Aborigines really put the last nail in the coffin for Lightning Ridge.

Some say that we've seen it all before and that the town will recover as soon as a good field is found. Others hope that when the world's economy gets sorted out the market will improve. In 1998 Asia and Russia went broke, people don't think of beautiful things like opal. People everywhere are worried about survival.

Susan says that these are the signs of the end of the world. She is busy converting sinners because the kingdom of god is imminent.

Our daughter Helena broke up with her boyfriend. She wants to find out what life is all about. She isn't afraid anymore of what dad will say or if mum will be upset. Tom is glad that she broke up with John.

John and his group of musicians squatted in a condemned house in Sydney. Helena rented a flat and John moved in with her while they both finished university and growing up. John wrote music and lyrics and Helena followed him wherever the group performed on Saturday nights.

Helena received her BA in economics and entered the business world. John became mildly successful and went on a tour. Helena is free to choose where she wants to be, what she wants to be.

Maybe I will settle in Europe, she said before she left. She told us that she wanted to hear the language of her parents as it was spoken in the theatre and in the streets. She only ever heard it spoken in our kitchen.

I have to find who I am and where I am going, Helena explained before she shut the door of her little red sport's car.

I could have told Helena that there are no answers but I'd have destroyed her hope of finding that out for herself and that is all one has. She wants to find the right path but there is no such thing because really every path brings you to Rome, as my mum used to say.

There are no mistakes, you can only experience rough going or a smooth one. You can walk in the meadow or climb the mountain. You'll get there if you want to or not. Any road you choose will bring you where you are going.

Tom always loved Helena more than the boys. She was always on his side. Maybe she learned from me. I wonder if the roots are calling her home, maybe she wants to experience what I left there.

Our son Leon and his wife are expecting their third child.

I really didn't need this shit right now, said Leon when he came to see dad in court. He visits Tom occasionally, they are so much alike. They argue constantly.

I had no right to shock them at the time like this, I know how outrageously stupid I was. I am so sorry. I toy with the idea of taking a bottle of sleeping pills. I know that's too easy and I have no right to do it at the time when everybody is trying to get their life back into some order. They don't need another shock now.

I can not undo what happened.

Shit happens, says Edie stoically to cover up the disappointment.

Edie's two boys started school. All our children grew up to believe in the sanctity of marriage. Tom and I were the living proof that the everlasting love exists and that it can conquer all. Family is important to all of us.

Miners liked Tom because he was successful at everything he did. If you rub long enough against someone like that, some of it is sure to rub off on you. It is best to avoid people who have no luck, failure may rub off as well. They keep away since Tom went to jail.

How could you do it in front of dad with a known clown who chased all the skirts in Lightning Ridge. At your age you should have known better, Edie lectured me. When he saw that I couldn't defend myself or cry, he gave up.

What's the use explaining. It is up to me to wipe the shit and make the surfaces shine.

Automatic guns were recently banned in Australia.

You are no longer allowed to protect your property or yourself. Every criminal has a gun yet a law abiding man is not allowed to own one, said Jack.

I will always have a gun to protect my family, said Tom.

A man needs a gun to protect his country from his enemies and his wife from his friends, laughed Jack.

It wouldn't help if I blamed Tom. When Tom yelled Marty smiled at me to take away the harshness of Tom's words. There was nothing else. It wouldn't help if I told my children that Marty and I were only friends, who helped each other get through life.

I don't want to rubbish Tom now that he is in jail, but we all tried to please him because we were afraid of what he would do if didn't.

You should wake up to yourself and stand up to dad, said Leon long ago. You are old enough to know better.

I was always told that I was old enough to know better. I couldn't risk arguments because my children only had their father and myself so I continued to smooth things up and make them look good. What was I to do, family is all we have.

You should put your foot down and establish the rules right from the start, advised Leon wisely. Leon is thirty five and the times have changed. He can not relate to the eighteen years old girl of the fifties. He only knows that I destroyed our family.

Susan's words of condemnation ring in my mind: God punishes into seventh generation.

Eventually I will clean this mess but will god ever forgive or will he punish into seventh generation.

Born again Christians can break the curse and change destiny, promises Susan.

If I have no faith you have no hope to change anything for me, I say.

Come to our meeting and we will pray for the gift of faith and for the curse to be taken away from your family, says Susan.

Of course, there is a curse over me. I am only a link in the chain that is being perpetually punished. I am only an impulse within the eternity, I only follow my destiny, I can not change the course. If I could only erase a few moments out of my faithful, loyal existence, my whole life would shine as a beacon of virtue. If I could only rub out few tiny black specks on the great big white panorama.

I gave Edie the key of our home and told him to take over our business. I moved to Bathurst.

I am amazed how easy it is to leave everything behind. All the mementoes mean nothing without the family. I wanted to leave long ago but the little nick-knacks kept me back. I was afraid that Tom would destroy them if I left. Was it really the possessions that kept me? Was it the security and the familiarity? Was it the ball Tom and I played with? The ball now rolled into the gutter and we left it there.

I used to worry about the flowers in the garden, about the lawns and the bills and the dirt and dust and about what people would say. Now I have nothing to worry about.

I left everything like Anton did in an unpremeditated instant.

Maybe I could explain to Ben but I feel tired of explaining. The game is over. I can not forgive myself so why should others forgive me.

For a little sex with a known womaniser you wrecked the family, accused Edie.

I want to explain that there was no sex but nobody is listening.

Tom and Marty were considered best friends. It would be easy for everyone to believe that the shooting was an accident but Tom told the police that he wanted to kill the bastard and that he will kill me as well when he gets out.

Nobody could imagine a sensible grandmother having a love affair. My children would like to reject any sexual association with their puritanical, meek, little mother. The solicitor tried to convince Tom that it was an accident but Tom insisted that it wasn't.

If it wasn't a love affair or sexual affair, what was it?
Was it just two lonely old people sharing a little kindness?

Marty and I made life a little more tolerable for awhile.

Marty and I liked each other and we liked being liked.

Poor Marty? Maybe I helped him forget Stephanie or his mother. Maybe he needed me to forget other people like I needed him to help me forget everything that did not work in my life.

If you forgive yourself, god will forgive you, says Susan.

Everybody knows that I am guilty.

You will find peace when you call on Jesus, consoles Susan.

I am all right, I lie.

I don't blame you, says Susan. Marty got what he deserved. Marty was the devil. He was after married women. Come and we will pray for you and for Marty's soul and for Tom.

Marty hasn't done anything to me. We kissed. That's all that's happened. I don't think that anyone is worried about the length of the

kiss but it was the shortest kiss in history, I confess to Susan. I need to confess and be punished.

Marty and I came through the door at the same time and our lips met for a second.

I don't tell Susan how Marty and I stood there afterwards, amazed at the sweetness and the stupidity of the kiss. Marty said that he adored me and I liked being adored. He wanted to please me the only way he knew how.

You only have to ask Jesus for forgiveness and you will be healed, says Susan.

I am going to Bathurst to be close to Tom. He will need me.

The truth will set you free, Jesus is the truth. Confess in the name of the father, and the son and the holy spirit, says Susan.

Being free never worked for me. Even in my dreams I get lost when I am free, I explain.

Give yourself to Jesus, insists Susan.

I tasted the forbidden apple, I have to accept the punishment, I manage a weak smile. There is a forbidden apple in every paradise.

I find a job as a telephonist in Bathurst hospital. I choose night duty so I can go to the park in the morning and wait for Tom to come out into the exercise yard.

I try to visit him but he would not see me. I write and the letters are returned unopened. But I see his head turn ever so slightly towards the bench in the park where I am sitting. I want to wave or call out or come to the fence but I don't dare. I just sit here and cry.

Tom walks from one end of the yard to the other like a caged lion.

I write to Tom that I am sorry and willing to do anything he wants me to do. I promise that it would never happen again. Of course we both know that it would never happen again. Marty is dead and Tom shot him. I tell Tom in a letter how it happened and that Marty only kissed me that one time. But I promised Tom not that long ago that I would never again betray him. I should have known better than to ask forgiveness. I promised too often and too much. I even lied that Marty and I just

bumped into each other. Just as well Tom didn't read my stupid letters. He is so much stronger.

Tom turns his head ever so slightly towards the park bench on the way in and we are saying goodbye in some remote unity that we still have with each other. The two glances keep us alive.

I go home and take a pill to sleep until my night duty. As I fall asleep I see pictures that are trying to reveal something, but there is no light, I am groping in the dark and can never remember any of my dreams in the morning. I suppose my subconscious is trying to rearrange itself and deal with the nightmares, I don't yet dare dream about.

Tom knew he could get any woman Marty slept with but he wouldn't have wanted an easy woman like that.

I began to smoke again. I smoke in my room after I take the sleeping pill and until it begins to work. I never smoke in the park because Tom might see me and think that I want to defy him.

There is nobody to tell me that I should be strong and that smoking will kill me. I cough a lot.

I like night shift. I can not sleep at night without Tom next to me. Nights scare me with their enormous silence. I'll do anything to keep my job until Tom comes out. I crave his closeness, I want to cradle his head on my chest and cry and cry and rub out everything that was ever wrong between us. We have always done that and then we made love. Every time there was anger or fear or anxiety or jealousy or loneliness or frustration, we ended up in each other's arms and made it better. Things became bearable until next time pain erupted like a festering boil and burst red hot and hurting.

We were always there for each other at the end of a day. I always came first to Tom, he watched my every step. At the end of my dreams and fantasies I always returned to Tom. Often I woke up in a sweat because I could not find my way home and I was lost and nobody spoke to me. The longing for love was an unknown dimension from which I had to return every time to be Tom's wife.

It was Lena that got me into this mess and in every other mess. Lena was punishing Tom and me. Lena wanted to blossom and produce little forget me knots.

Tom got eight years for manslaughter. There was no intent to murder, insisted his solicitor although Tom kept saying that he wanted to kill Marty and me.

In four years he will ask for a parole. He is a model prisoner. Time goes quickly.

I rarely think of Marty. My friends called him a hungry spider, an egomaniac, Casanova and a snake but I believe that he was just a handsome bystander, a life's casualty, a victim. He smiled and stroked and told everybody that it will all be right in the end. Marty's smile brought a little sunshine in my life. I could always count on Marty to be on my side.

Perhaps Marty felt a little stronger every time he won something that belonged to another, maybe he wanted to punish Tom or Stephanie. He whispered sweet nothings into my ears, he was like a gentle stream eating away at the pebbles on the river bank, convinced that in the fullness of time he will eat away my resistance and inevitable will happen. I doubt that either of us really wanted inevitable to happen. We could have found the time and the place if we wanted to. We played the game for years without injuring other players.

I think Marty is in love with you, said Melanie once and we both laughed at the absurdity of it.

Pig shooting was Marty's idea. When they came home dusty and sweaty Tom went for the shower. He left the gun at the door. Marty and I sort of collided coming in. He kissed me lightly and put his hand on my hair. I leaned on his shoulder and became mesmerised by the sweetness of the moment. When I opened my eyes I saw Tom in the mirror behind Marty. He had a towel around his belly and a gun pointing at me. I couldn't move or yell. Tom raised the gun and Marty turned towards Tom and the shot rang through him. I ran to our neighbour. After I rang the police I saw the ambulance coming. Tom must have called it. The ambulance

took Marty and the police took Tom. The slow motion of it all is imprinted on my mind.

Marty died in the hospital. I never again spoke to Tom. I wanted to tell him that we did not mean it, that Marty and I got caught in a spell of the moment.

I locked the door and took the phone off the hook.

I wanted to find my way home. I wanted to tell everybody that I took the wrong road. I returned to have another go. Only I know that there is no home like that and there are no second chances.

I had to tell our children.

You'll get over it, said Helen before she left. People say that to children who brake their toys. I have to mend Tom's heart and mine. I know that broken hearts eventually die but I have to hope.

Sometimes I want to find out what Lisa and Mel and Ema are doing but I am too busy fixing my family. Other people were just intrusions in our lives. Other people could not make Tom and myself happy when we were not happy with each other and they could not break us if we supported each other.

I sit on the park bench every day like a frightened little girl waiting for someone to take me home. I failed to grow up properly. Does anybody ever grow up? Do we just grow old? Do we only stop playing because someone took our toys. Do we pretend to mature just to stop children from having fun?

I never found the answers to any of the questions. Love and lust, the two signs of life, rarely drove me in the same direction. The rest failed to touch me.

There were calculations, the products of my mind, results of my labour, but there was only one drive, the desire for unity with that other, a desire to become complete, a part of the one whole which is love or god or Ben or Marty or Tom or the universe. Whatever it is that brings one home.

Marty and I were both frightened Catholics. We searched for a remote, eternal unity away from the mundane and transient. I suppose we were searching for god. We must have known that the place we were searching for could only exist in our dreams.

It was like that with Ben. We created a paradise in our minds but we never forgot that what we had was only a dream. We could never enter the paradise because the paradise is not a part of everyday life. As soon as you taste that apple, you are destined for death.

Magda and Lena struggle for the steering wheel of my life, one wants to grow roots and the other wants to fly.

Magda has to mend the things Lena breaks, Magda seeks the signposts and follows them. She never lost a grip on reality. Tom is Magda's life line. Tom and I are the reality, tested and durable.

Magda has to hold back capricious Lena who roams unattached to dazzle people. Lena is the fire in the fathomless darkness of my eyes, she is a wild, galloping mare luring stallions into a forest where she disappears. She loves the chase.

Magda and Lena made sacrifices. Lena sacrificed her quest for the divine unity and the emptiness of Magda's existence scares her. I wonder if god is at all pleased with Lena's sacrifice.

I care for Tom. Maybe that is all life is. Tom knows that I am sitting on the park bench opposite Bathurst jail, he would miss me, if I wasn't there. He is the only person thinking of me. We think of each other all the time now. I have to nourish this closeness, this fragile reality, because this is the only part of me that is still alive.

Thoughts visit me, little ideas walk into my awareness and like good fairies they carry messages to Tom. They are going and coming from the bench in the park over the high wire fence of the exercise yard. Tom keeps to the far side of the oval like he is scared that I would get close to him and touch him and speak to him. This tells me that he is aware of me and that we communicate constantly. That's how it always was, he pulled away only to be chased by me. You can't change the lifelong pattern overnight. Tom always escaped into the remote silence and waited for me to come asking for forgiveness and to make love. Maybe

he is afraid that I would stop coming if he showed an interest in me. We both know for sure that we are sorry and that we are sad not being together.

What did I want with Ben and Michael and Marty anyway? They responded as I imagined lovers should respond, we were drawn to the fire like moths and we singed our wings and suffered deliciously. We reached into the fire again and again. Marty and I ignited the fire as we gazed into each other's eyes and then we laughed saying that we were only playing.

Sometimes I dream that Tom died in jail and I wake up in a cold, deadly sweat. I need Tom alive so he can come home and forgive me.

During the last few years my fear of Tom grew smaller. Lena cut the strings that tied me to him but Magda is still afraid to fly. I lived in the safety of the cage too long. I am used to being in Tom's shadow, the sun blinds me.

The echoes of past conversation come to me as I sit on the bench.

You mustn't think about it, you just do it, it's much easier that way, Mel's words visit me. She tried to get me to jump into the cold pool long time ago.

I have to rehearse my contact with the cold.

You don't get scared and pimply all over if you jump in quickly. The water is warm, it's only the change that scares you. It's the only way, you jump in, and then you don't want to get out again. Inside me a little voice kept saying: don't let go, think before you leap. You'll never know if you never try, said Melanie swimming in the cool blue water. Maybe I should have ignored Mel's words. What did Mel know? Mel was a victim.

Nothing happens without a reason, reasoned Melanie.

I felt loved with Ben but our love survived only because we lived a real life away from each other. We expected too much from the love we neglected. We expected to meet where we first met in the snow scented with the hope of spring. That snow has melted since and the flowers grew and died. We died a little every day.

Ben and I remained innocent eighteen years old waiting for the cherry buds of spring. I am waiting for the whiteness of the snow to cover up my wanderings.

I could never fool myself into believing that I forgot Ben. There simply is no substitute for the dream I carried all my life across the world. Not even Ben could fulfil this dream, we both know that, not now, not ever.

We chose to accept the ordinariness of reality rather than risk the pain of disenchantment.

I try to read during the long silent hours at the hospital but the words have no meaning. I switch on television. People try so hard to be funny and different. There is so much sex and violence, people must love sex and violence. They warn you at the beginning of every film that there is violence and sex just to make you want to watch. Nobody wants to watch ordinary lives. I feel so ordinary.

There were never so many people fighting for attention. The actors are running out of the amazing and witty and outrageous lines and acts.

Tom is going in now. As he walks, he looks at me for a second and the look pierces through me like lightning. He pauses and runs his fingers through his hair. He feels my presence.

Tom knows that I will never go away because he can see the chains on my ankles. I promised to be his slave back then in Queensland. I am imprisoned outside the jail to pay for my crime. I can not leave myself behind, no matter how far I run.

I still go to church on Sundays. The church changed a lot since I was confirmed. God became a benign friend to those that worship him and to those that don't. He gives everybody an equal chance. Purgatory has been cancelled for quite awhile.

At the instant of death the new life begins, says the priest. The moment the seed dies the plant must begin to grow with god in eternity.

Living in sin is purgatory. The suffering caused by sin stops us from being united with god, reaffirms the priest. There is no suffering after death. Death is the beginning of an everlasting life, he beams.

I wonder why they never told me that before. I've gone through purgatory and hell, I've experienced the flashes of heaven but I was always afraid of eternal damnation.

What about hell? I ask the priest during the confession.

You wouldn't know how to be so bad to be thrown into hell, smiles the priest benevolently.

So hell is being gradually phased out. Children don't learn about hell any more, people don't want to frighten or inhibit children. Children have to freely express themselves, they can do what they like, more or less.

Children's self esteem might suffer if they learned to feel guilty for being naughty. Right now children need a high self esteem more than they need hell. We must not damage their sense of well-being by anxiety about the consequences of sin.

There is only heaven, everlasting and instant. People in heaven enjoy their true home, free from death, pain and hatred. Heaven is an endless joy, a discovery of self, of love and wisdom and living light. In heaven are all the answers.

I have experienced moments in heaven but I know hell better, I experienced hell when Tom refused to speak to me. I had my share of hell.

Most of the time I spent in purgatory. I am so glad purgatory is cancelled after death.

All your sins are forgiven, the priest waves his hand over the congregation. No need to confess and repent. We are forgiven.

Some say that when you are dead, you are dead and even that doesn't frighten me anymore. Anything is better than purgatory.

God's presence is heaven, says Susan.

Send a gift to us and we will restore your happiness, promises the evangelist on television.

God is in you and you are part of the whole and the whole is almighty and divine, said my godmother long ago. There is nothing to be afraid of when you are one with god.

What is there beside god anyway?

The priest tells us that both Martha and Mary were one person like Magda and Lena. Part of me served and part of me dreamt. Everything in the bible makes sense now.

Without Tom I would have no use for freedom because nothing would hold me back. I would have no desire for that other who could never be a part of me.

I watch the reports of war in Africa.

There are billions of us people looking for ways to kill each other. Death gives a fresh meaning to life. Destruction is the beginning of the reconstruction. Despair sparks hope. Vows are made during the massacres. Never, never again, people say, devastated by the suffering. People of the world promise to rebuild the countries. People will sin no more. They sign peace treaties, they have good intentions. Unity is good. Faith grows, the lesson is learnt. The new dimensions of suffering and

grief and cruelty redefine people. They know who they are and why they are here. Life begins. They are on their way to the future.

Tom will forgive me and we'll be fine.

I read a story in a local paper:

By the year 2000 the birds will not have to get up early to catch fat worms because whole flocks of birds will eat equal worms from the equal baskets.

The government will see to it that no-one will ever again want to be first.

Trophies are on the way out. Children receive an equal ribbon while the memory of the trophy is phased out.

The school reports reflect equality. No parent should think that their child is better or worse than anybody else.

Soon it will become immoral and shameful to strive to be better.

Our vocabulary will be much simplified by the removal of the long, complicated words like: excellence, perfection. incentive, motivation, perseverance, responsibility, reliability, competition. Notice how many syllables those words contain! Consider our innocent children.

The perfect future will be one for all, all for one.

I smiled at the story. Someone somewhere tried to be funny, of course.

Tom and I worked hard and we never threw away a piece of bread or a sock that wasn't properly worn out.

Tom predicted that one day it will rain so we saved for that rainy day. I realise now that he was talking of the rain of long ago when he was starved for food and love and recognition. Maybe we both were.

Tom offered me everything he is and has, he wanted all my love and my happiness and my gratitude. He clipped my wings but he couldn't make me happy.

The good die young, said Melanie when Alex died.

Maybe some of us have to live long to give the spirit a chance to find the way home.

There is nothing new under the sun. You can't re-invent the wheel, said Mel long ago.

Life is full of old clichés.

Nothing will ever change, only the awareness of what is, grows and dies. Reincarnation of the soul continues. The universe rotates regardless of who is watching, said Melanie.

If Marty wasn't meant to die he would be here. If Ben was meant to live with me, he would. But Tom is with me, our two troubled spirits can not find the way home just yet.

I look at the world from inside myself and I see it as I am, incomplete and in disorder. I wonder if a surgeon changed what I am, would I still be who I am. What is that unchangeable that is making me cling like a vine to Tom? What is it that make me long to be far away with Ben? What is this longing for wholeness?

I function like a hook on the wall or a curtain on the window. I am scared that I might be disposed of as useless if not attached to the place I belong to.

Maybe even birds aren't free. Maybe there is a big bird looking out for little birds, maybe there is a Marty of every specie luring someone into danger. The only safe place is a cage and my place in it. The caged bird is transformed into a cold-blooded lizard. It sits in the sun to catch the warmth but it's blood is never hot again.

Lena is the lizard sitting in the sun looking for a perfect mirror image of herself. Invisible to others, she wants some proof that she really is. Lena is totally self centred and selfish. Magda tells her to pull herself together, she has done enough damage to her family.

I am the moon, my warmth comes from the sun, I am cold and dark and invisible without the light reflected in me. Without love I am a corpse ready to be buried.

Maybe ordinary life is all there is. Heaven is where stars are. What would I do with a star in my pocket? What would a sky do without stars?

I am putting the pieces of my life back into a jigsaw. I hope that Tom will be pleased with the picture.

I saved all my loving for the rainy day. It is pouring right now. I hope Tom and I will celebrate 2000 together with our family. One day soon I will wave to Tom, maybe he will wave back. But not yet.

From my bench in the park I sometimes see people from the Ridge going through the jail entrance.

They look around for a moment before they hurry through the door. I am shocked to see Maria and her little boy going to see Ken. I almost call out to Maria but she wouldn't like to see me here. We would both be embarrassed. I can't believe that she takes her son to visit his father who is a murderer. I wonder if her family knows.

Maybe Tom and Ken talk about opal mining and Lightning Ridge. I doubt that Tom would ever talk to a murderer. Other inmates may consider Tom a murderer but we know that he didn't mean to kill Marty.

What do Ken and Maria do during their visiting hours? Is there something loveable about Ken, is there hidden behind the murderer another man who is gentle and loving. Maybe Maria was with Ken in everything he did. Maybe he didn't do it after all. They never found the bodies and he maintains that he is innocent.

Ken's first wife also comes to see Ken. I can't say good day to her either. She snaps and swears at people. Over the years his daughters and sons come one by one. There must be something loveable in Ken. Ken's first wife always defended him. She is a neurotic, they say she suffers from schizophrenia. Maybe her children do as well. There is so much misery. Some blamed her for Ken's behaviour, others blamed him for hers. Everybody blamed them for the unhappy children.

I am the only regular visitor Tom has. Our boys come occasionally but Tom and I know that we are together every day.

Visitors rush away from the prison building, they don't stop to admire flowers in the park where I sit. Most hated the people they come to see but hate is a shade of love and it becomes love sometimes.

Maybe suffering is only a shade of joy. Pain inspires hope. Maybe pain is the saving grace after all.

People talk about their visits with the loved ones in prison.

Edna came on her own once. She had a parcel as she went in but when she came out the parcel was gone. What did she bring the man who ruined her daughter? Do all women always forgive and try to repair sick relationships. Does she know something about Ken that is redeemable? Is she bound to the father of her grandson?

I see other people from Lightning Ridge but I never approach anyone because we would be embarrassed.

Actually I am no longer ashamed or afraid. I don't even feel guilty. Tom is simply all I have and I am all he has.

I remember Charlie carrying groceries home to his camp on the field.

How are you, I ask.

Like a dog without a chain, said Charlie.

That's good.

No, it's not, said Charlie. A dog with a chain belongs and is fed and loved. A dog without a chain is kicked along the road. Maybe shot at.

It is good to be free.

You are never free. Your body betrays you, it wants to be fed and patted, said Charlie.

Maybe Charlie and I need to be chained. Maybe everybody needs to belong.

Vicious dogs are always on a chain, said Charlie. People call out to them: good doggy, good doggy. You say good doggy to the growling big dog because you are afraid that it will attack you. The mongrel on the street is never called good doggy. It wags its tail and begs to be taken home and be chained and patted and fed. People don't want to touch the dog on the street. It might carry the disease or flees. They kick it along.

Tom growled like that and I followed because I was afraid.

There is a verse of a poem on a billboard where carefree girls model spring fashions:

Though nothing can bring back the hour
of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower.

I can hear a song coming from the unknown. Maybe one day in spring I will paint again.

Nothing changed, Ben's words echo on. I said that things never remain the same from one minute to the next but maybe Ben was right. Nothing really changed. People keep talking and doing things, the sun rises every morning and sets in the evening, the birds chirp, the wind blows, the flowers bloom.

Lena still wants to see the other side of the mountain. There is always another mountain and another to climb.

I light a candle for Tom every Sunday.

The victim returns to his abuser and the criminal returns to the scene of the crime, said Melanie long ago.

Why do I remember her words now?

Tom and I will go home one day soon to mend our family.

It has been raining right through the winter 1998. Is this the rainy day we were all waiting for?

This is the biggest flood since 1976, says the reporter on the television. Most people don't even remember 1976 flood, they were too young or weren't born yet. In a few years people won't remember anything that I agonise about now. There is a comfort in knowing that nothing lasts forever and that nothing is new under the sun. Essentially nothing changed.

