

## Auto

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*For Tracy*



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## Prologue

Winters in the southern wheatbelt can be deadly. Black frosts, driving winds, and heavy rain. Or no rain at all—but still the biting cold that no amount of storm wood or wood rescued from freshly cleared ground will defeat. The edge of the forest looks fragile. Fire radiates from the centre out with a dry summer storm—a lightning strike—but now it is quiet and dark and damp. Past and future fires are built into this stasis. Plants brood silently, packed for spring, awaiting their trigger. Curled against the cold, you hear your brother swearing as he tries to run water from the rainwater tank to fill the kettle. The cold has frozen the pipes. And there'll be ice on the windscreen of the car. The new growth in the paddocks will be scaffolded with bright crystals, though the dark hangs back late. Where were you on the morning Kurt Cobain died? Or Ayrton Senna? Or when Ken Wark emailed you this question years later? When Senna died I was cold in an empty flat in Coralie Court, Armadale. Two young men had shot the local deli owner, or were about to. My brother has switched on his shearing grinder and the furiously spinning stone abrades the metal of his cutters as they swing on the pendulum. It's a high-pitched whine, peaking and troughing. I can see the sparks inside my head as I move in and out of sleep. It is cold and dark though

the sparks are bright just outside my window, and I can see them inside my head. There is ice on the ground, forming caps on the rainwater tanks. The impurities in the dam will probably keep that body of water fluid. Rain that has fallen over past nights will be windows of ice in hollows and potholes. The sheep will huddle together. The weather brings back another part of their lives. The cold unlocks all of the grand narratives. They call it reintegration amongst themselves.

It is our fourth winter in Cambridge. We call this home. The ice is coming, the puddles will seal over and the walk through Saint Edmund's will become delicate. The orchard will be sullen and limply fragile. Ice creates contradictions. We will become conscious of the salt in plastic boxes stored by paths in the centre of town. It's been one of the warmest years on record. It is much warmer than when I first came to Britain in the early eighties. But still, the ice is coming, has arrived. A couple of hours' drive east and you hit the coast. Sizewell nuclear power station. You can't escape them here—the lust for heat. For the eternal release of energy. I walk through the observatory grounds at the back of college and count a record number of grey squirrels. In the trees, amongst the undergrowth. Crows charge the conifers. The species of trees and shrubs have become familiar—yew, oak, alder, and the odd elm left after the disease, resisting pollution. And elder—tree never cut after dark in Cambridgeshire, a tree loved by witches. To sleep beneath the elder is fatal. Tree that Judas hanged himself from, tree of the Cross of Calvary. We read in Enid Porter's *Cambridgeshire Customs and Folklore*: "If you tap an iron plough with a hammer and it gives off a dull booming sound, sleet and snow are coming; if you get a ringing sound, then look out for frost and snow."<sup>1</sup> Down near the shearing shed—at Wheatlands, at Happy Valley—the old machinery burnishes with winter. The rust shines and waits for spring to shed its layers. Tap tap tap. The places morph into each other. The air cold and the height of summer a long way off. The dry air, the dust of the farm, aren't here now. Though you can taste them, and the double gees prick at your feet through the soles of your

shoes, sharp as ice.

It's so clear you touch the surface  
only half-expecting resistance,  
but your tepid flesh sticks  
and beneath its hard clear finish  
the stuff of puddles is sharp  
and laid out perfectly—a leaf,  
brown and crinkled residue of autumn,  
tense and precious. Beneath  
it might be a perfect climate.  
Further down the path, shattered  
sheets of ice disperse reflection:  
your face, a branch, the stark  
blue winter sky. A landscape  
saturated with trigonometries.  
Small tundras refusing reverence,  
exteriors you might slide across  
or fall through endlessly.<sup>2</sup>

## CHAPTER 1

# The Cut Snake

Picking wildflowers, which even during my childhood was illegal, my grandmother woke a small tiger snake which coiled itself about her hand but was still too sleepy to bite her. Later someone would joke that this was her punishment and she'd reply sternly that it was on family property and she only ever took one or two. I don't think anyone ever referred to the occasion in the twenty-five years that passed until her death. But I had been there, along with my brother, my cousins, my mother, auntie and uncle. A whole family had witnessed her moment of terror, bewilderment, and relief. The snake was beheaded, its whip of a body thrown in the boot and carted back to the farm where it writhed on the ground until sunset—the headless stub clotted with dirt. Just like the old wives' tale?

The farm, or Wheatlands as it was called, was our escape. We went there every second weekend, spent whole holidays there. When my mother was working her way through university and making a living by teaching piano it was the farm that provided us with hand-me-down clothing. When things were emotionally hard it was the farm that offered refuge. The things that kids dreamed about doing in our suburban school could be done on the farm. So, from as far back as I can remember, the farm was an alternative reality. Even if things were bad in the

country—drought, the Meckering Quake, poor seasons, it still remained a place that wasn't constrained by the laws of the city. I helped my uncle and cousins plant trees to reclaim land lost to salinity. We planted thousands, ringing the salt like the circles of Inferno, working our way through the hot snow, the frozen centre that would burn a hole straight through you. This desolation became mythological for me. It replaced the language of place that had been seemingly stripped away with the scrub. The salt was the poison. The salt was the truth behind it all and the rich green and the yellow and then burnt stubble of the crops were only an illusion. I remember the first hay baler coming onto the place. We'd seen it the year before at the York Show. There might have been balers around for years but it was the first time one came onto Wheatlands. Before that it was stooks—and I remember the Nyoongah families out in the blazing sun. And I remember someone telling me that the local Nyoongahs had been deceived into accepting a bent shotgun and a sack of flour for the district. And this was told to me by someone who'd prospered from their loss. There was guilt there: there was guilt all around. Some of the young blokes in town expressed their guilt by getting pissed and getting stuck into any Nyoongah they could find. The Nyoongahs don't want their guilt. That's what guilt does. They want land back. We can keep our guilt.

My cousins ride their bikes up to the house-dam paddock and park them in an old rainwater tank that lies on its side. The school bus come past and picks them up. I've got a few days off school. I can't remember why now. I take a twenty-two rifle and wander off up to Uncle Jack's bush. Uncle Jack is fanatical about gates—like most farmers—so I climb fences instead of taking the risk of not doing them up properly. I've always been paranoid. And a little obsessive-compulsive. I'd have to go back and check it after walking ten steps away. And then again, maybe. I rest the gun against a post. I climb over, catching my jeans on the barbed wire. The fence twitches and the gun slides to the ground. It's a single shot bolt action and there's nothing in the chamber. I heard once of a guy resting his gun and then climb-

ing and the fence twitching and the gun falling. It was loaded and shot him dead. I shoot twenty-eight parrots. I put them in a sack I've tucked into my belt. I take them back for the pigs. The pigs eat colour. I shoot so many I run out of bullets. There's no one around to say that's enough. The barrel is about as hot as a single shot twenty-two can get. My Uncle Jack working in a nearby paddock remarks on it when I see him, walking back to the house. I shoot the galahs off my television aerial, he says. He approves. They get into the crop, he says. He is a water diviner. We believe in diviners where I come from. And we're right. I'm a vegan now. Have been for fourteen years. I like to think that every parrot I shot has a memorial in one of my poems. But we all know memorials are hollow gestures designed to appease our own guilt. I killed and killed and killed. Sometimes I would go with my cousin Ian into the centre of the salt, into the tamarisks, and watch the finches. The guns stayed at home.

My father is managing the farm of a well-known Perth tycoon. His thing is machinery—he's a mechanic by trade. A very good one. We don't see eye to eye on much. He's into football—did his knee in playing for the East Perth Colts. He was going to the top. His sons have a responsibility. We, or at least I, don't compute. It's Mullewa, north of Geraldton. My dad shoots unwanted puppies, my brother and I get stuck in a silo, Dad's new wife packs us thick lunches which we take into the scrub. The tractors have wheels twice our size. They're called Steigers and Panthers. We trap parrots to take back to city aviaries.

Two years later our mother moves us to Geraldton—she has been transferred. We go to the same school she teaches in. Dad has gone further north so he's a long way away. He only stayed in Mullewa for a couple of years. He's in Karratha now. Soon he'll be in Carnarvon—one of the most racist towns in Australia. Geraldton is not far behind. There are fights between the blacks and whites most nights down on Front Beach. The cops beat Aborigines up in the cells. Everyone knows it. Geraldton is country and coastal town in one. The farm meets the surf, the crayfishermen meet the cockies. This also creates tensions. Fights are frequent. The explorer Gray is much spoken of. He

had an interest in Aboriginal dialects and put together a dictionary when he was in Albany. My work on him—*The Benefaction*<sup>3</sup>—is to be published twenty years later in Cambridge. It's about language and reterritorialisation. We get out into the country in minutes on our bikes. It's drier and windier than Wheatlands. And being on the coast it's sandplain country. It gets so windy that around Greenough the trees are bent almost horizontal. They appear on postcards and are a local attraction. In the town it's suburbs. We understand both spaces. They are fluid here. For me, it's a love-hate relationship. The school encourages my writing. I retreat further and further into books. We live in the old Geraldton hospital—it's a colonial mansion opposite the town prison. Mum gets it cheap through the education department. I make explosives and the results of my endeavours make the newspapers and are heard ten ks away. I go to ground. There are tunnels under the house and shadows move through the corridors. Many people died there. Some years back, visiting Anthony Lawrence who lived in Geraldton for a few years in the early nineties, I discovered that our home, the hospital, had been subsumed by a shopping centre car park.

I might be twenty. I'm looking after the farm for a couple of months. I'm a heavy drinker now. It will last for over another decade and then stop. For good. I'm drinking a beer and talking with my good friend Craig on the verandah. I read him a poem I've written. We're going to see the world together. I've already been to Europe and am fired up. Thing is, though, I know that it will only make me look closer at what's here. The further you move away, the closer you get. Craig takes photographs. Of the Needling Hills. Of the salt. The agony of a sky whose blue is not on a palette, defies the laws of the spectrum. He photographs parrots and the shadows of York gums. He photographs me starting the pump up at the housedam. It draws water into a tank on the dam wall which then gravity feeds to a tank down the hill near the house. Another pump drags water from this tank and onto the lawn. Which even in the middle of summer is fluorescent green. And there are roses. While all about is dead brown and yellow with mobs of sheep stretched out to collect

the narrow shade. But then the drought will come and there'll be no water and hope will decline with the colour of the lawn. And the locusts will come and eat everything green—even the shade cloth. My uncle is a church alderman. The parish minister is a family friend who loves poetry. The salt glows and I tell Craig about how ten years earlier a tv crew from the ABC's *TDI* show came out to make a programme about reclaiming saline land. It's hard not to be biblical. That's the mythology. Mythology is about incursion. It wasn't mythology before settlement. The word is corrupt.

Yarloop. An old woodmilling town. The area is almost bare of trees on the coast side of the rail line now. It's dairy country and is heavily irrigated. The source is Harvey dam. Up over the rail lines, in the hills, is forest. There's a place where an old homestead has been consumed by scrub and blackbutt. But the fruit trees remain. On weekends people picnic under them, surrounded by windfalls. The cows work overtime. They are cybernetic. The dairy farmer has managed to meld flesh and steel.

Bridgetown. The shack. Dreadlocks and no electricity. Deep South. All sorts here—dykes and bikies and alternative lifestylers and rednecks and people who don't make themselves known. The logging trucks go at it day and night and you are threatened for giving them the finger. You're called a dyke and a flea. You can't work out the connection. You read Ciardi's translation of *The Divine Comedy*<sup>4</sup>. You read all of Beckett again. You grow organic vegetables and the broccoli is superb. You collect storm wood. You listen to the foxes bark at night. The cows that surround your place are called things like Molly B12. You wonder if B12 is a bad joke. You're a vegan now. The shack is good for about nine months until the Slatteries drive you out. Someone poisoned the water. Someone shot at the house. Someone made death threats. Someone wrote at the bottom of a poem draft—"The Cut of Broccoli"<sup>5</sup>—"we have been read", the night after you read Beckett's *Company*<sup>6</sup> aloud to your girlfriend already pregnant.

Happy Valley—the name is barely believable—but it is the

richest land in the region. Yes, that's its name. My brother has been there three years and will be there another year, maybe two. Behind the house is Dryandra Forest. We're getting ready for a walk. We'll see an echidna. We watch out for numbats and phacalogytes. Both rare. There's an eagle hovering as we cross the creek and move up to the fence. They stripped the trees from that creek until the banks ran a stale sort of red. We're about twenty ks from Williams—Narrogin is about thirty ks. I spend most of my time here—four days in the week. It's like that for years. This is my brother's home, and he makes it mine. It's Sunday and he's not shearing today. His hands are gnarled and large from pushing a handpiece. His dogs run ahead. He calls them back, not wanting them to chase animals in the forest. He says he's going to live in there, in here, one day. Eventually he will. For a few months. When things go wrong and he doesn't want to be around people all the time. But he returns to them and they welcome him back.

Albany. King George Sound is polluted by heavy metals. A lot of people say this could be Europe. Or maybe Nantucket, but I wouldn't know about that. There are signs of the old whaling days everywhere. As a child I visited the Cheynes Beach whaling station. I remember the stench. My grandfather had been out on whalers and in the spotters at the whaling station up at Carnarvon. His best friend owned it. I write letters of support to Greenpeace. Whaling has stopped here but must be stopped everywhere—"scientific research" is a farce. Not far from town is The Gap—that chasm of granite in which the Southern Ocean grinds itself to foam. Place where phenomena shape themselves like the vertebrae of whales, tormented by water, wind, and sun—anchored to the coastline by harpoons requisitioned from the magazines of scuttled whale-chasers limping sulkily icewards. You've been wandering. You'll stop drinking soon. An old bloke tells you, "You're as mad as a cut snake!" Very soon. It's long since got the better of you. The hotel is called the King George. You look down onto the harbour. Years back you and your brother talked with a Norwegian sailor on the hill about Knut Hamsun being a fascist. You'd been shocked. You thought

you saw a frill-necked lizard. But now it's hard to move. All you've got left is a copy of JH Prynne's *Poems*<sup>7</sup>. You brought it back from a trip to England. A while before. It's cold though it's not winter. Last winter it snowed on the Stirling Ranges. It had been cold and then warm in England. The sun is full of snow. Like the salt. Which is and was snow. It is receding though will be back within a few seasons if care isn't taken. Custodianship? Preservation. Six years will pass. I'll be in Cambridge and late snow will be covering the fens. I'll be proofing JH Prynne's new collection of *Poems*<sup>8</sup>. There are single quotation marks where there should be doubles in "Smaller than the Radius of the Planet":

"The gradient of the decrease may be determined by the spread in the intrinsic luminosities"—the ethereal language of love in brilliant suspense between us and the hesitant arc. Yet I need it too and keep one hand in my pocket & one in yours, waiting for the first snow of the year."<sup>9</sup>

My wife has not long finished a poem in memory of our friend John Forbes who died in January. I look out at the grey humid skies, listen to the blackbird, and recall him saying—"when you're in England you'll realise how foreign you are . . ."