

Edited by
FRANK MOORHOUSE

The Drover's Wife



a celebration of a great
Australian love affair

About the Book

Since Henry Lawson wrote his story 'The Drover's Wife' in 1892, Australian writers, painters, performers and photographers have created a wonderful tradition of drover's wife works, stories and images.

The Russell Drysdale painting from 1945 extended the mythology around the story and it, too, has become an Australian icon.

Other versions of the Lawson story have been written by Murray Bail, Barbara Jefferis, Mandy Sayer, David Ireland, Madeleine Watts and others, up to the present, including Leah Purcell's play and Ryan O'Neill's graphic novel.

In essays and commentary, Frank Moorhouse examines our ongoing fascination with this story and has collected some of the best pieces of writing on the subject. This remarkable, gorgeous book is, he writes, 'a monument to the drovers' wives'.



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Illustration for 'The Drover's Wife' by Frank Mahony, for the first edition of While the Billy Boils (1896)

The ,
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CONTENTS

[Cover](#)

[About the Book](#)

[Frontispiece](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[PART ONE: LAWSON AND THE EVOLUTION OF 'THE DROVER'S WIFE'](#)

[The Drover's Wife – Henry Lawson](#)

['The Drover's Wife': a great reading adventure – Frank Moorhouse](#)

['A mixed-up affair all round': girl/woman/wife/mother/man/Black man and into the landscape – Frank Moorhouse](#)

[Sexual tensions in 'The Drover's Wife': what was it like when the drover was home? – Frank Moorhouse](#)

[Mateship love: how did Lawson experience mateship? – Frank Moorhouse](#)

[The younger Lawson v the older Lawson: the sourcing of 'The Drover's Wife' – Frank Moorhouse](#)

[Extracts from Snake – Kate Jennings](#)

[The Australian Bush-Woman – Louisa Lawson](#)

[The Drover's De Facto – Anne Gambling](#)

[The Drover's Wife's Dog – Damien Broderick](#)

[The Drover's Wife – Craig Cormick](#)

[The Drover's Wife Club – James Roberts](#)

[Afraid of Waking It – Madeleine Watts](#)

[PART TWO: ENTER DRYSDALE](#)

[The Drover's Wife – Murray Bail](#)

[The Drysdale/Lawson mysteries and the question of the Big Women – Frank Moorhouse](#)

[Big Edna – Mark O'Flynn](#)

[The Lie of the Land – Hamish Clayton](#)

[The Drover's Wife – Barbara Jefferis](#)

[The Drover's Wife – Mandy Sayer](#)

[The Drover's Wife – David Ireland](#)

[PART THREE: 'DROVER'S WIFE' COMMENTARIES \(INCLUDING FRANCO CASAMAGGIORE\)](#)

[The Drover's Wife – Frank Moorhouse](#)

[Responses to Franco Casamaggiore](#)

[The Originality of Henry Lawson – Ryan O'Neill](#)

[Henry Lawson, 'The Drover's Wife' and the Critics – Kay Schaffer](#)

[Origins of *The drover's wife* – Anne Gray](#)

[Writer and director notes: *The Drover's Wife* – Leah Purcell and Leticia Cáceres](#)

[In the footsteps of Henry Lawson; if you know Bourke you know Australia; congratulations, Emily King – Frank Moorhouse](#)

[PART FOUR: MISCELLANY](#)

[A parliamentary question](#)

[A university course outline](#)

[List of other drover's wife artworks](#)

[Henry Lawson: a narrative timeline](#)

[Lawson sites of significance](#)

[A joke](#)

[Picture Section](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Notice](#)

Dedicated to Murray Bail, lifelong colleague in writing, who has made such a magnificent contribution to Australian literature. Without his short story 'The Drover's Wife', this book would not exist.

Dedicated to Helen Lewis, writer, editor, researcher and long-time friend, who has worked with me and supported me on varied projects, and who contributed greatly to the making of this book and to my life.

PART ONE

**LAWSON AND THE EVOLUTION OF 'THE
DROVER'S WIFE'**

THE DROVER'S WIFE

HENRY LAWSON

THE TWO-ROOMED HOUSE IS built of round timber, slabs, and stringy bark, and floored with split slabs. A big bark kitchen standing at one end is larger than the house itself, verandah included.

Bush all round – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few sheoaks which are sighing above the narrow, almost waterless creek. Nineteen miles to the nearest sign of civilisation – a shanty on the main road.

The drover, an ex-squatter, is away with sheep. His wife and children are left here alone.

Four ragged, dried-up-looking children are playing about the house. Suddenly one of them yells: 'Snake! Mother, here's a snake!'

The gaunt, sun-browned bushwoman dashes from the kitchen, snatches her baby from the ground, holds it on her left hip, and reaches for a stick.

'Where is it?'

'Here! gone into the wood-heap!' yells the eldest boy – a sharp-faced, excited urchin of eleven. 'Stop there, mother! I'll have him. Stand back! I'll have the beggar!'

'Tommy, come here, or you'll be bit. Come here at once when I tell you, you little wretch!'

The youngster comes reluctantly, carrying a stick bigger than himself. Then he yells, triumphantly:

'There it goes – under the house!' and darts away with club uplifted. At the same time the big, black, yellow-eyed dog-of-all-breeds, who has shown the wildest interest in the proceedings, breaks his chain and rushes after that snake. He is a moment late, however, and his nose reaches the crack in the slabs just as the end of its tail disappears. Almost at the same moment the

boy's club comes down and skins the aforesaid nose. Alligator takes small notice of this, and proceeds to undermine the building; but he is subdued after a struggle and chained up. They cannot afford to lose him.

The drover's wife makes the children stand together near the dog-house while she watches for the snake. She gets two small dishes of milk and sets them down near the wall to tempt it to come out; but an hour goes by and it does not show itself.

It is near sunset, and a thunderstorm is coming. The children must be brought inside. She will not take them into the house, for she knows the snake is there, and may at any moment come up through the cracks in the rough slab floor; so she carries several armfuls of firewood into the kitchen, and then takes the children there. The kitchen has no floor – or, rather, an earthen one – called a 'ground floor' in this part of the bush. There is a large, roughly-made table in the centre of the place. She brings the children in, and makes them get on this table. They are two boys and two girls – mere babies. She gives them some supper, and then, before it gets dark, she goes into the house, and snatches up some pillows and bedclothes – expecting to see or lay her hand on the snake any minute. She makes a bed on the kitchen table for the children, and sits down beside it to watch all night.

She has an eye on the corner, and a green sapling club laid in readiness on the dresser by her side; also her sewing basket and a copy of the *Young Ladies' Journal*. She has brought the dog into the room.

Tommy turns in, under protest, but says he'll lie awake all night and smash that blinded snake.

His mother asks him how many times she has told him not to swear.

He has his club with him under the bedclothes, and Jacky protests:

'Mummy! Tommy's skinnin' me alive wif his club. Make him take it out.'

Tommy: 'Shet up, you little ——! D'yer want to be bit with the snake?'

Jacky shuts up.

'If yer bit,' says Tommy after a pause, 'you'll swell up, an' smell, an' turn red an' green an' blue all over till yer bust. Won't he, mother?'

'Now then, don't frighten the child. Go to sleep,' she says.

The two younger children go to sleep, and now and then Jacky complains of being 'skeezed'. More room is made for him. Presently

Tommy says: 'Mother! listen to them (adjective) little opossums. I'd like to screw their blanky necks.'

And Jacky protests drowsily:

'But they don't hurt us, the little blanks!'

Mother: 'There, I told you, you'd teach Jacky to swear.' But the remark makes her smile. Jacky goes to sleep.

Presently Tommy asks:

'Mother! Do you think they'll ever extricate the (adjective) kangaroo?'

'Lord! How am I to know, child? Go to sleep.'

'Will you wake me if the snake comes out?'

'Yes. Go to sleep.'

Near midnight. The children are all asleep and she sits there still, sewing and reading by turns. From time to time she glances round the floor and wall-plate, and, whenever she hears a noise, she reaches for the stick. The thunderstorm comes on, and the wind, rushing through the cracks in the slab wall, threatens to blow out her candle. She places it on a sheltered part of the dresser and fixes up a newspaper to protect it. At every flash of lightning, the cracks between the slabs gleam like polished silver. The thunder rolls, and the rain comes down in torrents.

Alligator lies at full length on the floor, with his eyes turned towards the partition. She knows by this that the snake is there. There are large cracks in that wall opening under the floor of the dwelling-house.

She is not a coward, but recent events have shaken her nerves. A little son of her brother-in-law was lately bitten by a snake, and died. Besides, she has not heard from her husband for six months, and is anxious about him.

He was a drover and started squatting here when they were married. The drought of 18— ruined him. He had to sacrifice the remnant of his flock and go droving again. He intends to move his family into the nearest town when he comes back, and, in the meantime, his brother, who keeps a shanty on the main road, comes over about once a month with provisions. The wife has still a couple of cows, one horse, and a few sheep. The brother-in-law kills one of the sheep occasionally, gives her what she needs of it, and takes the rest in return for other provisions.

She is used to being left alone. She once lived like this for eighteen months. As a girl she built the usual castles in the air; but all her girlish hopes and aspirations have long been dead. She finds all the excitement and

recreation she needs in the *Young Ladies' Journal*, and, Heaven help her! takes a pleasure in the fashion-plates.

Her husband is an Australian, and so is she. He is careless, but a good enough husband. If he had the means he would take her to the city and keep her there like a princess. They are used to being apart, or at least she is. 'No use fretting,' she says. He may forget sometimes that he is married; but if he has a good cheque when he comes back he will give most of it to her. When he had money he took her to the city several times – hired a railway sleeping compartment, and put up at the best hotels. He also bought her a buggy, but they had to sacrifice that along with the rest.

The last two children were born in the bush – one while her husband was bringing a drunken doctor, by force, to attend to her. She was alone on this occasion, and very weak. She had been ill with a fever. She prayed to God to send her assistance. God sent Black Mary – the 'whitest' gin in all the land. Or, at least, God sent 'King Jimmy' first, and he sent Black Mary. He put his black face round the door post, took in the situation at a glance, and said cheerfully: 'All right Missis – I bring my old woman, she down alonga creek.'

One of the children died while she was here alone. She rode nineteen miles for assistance, carrying the dead child.

It must be near one or two o'clock. The fire is burning low. Alligator lies with his head resting on his paws, and watches the wall. He is not a very beautiful dog to look at, and the light shows numerous old wounds where the hair will not grow. He is afraid of nothing on the face of the earth or under it. He will tackle a bullock as readily as he will tackle a flea. He hates all other dogs – except kangaroo-dogs – and has a marked dislike to friends or relations of the family. They seldom call, however. He sometimes makes friends with strangers. He hates snakes and has killed many, but he will be bitten some day and die; most snake-dogs end that way.

Now and then the bushwoman lays down her work and watches, and listens, and thinks. She thinks of things in her own life, for there is little else to think about.

The rain will make the grass grow, and this reminds her how she fought a bush fire once while her husband was away. The grass was long, and very dry, and the fire threatened to burn her out. She put on an old pair of her husband's trousers and beat out the flames with a green bough, till great

drops of sooty perspiration stood out on her forehead and ran in streaks down her blackened arms. The sight of his mother in trousers greatly amused Tommy, who worked like a little hero by her side, but the terrified baby howled lustily for his 'mummy'. The fire would have mastered her but for four excited bushmen who arrived in the nick of time. It was a mixed-up affair all round: when she went to take up the baby he screamed and struggled convulsively, thinking it was a 'Black man'; and Alligator, trusting more to the child's sense than his own instinct, charged furiously, and (being old and slightly deaf) did not in his excitement at first recognise his mistress's voice, but continued to hang on to the moleskins until choked off by Tommy with a saddle-strap. The dog's sorrow for his blunder, and his anxiety to let it be known that it was all a mistake, was as evident as his ragged tail and a twelve-inch grin could make it. It was a glorious time for the boys; a day to look back to, and talk about, and laugh over for many years.

She thinks how she fought a flood during her husband's absence. She stood for hours in the drenching downpour, and dug an overflow gutter to save the dam across the creek. But she could not save it. There are things that a bush-woman cannot do. Next morning the dam was broken, and her heart was nearly broken too, for she thought how her husband would feel when he came home and saw the result of years of labour swept away. She cried then.

She also fought the *pleuro-pneumonia* – dosed and bled the few remaining cattle, and wept again when her two best cows died.

Again, she fought a mad bullock that besieged the house for a day. She made bullets and fired at him through cracks in the slabs with an old shotgun. He was dead in the morning. She skinned him and got seven-and-sixpence for the hide.

She also fights the crows and eagles that have designs on her chickens. Her plan of campaign is very original. The children cry 'Crows, mother!' and she rushes out and aims a broomstick at the birds as though it were a gun, and says, 'Bung!' The crows leave in a hurry; they are cunning, but a woman's cunning is greater.

Occasionally a bushman in the horrors, or a villainous-looking sundowner, comes and nearly scares the life out of her. She generally tells the suspicious-looking stranger that her husband and two sons are at work

below the dam, or over at the yard, for he always cunningly enquires for the boss.

Only last week a gallows-faced swagman – having satisfied himself that there were no men on the place – threw his swag down on the verandah, and demanded tucker. She gave him something to eat; then he expressed his intention of staying for the night. It was sundown then. She got a batten from the sofa, loosened the dog, and confronted the stranger, holding the batten in one hand and the dog's collar with the other. 'Now you go!' she said. He looked at her and at the dog, said 'All right, mum,' in a cringing tone, and left. She was a determined-looking woman, and Alligator's yellow eyes glared unpleasantly – besides, the dog's chawing-up apparatus greatly resembled that of his namesake.

She has few pleasures to think of as she sits here alone by the fire, on guard against a snake. All days are much the same to her, but on Sunday afternoon she dresses herself, tidies the children, smartens-up baby, and goes for a lonely walk along the bush-track, pushing an old perambulator in front of her. She does this every Sunday. She takes as much care to make herself and the children look smart as she would if she were going to do the block in the city. There is nothing to see, however, and not a soul to meet. You might walk for twenty miles along this track without being able to fix a point in your mind, unless you are a bushman. This is because of the everlasting, maddening sameness of the stunted trees – that monotony which makes a man long to break away and travel as far as trains can go, and sail as far as ships can sail – and further.

But this bushwoman is used to the loneliness of it. As a girl-wife she hated it, but now she would feel strange away from it.

She is glad when her husband returns, but she does not gush or make a fuss about it. She gets him something good to eat, and tidies up the children.

She seems contented with her lot. She loves her children, but has no time to show it. She seems harsh to them. Her surroundings are not favourable to the development of the 'womanly' or sentimental side of nature.

It must be near morning now; but the clock is in the dwelling-house. Her candle is nearly done; she forgot that she was out of candles. Some more wood must be got to keep the fire up, and so she shuts the dog inside and

hurries round to the woodheap. The rain has cleared off. She seizes a stick, pulls it out, and – crash! the whole pile collapses.

Yesterday she bargained with a stray Blackfellow to bring her some wood, and while he was at work she went in search of a missing cow. She was absent an hour or so, and the native Black made good use of his time. On her return she was so astonished to see a good heap of wood by the chimney, that she gave him an extra fig of tobacco, and praised him for not being lazy. He thanked her, and left with head erect and chest well out. He was the last of his tribe and a King: but he built the woodheap hollow.

She is hurt now, and tears spring to her eyes as she sits down again by the table. She takes up a handkerchief to wipe the tears away, but pokes her eyes with her bare fingers instead. The handkerchief is full of holes, and she finds that she has put her thumb through one, and her forefinger through another.

This makes her laugh, to the surprise of the dog. She has a keen, very keen, sense of the ridiculous; and some time or other she will amuse bushmen with the story.

She had been amused before like that. One day she sat down ‘to have a good cry,’ as she said – and the old cat rubbed against her dress and ‘cried too’. Then she had to laugh.

It must be near daylight now. The room is very close and hot because of the fire. Alligator still watches the wall from time to time. Suddenly he becomes greatly interested; he draws himself a few inches nearer the partition, and a thrill runs through his body. The hair on the back of his neck begins to bristle, and the battle-light is in his yellow eyes. She knows what this means, and lays her hand on the stick. The lower end of one of the partition slabs has a large crack on both sides. An evil pair of small, bright, bead-like eyes glisten at one of these holes. The snake – a black one – comes slowly out, about a foot, and moves its head up and down. The dog lies still, and the woman sits as one fascinated. The snake comes out a foot further. She lifts her stick, and the reptile, as though suddenly aware of danger, sticks his head in through the crack on the other side of the slab, and hurries to get his tail round after him. Alligator springs, and his jaws come together with a snap. He misses this time, for his nose is large, and the snake’s body close down in the angle formed by the slabs and the floor. He snaps again as the tail comes round. He has the snake now, and tugs it out

eighteen inches. Thud, thud comes the woman's club on the ground. Alligator pulls again. Thud, thud. Alligator pulls some more. He has the snake out now – a black brute, five feet long. The head rises to dart about, but the dog has the enemy close to the neck. He is a big, heavy dog, but quick as a terrier. He shakes the snake as though he felt the original curse in common with mankind. The eldest boy wakes up, seizes his stick, and tries to get out of bed, but his mother forces him back with a grip of iron. Thud, thud – the snake's back is broken in several places. Thud, thud – its head is crushed, and Alligator's nose skinned again.

She lifts the mangled reptile on the point of her stick, carries it to the fire, and throws it in; then piles on the wood, and watches the snake burn. The boy and dog watch, too. She lays her hand on the dog's head, and all the fierce, angry light dies out of his yellow eyes. The younger children are quieted, and presently go to sleep. The dirty-legged boy stands for a moment in his shirt, watching the fire. Presently he looks up at her, sees the tears in her eyes, and, throwing his arms round her neck, exclaims:

'Mother, I won't never go drovin'; blast me if I do!'

And she hugs him to her worn-out breast and kisses him; and they sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over the bush.

*This version of the story first published in While the Billy Boils
(Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1896)*

Glossary

Gin: An Aboriginal woman; the word derives from 'Aboriginal'.

Kangaroo-dog: A purpose-bred Australian sighthound, considered a 'type' of dog rather than a purebred.

Snake-dog: Not a breed of dog, but one that is good at killing snakes without being struck. Some breeds are better at this than others.

Swagman or swaggie: An itinerant bushman who carried his belongings, clothes and personal items rolled in his blanket and ground sheet, and tied together with rope to make a swag; a tramp, hobo, vagabond.

Wall-plate: A horizontal, structural, load-bearing member in the framing of a wooden building. Lawson perhaps learned this term from his work in the building trade.

‘THE DROVER’S WIFE’ – A GREAT READING ADVENTURE

FRANK MOORHOUSE

THIS YEAR, 2017, MARKS the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of the Australian writer Henry Lawson.

Lawson scholar Paul Eggert, in *Biography of a Book: Henry Lawson’s While the Billy Boils* (2013), recounts Lawson’s death, at the age of fifty-five, and funeral:

He died in poverty on the morning of 2 September 1922, a Saturday. Well known around the streets of inner Sydney as a ruin of a man, a sad alcoholic, he was nevertheless accorded a state funeral – on Monday the 4th. George Robertson and then Phillip Harris, editor of the *Aussie*, approached the state government on the Saturday for a New South Wales state funeral. The requests were turned down; but the chance arrival of the Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia, Billy Hughes, by train on the Sunday morning changed everything ... A deputation organised by Harris and Mary Gilmore put the case for a state funeral to him. He ordered the funeral for the next day at St Andrew’s Cathedral in Sydney. The newspapers on the Monday were able to report his tribute: ‘[Lawson] knew intimately the real Australia, and was its greatest minstrel. He sang of its wide spaces, its dense bush, its droughts, its floods. He loved Australia ... None was his master. He was the poet of Australia, the minstrel of the people.’

During his short lifetime, Lawson published twenty-three collections of stories and verse. The population of his Sydney, in say 1900, was nearly half a million, roughly the size of Newcastle today. The population of

Australia was at that time 3,700,000, just over half the population of London.

In early 1902, Henry Lawson was thirty-four and at his peak as a writer, living in London with his family: his wife, Bertha, and their two children. He published three books in England, one including the short story 'The Drover's Wife'. The highly respected English critic Edward Garnett wrote at the time:

'The Drover's Wife' [is] a sketch of a woman in the bush, left for months alone with her four children while her husband is up-country droving. If this artless sketch be taken as the summary of a woman's life, giving its significance in ten short pages, even Tolstoy has never done better.

The passage of Lawson and his family to London was paid for by his Sydney publisher, George Robertson of Angus & Robertson; the Governor of NSW, Earl Beauchamp; and book collector and benefactor David Scott Mitchell. They wanted Lawson to make his name there. To some extent, he did: in the two years he was in London, he found a literary agent and published the three volumes of his work. He gained strong reviews and recognition from the critics – but not all were favourable.

Lawson did not 'make it'. During this time in London, Bertha was admitted to Bethlem Royal Hospital as a mental patient. She and the children returned to Australia in the middle of 1902, and Lawson followed soon after; they were all back before the end of July. In Sydney, Bertha, after six years of marriage, obtained a decree for judicial separation, testifying to Lawson's violent behaviour towards her. He is thought to have attempted suicide later that year.

After the return from England, Lawson's life entered a decline and his work began to deteriorate. Yet he remained much read up to and after his death, and photographs and illustrations of him turned him into an icon and voice of the young Australia, emerging from its post-settlement origins. In 1949, Lawson's face honoured the general-use postage stamp and, from 1966 to 1993, he featured on the first Australian ten-dollar note. In 2017, a stamp series was issued to commemorate some of his stories, including 'The Drover's Wife'.

‘The Drover’s Wife’ is Henry Lawson’s most republished short story. But it is more than that: since 1892, when the twenty-five-year-old Lawson first published the story in the *Bulletin* magazine, Australian writers, painters, performers, filmmakers, playwrights, photographers and literary theorists have created a rich river of art and scholarship inspired (or, in some cases, provoked) by the story.

It is thought by some critics that even only a few years after the story first appeared in the *Bulletin*, it evoked reaction from two women writers, Barbara Baynton and Katherine Mansfield, who wrote stories that have been seen as having a competitive, challenging and/or corrective intention towards the Lawson story. While Baynton’s ‘The Chosen Vessel’ (1896) and Mansfield’s ‘The Woman at the Store’ (1912) do not directly echo or allude to the Lawson story, they both involve a lone woman in an isolated rural setting, who is sexually threatened, or, in ‘The Chosen Vessel’, killed, by an itinerant man.

Some of the works inspired by Lawson’s story are also inspired by Russell Drysdale’s iconic 1945 painting *The drover’s wife*, now housed in the National Gallery of Australia after having been in private collections for many years. The painting is commonly seen as the first work inspired by the Lawson story; Drysdale denied the connection, but I seriously doubt they are unrelated. To add further confusion, in 1975, both the painting and the story were brought together in a short story by Murray Bail. If the Drysdale denial is correct, the Bail story would be the first creative coupling of the Lawson story with the painting.

In any case, while this conjoining of the two works in many of our minds could be a false reconstruction, it could be said that both the Lawson story and the Drysdale painting have become Australia’s own version of the *Mona Lisa*. Leonardo da Vinci’s enigmatic painting has been described by the critic John Lichfield as ‘the best known, the most visited, the most written about, the most sung about, the most parodied work of art in the world’. Some of the drover’s wife stories published since have taken their lead from Bail, intertwining the story and the painting. There are thirteen contemporary short stories with the title.

Recent works that allude to Lawson and/or the story include an experimental graphic novel, *The Drover’s Wives*, by Ryan O’Neill (2014); a novella by Madeleine Watts, *Afraid of Waking It* (2015); Leah Purcell’s prize-winning play *The Drover’s Wife* (2016); and *From Heaven to Hell*

(2016), part song cycle and part oratorio, by composer Andrew Howes. In 2017 alone, there were three new books published about Lawson.

It is a phenomenon unique in the Australian artistic imagination.

As a curious footnote to the wanderings of the Lawson story, I recently came across a Malaysian teaching aid about ‘The Drover’s Wife’, presumably used in a course about Australia. In 2009, the Malaysian Digital Storytelling Unit created the aid using still photographs; at the time of writing, it had over 6000 viewings online. In the same year, a teacher in one of the Malaysian schools involved with the course also created a YouTube version of the story in which four science students, all girls, perform a classroom version of ‘The Drover’s Wife’ in their hijabs.

The impact of the drover’s wife – and her absent husband – has been interpreted in a number of ways. I see the story as an allegorical telling of the first white Australian settlers in a harsh land, and the threats they faced, some of which they brought on themselves through their treatment of Aboriginal Australians.

These settler immigrants, together with freed English convicts, and then the first Australian-born settlers – once known as ‘currency lads and lasses’ and, for a while, also known as ‘native-born Australians’ – were ultimately seen as a hostile presence by Aboriginal people. The drover and the drover’s wife in Lawson’s story are first-generation white Australians but, perhaps confusingly for some of his contemporary readers, in the story the Aboriginal man who creates the hollow woodpile is referred to as a ‘native Black’.

The Lawson story touches on this friction, and the racialism was heightened by changes Lawson made to the original version of the story. I discuss these changes in an essay in this book, ‘The younger Lawson v the older Lawson – the sourcing of “The Drover’s Wife”’. I have also included the writer’s and director’s notes for Leah Purcell’s postcolonial reimagining of the story; Purcell’s notes about the production explain her connection to ‘The Drover’s Wife’.

Among the post-1788 settlers and their descendants – and, I suspect, even post-World War II immigrants and their children, coming to learn about the history of Australia – there is a growing consciousness of the fundamental, inescapable tragedy of our uncomfortable presence on this continent. For some post-1788 Australians, this tragedy continues to mar any satisfaction felt about the achievements of successive generations since

settlement; that is, the social amenity and relative civic stability so far achieved.

‘The Drover’s Wife’ could be seen as a symbolic representation of the immigrant and the refugee experience. I stress *symbolic* since, in reality, the journey of these immigrant and refugee generations has often been due to extreme distress, both war-made and economic, in their countries of origin. After their arrival in Australia, a place of refuge, they have been confronted with the struggle to create a home, to acclimatise to an often radically different culture. These immigrants and refugees have had to adapt to what they see as a strange natural environment and to deal with uncommon threats. As outsiders, they have struggled to find security within a not-always-welcoming, sometimes bigoted community. We may yet see from these people ‘Drover’s Wife’-inspired artworks expressing the refugee and immigrant experience: the isolation and hostility encountered here, the peculiar landscape and creatures as well as, sometimes, expressions of a better humanity from their hosts.

But facing the consequences of this tragedy of dispossession does not mean that Australians – or, at least, those of us who came after 1788 – cannot empathise with those early settlers and what they cruelly and clumsily created as a *way of life* against the land and against Aboriginal Australians. We can feel for the drover’s wife and her kind, both historically and universally, because they also represent other, more universal fables.

Lawson’s story, for some of us post-settlement Australians, still lives as a powerful legend of our ancestors, describing the hardship of early settlement – the cutting of trees to build a shelter, the ploughing of virgin land, the making of a family, the struggle to feed and clothe children. It has within it the great parable of *the first human family ever to settle the virgin land*.

There is a remarkable essay, titled ‘The Australian Bush-Woman’, written in 1889 by Lawson’s mother, Louisa, three years before ‘The Drover’s Wife’, which inspired her son’s story. Her essay, originally published in the *Boston Woman’s Journal* and the London *Englishwoman’s Review*, is published in this book.

In ‘The Australian Bush-Woman’, there is an examination of the cruel, violent relationships that existed between men and women back then, awakening us to our inheritance of that domestic culture that continues to scar us as a society. While drawing very much on his mother’s essay,

Lawson leaves out her references to male violence towards women, although the threat of rape pervades the story. As we now know, especially since the publication of Kerrie Davies' book *A Wife's Heart*, violence was to emerge in Lawson's own domestic life.

Louisa Lawson writes that the early settlers who took to the bush life:

were generally of rough, coarse character, or, if they were not of such nature originally, the solitude and the strange, primitive life must have made them so. In those remote and isolated spots, man is king and force is ruler. There is no law, no public opinion to interfere. The wife is at the man's mercy. She must bear what ills he chooses to put upon her, and her helplessness in his hands only seems to educe the beast in him. There is a vast deal of the vilest treatment [of women].

Interestingly, Louisa Lawson saw the subsequent generations of Australian men as promisingly different from the earlier English and foreign settlers, and she had high hopes that the daughters of the drovers' wives would win their independence and their pride. I would suggest that the drover's wife story might now symbolise the distance, redefinition and friction still being worked out between males and females in Australia – as illustrated by high divorce rates, high incidence of domestic violence, the emotional absence of the male, harassment of women in the workplace and wage inequality.

'Mother, I won't never go drovin'; blast me if I do!' the drover's wife's eleven-year-old son, Tommy, pledges to his mother. Tommy has tried to kill the snake and to be her male partner in the absence of her husband. His pledge – on behalf of all males, to all wives, mothers and lovers – is to not abuse the contracts of intimacy and domesticity.

Well, we'll see, Tommy – men have a way to go yet.

We learn in her story that the drover's wife thinks if the drover had the means, he would take her to the city and keep her there 'like a princess'. But he didn't. He couldn't. She is not to achieve this female fantasy, nor many of the other relationship goals of a woman, then and now. Her absent husband 'may forget sometimes that he is married'.

'No use fretting,' she says.

The story also carries within it the challenges of all parenting – the anxiety about ‘getting it right’ – and the struggles of the working mother. More, it is a complication of the single-mother story: after all, her husband is occasionally away for eighteen months at a time. Her situation is such that, ‘She loves her children, but has no time to show it. She seems harsh to them. Her surroundings are not favourable to the development of the “womanly” or sentimental side of nature.’ At the end of the story, ‘she hugs [Tommy] to her worn-out breast and kisses him; and they sit thus together while the sickly daylight breaks over the bush.’

Lawson’s stories and verse have contributed to our understanding of settlement – as well as the making of our early urban life, the making of our cities – and have introduced the young Australian nation to powerful notions of nationalism, republicanism, Australian socialism, our (now almost lost) egalitarianism, the ‘romance’ of the bush and the ideal of mateship. Lawson also lived out the Tragic Artist Legend, and the role of the arts in shaping our sense of ourselves. This story, too, is still alive as we try to answer the question of how a civilised society such as Australia is to find ways of sustaining its artists.

These links between Lawson and Australian identity have been looked at by many writers in Lawson biographies and critical studies over the years. We publish an essay by the Lawson scholar Kay Schaffer, ‘Henry Lawson, “The Drover’s Wife” and the Critics’. What Schaffer has described as ‘the competition to define the “real” Henry Lawson, “the first articulate voice of the real Australian”’ goes on.

Talking to my friend Rohan Haslam about this book when it was in its early stages, I said I was having difficulty in describing the project. He stopped me and said, ‘You have described the subject of this book with your use of five words: icon, muse, myth, legend, tragedy.’

Something else occurred to me while bringing this book together. The assembly of it, with all these imaginative and intellectual creations flowering from Lawson’s original story, together forms yet another layered version of ‘The Drover’s Wife’.

This book is a monument to the drovers’ wives.

‘A MIXED-UP AFFAIR ALL ROUND’ – GIRL/WOMAN/WIFE/MOTHER/MAN/BLACK MAN AND INTO THE LANDSCAPE

FRANK MOORHOUSE

IN THE BUSHFIRE INCIDENT, the drover’s wife experiences, for a few moments, dramatic transformations in her personality that are wonderfully revealing.

For a brief time, she becomes a man. She crosses the sex boundary: ‘She put on an old pair of her husband’s trousers and beat out the flames with a green bough ... The sight of his mother in trousers greatly amused Tommy’, her oldest child. This is perhaps the nervous laughter of children when confronted with a disordering of their certainties. Tommy may have been even more nervously amused if his drover father – had he been around – had put on one of his wife’s dresses.

She is also transformed momentarily into an Aboriginal Australian – she experiences life from the other side of the racial divide:

It was a mixed-up affair all round: when she went to take up the baby he screamed and struggled convulsively, thinking it was a ‘Black man’; and Alligator [their dog], trusting more to the child’s sense than his own instinct, charged furiously, and ... did not in his excitement at first recognise his mistress’s voice, but continued to hang on to the moleskins until choked off by Tommy with a saddle-strap.

As in the process of making all fiction, the person ‘Henry Lawson’, as a flawed, hapless man, retreats backstage, and the imagination strides onstage to take over, forming itself as the Storyteller, the Narrator. In the case of Lawson, from what we now know of him the person living backstage has a precarious personality, distinct from the assured writer of strong stories and,

sometimes, overwrought, high-flown, drum-beating verse – the writer with a very masculine moustache: darkened, thickened, exaggerated. This persona can express more than the hapless person backstage knows or understands, and does so with great boldness.

The fusion of the feminine and the male in Lawson created the strong, unified body of work, known as that of ‘Lawson’, paradoxically disembodied from Henry Lawson, the person backstage, whose personality was sexually confused, alcoholic and chronically troubled.

Contemporary descriptions of the personality and manner of Henry Lawson, and his own description of himself, reveal him as having a precarious sense of his sexual nature, now described academically as gender, as distinct from a person’s anatomical sex. Lawson uses the word ‘effeminate’ to describe himself, as did others. But given the rigid and coarsened Australian masculine culture in which he mostly moved, Lawson’s consciousness of his femininity, which was considerable, meant that he would have tried to suppress or modify it so that he could find acceptance in conventional male company, hence his adoption of the big moustache. He does not seem to have been too successful in ‘passing’ as a ‘normal bloke’ in society, yet he was successful in projecting through his writing the voice, manner and mores of the normal male bloke of his times – although some contemporary commentators detected the femininity in his writing.

From his early life, Lawson was seen by relatives and others as a ‘sensitive’ or a ‘delicate’ young man. The words were, still are, polite code for feminine or effeminate, sometimes used to denote an ‘artistic personality’ in a male.

Lawson describes his own sense of his *difference* in *A Fragment of Autobiography*, written around 1903 to 1906, when he was in his late thirties, but only published in full in Cecil Mann’s 1964 edition of *The Stories of Henry Lawson*. Lawson writes, in a margin of the original manuscript, ‘I had a fondness for dolls, especially wooden judy dolls, and later on developed a weakness for cats – which last has clung to me to this day.’ He writes, ‘I kept big things ... locked up tight in my heart ... the lady told Aunt, I was a very sensitive child’; ‘My aunts said it was a pity I hadn’t been born a girl’; ‘My old schooldays sweetheart was Mary B – the tomboy’.

He also reflects:

About this time – or I may have been a little younger [I] began to be haunted by the dread of ‘growing up to be a man.’ Also I had an idea that I had lived before, and had grown up to be a man and grown old and died. I confided in Father and these ideas seemed to trouble him a lot. I slept in a cot beside the bed and I used to hold his horny [sic] hand until I went to sleep. And often Id [sic] say to him: ‘Father! it’ll be a long time before I grow up to be a man, won’t it’; and hed [sic] say ‘Yes, Sonny. Now try and go to sleep.’ But I grew up to be a man in spite of lying awake worrying about it.

Lawson’s diary was not offered for publication in his lifetime nor, maybe, even for readership among his intimates, but it is remarkable that he made this unflinching attempt to see himself so clearly and, through writing, attempt to reconcile these views of himself – and that he kept it.

When in the workforce, as a young man, Lawson also records, ‘Blank [one of his employers] ... seemed to hate me especially – because of my clean skin and effeminate appearance probably. He used to call me a “B——y woman!”’ Lawson describes being tormented and bullied at another job because he was different. He also identifies with others like him: ‘I’ve seen the poor, pale, delicate victim the butt of brutal ignorance in many places ... I always know him ... his face, figure, voice and manner told plainly of a gentleman.’

Lawson’s wife, Bertha, in 1943, about twenty years after his death, published a biography of him titled *My Henry Lawson*, in which she tries to describe his *difference*, drawing on what she knew of his childhood and youth before their unhappy six-year marriage:

Harry’s mannerisms and queer ways were often the subject of comment at home ... as jests about himself putting his ‘odd self’ to the test of feminine appreciation ... He went to one of his mother’s boarders and asked her to marry him believing she would laugh and refuse. But to his dismay, she accepted him ...

To add to his struggles with effeminacy, Lawson had a lisp. A speech issue rather than an ‘affectation’, I do not think a lisp is an indicator of gender, but people commented on Lawson’s with perhaps some implications about his effeminacy because, to conventional minds, it fitted with other characteristics – his ‘queer ways’. A friend of his, the writer E. J.

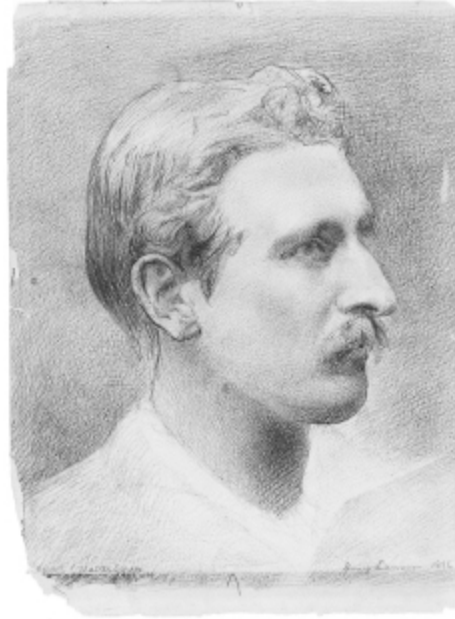
Brady, described his manner of speaking as a ‘curious lisping drawl’; in an essay, he transcribed Lawson saying, ‘Yeth, Ted – beer.’

In Bertha’s biography of Lawson, she also reports a mate saying, ‘Henry was, at times, inclined to be what to-day would be termed “fussy”.’ His closest mate, Jim Gordon, describes how particular Lawson was, both in his tramping and camping practices, and also uses the term ‘fussy’. Lawson’s close, special relationship with Jim is dealt with in my essay ‘Mateship love – how did Lawson experience mateship?’.

When Lawson was at a poets’ camp in Mallacoota, Victoria, in 1910, organised by Brady, Lawson remonstrated with his fellow campers because they did not have a camp broom. Using a fishing line and some tea-tree limbs, he spent a morning binding together a broom to sweep the hut and tent daily. He also taught the others how to make a campfire properly, and when to put the billy on to boil; they laughed at him for his prim housekeeping. When they changed campsites, he created for them a camp with elaborate bush comforts. Again, the others were amused at Lawson’s ‘clean queen’ tendencies.

These qualities of Lawson’s led some to warn Bertha of his unsuitability as a husband figure. She describes how Lawson’s publisher, George Robertson, seriously tried to talk her out of marrying him, saying, ‘Henry Lawson is a genius and you know what geniuses are like – they can never make a woman happy.’ At eighteen, she probably had little knowledge of ‘geniuses’ or, for that matter, what would, in a man, make her, as a woman, ‘happy’. Robertson’s advice is telling, even if it did not stop Bertha from marrying Lawson.

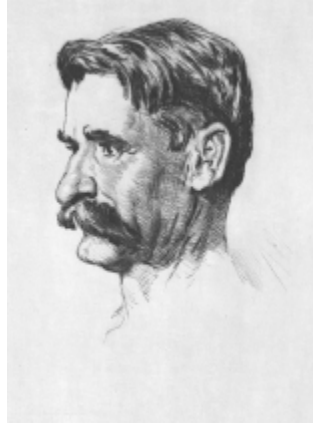
There are descriptions of Lawson being involved with women – Mary Gilmore; Bertha; Hannah Thornburn, his ‘spirit girl’ to whom he wrote a poem; and finally Isabel Byers – and Bertha’s descriptions of their courtship seem to show that he felt a strong attraction to her: ‘We had happy times in those days of our courtship, with many outings and plenty of fun.’ As a courting man, she describes him as ‘teasing, and mischievous’.



Drawing of a young Lawson, dated 1896, by Walter Syer (1854–1911)

Paul Eggert quotes this description of Lawson at twenty-nine, from an 1896 interview with Henry Hyde Champion, bookseller and editor of *Champion* literary magazine, when Lawson was in Melbourne: ‘A tall, slight man, delicate in appearance, and with an air of refinement and sensitiveness, Lawson would give a first impression of femininity. This is deepened by his quiet, though decisive, style of speech ...’ But Champion rushes to say that, ‘it is in his virility of thought that his masculinity is manifested’.

Lawson doesn’t yet have the more dramatic, even theatrically exaggerated, moustache that was to become an important part of his image. A skilled barber, perhaps protective of his customer’s manhood, would have used the tricks of his trade – moustache wax, dye, argan oil – to thicken and blacken it. This moustache was to appear on Lawson on the postage stamp and ten-dollar note, a contrast from the boy he had been:



Portrait of Henry Lawson by Sir Lionel Lindsay, dated 1919



Lawson aged fourteen

In 1896, Lawson's first book of verse, *In the Days When the World Was Wide and Other Verses*, was published and reviewed, almost certainly by A. G. Stephens, editor of the *Bulletin*. The reviewer says, 'Lawson's keen sympathy, his knack of observation, are characteristically feminine. His sense of humor, his talent for vivid portrayal, are as characteristically masculine ...' They continue, 'His womanish wail often needs a sturdy Australian backbone.'

Other critics in Lawson's day came to criticise this 'femaleness' in his work. In 1897, Joseph Furphy, a friend of Lawson, said that he was 'too feminine ... indifferent to the virilities of human response – too indifferent to achieve a balanced view of life'.

In her 1988 book *Women and the Bush*, Kay Schaffer writes:

For the most part, critics begin to challenge Lawson's bush as unrepresentative, morbid and brooding. But what they deem undesirable in the fiction, they attribute to failings in the personality of the artist. Further, the form of chastisement relies on an understanding of masculine/feminine dichotomies. Lawson is depicted as weak, womanish and unmanly when his writings no longer conform to the nation's dominant idea of itself.

Schaffer comments that, through the years, 'The Drover's Wife' is excepted from this criticism by most male critics, and suggests that this is in part because it depicts 'a malleable, pliant, non-threatening phallic bush/mother'. Schaffer writes, 'Critics variously interpret [Lawson's] personal attributes as indicative of feminine weakness or a poetic sensibility (which can of course amount to the same thing) ... that which is deemed "weak" in Lawson's writings and in his personality.'

Schaffer continues:

The critics of Lawson, depending on the social, economic and political requirements of the age and the speaker's relation to the dominant discourse of the day, have found in his writings evidence of manly strength and feminine weakness, national prosperity and supranational pessimism ... 'The Drover's Wife' can be seen as a symbol of freedom and progress, or constriction and defeat, depending on the requirements of the age and the critic's ideological ties to the 'national interest'.

Since the time in which Schaffer was writing, at the cutting edge of gender studies, the social and academic discourse has made shifts towards examining other gender positions, away from approaches that are strictly medical or psychotherapeutic. New approaches in gender studies recognise that there is a spectrum of gender personalities, each with its own integrity and with a recognised public expression. We have the awkward acronym for LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex) people, often grouped as 'queer culture'; other terms now in use include 'gender fluid', 'non-binary' and 'gender non-conforming', or 'bigendered', which is how I would describe Lawson. Queer Language Central tells us that new initials are to be added; for example, A for asexual and A for ally of the movement. I think the problem is that the acronym

does not make a word; it is unpronounceable and difficult to remember. It also presupposes that there is a Queer Language Central. For this book, I use LGBTQI. In the television series *The West Wing*, the character C. J., chief of staff to the president, is confronted with the rumour that she is a lesbian. She objects, saying that she wouldn't mind being a lesbian but did not like being thought of as 'gender unstable'.

These approaches open up new possibilities for our reading of Lawson and 'The Drover's Wife'.

Which brings me to the question of George Lambert's intention for his 1931 sculpture of Lawson in Sydney's Royal Botanic Garden. A few years back, I wrote to my friend, short-story writer and publisher Tim Herbert, of my recent visit to the Lambert statue, 'You will recall that when I last visited Lawson I observed to you that Lambert had given Henry a limp wrist. I thought it gently captured something which contemporaries had also observed in Lawson – what we might see today as a fey sensitivity and a posed manner uncharacteristic of the "real" men in Lawson's world.'

Tim visited the statue and wrote back to me, 'Limp-wristed he is indeed. Does Lambert include the much more masculine (hairy and big-handed) character from *While the Billy Boils* on the right hand side as a counterweight to effete Henry?'

We aren't alone in seeing this effeteness in the statue. Lawson scholar Chris Lee, in a 1997 essay in *JASAL*, the journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature, examines the evolution of the Lambert statue. After Lambert had presented a sketch to the statue committee, the poet John Le Gay Brereton, a member of the committee and friend of Lawson's, said he:

was unhappy with the conventional representation of the poet. No poet looked like this. [Brereton] felt that the Lawson figure needed to display more 'strength of character' considering his 'appeal was to the bushman and to the vigorous'. He also considered the hair 'unnecessarily long'. Ifould [a committee member] was directed to instruct the sculptor to 'strengthen' the figure of Lawson by making him less of a 'stage poet' in general, and by making his hands 'more virile' in particular.

A glance at Lambert's preliminary pencil sketch of the Lawson figure makes it quite clear what Brereton and the committee were

complaining about. The stance of the model, its slender figure, and the flaccid poise of its delicate hands and wrists are effeminate. It is very different from the heroic, independent images of Bush characters.



Lambert's sketch



The statue

It appeared Henry Lawson was again in need of some 'sturdy Australian backbone'.

Yet Lambert seems to have ignored the committee's instruction, except for the tilt of the head and the tidying up of Lawson's hair. For example, he heightened the bend of the knee. His styling of Lawson's stance seems to capture his often-remarked-upon lankiness; he was described as 'tall and thin with usually an awkward quality'. Maybe this accounts for Lambert's suggestion that Lawson did not present himself in the conventional way of men.

A number of people who knew Lawson have described the somewhat charismatic quality of his physical presence, especially of his eyes. Chris Lee told me he thought Lawson had 'woman's eyes', but I doubt that there are established sexual differences in eyes. The female gender has evolved ways of using the eyes for heightened expression, with cosmetics, and lash and brow shaping. Perhaps many women have longer eyelashes, as did Lawson. Michael Tansey, a teacher of Lawson, wrote, 'his soft brown eyes ... twinkled like stars ... and invited you to talk to him.' Poet Helen Jerome said that 'his dog-like yearning eyes ... always seem to have tears lurking in their brown depths.' Journalist and author Arthur H. Adams wrote, 'His voice was low, his soul was sad, his fine and mournful eyes looked out with a child's wistfulness at this strange world.'

Lambert knew Lawson but, unlike Lawson, 'With great charm, he moved easily in fashionable circles' and had 'a slightly theatrical manner' (Martin Terry, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*). Today, Lambert himself might be seen as gay. I think in his sculpture he was trying to portray his friend as he actually was, as a response to all the blokey mateship and other masculine codes in which Lawson's work had been cloaked; I think that Lambert saw, as I do, the beauty in Lawson's effeminacy. It is a pity that Lawson did not find like-minded friends in Lambert's circle. Maybe he did. I hope so.

Tim happened to pass the statue again with Mark Facchin, an artist and designer, and Mark at first doubted our perception. But after Tim sent him the Lambert sketch, he changed his mind. Mark wrote back, 'Yes, in the sketch and statue, Lawson ... has a slightly awkward contrapposto. The weight feels like it's directed from HL's right shoulder down to his left hip and foot, suggesting he is leaning on a wall. His right heel is about to push forward ... Definitely a queer pose.' I learn from Mark that contrapposto is the classical sculptural use of a body pose to express personality, psychological disposition or temperament.

But in her book *A Wife's Heart*, about Lawson's marriage to Bertha, among other things, Kerrie Davies' interpretation of Henry's stance in the Lambert statue is that:

Henry's hand seems to form around an invisible mug, perhaps of billy tea, or more likely beer ... however, the Memorial Fund's chairperson said Lambert wanted to capture Henry's mannerism: Lawson's hand was not raised in gesticulation whilst reciting, but 'so as to see a distant hill or as if to recall far horizons of memory – a familiar gesture of the poet's'.

Regardless of the meaning of the statue's pose, Lawson, in his own observations of his 'effeminate' nature, seems clear about the markers and implications of effeminacy in his world – and, in male subgroups today, they would still apply.

Dr Zoe Fraser, who as a doctoral student at Griffith University researched this area, read a draft of this essay, and questioned what the words 'feminine' or 'effeminate' meant when directed at a male in Lawson's time, compared to what we take them to mean today. I would speculate that these words would have been used to describe Lawson's personal style as odd, queer and abnormal, and later used to imply his weaknesses as a man, both in his character and his writing. I would further speculate that, given this expression of difference, behind his back those men and women who knew him would have wondered about his sexual preferences.

Perhaps the word 'effeminate' is now somewhat politically incorrect, given it still carries a derogatory implication. Indeed, the word's pejorative meaning has been in English for more than three hundred years, its equivalents having existed in other languages and cultures going way back, at least to the Greeks. While the English word 'tomboy' in its current meaning is also centuries old, dating to 1545–55, it is rarely pejorative, more a term of amused acceptance, a corrective nudge to a young girl to be more 'ladylike'. I would think that both feminine and effeminate, when directed at males, are only slightly less pejorative now. While writing this essay, I heard of the suicide in 2016 of thirteen-year-old Tyrone Unsworth, after his bullying at Brisbane schools. His mother said he was gay and that he had been consistently bullied about his sexuality for years: 'He was a

really feminine male. He loved fashion, he loved make-up and the boys always picked on him, calling him gay boy, faggot, fairy; it was a constant thing from Year Five.'

The critic A. A. Phillips wrote in 1958 that 'Lawson could not resolve women's rejection of him and the ... alienation from his wife and mother ... he succumbs to feminine weakness.' Other critics, including A. G. Stephens and Manning (oh dear, the name) Clark, have seen a deficiency in his writing talent springing from the effeminate 'weakness' in his personality. Clark wrote that Lawson had 'a feminine mind in a masculine body', and later wrote of 'a violent destructive person inside the gentle Henry Lawson'. He claimed that Lawson 'should have been a girl' and inferred 'a repressed homosexuality, a spendthrift personality and the influence of British philistinism' as reasons for his disturbed personality and the ultimate disintegration of him as a person and as a writer.

Lawson's androgynous nature – what these critics deemed his effeminacy – is not uncommon in the arts. In 1929, Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own*:

I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man.

Many writers have contemplated the role of androgyny and gender fluidity in the arts; I have myself. But what does the androgynous personality *know* – both conventional genders? Or neither fully? Does androgyny open up insights, or does it close off the writer in an ungendered no-person's land? We have to trust our intelligence, scholarship and imagination to give us some knowledge of *others* and a release from our sex/gender/class/ethnicity cages.

The most significant influence in Lawson's formative life, and his mentor, was his mother, Louisa Lawson (1848–1920). He was sixteen when he joined her in a bohemian, radical, feminist household in Sydney, after they left the bush and Henry's father.

In 1887, Louisa bought the *Republican* magazine and with Henry, aged twenty, edited and wrote most of its copy. In fact, they created a merged

identity, with their joint contributions appearing under the pseudonym of 'Archie Lawson', mingling his creativity with hers.

When Lawson was twenty-three, he began a relationship with the poet and radical Mary Gilmore, who was two years older than him and better educated. A story of the relationship is told in Anne Brooksbank's 2015 play *All My Love*. Gilmore taught Lawson to use a dictionary and lent him books she felt he should read. She writes in her letters and diary of an unofficial engagement and Lawson's wish to marry her, but she broke it off, perhaps because of his frequent absences, of which she writes, too. Heavy male drinking can be a form of emotional flight and absence, too – the abrupt flight pattern was emerging in Lawson's life. At some stage in his relationship with Mary, he seems to have taken off to Western Australia for six months (the absent drover) and, on his return, he moved out from his mother's home into bachelor accommodation.

In 1888, Louisa established the *Dawn*, a journal devoted to feminist issues, which continued publication until 1905. The next year, Louisa also launched the campaign for female suffrage and announced the formation of the Dawn Club, where women met to discuss 'every question of life, work and reform'.

As I have mentioned, Louisa's essay 'The Australian Bush-Woman' also contained an outline of a 'drover's wife', from which Henry drew detail for the story. Based on what we know from historical sources, the story, in physical detail, is an accurate-enough fictionalised picture of some of the living conditions in which women settlers found themselves. The story captures a basically sound realism, and would have drawn on descriptions of outback life that Henry would have observed early in life and heard told by others. Henry wrote his story three years after Louisa's essay was published.

I think that Louisa's description of the isolated bush-woman also describes Lawson the silent observer, living in a state of semi-deafness since he was a child, alienated by his creative sensibility, living with his precarious gender. A bubble of isolation formed, which, even when in company, placed him apart from his male companions.

Given this, I believe that Lawson was able to successfully empathise with the drover's wife's sense of herself as a lone, threatened female coping with significant difficulties in a hostile bush. In his poem 'Ruth', Lawson writes: 'I am shamed for Australia and haunted by the face of the haggard

bush wife – / She who fights her grim battle undaunted because she knows nothing of life.’ And later: ‘Eve’s beauty in girlhood destroyed!’

I think contemporary readers would find the efforts of Lawson, as a man, to portray in the story the daily life, and the inner life, of an outback girl, wife, mother, convincing. The drover’s wife is oppressed by her environmental conditions and by the contract of marriage – and within that, oppressed also by the contract of her gender, which further degraded her situation, even if she claims to have come to terms with its difficulties: ‘No use fretting.’

In 1894, Louisa, with the twenty-seven-year-old Henry, edited and published the first selection of his work, *Short stories in prose and verse*, which contained ‘The Drover’s Wife’ but slightly, interestingly, revised the original *Bulletin* version published two years prior. Louisa would also have been the first reader of ‘The Drover’s Wife’ at the manuscript stage and I assume that, in the writing of it, Lawson tested the story with his mother, who had already provided the framework and details for it in her essay.

Over the last century, over and above the story’s core realism, there have been a number of allegorical and ideological readings of ‘The Drover’s Wife’. My concentration on and elaboration of Lawson’s gender precariousness could itself be seen as a contemporary ideological emphasis.

And now a final thought – the younger Henry, who at twenty-five wrote the story, was coming to realise the personal isolation brought about by his partial deafness, the demons of his effeminacy, the failure of his romance with Mary Gilmore, his loneliness, the difficulty of scratching a living from his writing in a difficult country. Lawson may have been allegorising his own condition, his own ‘sickly daylight’. He did not write another story from within the gender persona of a woman; Lawson himself may be the drover’s wife.

In writing ‘The Drover’s Wife’, he, too, became girl-woman-wife-mother and, while he did not merge into the landscape, he became, instead, a writer.

SEXUAL TENSIONS IN ‘THE DROVER’S WIFE’ – WHAT WAS IT LIKE WHEN THE DROVER WAS HOME?

FRANK MOORHOUSE

THE SEXUAL TENSIONS IN ‘The Drover’s Wife’ are stark.

The girl-wife

The drover’s wife has found herself in the outback, living in relative isolation in a two-roomed shack, one room with an earthen floor and one with a slab floor. She has four young children and a husband who is away droving for long stretches of time – he’s been gone for six months without any communication, and at one time had been gone for eighteen months. She is virtually a single mother, or part-time wife, or maybe a semi-abandoned wife. She has become used to the loneliness of her life.

‘As a girl-wife she hated it, but now she would feel strange away from it.’

Maybe life was better without the drover being home?

She attempts to hold to her feminine standards and qualities

If she has accepted her life as a part-time wife, she still holds to her femininity as part of her sexual being.

She struggles to preserve her integrity as a woman both in the terms of the womanly conditioning of her times, and her inherent female qualities: that is, expressions of the hormonal, anatomical, genetic and psychological fundamentals of the female that come, in part, from the female role, or anatomical potential, of child-bearing. These elemental characteristics are thought to exist in women universally but were being contested by feminism even in her times, and continue these days in the analysis and

discourse of gender studies, if ever these characteristics can be separated out from social and parental conditioning, let alone from the variations of the 'norms' found within the diversity of the individual female personality. As Louisa Lawson says in 'The Australian Bush-Woman', 'there [are] in the colony of New South Wales about 471,000 women and girls, so that I suppose there [are] ... 471,000 different kinds of women.'

In some cultures, there is a move away from the binary of male/female genders towards the idea of a spectrum of genders while still holding, broadly and socially, for functional purposes, to the binary conventions – in dress, customs, body styling and so on – during a presumed transition to wider gender categories, such as those of the LGBTQI family, some with their own style, glitz and glamour.

The drover's wife reads the magazine the *Young Ladies' Journal* as a guide to her femininity and as something of an aspirational model of womanhood: 'She finds all the excitement and recreation she needs in the *Young Ladies' Journal*, and, Heaven help her! takes a pleasure in the fashion-plates.'

Whose voice says, 'Heaven help her'? Is it the drover's wife mocking herself for having such out-of-reach aspirations? Or does it come from Lawson's mother, Louisa, while reading a draft of the story over his shoulder? The magazine presents something of a lifestyle of *femininity*, ultimately unrealistic for outback women such as the drover's wife, a femininity accessible only to women of a certain class and income.

Or does Lawson perhaps say 'Heaven help her' to himself, to the 'her' in his own make-up? Perhaps Lawson speaks here to the out-of-reach fantasy of gender/sexuality realisation within the attic of his own gender duality – or sexual *amalgam*, or an inner sexual diversity – as a boy who, as he wrote in his unpublished autobiography, did not wish to grow up to be a man.

The drover's wife practises her femininity:

... on Sunday afternoon she dresses herself, tidies the children, smartens-up baby, and goes for a lonely walk along the bush-track
... She takes as much care to make herself and the children look smart as she would if she were going to do the block in the city.

When her drover husband had money, 'he took her to the city several times – hired a railway sleeping compartment, and put up at the best hotels.' This suggests that, for a while, there had been romantic indulgences and fantasies about how she might one day live as a 'proper' woman. She believes, 'If he had the means he would take her to the city and keep her there like a princess.' But in the story she has accepted that she will never be a princess; by the end, she has given in as 'the sickly daylight breaks over the bush'.

'No use fretting,' she says. And later: 'She is glad when her husband returns, but she does not gush or make a fuss about it. She gets him something good to eat, and tidies up the children.' We hear that she and her husband 'are used to being apart, or at least she is'. Lawson gives her no expression of heightened anticipation of their marital reunion, of emotional gladness, of swelling passion, of sexual frustrations about to be released or of anticipated sexual intimacy, which might be expected to have followed from his arrival home.

She gets him something good to eat, and tidies up the children. No passion here. Or is the reader to *assume* the customary passion of reunion? Or is Lawson portraying a low-key, emotionally casual, 'laid-back' style, found among some Australian couples as a way of handling romance and sex? As Louisa says in her essay, the husband and wife in a bush marriage are often 'a comparatively cold and impassive pair'. Again, I presume that Louisa guided the story, as first reader and as the interventionist editor she was. Or was this omission of sexual reference just the prudery of the day restraining the story?

'He may forget sometimes that he is married ...' Do the description of his homecoming and this comment suggest that he has begun to give up his husbandly role as lover, and that they do not care much about the physical part of their marriage anymore? Are we to assume that he finds sexual outlet in other towns during his absences, and that she accepts this? Wouldn't be unusual.

It is recalled that, 'As a girl she built the usual castles in the air; but all her girlish hopes and aspirations have long been dead.' Nowadays, her dreams are more grounded: 'if he has a good cheque when he comes back he will give most of it to her'. Could this be guilt money from the drover for his husbandly absence, and his neglect of the responsibilities of

fatherhood? Regret money? Or is it a way of being the big-shot male, buying his way back into her bed?

She lives with sexual threat

The story presents rape as one of the drover's wife's recurring fears.

She recounts that:

Occasionally a bushman in the horrors, or a villainous-looking sundowner, comes and nearly scares the life out of her. She generally tells the suspicious-looking stranger that her husband and two sons are at work below the dam, or over at the yard, for he always cunningly enquires for the boss.

Only last week a gallows-faced swagman – having satisfied himself that there were no men on the place – threw his swag down on the verandah, and demanded tucker. She gave him something to eat; then he expressed his intention of staying for the night. It was sundown then. She got a batten from the sofa, loosened the dog, and confronted the stranger, holding the batten in one hand and the dog's collar with the other. 'Now you go!' she said. He looked at her and at the dog, said 'All right, mum,' in a cringing tone, and left.

But sexual abuse is not the only male threat for the bush-woman: the bush could be a brutal place. Louisa's essay creates a picture of male violence against women in some of the bush marriages that she would have observed, with the wife 'alone in the wilds with a brutal husband' and 'a slave, bound hand and foot to her daily life'. Louisa writes:

To generalize roughly, one must say that the bush-woman's life is, however, on the average, a sad one ... Some are worked to death and some are bullied to death; but the women are so scattered and so reticent that the world hears nothing of it all ... out in that loneliness of mountain and plain, where is the redress, where the protection? ... I have known a woman to be up a tree for three days, while her husband was hunting for her to 'hammer' her.

Louisa's depiction of the domestic violence of those days in her essay does not enter into Henry's story but, as Kerrie Davies argues in *A Wife's Heart*, domestic violence was to seriously enter his own life.

Academic Sue Kossew has written of 'Lawson's snake as a phallic and predatory intruder'. I agree that the snake is symbolic of the threat of phallic rape; I also conjecture that, paradoxically, it gives the drover's wife the elusive tremor of the penis image – even an element of anger at the absence of the penis from her life: 'At every flash of lightning, the cracks between the slabs gleam like polished silver.' However, there is no suggestion in the story that she ever finds sexual relief or pleasure with strangers. If the story were to go in this direction, it would have perhaps been unpublishable.

The loss of the maternal nature of her femininity: she becomes the landscape

'She loves her children, but has no time to show it. She seems harsh to them. Her surroundings are not favourable to the development of the "womanly" or sentimental side of nature.'

The drover's wife is 'gaunt' and 'sun-browned'; she is becoming the land. 'The bush-woman is thin, wiry, flat-chested and sunburned,' as Louisa describes her.

'The land wins,' John Kinsella says in his introduction to *The Penguin Henry Lawson Short Stories*, 'as it always does.'

Reading 'The Australian Bush-Woman', I thought that not only was Louisa describing the harsh condition of some Australian women for overseas readers, she was also teaching the young Henry a model for a young Australian woman – and, indirectly, the liberated male – which she hopes will be found in the daughters of the drover's wife and subsequent generations of Australian-born girls. She describes these girls as 'enlightened and progressive ... fit to obtain what their mothers never dreamed of – women's rights', a model that I suspect Henry absorbed, in some way, into his own personality. Given his involvement in Louisa's household and work, he would have been surrounded by conversations about feminism.

In Louisa's essay, her bushwomen live 'almost masculine lives'; they are 'a race apart'. The 'flat-chested' look she refers to has come and gone in women's fashions, and Louisa's reference was perhaps a hangover from the corseted styles of nineteenth-century England (though the flat female chest returned as a fashion in the 1920s, especially among flappers). I don't understand why Louisa would have thought it a desirable look for a

liberated woman – perhaps it was a means of de-emphasising anatomical femininity, moving the image away from the notion that a woman’s body existed primarily as a possession of male sexual desire.

According to Louisa, the bushwoman is intellectually alive, if solitary; she longs ‘to hear of a life she does not know, to get news and speech of outside things from even the most worthless stranger’. The bushwoman ‘is not mindless; she loves poetry and pictures ... she reads earnestly and remembers’.

So, with the loss of her womanhood, there is a transformation of the drover’s wife into a neutered state – or, as some writers have suggested, she becomes part of the landscape. A report by Dr Bronwyn Hanna for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service’s Gendered Landscapes Project says, “‘landscape’ is a spatial representation of human relationships with nature, while ‘gender’ is the representation of sexual difference ... both concepts are malleable, cultural constructions.’

Kay Schaffer, in *Women and the Bush*, argues that two dominant historic modes of gendering the Australian landscape have influenced representations of it, as the site of white masculine endeavour (‘no place for a woman’) and as a feminine being (‘Mother Nature’). Yet the contemporary Western woman often resists the Mother Nature ideal: in some of her variations, she is not free of cruelty and racism; women can be commandants of concentration camps and hold vicious prejudices, and, as with men, often do not hold the general humanist ideal involved in the qualities of ‘sensitivity’, ‘caring’ and ‘tenderness’.

Nevertheless, the defeat of the drover’s wife’s womanhood is expressed in the last line of the story: ‘And she hugs [her son Tommy] to her worn-out breast ...’ With these words, she acknowledges the loss of her maternal and sexual roles. Eleven-year-old Tommy has assumed the role of his mother’s protector: when he fights the fire with her, he is ‘a little hero by her side’; he tries to kill the snake; he drags the dog away from her when it mistakes her for ‘a “Black man”’.

The sickly daylight breaks over the bush. What is Lawson saying when he writes this phrase? It is the atmosphere of her defeat as a woman – no glorious dawn. No fresh new day of promise.

MATESHIP LOVE – HOW DID LAWSON EXPERIENCE MATESHIP?

FRANK MOORHOUSE

IF HE WERE ALIVE today, Lawson may not be as destructively conflicted about and disturbed by his effeminacy, and may be bolder in his assertion of himself. Even so, he would recognise the strong remnants of the primitive male culture he dealt with, and the psychological damage and suicides it causes.

Maybe Lawson's imagination and the direction of his writing would have been safely liberated. Who knows; maybe he would have written the film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, the story of two drag queens and a transgender woman who take a Lawson-like tour by bus from Sydney to outback Australia. During the journey they win over, even triumph over, the masculinity of Lawson's outback. There is a pub in Broken Hill known as the Priscilla, officially the Palace Hotel. Lawson's moustache may have, to his surprise, made him more attractive to some gay men.

In Lawson's story 'That Pretty Girl in the Army', he defined the culture of mateship as follows:

A bushman has always a mate to comfort him and argue with him, and work and tramp and drink with him, and lend him quids when he's hard up, and call him a b—— fool, and fight him sometimes; to abuse him to his face and defend his name behind his back; to bear false witness and perjure his soul for his sake; to lie to the girl for him if he's single, and to his wife if he's married; to secure a 'pen' for him at a shed where he isn't on the spot ... And each would take the word of the other against all the world, and each believes that the other is the straightest chap that ever lived ...

Michael Taussig, in his 1992 book *The Nervous System*, notes that ‘mateship’ as it developed in Australia through the works of Lawson and others was, in some cases, a way of ‘naturalising’ practices that were seen as ‘unnatural’ (the legal term of the day). It is well known that some men, in the absence of women – say, the first settlement convicts, men in prison, boys in boarding school, sailors at sea – turn to these ‘unnatural practices’ for relief and pleasure.

Russel Ward, in his classic historical work *The Australian Legend* (1958), sees mateship as a central Australian value but does not resolve the place of women in the term. Ward argues that mateship is based on the traditions of mutual aid among rural workers and convicts in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, which emerged as the ideology of trade unionism and friendly or benevolent societies. Mutual aid was expressed in the sharing of shelter, food and money to survive in difficult conditions. Ward also identifies mateship as a public style or demeanour; the ‘typical Australian’ was ‘a practical man, rough and ready in his manners’, stoic, ‘taciturn rather than talkative’ and sceptical of pretension and authority.

Nick Dyrenfurth, author of the 2015 book *Mateship: A Very Australian History*, says the term has come to be used to ‘describe sets of ideals in both left and conservative ideologies’:

Trade unionists, labour movement activists, radicals for a long time said that mateship was the same thing as unionism; mateship was equivalent to socialism ... [but] more conservative Australians have often identified with mateship. They’ve often pointed to the sacrifice of Australian soldiers in wartime, in particular the Anzacs at Gallipoli and on the Western Front during World War I ... it’s about devoting yourself to the national effort.

The word can also be used in a threatening way. Bruce Moore, in his book *What’s Their Story? A History of Australian Words* (2010), looks at the ironic and threatening use of the word, as in ‘I’ll remember *you*, mate. You’ll keep!’ and ‘I’ve just been sweating on an opportunity to do you a damage, mate.’

In 2005, David Wroe wrote for the *Age*, ‘security guards at Canberra’s Parliament House were banned from addressing members and senators as “mate”, supposedly after a complaint from an MP or public servant.’ Most

likely the guards were using the word sardonically, as an expression of aggressive egalitarianism – to stop politicians and senior public servants getting ‘above themselves’ and using the guards as personal servants.

But how did Lawson personally experience mateship?

While working on this essay, I came to speculate that Lawson’s creation and celebration of mateship might have within it a yearning for an intimate bonding with a male. My earlier research had, to my surprise, already established Lawson’s effeminacy and I had wondered if this behaviour of his ever expressed itself homosexually. As I’ve mentioned, Lawson had at least four romantically significant but difficult relationships with women.

I was therefore happily intrigued by the appearance of Gregory Bryan’s book *Mates: The Friendship That Sustained Henry Lawson* (2016). Until Bryan’s book, no deep, close relationship of Lawson with a male had come to my attention. But Bryan establishes that Lawson found a singularly intense bond with a young man, Jim Gordon, which stands out from the relationships Lawson had with any other male friends or mates. Even if the face-to-face relationship covered only five years of their lives, divided into two parts, it was perhaps the most intense bonding Lawson had with another person.

The relationship between Jim Gordon and Lawson began in 1892, when Lawson, aged twenty-five, travelled to Bourke for the *Bulletin* and met seventeen-year-old Jim, who described the meeting this way:

I had noticed this long-necked, flat-chested stripling eyeing me off each time we passed and I noticed too that he had the most beautiful and remarkable eyes I have ever seen on a human being ... soft as velvet and of a depth of brownness that is indescribable ... Lawson eventually said ‘Hullo’ and introduced himself.

Jim says they talked easily, and quickly found empathy. Jim was on the track looking for work many miles from home, and was at the time as ‘homesick as a motherless calf’.

‘Where are you staying?’ Lawson asked. Jim told him he was ‘living at a hotel but that my sugar bag was running low ... Lawson became animated ... and gripped my hand and said, “Come and camp with me.”’

I should at this point declare a bias in the trace of my research, something of an undertow: I discovered, and I feel, other personality

empathies with Lawson through parallels with my own life. I am not the first writer to find parallels and to claim Lawson as something of a soulmate – Frank Hardy stands out for having adopted Lawson as a personal socialist comrade. I want to strongly stress that these emotional parallels with Lawson did not motivate the creation of this book, which was initiated by my curiosity about the unique survival of ‘The Drover’s Wife’. But I am arguing that Lawson belongs just as much with the LGBTQI movement as with any of the other individuals, and the nationalist and political movements, that have over the years claimed him, identified with him and used him. Who knows; he may yet become a hero to all Australian queer kids, or the broader LGBTQI movement.

We talk of different types of ‘intelligence’ – apart from the general IQ test result, there are emotional, mathematical, language and artistic intelligences, and so on. As with intelligence, we also have a repertoire of ‘empathies’, some of which we are able, at times, to deploy, while others may be beyond us. Our repertoire includes being able to empathise with the differences of, say, other genders, other races, even with the ‘enemy’ in warfare and the misfortune of others – all the categories of ‘other’ we encounter. So, I find I have empathies with Lawson. I know the sort of apartness he felt that comes from being a writer. I, too, have an alcohol dependency, although not one as unmanageable or as destructive as Lawson’s. I have had trouble maintaining long-term domestic relationships with women. I have had trouble managing money. But more curiously, as with Lawson, I know the feeling of apartness, if not alienation, from some of the mainstream masculine cultures.

As Lawson did, I know the Australian ‘bush’ in some of its meanings. The term is used to cover quite a few distinct types of experiences: living in the outback, working in agriculture, recreational bushwalking, hard trekking in wilderness country. Even small-town life is sometimes described as ‘the bush’.

I, too, have had a crucial bonding with a man, which began when I was seventeen and he twenty-seven. From the beginning, the relationship was sexual – my first of the kind – initiated by me. We lived together for a few years and it continued on and off through my life for fifty years. We both went on to marry; in his case, he had children and his marriage has lasted. My only legal marriage, to my high-school girlfriend, was unsuccessful.

Although the empathy between me and this man faded somewhat, the sexual attraction and affection remained.

After their bonding in Bourke, Lawson and Jim spent eighteen months together wandering the outback to find work and, in Lawson's case, to find copy for the *Bulletin*. Lawson and Jim shared their earnings and their food, and perhaps their blankets, as they slept under the stars, or in travellers' huts or rouseabouts' huts at sheep stations. Both discovered they were uncomfortable with the coarse masculine language and blokey larking of the shearing sheds, where he and Lawson found menial jobs as rouseabouts as neither could shear. Lawson later wrote of being a 'spiritless exception' to the men of the sheds. Jim describes Lawson lying in his bunk in the rouseabouts' hut after work, writing, while the other men carried on, fooled about. In his book, Bryan says, 'Lawson would have seemed an effeminate oddball.' It's possible to imagine that Lawson and his young mate would have been the subject of other sorts of taunting remarks and innuendoes, similar to those Lawson had experienced in his earlier life and childhood.

Lawson and Jim 'humped their blueys' together on the track between Bourke and Hungerford, a return journey of some 450 kilometres. Lawson wrote of the trek that there was 'no break in the awful horizon ... [and] fierce white heat-waves blaze'.

Journalist and Lawson scholar Bruce Elder, who has walked the track, describes it as 'the most important trek in Australian literary history' and says that it 'confirmed all Lawson's prejudices about the Australian bush. Lawson no longer had romantic illusions about a "rural idyll".'

I am unsure of the track's importance in literary history, but I imagine that it was for Lawson and Jim, perhaps emotionally, the most important time in their lives. From what I know of male life, I would imagine that their personal romance grew, even if the romance of the bush did not.

They parted in Bourke at the end of the three months and went their separate ways. Abruptly, Lawson went back to Sydney. There is no information on why they parted, but Lawson had other abrupt breaks throughout his life, a pattern of fleeing from the demands of emotional relationships. In the case of Lawson and Jim, they were also blocked by the times – they could not have gone on living together.

They did, however, live in each other's minds, and their writing. Three years after their separation, Lawson wrote a poem called 'To an Old Mate':

I found you unselfish and true –
I have gathered these verses together
For the sake of our friendship and you.

You may think for awhile, and with reason,
Though still with a kindly regret,
That I've left it full late in the season
To prove I remember you yet;

...

I can still feel the spirit that bore us,
And often the old stars will shine –
I remember the last spree in chorus
For the sake of that other Lang Syne,
When the tracks lay divided before us,
Your path through the future and mine.

...

You will find in these pages a trace of
That side of our past which was bright,
And recognise sometimes the face of
A friend who has dropped out of sight –
I send them along in the place of
The letters I promised to write.

'I can still feel the spirit that bore us' – they were not to meet again for twenty-three years. Both went on to marry and fathered children. Jim's marriage seems to have been happy enough, and it survived; Lawson's did not.

Then in 1916, when Lawson was forty-nine and struggling with life, he was given a house and income in Leeton through the assistance of friends and the NSW government. (The town had had prohibition, one of the reasons in the minds of the sponsors of the project; however, he managed to keep drinking there, helped by 'well-wishers' in the town.)

Lawson had been given what we would now call a residency–fellowship to write about the great agricultural experiment with irrigation in the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area (MIA), centred on Leeton, a town planned by Walter Burley Griffin. Lawson was accompanied by Isabel Byers, who was now his de facto wife – or maybe de facto mother.

Isabel was separated from her husband and ran a coffee shop and boarding house in North Sydney. She was a poet, not very successful, in a style similar to that of Lawson. When he was thirty-six, Lawson leased a room in her boarding house, though the nature of the contract is not clear. Isabel regarded Lawson as Australia's greatest living poet. She negotiated on his behalf with publishers, helped to arrange meetings with his children. She contacted friends and supporters to help him financially, and nursed him through his ill health. She managed his life. We know nothing of their sexual intimacy, if any.

During much of this time, Lawson was a constant drunk, known to have written personalised doggerel in pubs in payment for drinks; he was isolated in his partial deafness, laughing when he saw the others laughing, bluffing his way in conversation. His drinking companions would have been men, in those all-male bars.

It turned out that Jim was also in Leeton with his family, trying to make a go of a government-allotted irrigated farm. Jim read of Lawson's arrival in the *Murrumbidgee Irrigator*. He sought him out and they met up.

They bonded again as mates – Lawson used the expression 're-mated'. Each day they spent more and more time with each other, camping together for days on the Murrumbidgee River. 'Fishing' was their cover; the image recalls the two married, closeted cowboys in *Brokeback Mountain*. Jim records that they spent their time talking and drinking. Jim's wife, Daisy, became jealous, but their kids loved Henry.

Jim recalled that they 'talked and talked', and that Henry and he would walk arm in arm or 'holding hands'. Sometimes they walked and talked in the moonlight. They were 'loath to part' at the end of each day. Gregory Bryan quotes Jim's poem 'When Lawson Walked with Me': 'Henry gripped my fingers tight' and 'linked arms with me'. I questioned Bryan about the physical nature of their relationship; he told me that 'some of Gordon's descendants speculated about the homosexual nature of the relationship ... a granddaughter spoke of them walking hand-in-hand; however, she was not born until later, so would only have heard of them from someone else.'

Henry wrote that the name he used to call Jim 'surprised and disturbed' and caused 'distress and pain' to Daisy and the family. I would love to know what the name was.

Bryan said to me that he found a line in 'By the Banks of the Murrumbidgee', written by Lawson shortly after the 1916 reunion in

Leeton, particularly thought-provoking:

We first met in Bourke some twenty-five years ago, and thus we share two pasts, so as to speak; but we were very young men then, those pasts are boys' pasts; and being but recently re-mated we haven't got to speak of those pasts yet. There's a certain shyness about the matter, if you understand, which may or may not deepen as those twenty-five-year pasts are cleared up.

What is the 'certain shyness about the matter' of their earlier association? Also, what were the 'hosts of old regrets' that Jim recalled feeling, in a poem he wrote after he learned of Henry's death?

After a year and a half, Henry could no longer stand small-town Leeton or the publicity-type work he was expected to do, though he did fulfil his contract by writing thirty poems and ten prose sketches about the MIA. And, of course, there was the problem of prohibition. As well, living with Isabel had become acrimonious. Perhaps she, too, was jealous of Jim.

Lawson abruptly left for Sydney; he didn't even pack his things or say goodbye to Jim, but simply wrote a note to him, saying, 'I'm the Commander of the Army of the Fedups.' Isabel had to look after the practicalities and formalities of closing up the house and the sale of their possessions, and she then followed him to Sydney.

Lawson was repeatedly hospitalised for alcoholism and mental illness, and at times he left Isabel and became an itinerant in the streets. Jim and Lawson kept in contact by letter and Jim would visit him in Sydney, where they would go on drinking sprees. Jim visited Lawson in hospital after he had had a stroke and brought him his favourite delicacies.

In 1922, Lawson returned to Isabel and died in her home in Abbotsford, aged fifty-five.

On Lawson's coffin was 'a bunch of native roses, a cluster of glowing wattle and some bush ferns' put there by Mary Gilmore, who had remained a friend throughout his life and had come to be Jim's friend. Jim may have helped Mary with the funeral arrangements and flowers.

Perhaps Jim and Lawson, with their deep rapport, their love of writing – Jim became a writer, too, tutored by Lawson – and their shared love of drinking, also found sexual pleasure, sleeping together under the stars, or in travellers' or rouseabouts' huts. I hope so. Dining and drinking together

while in intimate conversation and camping together can express deep intimacy, maybe surrogate sex; but, after all, sex is sex. There is no surrogate for physical sex.

I know of no suggestion or record – nor would I expect to find it, given the repressive times – of Lawson having a homosexual life; that is, of having had sex with males or wishing to have sex with males. I am resistant to Manning Clark's view of mateship as a form of 'sublimated homosexuality'; I cannot see how that can be established. Nor do I accept the term 'repressed homosexuality', unless these terms are used by someone who feels that they are 'sublimating' or 'repressing'; who discovers this in themselves. These things cannot be confidently discerned by observation.

Sexual activity and deep intimacy are not inseparable or implied: men and women, men and men, women and women can have an intimate relationship and live together without having a sexual relationship. There can also be married relationships where one or other has an important relationship outside the marriage – sometimes it is as important, or even more important, than the marriage, without threatening it, and is even incorporated into it as a shared, respectful bonding. And people's gender expressions often confound our expectations: there are effeminate straight men and non-effeminate gay men.

If Lawson did have a sexual relationship with Jim, given the evidence of Lawson's sexual attraction to women he would today be described as bisexual, or even as sexually fluid. I think he was bigendered. The other hypothesis is that Lawson's real sexual and emotional need was for a relationship with a male, and that his attempts at heterosexual relationships were driven by convention and, for him, brought him into a blind alley.

The story Bryan tells is one of deep male bonding and of what seems to be the happiest relationship Henry ever found. Lawson's daughter, Barta (originally Bertha), said that, 'Dad loved Jim very much. And Jim loved him ... Dad said, "After all, I think he's about the best thing I ever did."'

After Lawson's death, Jim wrote: 'The stars have never seemed so bright / Since Lawson walked with me.' He continued to commemorate Lawson in his writing until his death.

Lawson's difficulties with intimate male-and-female relationships, first with Mary Gilmore, then with Bertha and with Isabel, contrast remarkably with the ease, pleasure and depth of his relationship with Jim as recorded by them both, and maybe with a couple of other relationships with men present

in the stories of Lawson. Some critics identify Lawson's recurring character Mitchell as Jim.

I state here the accepted caveat that it is very difficult for an outsider to *know* an intimate, domestic relationship. But we try to understand other relationships to understand our own, and every relationship does leave something of a record, glimpses of itself, even if it be in the unreliable form of divorce proceedings, gossip and the words of the surviving spouse and children.

Lawson struggled with the conventional masculine role and I believe the unresolvable inner tensions of his sexuality – his effeminate personality and appearance – contributed to his abuse of alcohol, which can be both a relief from and a form of emotional absence within a relationship. He was in some sort of flight from this domestic male role throughout his life.

In describing the Leeton days, Jim goes out of his way to record, as a way of celebrating the very special nature of their bonding, that there was only ever one tiff between Lawson and him, about a very minor matter. The reunion in Leeton with Jim must have brought home to him what he wanted, what he should have searched for and the impossibility of it all.

I wonder if some inklings of this were in Lawson's poem 'The Wander-Light', written in his private diary in 1905, when he was thirty-eight:

For my ways are strange ways and new ways and old ways,
And deep ways and steep ways and high ways and low;
I'm at home and at ease on a track that I know not,
And restless and lost on a road that I know.

The lines echo Isaiah in the King James Bible: 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways ...'

Lawson was saying that he was very much alone, inside his femininity and its strangeness to conventional society, inside the inner life of writing, but maybe he was also affirming his exceptionalism; the words were addressed to the heterosexual world and contain, in a defensively superior way, the special value, as well as the alienation, inherent in his nature.

And, in our history and literature, Lawson is exceptional.

THE YOUNGER LAWSON v THE OLDER LAWSON – THE SOURCING OF ‘THE DROVER’S WIFE’

FRANK MOORHOUSE

LAWSON SCHOLAR PAUL EGGERT recalls that, when he was a third-year high school student in 1966, as a prize for mathematics he opted for a hardback copy of Cecil Mann’s *Henry Lawson’s Best Stories*:

I would have noticed the large sad eyes and scraggy moustache of a man at three-quarters turn, formally photographed, peering out of the darkness and looking piercingly at me ... that same year Australia had changed its currency from pounds, shillings and pence to dollars and cents. Henry Lawson’s image appeared on the ten-dollar note ... In any case, it would be the first book of Lawson in my family home.

Eggert writes, of this edition:

The pacing of that first sentence from ‘The Drover’s Wife’ in Mann’s selection is not, in fact, presented as Lawson originally wrote it. The sentence was rewritten by a publisher’s editor for *While the Billy Boils* in 1896. There turned out to be, as I discovered, hundreds of such changes.

These changes are painstakingly recorded and examined in Eggert’s groundbreaking *Biography of a Book: Henry Lawson’s While the Billy Boils*, and the companion volume (with Professor Elizabeth Webby), *While the Billy Boils: The Original Newspaper Versions*.

I am not a Lawson scholar, and I write these essays as one writer wishing to know about a writer from another generation who has given me

much pleasure and who plays a very interesting part in our cultural life. I do not wish to enter into a discussion of the importance of these editorial changes to 'The Drover's Wife', but I have identified some changes I wish to discuss.

The standard practice in contemporary Australian publishing is for the author to be consulted about any significant changes an editor wishes to make for the first edition, and for the author to have the final decision. With subsequent editions, it is not uncommon for the author to make further changes; these changes are not, it could be argued, necessarily improvements.

According to Eggert, in Lawson's day the author would have had a say in some but not all proposed changes. The seniority and reputation of the author would also change the relationship between editor and author.

In some cases, Eggert and Webby have identified motives for the changes: for example, commercial appeal, page and chapter endings, and conformity to house style in spelling and punctuation. Eggert suggests that Lawson was perhaps pressured into some style changes.

'The Drover's Wife' was first published in the *Bulletin* on 23 July 1892, when Lawson was twenty-five years old. It was his second published story, although he had published verses. The original manuscript is missing.

Two years after the *Bulletin* publication, Lawson and his mother, Louisa, put together a poorly printed collection of some of Henry's stories, including 'The Drover's Wife', titled *Short stories in prose and verse*. I was interested to discover the changes they made to the *Bulletin* version, which included capitalising the 'b' in 'Black' when referring to Aboriginal characters – as in our usage, say, of French, not french.

Two years later, Angus & Robertson put together a larger, commercial selection, *While the Billy Boils*, including a further edited version of 'The Drover's Wife'. The A&R editors reversed the capitalised 'b' for Black, and Lawson, presumably, or others with his permission, added new text.

This has become the standard version of these stories but, in the case of 'The Drover's Wife', not the only variant in use. When there was no original manuscript available for the stories, A&R editors and printers worked from clippings of the stories taken from the newspapers and magazines in which the stories had originally been published. With 'The Drover's Wife', it appears they worked from Louisa Lawson's version in *Short stories in prose and verse*.

I take the capitalisation of ‘Black’ to have been a measure of respect for Aboriginal people or, at least, an acknowledgement of their existence as an ethnic entity. I suspect it was Louisa’s idea; she was a feminist progressive thinker, often the first reader of Lawson’s early work. Louisa wrote that Aboriginal women ‘are wives and mothers like ourselves’. She said feminists should ‘show consideration and kindness ... sympathising in their troubles, alleviating, as far as possible, their hardships, and honouring their womahood ...’ But she also held the commonly accepted idea that Aboriginal people were a ‘dying race’. Even when I was at school in the 1950s, we studied Henry Kendall’s 1864 poem ‘The Last of His Tribe’:

He crouches, and buries his face on his knees,
And hides in the dark of his hair;
For he cannot look up to the storm-smitten trees,
Or think of the loneliness there –
Of the loss and the loneliness there
...
But he dreams of the hunts of yore,
And of foes that he sought, and of fights that he fought
With those who will battle no more –
Who will go to the battle no more ...

Despite the fact that there were Aboriginal children in our primary school class, we, too, accepted the conventional wisdom that Aboriginal people were dying out. Now it is the Anglo-Saxon tribe that is dying out.

In ‘The Drover’s Wife’, three Aboriginal people appear and there is one casual reference made to each of them.

The first to appear is Black Mary – ‘the “whitest gin” in all the land’, who comes to the drover’s wife when she is ill with a fever; she had prayed to God to send assistance, and Black Mary came. ‘Whitest gin’ was, at the time, a term of perverse respect, meaning that the Aboriginal woman was worthy of respect because she conformed to white social expectations and could be trusted. The story implies something of a reconciled, humane relationship between the drover’s wife and Mary, even if it was perverse.

Someone involved in the editing of *While the Billy Boils* made significant changes to this paragraph. My comparisons of his handwriting

convince me that it was Lawson who made the changes; in any case, we assume that he approved, whoever made them.

The first change was the insertion:

Or, at least, God sent 'King Jimmy' first, and he sent Black Mary. He put his black face round the door post, took in the situation at a glance, and said cheerfully: 'All right Missis – I bring my old woman, she down alonga creek.'

This passage was not in the *Bulletin* version, nor in the version in Louisa Lawson's book. The humane engagement of the Black woman and white woman in the earlier versions is turned into this caricature, as 'King Jimmy' makes his appearance and is mocked with his 'comic' stage dialogue. The changes make the relationship between Mary and the drover's wife into a music-hall farce.

The third appearance in the story is of an itinerant Aboriginal man who offers to cut wood for the drover's wife. He appears to have done a good job; she gives him 'an extra fig of tobacco, and praised him for not being lazy' – of course, all Aboriginal people were seen as lazy – and, in the original versions, he leaves 'with head erect'.

In the morning, the drover's wife goes out to get wood and the woodheap collapses. The man had built a hollow pile; he had duped her. In *While the Billy Boils*, someone, most probably Lawson, changed the Aboriginal man's leaving by adding to 'head erect' the words 'and chest well out. He was the last of his tribe and a King.' Another 'king'.

Again, the editorial change in *While the Billy Boils* turns the Aboriginal man into a strutting caricature: 'head erect and chest well out'. It introduces the joke, which was common even in my childhood, that all Aboriginal men claim to be 'kings' of their 'tribes', a joke at the expense of a degraded masculine identity in a dispossessed culture.

From the early nineteenth century, one of Governor Lachlan Macquarie's strategies to achieve nominal peace between the Aboriginal population and the settlers was to establish 'chieftainships', whereby a chief (or 'king') would act as the intermediary between his 'tribe' and the government. These chiefs were 'crowned' at public ceremonies, where they were presented with a gorget, a crescent-shaped breastplate used to denote rank. By 1850, the ceremonies had become common practice; hundreds, if

not thousands, of breastplates had been handed out by the time the final one was presented in 1946.

The editorial change in Lawson's story ridicules the man and removes what could have been a degree of dignity in his deportment – even though he had been deceptive with the woodheap. But I would read the Aboriginal man's deception and the independence in his way of walking, in the first version, as an expression of defiance; I would see the hollow woodpile as a retaliation against whites who had stolen his land – as petty sabotage against the intruding whites.

In the story, there is a casual fourth reference to Aboriginal people when the drover's wife, in her husband's clothing and blackened by fighting a bushfire, is mistaken by her dog and her baby to be a 'Black man'. The reference is light-hearted but also carries the grim message that Aboriginal people were feared by whites – even feared by dogs and babies.



Mickey Johnson, who lived in the Illawarra district of NSW, wearing a large gorget that declares him a 'king'.

These racist changes are repeated in Lawson's book *The Country I Come From*, published in London in 1901, when Lawson was living in England and was involved in the editing of the book.

The *While the Billy Boils* version, with these racial coarsenings – the caricatures and the reversed capitalisation – are repeated in most of the anthologies and editions of 'selected Lawson' over the last hundred years,

including the Penguin Classics edition of *Henry Lawson Short Stories* (1986, reprinted in 2006), and the definitive *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* (2009).

But not all anthologies have used the coarsened version. Some use the original *Bulletin* version or Louisa's version; some use other variants. *The Bulletin Story Book*, published in 1901 to mark the first twenty years of the *Bulletin* (and to join it with the new Australian Federation), used its original version of the story, the one without the racist farce, and so did the centenary issue of the *Bulletin* in 1980 (which also carried my story 'The Drover's Wife' but, inexplicably, not Murray Bail's).

There were yet other variants of the story. The first odd standout is in *An Austral Garden: An Anthology of Australian Prose*, published circa 1912, which caps 'Black' in one place – the casual generic reference in the bushfire incident – but not in the woodheap incident, and leaves out the section about Black Mary attending the drover's wife during her fever. The woodchopping Aboriginal man is not caricatured in this version and leaves, simply, with his 'head erect'.

The book was edited by Donald McLachlan – I couldn't find out much about him – and published by George Robertson and Company in Melbourne, the same George Robertson who had joined with David Angus to establish A&R, Lawson's publisher. Robertson continued to publish under his own company name in Melbourne, as well as publishing books under the A&R imprint.

In the acknowledgements, McLachlan says for his version of 'The Drover's Wife' he took the text of the story from *The Bulletin Story Book*, but he did seriously change the story – for example, by omitting Black Mary's care of the sick drover's wife – for reasons that I cannot discover. Maybe it had been cut because it was too long; but then, why this cut?

Another 'Drover's Wife' version that stands out appears in *The 1890s: Stories, Verse and Essays*, edited by Leon Cantrell for University of Queensland Press in 1977. Not only does it not use the coarsened music-hall parts of 'The Drover's Wife', but it also caps 'Black' in both the woodheap incident and the casual reference – the only version I have come across that does this. Cantrell acknowledges Louisa's book *Short stories in prose and verse* as his source, but he had further emended the story with the capping of 'Black'.

Historically, the first two published versions of the story show some bare but conscious respect for Aboriginal people, which we assume Lawson and his mother intended to convey at that time.

Then came the racism. What can we say about it?

Eggert and Webby do not comment on these particular changes. Eggert concerns himself with more detailed style changes in Lawson's work: alterations to sentence structure and word order, made by various hands, with or without the consent of Lawson.

The two writers who wrote the introductions for the Penguin Classics edition – John Barnes in 1986 and John Kinsella in 2009 – do not comment on the racist changes. However, Kinsella says:

I really struggle with Lawson's racism, for which there is no excuse. There are occasions when his very brief portraits of non-whites show some empathy, sympathy, or recognition of something outside subalternity ...

In 'The Drover's Wife' there is the anxiety of the threat of the primal, the indigenous, the bush ... the snake itself is not only the snake of paradise, tempting: it is the land, it is the spirit of the dispossessed.

I like the suggestion that the vengeful snake is the spirit of the land from which Aboriginal people have been dispossessed. It is perhaps too generous to Lawson; perhaps not. As a reconstructed Freudian, I see the snake as phallic and, as something of a bushman myself, I see it also as a lethal threat.

Lawson was twenty-five years old when 'The Drover's Wife' was first published and twenty-nine years old when *While the Billy Boils* was edited; he was thirty-four years old when the story was published in *The Country I Come From*. He was involved in the editing process up to this point in his life and could have objected to the changes or reconsidered them; it appears he didn't.

Maybe Lawson thought, or hoped, that the music-hall caricatures in the story would work to his advantage with his readers – he heard what the people with whom he drank laughed at, what amused them, and their humour would have been, in part, racist. I can imagine he wanted acceptance to their company so made the changes to amuse them.

A coarseness had entered into Lawson's work after his writing of the story. The coarsening of his later writing has been observed by others.

For this book, I considered using the Louisa/Henry version of 'The Drover's Wife' because I prefer the writer Lawson was back then. Contemporary publishing protocol is to use the version the author last authorised, which means that, with regret, I use the coarsened music-hall version. But I have capped 'Black' in all places, because that would be accepted editorial practice today – and I do it as a gesture of respect for Aboriginal Australians.

EXTRACTS FROM *SNAKE*

KATE JENNINGS

26

Alive as Fire, and Evilly Aware

A small boy was walking along a bush track, hands stuck in his pockets, lips puckered in a whistle. Sunlight streamed through the leaves, dappling his path. His presence disturbed a flock of corellas, and they burst into the air, wheeling and whirring. The boy watched appreciatively, canting his head, shading his eyes, and then continued on his way, until he came to a log. He stepped over it, taking his hands out of his pockets, angling his body, for it was a large log. The snake struck with impersonal dispatch.

Exclamations of horror rose from the class. The boys started in their seats, the girls covered their eyes or wrung their handkerchiefs. The teacher, who was standing by the projector, hushed them, and they settled down to watch the rest of the film. The boy's whistling, the sounds of the bush, had been replaced by the voice of a narrator – male, grave, pedantic, the voice that ran the world. 'Stuart was careless,' it intoned. 'He risked certain death.'

Fortunately for Stuart, he had in his pocket what he needed to save himself: a razor blade. He also had presence of mind, which was the quality one needed above all others to survive the perils of the Australian bush, or so the narrator instructed the class. Using what remained of his strength – with every beat of his heart, the poison was coursing through his bloodstream, a fact borne home by the soundtrack, which thumped intimately – the boy tore a strip off his shirt and tied it around his thigh. He scrabbled in the dry leaves and found a stick, inserted it in the bandage on his leg and twisted until the cloth tightened into a tourniquet. Grimacing at the pain, he made a cut where the wound was and bent to suck out the poison.

The class gagged. Like all country children, they had learned from an early age to be watchful. There were no leopards, tigers, or bears in their surroundings, noble animals that rushed and growled and gave their victims a sporting chance, only stealthy, circumspect creatures like spiders, scorpions, and snakes.

The film was over, the blinds raised. The teacher read to her class from a natural-science textbook: 'Australia has a larger proportion of venomous snakes than any other continent in the world, over seventy varieties. The species that kill include the death adder, the brown snake, the black snake, and the tiger snake. When milked, a single tiger snake was said to have produced enough poison to kill 118 sheep.'

The phrase 'certain death' lodged in Girlie's brain, as did the statistic of 118 sheep. She lay in bed at night and imagined snakes, silent and purposeful, slithering up drain-pipes, sliding through knotholes, into the house.

45

The Imperative: Snakes May Not Live

Boy saw him first. A brown snake. It was sunning itself on the path leading to the house. Had to be seven feet long. At least. A whopper. Boy picked up an axe and went after it, but the snake moved faster than seemed probable for its size. Boy smashed down on the concrete with the axe, missing the brute. And smashed down again. The snake seemed to be making for the gate but at the last moment veered into a bed of rose bushes, traversed a stretch of lawn, and disappeared among the tangle of roots at the base of the passion-fruit vine.

When it was over, Boy found he had gouged holes in the cement at regular intervals the full length of the path. When Rex saw the damage, he took off his hat and scratched the back of his head. 'Stone the crows, Boy. Was that necessary?'

46

Passenger of My Passage

Girlie was walking along the narrow dirt path to the vegetable garden when her father called out, 'Don't move, Girlie. Keep very still.' A snake. Girlie's

wits deserted her, took off for the hills. She was left hollow, staring, like a china doll.

Afterwards, Rex hunted the creature for over an hour, beating the grass, lifting back foliage, without any success. He said that the snake – brown, slim, about five feet long – had been right beside her, moving very slowly, unconcerned about her presence, promenading!

Irene watched the goings-on with an air of bemusement. ‘*Poor Girlie,*’ she said, shaking her head, ‘such a scaredy-cat!’ Irene had read somewhere that snakes were necessary to the balance of nature.

First published in Snake (1996)

Kate Jennings is a poet, essayist, short-story writer and novelist. Both her novels, Snake and Moral Hazard, were New York Times Notable Books of the Year. She has won the ALS Gold Medal, the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction and the Adelaide Festival fiction prize.

THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH-WOMAN

LOUISA LAWSON

THE GOVERNMENT STATISTICIAN ESTIMATED that at the end of 1887 there were in the colony of New South Wales about 471,000 women and girls, so that I suppose there were at that time, in various stages of growth, about 471,000 different kinds of women. This is rather too large an assortment to be separately described in the *Woman's Journal*, unless you will place me on the staff as a life contributor. This suggestion can be considered at leisure.

Meanwhile, for hasty purposes, my colonial sisters may be roughly sorted into three heaps – city women, country women, and bush-women, and it is of the last I will write; for it is of their grim, lonely, patient lives I know, their honest, hard-worked, silent, almost masculine lives. My experience lies chiefly among the women of New South Wales, but I think in the main, and as far as generalizations can describe a large number of units, my description will apply to the bush-women of all Australia.

The city women in Australia are for the most part like all other English-speaking women. Their civilization is pretty nearly up to date, and the tragedy-comedy of their lives is of a type common to all the cities of the world. The country women have also no features which are unique. As everywhere, they drag behind the town in fashions, they imitate the town in a leisurely, bucolic way; they are a little healthier, a little less clever, and a little less artificial. But the bush-women are a race apart. No 'foreigner' can seem so strange to them as a city woman does. A bush-woman in town is as lonely, as helpless, as homesick, as an Esquimaux landed at Honolulu. What does she know of domestic comforts? She desires none. There is nothing for her to do. She cannot keep house: she who comes perhaps from rounding up lost cattle or ring-barking trees. She is independent, taciturn, and the regularities and measured methods of town life appal her. If the cattle were lost, she would be all day long in the saddle, working as well as any of the men, and she would do what little had to be done in the house on her return

– whenever that might chance to be. It would not anyhow be much more than the making of a ‘damper’ in a tin dish and putting it in the ashes. She is not one to be easily moulded to the hours and times of city customs. For by bush-women I mean not the wives of settlers in accessible country, near a railroad or town, but the wives of boundary-riders, shepherds, ‘cockatoo’ settlers in the far ‘back country;’ women who share almost on equal terms with men the rough life and the isolation which belong to civilization’s utmost fringe.

Progress begins at the seaports, and it is a long while before the ripples reach the bush-woman. It is less than five years since I saw one start out to tend sheep, taking among her few necessaries a flint and steel. Half a century of advance lies between her and her daughters, educated at the public schools; but the bush-woman herself, Australian-born, and the daughter or granddaughter of a pioneer, retains her characteristics in spite of the march of the times.

The bush-woman is thin, wiry, flat-chested and sunburned. She could be nothing else, living as she does. She lives on meat; sometimes she does not even eat bread with it. She rarely sees vegetables, and no costly bouquet of orchids could so surprise and delight a city dame as a cabbage would gratify and amaze a bush-woman. She is healthy and full of vigour, but it is a leathery, withered, sun-dried health. You would call her a poor starveling in appearance, if you contrasted her with one of the fair, fresh-looking, plump city women whom two miles’ walking would utterly exhaust. If the energy of the bush-women could only be put to some profitable use, they might be millionaires; but they live in perpetual feud with the sun. They try to keep bees, but the heat starves them out. If they have cattle, the drought or the pleuro kills them. When they do get a wet season, the flood rots all they have in the ground. Two-thirds of their labour is wasted. They are lank, yet wiry, sun-cured while alive, but able to do, and almost always doing, the work of a strong man. In the city, a wet day is accursed; it makes people melancholy; every one abhors dullness and damp; but the bush-woman’s ideal home is a place where it *is* dark and wet, some damp, lush, grassy hollow. Let her be ever so miserable, ever so ill-fed and hard-worked, her life becomes full of bliss when she hears the rain pattering on the roof. There is no sorrow that a good shower will not wash away.

Though she is not egotistical, she has no patience with the ways of city folk. She is disgusted at their fastidiousness. They want soft, comfortable

beds; but she can sleep anyhow. Often, in the self-abnegation which is natural to her, the supreme recognition of the claims of hospitality, which is only with her a habit and ingrained custom, she relinquishes her bed to a stranger and sleeps on the floor. As to food, the heel of a 'damper' and the fag-end of a piece of beef will do for her. She is utterly self-neglectful. The white plump women of the city seem soft to her. They cannot walk a mile without fatigue, while she will tramp five miles with a heavy child on her hip, do a day's washing, and tramp back again at night. She works harder than a man. You may see her with her sons putting up a fence, or with the shearers, whistling and working as well as any. She has a fine, hard patient character; she is not emotional, nor very susceptible, but she has no conception of the little jealousies, the spite and petty meannesses of city women. Her generosity to any sort of stranger is natural, for society of any kind is at a premium. The monotony of the ever-green (or rather ever-brown) Australian bush, and its years of unbroken drought, tend to make time seem as if it had no changes and no periods. To hear of a life she does not know, to get news and speech of outside things from even the most worthless stranger, is payment enough for all the shelter, food, and assistance that she offers. It is such an incursion of novelty into her dreary domain of changeless months that it is a pleasure and a relief no town-bred woman can understand.

Of her own life she never speaks. To her oldest friends she does not talk of her hardships, though her life may be nothing but a record of ill-usage. She may be an isolated woman prey, alone in the wilds with a brutal husband, yet she does not complain; she suffers silently. She thinks her lot peculiar to herself. Resource she has none, nor escape, nor redress. She is tough and patient, and works till she dies without murmuring. Reform can never come through her, for should one speak to her of anything touching her own life or fate nearly, she would look at her askance, and shrink from her. People who think must be 'cranks,' for he who lives in the bush and thinks, goes mad. She may have ideas, but she never exchanges them. She is a slave, bound hand and foot to her daily life. If an educated man – and there are such, with strange histories behind them – goes into the bush and becomes a shepherd, hut-keeper, or the like solitary exile, his mind recoils on him. In the solitude he becomes at the least a 'crank,' and there is no more respect for him. So with a bush-woman; she does not speak of what she has discovered or thought out, she does not go beyond her daily life,

because they would say ‘She hasn’t got all her buttons,’ she is a ‘crank.’ Nevertheless she is not mindless; she loves poetry and pictures, and what newspapers come in her way she reads carefully. She often knows more of letters than her sisters of the city, for what she reads she reads earnestly and remembers. She cuts out the articles which she values and preserves them. You would not suspect they lay among her treasures, for she says nothing. Her thoughts and actions are all alike uncommunicated and self-contained.

She has no pleasure nor comforts. When she is sick, she leaves it to nature, or treats it with one of the three remedies she recognizes as a complete and sufficient pharmacopoeia – salts and senna, castor-oil and Holloway’s pills. She would laugh at a medicine-chest; she could not be bothered with it. Many of these women even endure a confinement almost without aid. Some will mount a horse and ride for the nurse themselves. In one case the husband, with the customary indifferent, indolent, non-interfering habit, left his wife to ride alone to the midwife. She became ill on the way, and was never seen alive again. The native dogs watched her agonies and ended them.

There is one thing the bush-woman hates – it is discipline. The word sounds to her like ‘jail.’ System, regularity, method, her life has nothing to do with. The domestic affairs of town women, which are ordered with the precision of an almanac, are an abhorred mystery to her. You could not put her to worse torture than by setting her to dust the drawing-room every morning at a fixed hour. Her home among the eucalyptus bush or on the ‘ironbark’ ridge is guiltless of drapes and mantel boards and ornaments; her domestic duties are merely the simplest of cooking; her life is out-of-doors in the broiling sun and the dry wind. She can handle a stock-whip better than a duster, she can swear mildly when the cattle are very refractory and the dogs utterly unmanageable, and she would far rather break in a horse than flutter around pictures with a feather broom.

There is also one thing in which she becomes particularly expert, the weather signs. The one hope of her life is for rain. She is always on the watch to wrest from nature the earliest news, and she can tell you whether the showers will come or the drought continue. She hates the cry of the ‘hard times bird’ who shrieks in the dry, dewless nights and parching days of drought seasons; she watches the colour of the sky, the clouds, the sun as he rises and sets; she hearkens to the frogs, and can tell from the colour

which the atmosphere gives to distant objects whether the drought will break and the cattle live.

The bush-woman's husband, if he be also Australian born, is like herself, spare and wiry. He is inured to wind and weather, cold and heat, and what is better, he can *fast* well. He is not, as a rule, dissipated, nor is he brutal to her. He has a tendency to leave her to manage the business, and he is rather indolent and neglectful. He will sit with others talking, while she, a thin rag of a woman, drags two big buckets of water from the creek, for instance, and if he stands by while she chops the wood, he sees no unfitness in the arrangement. They are a comparatively cold and impassive pair, inured to weather and hardships and rough living. They are never jealous of one another, and rarely unfaithful, so that the bush-woman, if married to an Australian, has generally a smooth life enough. She is fortunate in such a marriage, for the native is innately mild and not ill-natured, even in a life which seems to intensify in other men all the brutality they possess. To generalize roughly, one must say that the bush-woman's life is, however, on the average, a sad one. The Englishmen, Germans, Scandinavians, and, indeed, all the men of whatever nationality who took to bush life, were generally of rough, coarse character, or, if they were not of such nature originally, the solitude and the strange, primitive life must have made them so. In those remote and isolated spots, man is king and force is ruler. There is no law, no public opinion to interfere. The wife is at the man's mercy. She must bear what ills he chooses to put upon her, and her helplessness in his hands only seems to educe the beast in him. There is a vast deal of the vilest treatment. Some are worked to death and some are bullied to death; but the women are so scattered and so reticent that the world hears nothing of it all. In town, the fear of the law operates insensibly; we know that a woman can, if she needs, reach a police-station in five minutes, and charge her husband with assault; but out in that loneliness of mountain and plain, where is the redress, where the protection? She cannot ride a hundred miles in search of a magistrate; she cannot leave the hut and the sheep and the cattle to look after themselves in her absence; the law is not accessible, even if she would use it; if she writes a letter, it may lie a fortnight before the chance comes of sending it on. Besides, she is not the kind of woman to run to the law. She keeps her sorrows to herself, and endures everything. I have known a woman to be up a tree for three days, while her husband was hunting for her

to 'hammer' her. It is horrible to think such things are possible, yet worse things happen daily. Time and our efforts may help to mend the world.

A bright and promising story follows the saddest part of this narrative of the bush-woman's life. The best qualities of her live in her girls, and they will make their mark on a fairer page of Australian history. I have heard it urged against them that they are very shy. It is a true bill. They are as shy as the kangaroos and emus, their wild fellow-lodgers in the bush. You may catch sight of two girls astride a horse. They see you and are gone in a flash. They have no curiosity about strangers. I remember a man telling me that he had often caught a brief glimpse of a girl about a certain district, and that some day he meant to get a horse and run her down. In the old days the children used to get a little schooling in the evenings from some shepherd who could boast of education; but now wherever a dozen children can be got together, there is a school. Many of them walk or ride very long distances, but they get there; for the bush-woman is anxious for her children to get on, and is proud of their successes. Anything is good enough for her, she thinks, and if any comfort or advantage comes with growing civilization, it falls to the children's share. The girls are of very quick intelligence; they learn everything rapidly, and surpass the boys. Where they have a chance they make clever women, and a great number become school-teachers, but in those who get no schooling this astuteness turns to slyness and cunning. Take them all round, they are fine girls, always ready in an emergency, and capable of anything. Tough, healthy, and alert, they can cook or sew, do fancy-work or farm-work, dance, ride, tend cattle, keep a garden, break in a colt. They are the stuff that a fine race is made of – these daughters of bush-women. The men are more idle, and besides they have always the drink washing away their prospects; therefore we look to the girls for the future.

So as the bush-women, one by one, end their sad, lonely, hard-worked lives, these girls, quick, capable and active, will be ready to step into their places, and the iron strength of character, the patience, endurance and self-repression which the bush-women practised and developed, passing to a generation more enlightened and progressive, will give us a race of splendid women, fit to obtain what their mothers never dreamed of – women's rights.

First published in the Boston Woman's Journal, July 1889

Louisa Lawson (1848–1920) was an Australian poet, writer, publisher, suffragist and feminist. She was the mother of Henry Lawson.

THE DROVER'S DE FACTO

ANNE GAMBLING

IT WAS THE WOOD stove she hated most of all. That and the whispers at Woolies. There she goes. No, not 'er, Maggie. *Her*. Yeah, that's the one, livin' with him. And him away so much an' all. Wouldn't be surprised if she's runnin' a – well, you know – in that old house.

It was old but it was the one thing in her life she really liked. That old cottage, only tiny, mind, but large enough for the two of them and that little kitten he'd bought her to stave off loneliness.

And the veranda, wide and breeze-catching. She'd sit out there and study while they whispered and walked by and watched.

She did it for a lark more than anything else.

At one of those singles bars where you can choose your meat, she met him – big, bold, brash, and a man. She was sick of all those emaciated city boys with their thin bodies and thin ties.

Here was one with real shoulders, not padded shirts, and the kind of face that clung to honesty like a life-support. No sly half-smiles like the city boys who tried to impinge on a girl's right to be sought after.

The new sex deal not for her. Still wanted to be wooed and bought expensive drinks.

She left with him.

He took her to a classy hotel in his big Mack truck.

Called ahead on the CB to reserve the honeymoon suite while she giggled like a schoolgirl, twenty-five with a degree.

He told her of his wife, the girl he'd gone through the country high school with, fondles and cigarette butts behind the lavs and a marriage because of a bloody bun in the oven.

He asked her to live with him straight away. Not much to offer, he conceded, and he'd be away quite a lot because of the droving, but the

house was cosy, in town and all, and it shouldn't be too lonely once she got to know some folks.

The romance of the bush overtook her sensibilities. Paterson and Lawson combined to urge her toward a life for which she was uneducated and unprepared.

But – that's OK, she said, I'll work on my Masters. Yeah, he said, something to do, I guess.

Something to do, she mused as a wayward gust of wind swung under the awning to tug at her papers. Something to do as she watched the occasional car pass or heard the occasional road freight train down on the highway. And she chewed her pen end into a pulp just for something to do.

She'd looked at the old wood stove with a feeling mixing trepidation with revulsion. He'd just laughed. You'll get used to it, he said. You'll have to if you want hot showers and hot food. She felt sick.

She remembered a time camping with friends when it rained for a week. Fears of not being able to cook brought a man from a nearby site to the rescue with a tried and true method for roaring fires in pouring rain. They'd revered him like God after that and he drank most of their beer accordingly.

A real bushie, she thought wryly as he explained the more intricate workings of the temperamental stove. She considered herself fortunate that electric light had preceded her coming.

She stoked the thing hourly and when he said he'd be gone for a while, it was up to her to chop the wood. Her lily white hands turned to red blisters and open sores while neighbours whispered and watched and smirked.

He was away so much, he was away so much.

She felt like a half-caste, a fringe dweller between suburbia and ten acres. It wasn't like in the books and that made her sad. Prying noses, none of the anonymity of her former existence, but all the pioneer spirit.

I can't even make a mistake without the whole of the town knowing about it, she found herself saying to him. He would only stare blankly at her anger and frustration and ask for a cold one out of the fridge.

Spent, like loose change in a lolly machine, she was tired of her incompetence and the disapproving non-association of those on their side of the fence.

He was away so much, he was away so much.

At first she used to be waiting eagerly out front for him to steamroll in in that huge machine, parking it with a wince and a groan on the spare allotment beside their thirty-two perches. She'd run out like she'd seen Scarlett O'Hara do, to be whisked from the ground in a mad and passionate fling. But he'd just pat her behind and say not 'ere, love, some o' me mates might be watchin', with his eyes dully flicking round to the neighbours' windows.

Then he'd ask about dinner and would sit and drink stubbies until he'd lost his appetite while she laboured and stoked and it hissed and spat back at her.

Haven' a bit o' trouble are ya, he'd call and take another gulp of his amber bubbles.

Her hands would be black with soot by the time the meal, or what could loosely pass for one, was prepared.

And with expectant love, she'd watch him eat first like a devoted lioness, hoping for the gratitude that never came between slurps and gulps and munches and mutterings for more, more. Coarsely, she thought.

And then he'd be gone, to snore in front of the ABC news while she forced down cold steak and rock-hard veges and salty teary tea.

But that was only on short hauls.

Sometimes it was 3 a.m. before she heard the truck pull up outside, finally home from taking four decks to Brisbane.

She never drove with him because of the nauseous smell of sweating beasts behind the cabin. And the pain they have to tolerate if one slips on a curve, she quizzed him on occasion. Pack 'em in too tight for that, love. Yes, so each one lives in the other's excrement. Charming. It's money, love, and that's food in yer mouth.

She recalled that run of truckie movies with disgust.

And he'd arrive home at whatever time it was and want to lay her. At first she thought it romantic until it came to the physical torture of no foreplay and no satisfaction ever, for her, enduring half an hour at a time. Like a hulking ape, he'd groan and grunt, twist and push with no knowledge of the shapely log beneath him. She'd go limp in his arms and if it was dark, she'd cry. Whimpering that he took for signs of ecstasy.

Then he'd finish with a thrust and a florid expending of air from his lungs. Roll over and lie there, alone and apart. Soon, he would lift his head and say I'm hungry, how would ya like ta cook somethin' for me, love?

And when it was ready, he'd be wheezing out loud in that sleep of the unconcerned and uncaring.

And neighbours would waken at 5 a.m. before he was due to leave, droving his crates of cattle to the coast, a girl's brown head bobbing over steak and eggs in an uncurtained kitchen.

And they'd say, she'll run 'erself into the ground fer 'im.

And he'd tell his mates in the pub on a Friday night, yeah a good lay an' not a bad cook. A man can live with that pretty well, ya know. He was pleased she didn't often leave the house, because she was still quite attractive and well, you know. I guess a woman hangs out fer it sometimes too when she's been off it a while, just like I gets when I'm in the city waitin' on a load back. Them ones at Lu-Lu's are nice'n'clean. Gettin' to be like them sailors, one in every port, they jibed him. He grinned, hope I get the Sydney run next. Winked wickedly at the barmaid while his mates laughed with that raw raucous humour of the mentally inept.

But she never used to drink much. Until later, when spates of depression hung over her like rainclouds. She was always damp with the continual degradation so she drank to dry off.

Whenever he brought home a dozen cans she'd hide four while he drank himself toward oblivion. Then he'd send her out for more and she'd get extra with the money and keep him drinking while she fed him the line about prices going up because of the wage rise.

Then, when he was away, she'd sit and drink and kick the cat. Becoming agoraphobic, and undisciplined when it came to her thesis and they were writing angry letters about her failure to comply with university regulations. She used them to stoke the fire.

He came home one night and found her on the lounge with empty and half-empty cans scattered all over the floor. Himself personified.

There was shock in his eyes. Get up offa there and get me m' tea, he said, pointing directions to her glazed eyes.

Tonka toy, Tonka toy, she taunted.

What? his anger rising.

Yeah, what – what is that thing out there? Nothin' but an oversized Tonka toy, she said.

He stood for a moment dully. You talkin' about me truck?

Her laughter was uncontrollable and gulping. Your truck, your truck – it's like saying your dick, your dick. Gives you a potency, huh? Bigger is

better but you don't have that in bed!

His eyes grew wide with fire and he rushed at her with arm extended. Why you little bitch, while she screamed her defence.

He backed off and left the room while neighbours hurried to their windows in the hope of witnessing a murder. A starting motor and very audible sobs dashed their pleasure. Poor kid, always knew 'e was no good. After that young thing with the little 'un ran away from him an' all. He was all smiles on 'is weddin' day then too. Nodded in silent agreement of an ensuing character assassination.

She tried to muster some semblance of sobriety from her drunken spinning head and managed to clean up the lounge before vomiting conveniently into the toilet.

She felt better later so chewed her way through some corn chips while she thought about what she had said to him. It didn't seem misplaced. Cruel, maybe, but no crueller than his expectations of her and his bedroom mundaneness. Fully justified, she slept easily and when he came in later to deliver his own brand of dominance, she was prepared to perform her duty humbly and on her knees.

It was OK for a while after that.

Things went on as before but she felt a new enthusiasm for making it work and he noticed a subtle change in her, hair not unkempt and face exhibiting traces of blusher and a little lipstick.

Pretty lady, he murmured.

What's that, dear?

Nothin' luv, but by jeez you're cookin' some good tucker lately. She smiled, a portrait of feminine perfection. Trying to please. Succeeding.

She started going out more. Looked up some elementary psych texts and decided to do something about her situation. He wasn't too bad, gave her money to do things with, though she hadn't bothered before.

Now she walked tentatively down the main street. Switched off to the whisperings. It was the first step.

She felt best when he wasn't around to check up on her. Just like everyone else in that poky little town, he wanted to know her every movement. Not to spy, mind, just a healthy curiosity like all the other people there. Not enough of their own business to keep them occupied so kept themselves informed of the rest of the town's doings.

He chose me because I'm me, well I'm gonna be me, she decided. And when he was gone, she could.

Went into the butcher's. Where's yer mate, they'd ask of the lone woman without the shield she usually took shopping.

Gone on the Sydney run this week. And could I have 250 of mince too please?

To the bakery and where's yer hubby luv? Gone off and left ya, ay?

No, just took a trip to Kathmandu to find himself. One of those buns please.

She was enjoying herself. It was a Friday and a whole weekend to herself. She'd get into some serious study.

She saw the oilies further on up the street before they saw her. Came to town each weekend to drink after working the fields in the Basin. Giggled as she proposed what she'd do. They looked different to town folks. Brighter, more alive.

Hi fellas. I'm doing some work on the social habits of oilies. Like to be guinea pigs?

They laughed and looked at each other. Why not, come an' we'll buy you a beer. In the public bar.

I can't even make a mistake without the whole of the town knowing.

Tinted windows but she could still see the frowning faces move past the bar in the hot afternoon sun. Still noticed how the regs and the barmaid ignored her presence.

But she had fun. With the dirty jokes and tall tales they told. Two were engineers. She remembered their type at uni. The Monty Python humour and fresh-faced friendliness. One especially appealed to her.

He asked her out to the local football club's disco the next night. She agreed.

Still liked to be wooed and bought expensive drinks.

The rest of the oilies were there too. Not liked by the locals. Out-towners always caused trouble. And they noted her presence with their number. Not done.

Not one o' us, always knew it. Can't have bad eggs in our midst. Destroyin' the whole fabric of society. Get the children away, Martin. Don't want them witnessin' a slut at work.

She was laughing. Really laughing. He was so nice. And they danced to the loud music and she thought for a moment she was back in the city and

she was happy and then it faded and they were being thrown out for disturbing the peace.

It's always the same, one said. We bring industry to the area, spend our money in the town and then they treat us like trash. No wonder the place's dying.

The nice engineer looked at her. Sorry about this, guess we've ruined your evening.

She smiled. More eventful than anything else I've done in a while.

Let's go get pissed and smash the place up, someone said.

She got up to go. I think I'll go home. He jumped to his feet and asked if he could see her again. Scarlett O'Hara once more on her mind. She shook her head and kissed his cheek. Then she left.

Four days later he arrived home spitting fire. Rushed into the house and as her lipstick and smooth hair welcomed him, he struck her full across the face.

Screwin' oilies you fuckin' bitch. Don'tcha have any respect for me!

Neighbours, ears plucked to the altercation, quietly opened their windows wider and turned out the lights, glued there as though to an evening soap. Reckon she had it comin' to her, they agreed, closing ranks on her guilt.

She was wide-eyed with astonishment, too shocked to react to the pain his blows inflicted. What on earth are you talking about?

Get out, pack yer bags an' get out. Slut, you fucking slut, he screamed, red in the face with red ears and red neck.

She stood still, quiet, calming. Can't I tell my side of it? None of them touched –

He cut her off with another smashing assault which flung her to the ground. I heard all I wanna hear from the blokes in town.

She cared less about her pulped face than her pride.

Oh yeah, listen to a crowd of bloody gossips and don't believe the truth – that I talked with them and danced with them. No more! She yelled at his thick pulsing skull. No more! Oh yeah, I'll go but because you questioned my fidelity. When have I asked you about blonde hairs on your coat or powder on your shirts? Yeah, I'll go, she sneered. How can I stay with someone who doesn't know the difference between truth and malicious rumour.

He stood still, trembling, red turning to purple as he crumpled. Deflated like a balloon with a slow hole in it, he hissed to the floor and curled there crying. She did it to me, too, she did – ran off with an oilie and took the little 'un with her. I couldn't bear it with you too. He looked up at her with his only life-support, honesty.

She pitied him and sighed. Do you want your dinner?

He nodded while she slapped it coarsely on a plate and set it on the table. Eat then, and she went to put Savlon on her swollen cuts.

She packed next day while he was out short-hauling sheep from one property to another for fattening. Droving in his truck. Wish it was on a horse like in those old Chips Rafferty movies but progress can't be helped. Makin' the best of me life, I reckon.

He left her that morning with a kiss and an apology and was coy when he asked if he could have pork chops for tea. She smiled, tired and hurting and after he'd gone, began to pack.

She walked down to the main street with her two ports bulging, bandaids on her face and no need for lipstick on a red and swollen pout. Left the bags at the Greyhound terminus to be put on the bus to Brisbane. Not enough money for her to ride with them so she started walking.

He came home at lunchtime to find her gone and as he backed the truck out, one of the neighbours beckoned him over and said, I seen 'er leaving this mornin' with two full bags of stuff.

He swung the cabin round and bottled out of town like the devil was after 'im, I swear, she told her husband that evening.

He found her ten miles east with her thumb hanging out like a nail knocked wrong into a piece of wood.

Come back love I didn't mean it.

I'll have the scars to prove you did, she said.

Please come back, I need you.

Go away, just go away.

He shrugged – pride too strong and ego too big to beg further. Next run to Brisbane, ask that Katie at Lu-Lu's if she'd like a taste o' the country life, he memoed to his mind.

Goodbye, said the girl.

Yeah, good luck an' all that, and he U-turned slowly to make her suffer. He watched her in his rear-vision mirror, saw her staring blankly after him,

watching the exhaust's blue smoke follow the truck like a faithful dog as it disappeared down the road back to town.

She turned and started walking again, the sun beating down on her uncovered head. And she decided to change the topic of her thesis.

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The writing of Anne Gambling PhD covers a spectrum from short fiction through novel, to non-fictional research and contemplative essay. She also composes poetry, song and mantra.

THE DROVER'S WIFE'S DOG

DAMIEN BRODERICK

1

Call me Alligator.

If you're feeling really precious you could go the whole hog and call me Alligator-clip. That's my role: I'm the Mediating Term. Man nor beast, wild nor free, autochthonous nor non-.

There again, I wonder sometimes if I ought fall in so abjectly with this other-directed arrogation of my autonomy. The decentring of the self can go only so far. I have logic on my side, species-wise. Watch carefully –

Here's the Wife (two legs, though we'll come back to this point), menaced by the black snake (limbless). Working back from Orwell, there's a case to be made for the following formalism:

Four legs good/
no legs bad:
two legs ... ho-hum.

2

A dog's voice is one thing; his typing (even with the brainless but indispensable aid of a powerful and apt word processor) another entirely. *Mirabile dictu!* Or *tactu*, however you express it. Tricks and sleight of paw. Such claims verge on the paranormal. Now I find myself baying at the moon. And here, evidence of my valid instinct, you see my words trotting out like happy puppies in a straggling line, sniffing at the kerb, piddling with the excitement of their first outing. Thus might an Uri Geller wow the marks, all you paying punters, worked to an anticipatory lather by his barkers.

Geller! A name to conjure with! Whatever became of him? By clairvoyance locating oil in the Antarctic? His sensitive fingers questing like bloodhounds along the inked geosynclines of some official map stripped of glacial encrustation in an infra-red satellite gesture of instant legerdemain? Tele-porting diamonds from the arse of some South African mine, subverting apartheid's treasury by extrasensory means? Working some flea-pit in Bogotá, drearily awaiting the next total eclipse and the restoration of his UFO-induced powers?

Ah, Geller, at his prime! Time bends to his command, the jaws gape, the spoon no honest dog may use to feed his face melts, thaws, resolves itself into a – The hands, the hands, the hands of the clock turn backward, leap and cavort to this sensitive stroking. I can feel the magic, the power, feel it coming ...

Watch
my poor hands.
Never free your gaze from
lapse
 blink
idiot
these my flying padded fingertits
 tips
nips there it went
Now the spoon
 sags
quite without effort, really
and the unwatched watch ticks
sticks
 sticky
d
 r
 o
 o
 p
 s
You can stopwatching

3

By God, Freudian, I'll give you Freudian, Lévi-Straussian, the kit and caboodle.

The house we live in? Just two rooms and a snake. Two terms, right? Me on a chain (the Mediating Term suppressed for the moment), hollow wood-pile outdoors. Ho ho.

Round timber, split slabs. I ask you. This is just the first sentence. The second? Holy Moley – big bark, stands at the end, larger than the house itself.

Bushy all around. Nothing for relief, save the she-oaks. Dear me. Give us a break.

Old Sheep-Dip off with his flocks by night, so what do you expect? Snake, snake, snake. Into the hollow of the poised, the waiting, the meretricious nigger wood-pile. The version I'm reading (a 1901 edition of *Bulletin* yarns chosen by A. G. Stephens) omits all mention of the 'stray blackfellow's' regal estate. Through the cracks the splits the suppressed under the floor. Just as well I'm here, maties, with my wet black nose for no-legs-bad.

Of course I feel obliged to point out that in terms of traditional narrative *tension* large-scale feral monsters on the order of your standard European megafauna are fairly thin on the Antipodean ground, not too many loose, cobbers, not your actual four-legs-good variety at any rate. Bigger-all lions, tigers, bears in brown coats and black, spittle gleaming and roaring throats deepest carnal red, or gryphons, or gleaming green- and gold-scaled dragons, for that matter, all flaring filament wings and stench breath.

So snakes it is, by the ecology of the bloody *mise en scène* and our fundamentally realist mimetic conventions, eh? Snakes or nothing, because even Henry Lawson could hardly raise much better than a novelty musical item out of a redback on the dunny seat. Sometimes a cigar is just a machine for transmitting lung cancer.

4

Language and its unconscious\$? (Shit! I keep jamming my damned dew-claw in between the return key and the dollar sign, something to do with the ergonomics of the system, I'm sure. Nothing semiotic.) It seems to me, starting a clean sheet here, turning the leaf over lickety-spit ... (but didn't

we set out on a word processor especially adapted to the clumsy paws of a black bitsa?) ... it seems to me, as I regard the blank page (or is it screen? but hardly blank, in that case, for my previous words would hang above these like a spotty auroral banner), the blank space of my rhetorical life (palimpsest in reality, since Henry's scribbled on it, and Barbara Baynton's put some jottings in the margins, and the genes for my yellow eyes and lovely grin and ragged tail basted by the Aussie sun, and the gaps between locked into place by Bail and Goldsworthy and all you infinite generative teeming reading Others, oh yes) (but let's pretend it's blank; it seems blank to me as I live it:) that the sentence this space represents *in potentia*, through whatever voids, already writtens, absences, drenchings, evasions, three bags' full, is determined in the paradox of its utterance and uttering to set forth (as it has already, in truth) with the Capital of itself (the 'I' in the 'It', as it happens) and run its course backward through however brief or protracted a passage to its terminal period: to have been, wherefore, the reverse and moon-tided enactment of a life ushered in from sterility (temporary, yes, cyclical, but don't forget the Wife's 'worn-out breast' at Henry's close) and expiring at the last in final guilt and execution.

5

I am afraid of nothing on the face of the earth, or under it. The living and the dead. Her dead child, borne nineteen miles by horse in this limbo of stunted, rotten apples; oh her brother-in-law's little son, killed by venom: in the ground, in the ground. I press my nose to the crack. I will snatch the filthy thing out and break its back. I will meet its bright blackness with my own. I'll never go droving, skinned nose or no. I have a marked dislike to friends or relations of the family; will make friends (mysteriously, by my wise nose) with strangers; will bark horribly at the Wife (no-legs in long pioneer skirt; hmm) when, blackened by soot, two-legged in trousers, drenched in *oily sweat* from the *fiery heat* (well, wouldn't you?) she reaches for the (swaddled? no-legs?) baby. Sank my six inches of manly doggish grin into his moleskins she wore, you bet.

6

Many miles further down the creek a man kept throwing an old cap into a water-hole. The dog would bring it out and lay it on the opposite side where

the man stood, but would not allow the man to catch him, though it was only to wash the blood of the sheep from his mouth and throat, for the sight of the blood made the man tremble. But the dog was also guilty.

7

And she hugs and kisses him while the sickly daylight.

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Damien Francis Broderick is an Australian science-fiction and popular-science writer/editor of seventy-three books. His award-winning novel The Dreaming Dragons introduced the trope of the generation time machine, The Judas Mandala is sometimes credited with first appearance of the term 'virtual reality' and his book The Spike was the first to investigate the technological Singularity in detail. Broderick holds a PhD from Deakin University. In 2005, he received the Distinguished Scholarship Award of the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts. He was the founding science-fiction editor of the Australian popular-science magazine Cosmos. His work has been translated into French, German, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Danish, Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Lithuanian and Russian. These days he lives in San Antonio, Texas.

THE DROVER'S WIFE

CRAIG CORMICK

HANG ON, SAYS ROSS, stopping the car suddenly and peering down the long dirt track. I think we've been down this road before.

Nick, in the back seat, leans forward. Peels himself off the hot vinyl. Looks all around them. Flat desert. Mulga trees. Flat desert. Small shrubs. Flat desert. Just like every track they've driven along all day. Bullshit! he says.

Suzie, in the front passenger seat, turns to Nick and says, Well we could've looked it up on the map if some dickhead didn't throw it out the window.

Gedfucked. Nick whispers it. But just loud enough for her to hear the trace of the words. But she turns to Ross. How do you know we've been here before?

Look at it, says Ross. Don't you feel it? Nick shrugs. Slumps back into the seat. Pushes his leather jacket aside. Doesn't want it to smell of vinyl. Wishes they had some beer left. Even warm ones. Wishes they were on a tarred highway somewhere. Anywhere. Wishes they were still in Melbourne. Whadayamean feel it? he asks.

We've driven down this road before, says Ross. There's a homestead along there with a bright blue roof.

Suzie looks at Ross really carefully. Trying to see his pupils. Wonders if he's been popping some of his pills while she was dozing. Or was busy screaming at Nick. Homestead? she asks.

Sure, says Ross. And we drive up to it. Really slowly. And it looks like nobody is there. Real quiet and still. And we look around the yard. It's flat and sparse. A few tall thin trees. A shed. Assorted old equipment. And a little garden. Geraniums wilting in the heat.

Ross waves his index fingers around as he speaks. As if painting the yard. Can you see it? he asks.

Nick looks up the track. No, he says. I can't see it.

Ross looks to Suzie. She just shakes her head. Patiently. Nick winds down his window. Looks out across the red sand and scrub. Nothing. Mulga. Desert. Sand. Heat. Nothing. Then, just for an instant he can see a distant lake. Shimmering out there. Inviting. Blue and cool. Then it's gone. Only sand. Flat desert. And the buzz of flies flitting in the window.

Hey, shut the bloody window, says Suzie. The flies are getting in. Shut the window!

Nick winds it shut. Slowly. Listens to the flies buzzing around his ears. Feels them landing on his neck. Hates them. But he knows that Suzie hates them more. Winds it really slowly.

And I hop out of the car first, says Ross. Just to look around, you know. To see if there's somebody there or not. Nick wants to tell Ross to shut up. But he listens to the words. The buzzing of flies. The engine grinding angrily in the heat.

And I start walking across the yard, says Ross. But slowly like. I put one foot out at a time. Like testing the ground. And I've only taken a few steps and a dog barks.

Ross looks around. Looks at the other two. Watching him. Waiting for him to go on. There is no movement. So he takes another step. And then the dog barks again. And comes charging out. A black and white mongrel cattle dog. All teeth and noise. And speed. So fast. And he's barely half a metre from Ross when he hits the end of his lead. Pow! A long nylon rope. It jerks him to a sudden stop. Ross has his hands up. Just like this, he says. In front of my face. I can only see the teeth and red eyes in front. The dog gulps large mouthfuls of air then leaps again. Straining against the rope. Barking and snapping.

Ross turns and looks at Nick and Suzie again. But they aren't sure what to say. They just look at him. Want to know what happens next. So he goes on. And there is this loud whistle. And the dog is gone. And so I take another step forward. But I stop at the edge of the rope's length. Just in case, you know. And that's when we see him.

Who? asks Suzie.

The Aborigine, says Ross.

Of course, says Nick, now swatting at the flies. How did I forget him?

We can't see his face, says Ross. It's hidden in the dark shade of its own features. But he's carrying a gun. As dark as his face. And he slowly raises

it and points it at us. Remember? And I want to say something, to tell him not to shoot, but my voice won't come. I can't get the words out.

Suzie is looking at Ross. A little worried. But wondering what the point of this is going to be. Where is he taking them with this? She wants him to explain it to her. But she can see how much the story is pissing Nick off. And so she says, And then what?

Then there is a shout, says Ross. Hey-oh! And the Aborigine puts down his gun. Turns. And a woman comes out of the homestead. A fat dumpy woman in a wide-brimmed hat. She walks up close. Past the Aborigine. And says, Whadchufellahswan?

Ross points up the track. Remember now?

No, says Nick. I don't. And we're stuck here in the middle of the fucken desert in central-fucken-Australia and we're just about out of fucken petrol and if this trip wasn't bad enough, you're off on your own fucken trip!

But that's it, says Ross. It's the petrol. We ask her if we can buy some.

And what does she say? asks Nick, wiping sweat from his eyes. 'Cause I sure hope she's got some to spare.

She says, Juzbring ya car aroun the back. Like that. And she's got this petrol bowser there. Not a flash one. Like an old farm bowser.

Oh yeah, says Nick, Now I remember it. And the old bird says to us, Can I check your fluids?

No, she says, Solomon ere'll do the filling. And she indicates the Aborigine. And then she says, Come into the ouse for a spell. And she takes a step towards the homestead. Just one. But we don't follow her. We just stand there. And then she says, I don't get much company. It's the way she says it. And so we follow her inside.

Ross turns around again. Looks at Nick in the back seat. Nick purses his lips. Like he's getting ready to spit. And Suzie can see he's about to say something awful. So godamnfuckingjustlikeNickawful. So she says to Ross, quickly, Tell us about the inside of the homestead.

Don't you remember? says Ross. It was real cool. And sort of like somewhere you know. The kitchen in a share house you used to live in. Or perhaps the kitchen of some auntie's place that you haven't visited since you were real small.

I hope she's got some coldies in the fridge, says Nick. Yeah, says Ross. She pours four large glasses of beer and places them on the table. Ere's

ealth, she says, and sculls half the glass. Then sits back. Wipes the foamy moustache off her lips. Then she says, My name's Bridie!

Bridie?

Yeah. That's right. And she says, I suppose Solomon must ave given youse a bit of a fright. You don't need to worry about im though. E's pretty harmless. Only shot two people. An they were both wogs!

Nick scowls at Ross. What does that mean? Is that meant to be a dig at me? This is my fucken car, sport! You're only driving because I let you.

Because you're too fucken pissed, says Suzie. And because you keep getting lost and don't have enough fucken sense to not even throw the fucken map away.

Never needed a fucken map in Melbourne, says Nick.

We're not in fucken Melbourne any more Toto, says Suzie.

Gedfucked! says Nick. Right into her face. Like a slap. Sees the anger building there. Remembers her sudden violence. Knows she's about to lose it. Slowly leans back into the hot vinyl seat. Listens to the flies buzzing angrily.

We don't get many people comin up the ol road any more, Bridie says suddenly. Breaking the tension, you know. It's pretty rough an all. She puts her glass down on the table and picks up the beer bottle. Just holds it there a moment. You lot must ave a bit of the pioneer spirit, she says. Either that or you really got yerselves lost! And then she pours us all another cold one. Really cold.

Ross says it again. Slower. Really cold. They can almost feel the taste of the beer. Wish Ross would stop talking about it. Want him to stop. Want him to go on forever.

And it's so cool in the kitchen. You can feel the chill of the lino through your shoes.

Suzie nods. Oh yes!

And there's this big print on the wall, says Ross. Right there. His fingers painting again. A portrait of a fat dumpy woman in the middle of nowhere. She looks just like Bridie. Standing there with a broad hat and shopping bag.

A shopping bag?

Well, like a shopping bag. She's standing in the middle of this plain, like, and there's this wagon in the distance behind her. She looks huge. Larger than life. You know the one?

Oh yeah, I get it, says Nick. She's the drover's wife. Right!

Yeah, that's right, says Ross. And Suzie wants to know where her husband is.

Why would I give a stuff about her husband?

I don't know. You just ask her. And she says, E's orf. Orf some-bloody-where.

And that's when Nicks says, He's a drover, isn't he? And she says, A drover. A driver. All the bloody same.

Nick looks forward at Suzie. Cautiously. But the anger has left her now. She's looking off into the distance somewhere. As if she can see something way out there. He follows her gaze. But he can't see anything. Flat desert. Mulga trees. Flat desert. Small shrubs. Flat desert. Nothing. But he can't seem to focus his eyes properly. Closes them a moment. Wishes the blackness were cool.

Then Ross says, So we're just sitting there, you know, and that's when the snake appears.

What snake? asks Suzie, looking back.

A big bloody black snake. Enormous. About two metres long and as thick as your arm. And it just slithers out from the wall somewhere. Right across the floor. And everybody screams. Like we try and jump up on the table. Call for somebody to kill it. And then Nick grabs this shovel.

And I bash Sweat is dripping from his face. So hot it's hard to think straight. Hard to remember the snake well.

And then what? asks Suzie.

Well, Bridie picks up the snake. Suzie nods. She is looking distantly out the window again. Looking up the track. Staring into the heat-hazed distance. Where she can see the old woman bearing one pale breast. Lifting the snake gently. Coiling it around her arm. Offering it her breast to suckle from. The image fades. Slowly. She looks at Ross.

He is smiling and nodding his head. And Nick is a bit embarrassed about it all and says, I think we'd better get a move on. And he stands up from the table and then all go outside again. The car's full and Solomon is nowhere to be seen. So we just hop in, and sit there, says Ross. Just like this. Not sure what we should do next.

But then Bridie goes over to the pump. Reads the counter. And says, Let's see, nearly a full tank, that'll be ah – a hundred dollars!

But that's about two dollars a litre, says Nick.

Yeah, that's right, says Ross. And Bridie says, I dunno ow much a litre it is, but it's ten dollars a gallon. And then Solomon steps out of the shadows again. With the gun. And the dog on a short chain. And Bridie says ... he looks at the other two. Waits for one of them to finish the story.

They are all looking up the track now. Flat desert. Mulga trees. Flat desert. Small shrubs. Flat desert. And something else.

Cheapest petrol for miles, says Suzie.

And she takes traveller's cheques, says Nick.

Yeah, says Ross. That's it. He puts the car into first gear and edges it slightly forward. And then the blue roof of the homestead seems to suddenly come into sight. Shimmering in the distance. As cool and blue as a distant lake.

Let's see if she's home, says Ross.

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Craig Cormick is an award-winning writer and science communicator.

THE DROVER'S WIFE CLUB

JAMES ROBERTS

MINUTES OF THE DROVER'S Wife Club meeting held on 1/4/2006 at 2pm in the Mechanic's Institute.

Present

Kerryn Jefferis (Pres), Barbara Goldsworthy (VP), Francesca Casamaggiore (Trs), Snowy Bail, Laverne Arens, Bee Broderick, Mandy Gambling, Anne Eipper, Louisa Sayer, Joanna Carrera, Isabel Thieme, and Hazel Lawson-Drysdale (Sec).

Absent

Henriette Drova

Apologies

None

AGENDA

1. Letters

- a) The Eden Venene Lab in Adelaide writes to thank Mandy Gambling for all the snake venom she has supplied this year.
- b) The CFS has requested sandwiches for their open day in June. They like focaccia and ask if they can have some sourdough rye as well. They remind us that the Claytons are celiacs, but say they can eat cold Vietnamese rolls and could we make sure there are a few halal choices.
- c) Trees for Life writes to thank us for the native seeds we collected. The city volunteers have grown 10 000 seedlings that will be ready to plant out in a few months. The regeneration areas selected include

those affected by the last bushfire and flood, as well as along the salinity corridor. They want to coordinate activities between our club, Greening Australia, Earthwatch and the Conservation Council.

- d) The Free Radicals society writes to ask us for a policy statement on GM crops.
- e) Opera in the Outback writes to ask if they can send an alto to scout locations for their proposed Drover's Wife cycle.

2. Business arising

a) President's Report on the Annual Drover's Wife Festival The festival proved popular again this year. Over 2500 people came from all over the district. The committee is to be congratulated on keeping up the high standard year after year. A special thanks to Hazel for all her work behind the scenes.

Prizes List

Best Drover's Wife Jam – Mrs Suzanne Kiernan

Judges' comment: 'The burnt fig, ginger and almond kernel jam was so thick you could stand a spoon in it. Heaven in a jar.'

Best Drover's Wife Dog – Ms Maureen O'Shannesey

Judges' comment: 'The bitch, Alligator Too, was an unwanted bitzer, some say out of Big Croc and Yer Bunyip. No provenance. Ugly as sin but perfectly trained by her owner. Blitzed the time-trial hunt, avoided all the endangered snakes and mammals, killed three rabbits, two cane toads and a fox before the bell. Left the fancies at her heels.'

Best Drover's Wife Snake – Ms Mandy Gambling

Judges' comment: 'Ms Gambling's clean sweep of the awards continues her dominance of this category. Her eastern brown took out the gold ribbon, her tiger took out the silver and her inland taipan took out the bronze. Outstanding reptile collection.'

Best Drover's Wife Pickle – Mrs Nesi Patel

Judges' comment: 'We've never tasted such an outstanding mango chutney. A perfect match for a hot lamb curry or pork medallions.'

Could she share her recipe with the judges, please!’

Best Drover’s Wife Poem (traditional) – Mrs Maggie Tanner

Judges’ comment: ‘*My way or the highway* is a fine lyric poem, if a trifle long at fifty pages. Every last ounce was squeezed from its use of bitumen as a metaphor.’

Best Drover’s Wife Poem (rap) – Bitter T.

Judges’ comment: ‘In Bitter’s rap, *Bush Ho*, the sap rises again, to take it to the man, whose story is old, she knocked ’em cold. That’s bold. Sold. She takes the gold.’

Best Drover’s Wife Macramé – N/A

Judges’ comment: ‘No prize awarded due to lack of entries for the seventh year in a row.’

Best Drover’s Wife Sculpture – Stacey Kay

Judges’ comment: ‘The steel silhouettes of the eponymous wife, with their flat planes, borrows from Drysdale’s iconic image. Viewed from the oval, they disappear into the bush. Up close it’s a different story; the layers of complex patina subvert first impressions.’

- *Motion*: ‘That macramé be dropped as a category in next year’s Drover’s Wife Festival.’ Proposed: Louisa. Seconded: Joanna.

Discussion – Joanna supported the motion, saying it was a continual embarrassment to the club. Laverne agreed. Anne disagreed, saying it was part of our heritage. If we didn’t have heritage, what did we have? Louisa pointed out that many categories have been dropped in the past, including Best Doily and Best Needlepoint Homily. Anne said she knew all too well as she had the awards at home to prove it. Snowy asked if Anne had seen *The Castle* or *Kath and Kim*. Anne said she didn’t enjoy reading Kafka and the category would be dropped over her dead body.

- Vote: 8–4. Motion passed.
- At 2:46pm Anne left the meeting.

b) Sister clubs

Francesca reported on the growing international interest in Drover's Wife clubs. Since her latest trip to Italy, nine new branches have started up. There are now four in America, ten in Italy, eight in England, six in Latvia and 257 in Japan. Isabel wondered why Japan has gone crazy on it since they have no sheep in the whole country. Francesca thought it might have something to do with their fascination with gumboots.

- *Motion:* 'That we develop a Drover's Wife franchise in order to capitalise on the global interest in Drover's Wives.' Proposed: Francesca. Seconded: Barbara.

Discussion – Louisa suggested that we consult a brand expert to come up with an appropriate logo. Isabel doubted that the boom would last – she could see a crash on the horizon. Mandy offered to look after the snake side of the business, but reminded us of the difficulties of live snake export. Bee was concerned that we may sully the Drover's Wife image by exploiting it for money. Snowy wondered about devising a reverse takeover of R.M. Williams. Laverne said she was too busy with the kids and couldn't face a franchise meeting as she had a bad experience with Amway.

- Vote: 5–5. One abstain. Motion not passed.
- Kerryng suggested we set up a sub-committee to explore the proposal. Francesca, Barbara and Louisa to report back next month.
- At 3:03pm Anne returned to the meeting.

c) Postgraduate activities

Joanna reported that applications from postgrads to study Drover's Wives are beginning to overwhelm her. While she supported the principle of further study, she had her own Masters degree to finish and found these newcomers a little annoying. Isabel agreed that it was hard to move around the district without bumping into a tertiary student. Francesca said this supported her idea for a global Drover's Wife franchise since the youth of today were early adopters. Barbara offered to take over the administration of student applications. Joanna thanked her for the offer but declined.

- Action: none.

d) International Drover's Wife sexual life satisfaction survey

Snowy reported on the survey conducted by the Lanolin Institute of New Zealand. It revealed that a majority of Drover's Wives are somewhat dissatisfied with their sex lives. Factors blamed were men, separation, distance, time, children and fatigue. The most satisfied Drover's Wives lived in Japan. Apparently Japanese drovers spend very little time away from home, since there are no sheep to drive. Gumboots were listed in the sexual aid category.

Discussion – Barbara said she had nothing to complain about in the bedroom since Russell started reading her *Cosmo* magazines. Bee thought sex in the flesh was over-rated but didn't mind a steamy novel or video. Laverne said she only thinks about it when Xavier's home, because when he's home, he's home. When he's away, it's a drought. Kerryn admitted she couldn't live without batteries. Mandy announced that she and Joanna had become lovers. Joanna said it might just be a stage – she and Tommy had issues. She asked the committee to keep the matter confidential. Noted. Louisa confessed she had a fling with a visiting dentist. Anne said it was a private matter. Snowy tried phone sex but Werner thought it was silly. Laverne said she had an open mind and would consider it if she wasn't engaged.

- Action: none.
- At 3:10pm Joanna left the meeting.

e) The Drover's Wife's Health Clinic

Anne reported that since the clinic opened there has been a reduction in the district's infant mortality, premature births and miscarriages. The club should be proud of these achievements. The picture was not so good for Indigenous women. She wondered what we could do about it, if anything.

Discussion – Kerryn thought it wasn't the place of white women to tell black women what to do. Francesca agreed that we had to be careful about being patronising. Louisa said we could start a dialogue. Isabel said that had been tried before. Mandy wondered why we even considered them separately and suggested that some of us probably had Aboriginal ancestors. Francesca said her dark complexion sometimes made Indigenous women call her sister. It made a change from wog. Barbara wondered if we

could get federal funding for an Indigenous Drover's Wife Health Clinic. Bee said we should be careful of tarnishing the Drover's Wife image.

- Action: none.
- At 3:23pm Joanna returned to the meeting.

f) Rural Australians for Refugees

Laverne reported on RAR's successful campaign to bring refugees to the country. There were now a dozen refugee families living in the district, with most of the men finding work in the abattoir. The extra labour would only enhance opportunities for drovers since markets were expanding. Tawfiq Khalil was the only one with any droving experience and that was with camels. His wife was pregnant with twins, according to the butcher.

- *Motion*: 'That we invite Ayishah Khalil to join the Drover's Wife Club as an associate.' Proposed: Snowy. Seconded: Laverne.
- Discussion – none.
- Vote: 10–2. Motion passed.

g) Country Women's Association

Mandy noted that many Drover's Wives were also members of the CWA. They had recently raised funds for an international micro-loan project so that women in a small village in Peru could start breeding guinea pigs for food and cash. The money involved was about \$1000. She wondered if we could do something similar.

Discussion – Anne thought it was a worthy idea but questioned the CWA's involvement in matters not directly affecting Australian women and children. Joanna thought we needed to keep challenging our mandate. Isabel doubted that we had enough knowledge of overseas women's needs. Snowy said she had read that there are more than 10 million Drover's Wives worldwide and that our needs might not be so different to theirs. Mandy said she could look into it. Bee said in her view the CWA was slowly moving away from a monarchist position to a republican one and so she was considering resigning. Kerryn stopped the heckling and brought the meeting to order. She said the members had agreed, after the last acrimonious debate, to defer any policy discussion on the republican issue until after the death of the Queen.

- Action: Mandy to research the proposal and report back.

h) Web Mistress Report

Barbara said the new Drover's Wife website was up and running and had over 2000 unique visits in the last month, with the bulk from Latvia. She didn't know why. She complimented the work of all the members who had contributed columns, and said the most popular were the Open Forum, What to Do When Your Drover is Away, Dips and Tips, De-knackering 101, DVD Review, International Spotlight, Child's Play and Kitch Hen. The most downloaded item was an MPEG demonstration on knot-tying. Further to the previous agenda item, Barbara added that she had a number of emails from California requesting assistance with micro-loans. Apparently the subsidy paid to American sheep farmers, equivalent to thousands of dollars per animal, gets lost somewhere between the lobbyists and agri-business. The Drover's Wives are doing it tough, so they say.

- *Motion:* 'That we consider funding a micro-loan to Californian Drover's Wives.' Proposed: Barbara. Seconded: none.
- Motion not supported.

i) Sports Report

Bee reported that the Drover's Wives defeated the Shearer's Sheilas netball team 46-43 in their annual grudge match. Ruth did a hammy, Helen's got a black eye and Cora is out for two months with an AC joint. Bee said 'but you should see the other team' (general laughter). Lawn bowls and tennis comps were ticking over nicely and the mid-week games had attracted a growing number of members. Kerry thanked Bee for her outstanding netball coaching for the season and hoped she will carry on.

3. Treasurer's summary

It has been a busy month, with income from the festival, leather stock whips, bondage and alternative lifestyle leather products, snakeskin souvenirs, snake venom, sandwiches and scones, pickles and preserves, dog training and stud fees, artworks, consulting, postgrad applications, coach tours, website subscriptions and advertising. Income for the month was \$15 560. Expenses were \$8 712. We made a profit of \$6 848. Our savings account is currently \$18 446. Beyond our regular outgoings, we've

committed \$10 000 to the Health Centre. We have cash at hand to fund several projects that gain committee support.

4. Any other business

a) Internet data speeds

Barbara thought we needed to lobby our local Member over the slowness of data speeds on the network. With the looming sale of Telstra, equitable access for country people was a big issue and could help swing the election. Snowy added that women in Afghanistan have faster net speeds than we do. Joanna noted that she had begun using a webcam and would appreciate all the bandwidth she could get. Mandy was opposed to the idea.

b) Application for business loan

Francesca said that, with the closure of the last bank in the district, their opportunities for getting a business loan were diminishing. Depending on the development of the proposed global Drover's Wife franchise, it might be worth meeting with a merchant bank like Macquarie to discuss listing strategies and market capitalisation targets. She proposed a trip to Sydney to begin discussions. Kerryn said that we should await the report of the sub-committee before committing funds for any individual travel, particularly as travel expenditure had already exceeded its budget allocation after Francesca's European tour.

c) Childcare

Louisa said that Drover's Wife Childcare Cooperatives had spread interstate, which was a good thing, but that one manager had received an anonymous phone call. She thought the caller was from one of the major childcare companies who were disturbed at the no-profit, community-focused model we used. He asked, 'How much for you lot to just go away?' She blew a whistle down the phone and hasn't heard from him since.

- *Motion:* 'That all Drover's Wives be issued with whistles.' Proposed: Laverne. Seconded: Bee.
- *Discussion:* none.

- Vote: 12–0. Motion passed.

5. Close: 4pm

6. Next meeting: 1/5/2006

Minutes prepared by Hazel Lawson-Drysdale.

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James Roberts is a writer and director. He is the author of a dozen short stories and a satirical novel, Pangamonium (as Zanesh Catkin). He coedited the book Writers on Writing, based on the ABC TV series he directed.

AFRAID OF WAKING IT

MADELEINE WATTS

HE SET THE CAMERA up by the wall in the space he used as his studio. It was one of the many rooms in the too-big house he didn't need. It was mostly empty – the wallpaper left to peel away from the walls, the plaster to crack and the dust left undusted. In the light that came in elongated grids through the barred windows I watched him move around the room beneath me, holding up the light meter to gauge the exposures.

I was wearing wings sitting high up on the rafters. He had gotten me up there with an aluminium ladder propped by the window. That afternoon he'd found a pair of glittery fairy wings abandoned outside the Woolworths on Illawarra Road. He cleaned them off and asked me to put them on. He had fixed the camera to the tripod. The light was getting away from him. I swung my legs, to watch the shadows ripple across the room like deep water.

Particles of dust drifted down around my ankles each time I shifted my legs. The wooden beams dug into my thighs. My white dress was filthy. Although it wasn't my dress, exactly. It belonged to him. There was a pile of women's clothing falling out of the wardrobe on the landing, which at first struck me as strange, because Rowland lived alone. The clothes were from different eras, in different sizes, to match the bodies of the women who had left them behind. There was a sort of leotard in black velvet. A white linen blouse with sweat-stained shoulder pads. An indigo bra that unclasped in front. These things didn't fit me. They were made in petite size, worn by women who had arms shorter and hips narrower and breasts smaller than mine who lived, I supposed, long before I had been born. He was old enough to be my father, although at the time that hadn't occurred to me as anything that might matter.

The white dress I was wearing while I waited for him to adjust the camera was the dress I had put on the first time he had steered me to the

pile of clothes and asked me to choose. It was a wedding dress, vintage 1940s. The lace held me tight at the top as though I was always just about to burst out of it, but it fell smoothly over my hips. Somebody, either the woman who had owned it before me or the bride who had first worn it, had taken a pair of scissors and cut off the bottom in one jagged gash. It fell in hang-threads at my knees. Now I wore it every time I modelled for him. Something about the stitching or its age or the lace had a strange effect. I felt as if I could be looked at, but remain unknown.

There was a yellowy spotlight Rowland had put in the far corner, but it didn't reach me up close to the ceiling. From the high window I could look out to the muddy river, and the industrial stretches that lead out to Botany Bay and into the hot evening ocean where Sydney lay immaculate. Earlier, the clouds had piled up over the airport like bruised flesh. The storm went from violet to green, the lightning in the distance making the roofs in Wollie Creek seem to billow up like sheets. In its absence the air felt exhausted. The summer smelled like wet and burning things.

At last he looked up at me and said, 'When you jump I want you to fall backwards, and reach out to the ceiling.' In the photograph he took of me that night I'm a blur holding my arms open to the dark.

Rowland had only gone back to teaching six months earlier. He needed the money. So sometimes he was called into school as a substitute for art classes when one of the teachers was ill or hung-over or lying immobilised by their own irrelevancy in bed. He was meant to start at 8.30 on the dot, but more often than not you'd sit there waiting in unsupervised rooms running at the low hum of no one in charge. Wait long enough and you would at last hear his footsteps approaching down the corridor, the laboured intake of breath as he pushed open the door.

It was a big deal, we had been told on his first day, that in our midst was an artist who had exhibited in London and New York, who had won prizes we hadn't heard of before most of us were born. 'Why's he need to teach, if he's as special as all that,' sneered a black-haired girl at the back of the class, not unreasonably perhaps, but not kindly.

He had come across me without meaning to. I had been sitting curled up in the wicker chair cast adrift among the papier-mâché props and faded Brassai posters of the smallest art classroom. I spent a lot of lunchtimes there. Reading, mostly, and observing other girls below the windows

moving about the world not knowing I was watching. Rowland walked in one day in September – he had been searching for a different room. I hadn't known he was watching until he coughed.

He apologised for having disturbed me. I stumbled over my words, trying to account for my presence. He nodded. And he looked me square in the eyes before backing out of the room. The most unnerving thing about Rowland was that he would hold your gaze a second longer than was necessary, as if the intimacy between the two of you was already extant. His eyes, meditative and grave, stayed with me long after he had left the room and the bell rang for fifth period.

Later that week my art teacher mentioned that he had been asking about me. 'Why?' I asked her. I didn't understand why an older man would give any thought to somebody like me – indiscernible, ill-defined, a girl he'd glimpsed only for a moment. She laughed at me and squeezed my shoulder with her clay-crusted hand, then moved away.

I watched out for him after that. I knew he lived nearby, because I saw him on the bus home sometimes, on the rainy days when he didn't walk. He was tall – he stuck out in a crowd – but he had delicate bones. I thought he might have been handsome when he was young. I never caught his eye, but I tracked him when he got off at the stop on Illawarra Road near the golf course, two stops before mine. I saw him walk up the hill by the river.

During October, I began to skirt down his street when I walked to the Vietnamese FoodWorks to pick up things my mother had scrawled on the back of the unpaid gas bill. I would pause behind the paperbark tree and peer at the house I thought he lived in, the front yard all long grass and bougainvillea engirding the second-floor balcony, white paint peeling from the weatherboard. I would glimpse his profile sometimes, slumped in a deep chair with a glass balancing on his chest.

The summer began early that year. Exams came in November, but the Christmas beetles had already begun to swarm the streetlights and the air grew thick with oleander. The heat made people hopeful. Children ran in their swimmers through the spray of garden hoses, in contempt of the city's water restrictions. A man with a paunch at the end of my street bought a Triumph and polished it in the driveway in the late afternoons. His wife rolled her eyes in the thick shadow of their mosquito-netted windows. Families began to put up plastic wreaths and fairy lights.

In the afternoons when I had nothing to do I took long meandering walks. Waiting for something to happen. I wandered along the street, passing the spoiled-meat-coloured facades of new apartment blocks, shuttered moneylenders, an Ogalo branch, a Domain real-estate agent, eight different Vietnamese restaurants all specialising in pho, grocery stores smelling of feta and durians, an implausibly large Chemist Warehouse, white stencilled 'Advertise Here' pleas by the stairway leading down to the train station platform, where a City Circle-bound Bankstown-line train plunged eastwards towards the skyscrapers. And beyond, the distant red Caltex sign at the bottom of the hill like a circular star to guide me home.

Taking the long way home after one of these walks, in which I went out searching for signs of a more interesting life, I veered down his street. The air was sticky. The banana trees were swelling and fruiting, viridescent. The smell of rot drifted from wet hibiscus flowers trodden mushy and grey into the pavement. I stood behind the paperbark tree across the street, but his lights were off. I didn't notice when he walked up behind me, holding a bottle in a brown paper bag. He had been right behind me all the long walk down Illawarra Road.

When I turned I realised I was blocking his path. I was carrying a canvas shopping bag filled with rice and lemons, and shifted it from hand to hand in front of my body to shield myself from what might be coming. An uncomfortable moment convulsed between us before he said anything.

'You were my student.'

I nodded. He looked at me closely, and I suspected that he knew exactly how many times I had hovered outside his front window.

As he walked across the burning bitumen towards his house, I heard him say, 'Come on then.'

And so I followed him.

The front door opened into a corridor with a staircase beyond. He turned right into the front room, where I'd seen him moving about in the half-light from the street. It was a room with bookshelves and two sofas facing one another, with not even a crate or a stool in between. I stood in the middle of the room in darkness. Rowland brought a bottle of whiskey out from the kitchen beyond and picked up two dusty shot glasses with the fingers of the same hand. He guided me to one of the sofas, then walked to the wall near the foot of the stairs and with a switch that was wiry and loose from the plaster he turned the lights on. I still hadn't said a word.

Later I learned that people didn't often come to his house. He had cut away from the people he knew. His closest friends had died years ago – overdoses, one suicide, junkie diseases of the liver and heart. There were some people he knew who were still in Melbourne, and there were a couple in London, I think. And in Budapest, where he had spent three years living in a rat-infested apartment leased to him by an old man who let him have the place for next to nothing provided he could use it once a week to host a rotation of delicate Chinese women with broken Hungarian, who dressed in black and cheap high heels and whipped him as he lay across their knees in the spare bedroom while Rowland watched television with the volume low.

In the incompleteness of the lounge room he sat opposite me on the other sofa and, balancing the shot glasses on each knee, poured fat man's fingers of whiskey. He handed me the glass and I took it from him while shaking my head.

'I don't drink,' I said. The truth was I had only drunk vodka mixed with sugary orange juice – once, because my friend Clemmie had insisted – and I was afraid to spit it out or even retch in front of this man who had seen me on his street and beckoned me into his house.

'You don't have to drink it,' he said. 'Look upon it as a courtesy.'

He moved to the record player mounted on a cardboard suitcase directly underneath the window. He turned the music on low. Something pretty and violent I didn't recognise. He talked about himself or, rather, he talked around himself, telling me stories about the record he was playing, the sofa I was sitting on, the stolen ashtray overflowing with cigarette butts on the bare floorboards, knowing perhaps that I was struggling for words. He spoke as he drank, and half mouthed the words to the song, searching in my face for something all the while. Never breaking the gaze. My fingers almost tapped to the music on the olive velvet of the sofa's arm. There were cushions with needlepoint white violets strewn across the couch he was sitting on, opposite my bare knees. They were the only sweet or reassuring things in the room.

On the wall behind Rowland was a huge photograph framed in glass, very black. The naked shoulder of a girl giving into the caressing hand of an upright headless man. There was an assured signature in the right-hand corner where the paper was white. His. On another wall, I would see later, was taped a letter written on ageing milky stationery with the letterhead of the Menzies Hotel emblazoned across the top. It was a scrawled message, in

what was unmistakably his hand. *Ghastly, with open eyes, he attends, blind. All the bells say: too late. This is not for tears; thinking.*

‘Is that your real hair?’ he said, apropos of nothing. ‘You haven’t dyed it or gotten a fucking perm or something like that?’

‘It’s just how it grows,’ I said.

He nodded. ‘Good. It’s better the way it is.’

He paused as he finished the last dregs of the whiskey from the shot glass I hadn’t so much as sipped from.

‘You know I’m not a teacher. Not really.’ I told him I knew. He walked me to the door. As I picked my way across the weed-split front path he called out. ‘Hey. You can come back if you want to.’

I began to visit him on the way home, instead of just passing by. Mostly I read with him. I would curl my legs up on the olive velvet sofa so that my body was compact and no part of me was touching his floor. At first I couldn’t concentrate on anything I pretended to read. I was too aware of the strangeness of him. The prize-winning picture of the naked girl that loomed black and beautiful over his head. But he would sit there, in the lounge room or in the kitchen, smoking with the ashtray against the open window, and eventually I would forget he was there.

It was a few weeks later that he told me he wanted to photograph me. I was not somebody people photographed. Even now, nobody ever asks to take my picture. I didn’t look myself in front of a camera. It had been different when I was very little.

From the moment I was born my mother was always armed with a heavy black Nikon. A thirty-six-frame roll of film could be used up in fifteen minutes as I careened around a room in purple parachute pants, conducting conversations with dolls and flowers. She was afraid of the time slipping by. The photos she took traced my moving away from her and disappearing into some awful, imagined future where she couldn’t protect me. They must have provided some kind of comfort. A verifiable chemical reincarnation, as if they could be offered up if any evidence was ever demanded of my passage through time.

When I got older there were no pictures, because I wouldn’t sit for them. If I got caught in a photo I looked out unsure and stiff from beneath a veil of hair. I didn’t like looking at the awkward versions of myself developed in full colour and bound up in a bright yellow envelope from a

nowhere place on the ground floor of Marrickville Metro. They were second-bests of a replica.

But I said 'yes' to him.

When he pulled out his equipment it was cobwebby, and the swell of air from the unlocked zippers hit me with the force of a low-tide squall. He rubbed the dust away with his shirtsleeve and explained to me how it worked. It was a big thing, bulky, like no camera I'd ever seen before. For one thing, it had to be held at chest height unless he was using a tripod. All of his equipment was old. The camera he preferred using – at least when he was working with me – was a medium-format model. It produced a square negative instead of the usual rectangular frames. That kind of camera, he told me, required a slower and more considered approach to photography. It only produced twelve negatives before it needed reloading. But its near-obsolence was part of the appeal. You had to consider what really mattered in the image. You had to have an enormous amount of control over what happened.

I found the wedding dress in the pile of clothes and I changed in the bathroom. It had been the last day of term, and I arrived at his house still wearing my scratchy skirt and knee socks and blue blouse with the school crest in gold over the breast pocket. The crest had a Latin motto furled out in capital letters beneath the gold shield. *Ut Filiae Lucius Ambulate. Walk As Daughters of the Light.*

In the bathroom I took off the pieces of the uniform and folded them on the vinyl chair by the sink. I washed my face, but the water heater was inconstant and the liquid that drained from the hot tap was almost freezing, even in the summer. I let my hair down. The white lace rustled across my back as I fixed the buttons into place. I looked at myself in the mirror: my long red hair and clean face and the delicate anachronism of the dress. The shock of the cold water against my skin had given my face a milky glow. My lips seemed redder. It wasn't that anything had changed exactly. It was more that the whole ritual of getting ready to be looked at had unveiled a part of myself I hadn't been aware of. I stared at my reflection as if I didn't know the girl in the mirror. The sensation struck and magnified a sense of conviction I didn't know I had. I wanted to be looked at. Until then, I hadn't realised.

When I walked back downstairs Rowland called out to me from a room I hadn't been into before. It was at the back of the house, behind the kitchen, with open roof beams and barely any furniture.

There was a specific image he wanted from me. He'd told me before that every photograph had its root in a feeling; how he proceeded from mental images, then adjusted and readjusted as the image caught fire. He stood me in front of the camera. He positioned me against a wall and moved my arm upwards. He told me to arch my back, as far as I could go. I did it. I was almost at right angles with myself. My neck strained against the weight of my head. I clutched my contorted muscles into place. I wasn't sure whether I could hold the position without beginning to shake. I glanced at him. I wanted to know if I was doing it right. But he was arrested by the process. He looked different with the camera held at his chest, aimed at my body.

It came as a long suspended moment before the lurch. It was as if the air pressure dropped, or somebody changed radio stations three streets away. An imperceptible change. The moment burned and expanded, acquiring a weight and brightness it didn't deserve. Standing in front of him felt like surrender. But it wasn't frightening. It felt more like relief.

In the photograph he took that night you can't see my face. The wall, gradually darkening towards the bottom, dominates the frame. You can see the patches that had been painted over, the different shades of cheap white paint. From the right of the frame my long hair hangs down, blurring where the ends split. The frame cuts off just beyond the shadow of my eyes. Above me is the corner of the old mirror, the art deco kind my grandmother had first hung in her spare room in the 1960s. My arm is thrust out from under my hair at an awkward angle, pressed flat against the wall as though I were trying to penetrate the plaster with my flesh. In the dead centre of the frame rests my palm. Open and very pale. There is and always was something disquieting about the picture, the way the certainty of the centre plays against the mutability of my body. The way I dissolve into the edges.

I went to one party that summer – just one – a little after Rowland first photographed me. Clemmie took me. She had been invited, I hadn't. Her mother had met my mother in a birthing class and they had both wound up alone with little girls in the same place. We were still close. We had all our history binding us together. But Clemmie had fallen away from me at

thirteen. She grew uninterested in the secret language we had together, in spending hours reading books and playing games lying on the floor. She began spending weekends in suburban multiplexes, inviting teenage boys with breaking voices to fumble inside her jeans. It wasn't that she was gone from me so much as that I didn't understand her. There was some gulf that opened up between her experience and mine. Slowly, I watched other girls around me jump their own version of the gulf, until it seemed as though I was the only one who hadn't felt the febrile pull of whatever it was the skinny, cheese-skinned boys seemed to trigger inside them. I remained alone on my side, and reacted by becoming quiet, more serious and growing my hair.

Until that year I had never thought about sex. Not the reality of it. I knew what it was. I knew girls like Clemmie were doing it. But I didn't desire it. Or, I didn't desire a body against mine, a body to touch. I didn't know what that would feel like. I did not know to want it. That came later.

Instead, I thought a lot about men like Ian Curtis or Kurt Cobain. Henry Miller or Hemingway. They weren't real: they were all dead for a start. They were men who were completely unreachable, and so safe. Secret. Mine because of all the men in the world I had chosen them. There was no relation between the men I thought about and the father of a friend whose eyes crawled all over me in the rear-view mirror. No relation to the teenage boy surrounded by his mates who lunged at my breast from the back of the bus. Less relation still to the man in the Woolworths parking lot, the underarms of his shirt marked with sweat lines like the bisected rings of a tree, asking me to give him 'a look-see' at my underwear. Instead, the ideas of imaginary men coaxed me down corridors towards unfathomable rooms. Rooms that I wasn't yet ready to cross the threshold of.

But Clemmie could drive, and I loved her, and the air in the city was oppressive. We played the radio and drove with the windows down. The lights of the western suburbs slipped past us all the way down the M5. I held my hand out and felt the wind ripple between my fingers as though I were parting sand.

The party was in a beige house in one of those uniform suburban cul-de-sacs where the lawns are neatly trimmed and green and tumble straight down to the road because nobody ever bothered building a sidewalk. Places where nobody walks, filled at night with a sense of emptiness and the screech of cicadas. Once we were inside I wandered through crowds of girls

with badly applied eyeliner and boys wearing unironed shirts. It felt as though the space between them and me had no end or bottom. I sat in a room with five awkward boys, a television on in the corner, none of us speaking, holding empty beer bottles just to give us something to do with our hands. I felt indistinct. I had nothing to say. I found Clemmie on a trampoline with a Newington boy and told her I'd take the train home and I left.

It was only eleven. I walked through the dark, empty streets of the suburb. A landscape of shuttered Chinese grocers, cricket pitches, blonde-brick unit blocks and blue TV lights flickering in windows. The barking of lonely dogs in backyards echoed through the wide streets. In the darkness the houses seemed to be dissolving. They seemed half withdrawn already. I looked ahead to the eastern shore where the city hung as though it were on fire, settled into its burning but unbreakable parts. Planes passed serenely across the sky, and I did not want to go home.

Two months earlier, in October, I had gone with my mother on a Saturday morning into the mountains. It was eleven before we reached Penrith and, because my mother stopped to smoke cigarettes by the highway, noon before we began to descend into the valley. My mother had quit smoking when I was four, but she had taken up the habit again recently.

It was out there in the Megalong Valley that my grandmother lived, where she stubbornly maintained that she wanted to die. My grandparents, with their three children, had lived there together for fifty years. They had kept rabbits, chickens, pigs. Once, an alpaca my grandmother named Bambi. But mostly horses. They were isolated, and far from any train station. It was an effort to visit them. Once I was beyond early childhood I saw them only irregularly. I have vague memories, like impressions on glass plates, of orchards, weathered white fence posts, crows fussing at dawn.

They lived in a wooden cottage they had built themselves, which had never been licked by bushfire. My grandfather used to leave for long stretches when he went out riding horses, leaving my grandmother alone in that misty valley of trees and birds. My grandmother kept the children safe, staying awake through the night if she sensed something malevolent coming. During the times she spent alone, nothing was wrong with her. She could get up with the roosters; look after the children and the property with

a sense of unexamined usefulness. Her ‘little spells’ only happened when her husband was present. Then came days when the bedroom door was left closed, the blinds drawn, the children instructed to tiptoe down the corridor.

My mother disparaged it as ‘learned helplessness’, and it was, but I couldn’t help feeling as if there was more to it than that. She was a woman who had a disconnected sense of her place in the world. Sickness provided a cause, but also symptoms and metaphors: in her emaciated frame, in her days in bed, in her pale skin.

My grandfather had died two years earlier, and my grandmother had since become increasingly peculiar and her behaviour more aberrant. During a visit in September my mother had found her lying on the wooden floor. She had fallen. There were bloody tissues clamped in her fist but she was alive. Querulous and still confused she said, ‘I got a nosebleed.’ There were rusty drops beside the rag rug. ‘I only wanted some juice.’

That was the point where my mother began to go back. Newly self-employed, she could work a few days at home, and took to using those days to stay with my grandmother up in the mountains, coming back home on Tuesdays. She refused to move her from the house. By the summer I was used to being alone and eating Weet-Bix for dinner.

My grandmother met us on the veranda. The spring daffodils were wilting and unwatered along the fence. The house smelt like dust and unwashed linen, and after the hours in the car I didn’t want to hold my breath. I walked through the garden while my mother and grandmother disappeared into the kitchen. There was an apple tree by the fence, some fruit still growing. I picked the last good one from the branch. The grass rustled around the barbed-wire fence, and I looked down, watchful for snakes. But it was just wind, blowing the grass about. Walking back along the side of the fence I saw a tuft of white fur nuzzled against the wire. It was a baby rabbit, completely unharmed, but resoundingly dead. It was perfect, like it was sleeping. Still soft.

‘Oh, it would have been in shock, probably,’ said my grandmother when I walked into the kitchen and told her. My grandmother knew about these things, and she remembered them now in her fuzziness, with a sometimes unnerving clarity. In some deep part of her brain these practical things remained. She knew how to protect the house from fire, how to scare the crows away from chickens, how to arm herself against sundowners.

‘The little girl on the property over found a rabbit last week,’ my grandmother explained. ‘It died, but it had a baby with it, and she’s kept it. I told her not to, stupid girl, but she didn’t listen. She was carrying it around in her pocket. She wouldn’t let it go. It was in shock.’

When a wild animal is captured or restrained, she explained, it becomes extraordinarily anxious. Its immediate reaction to stress is for its body to flood the system with adrenaline. If the creature is trapped for a long time the excess of adrenaline in the limbs can lead to a build-up of lactic acid in the bloodstream. The heart might begin to lose the ability to pump oxygen to the muscles. It might cause the muscles to die. *Capture myopathy*. I looked it up later, back in the city. Death can result in a matter of minutes. Or still, the captive animal might survive days, weeks or even months, only to die suddenly from heart failure or some apparent accident. Once the process sets in, there’s nothing to be done. It bends you to its will. It just takes you. Leaving a perfect, intact body. Apparently unharmed.

I walked through the wallpapered corridors while my mother threw away the curdled milk. My grandmother had tried to make scones; she couldn’t understand why they hadn’t worked out. She wandered out into the garden, but my mother followed her and called, ‘Mum, where are you going?’ I followed their voices through the screen door and into the garden. I watched my grandmother look around at her property, hesitant with her words. Her brain was buckling.

‘Your father,’ she said. She had her gaze fixed on a tree stump. ‘When he lost all that money in the 1980s he sat there crying by that tree with sheets of paper and a revolver, and he was there all day writing a petition for the house. I had to bring him a new sheet of paper every time he muddled the ink with tears. Such terrible handwriting.’ We led her inside, and my mother brewed tea on the old gas stove. My grandmother sipped it, still trembling. She said no more about rabbits, or tree stumps, or the past, but a week later my mother started spending four evenings a week with her instead of three.

On the drive back my mother asked whether I wanted to stop at the Pulpit Rock lookout. We parked under the shade of a gum tree and walked down the hill. It was a grey day. There were only a handful of tourists, further along the cliffs towards Govetts Leap. We walked to the end of the path, to where the cliff face ended and the waist-length fence held us back. My mother looked out into the trees that grew at an oblique angle down the

valley from the sandstone cliff face above. They blanketed everything in sight. I hated it there. The mountains. The valleys. Everything. There was nothing to see. You could walk ten kilometres through that landscape without ever being able to fix a place in your mind. A vast stretch of dun-coloured sameness. Enough to make me, or anyone, burn to break away and travel as far as a car could take you. Further.

Walking back up the path I pointed to a collection of bouquets and wreaths by the side of the fence. A printed note of office paper, protected by a plastic sleeve and leaning against the roses and wattle and weeping peonies, dedicated the monument to a seventeen-year-old girl, who had taken a suicidal leap over the fence and into the valley three weeks earlier. I read the note aloud to my mother. When I turned to look at her she looked hesitant, disquieted. 'Don't,' I said. 'Don't cry.'

'I want to get out of here,' she said. We walked back up the sandy path to the car and drove home along the highway in silence.

After the roll of film was shot and I had taken off the white dress we went out into what amounted to a garden. Rowland handed me a glass of wine. It was a limited-edition bottle, with his name engraved on the label. Somebody important had given it to him and he wanted to open it as a kind of celebration. Now that we were working together.

This time I drank. The wine stung the roof of my mouth, making the ridges swell and harden against my tongue. I took small sips until it was almost nice. I had never stayed with him so late, or for so long. It didn't matter, I figured, when my mother was away. There was a jacaranda tree flowering over the fence of the house next door. The night was full of it – and the smell of rotting things in the river at the bottom of the garden – as we sat on rusty chairs in the paved courtyard. The mosquitoes landed on my bare feet.

Rowland spoke to me, but no matter what he said I asked few questions. I sensed that once I had located the general idea of him, and knew the rhythms of how he behaved when we were together, that was enough. It was better somehow than trying to actually get to know him. I wasn't sure that I'd have been able to, even if I had tried.

He was sitting with his shirt unbuttoned, a white Bonds wife-beater underneath, stretched and gaping low on his chest. He had – I could just make out – what looked like a tattoo. I asked him what it was. It's one of

the only questions I remember asking him directly. He pulled the fabric aside to show me.

There was a small banner across his chest, a few inches north of his left nipple, with *Genevieve* written in a Gothic script, but barely decipherable in all the mess surrounding it. The skin, now mangled and necrotic, had been attacked with a razor blade and a red UniBall pen one night when he was coked out and newly alone, with demonstrably grisly results.

‘Do you regret it now?’ I asked.

‘There’s no point regretting anything,’ he said. ‘You just acquire a kind of wisdom about things.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘Simple things that don’t feel simple. That sometimes it’s possible to be so angry that you really do lose control.’ He took a drag of his cigarette.

When Rowland had moved into the house its aggressively seedy condition wasn’t out of his range of experience. They had gotten it cheap because he had promised the landlord – and her – that he would work hard to clean the place up. The walls were smeared with psychotic scribbling and what might have been blood, used syringes at the back of the garden, the fridge overrun with mould. So he washed and scrubbed the crusted stove with steel wool, waxed the floors, cleaned the windows, whitewashed the walls. He converted the space behind the kitchen into a studio and installed red light bulbs in the second bathroom so that he could develop prints without leaving the house. In the garden, which ran down to the edge of the river, the grass was still overgrown. An old trampoline had been left to rust into the soil. I sometimes wondered why they had held onto it, although I never asked out loud.

Genevieve had left questions like this all over the house. Echoes and shreds of her ghosted the rooms. I found things left behind by her whenever I looked. Tampons and sticky perfume bottles in the bathroom cabinet, a bone bracelet in the cupboard, recipe books piled in the corner of the kitchen, yellow and musty with her name written in biro on the front page. All the little traces of her all over the house. All the marks she left on him. There were habits and tastes formed by her that had lodged in his routines. They stayed long after she’d left. He ate breakfast over the sink. He added cayenne pepper to his beer. He wore the same brand of black jeans every day, because in June of 2003 she had said they suited him.

‘Genevieve kept a bottle of chilli sauce by her bed,’ he once said to me.

‘Wasn’t that strange?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘It made her the woman of my dreams.’

I couldn’t eat chilli sauce. I kept trying to accustom myself to it, but it burned my mouth and made my eyes water and each time I tried it felt like failure.

There was a tight feeling in my throat that I got when I thought about Genevieve. The first photographs he showed me – the old ones he had taken before his ‘dry period’ when he’d had to teach again – were the pictures he had taken of her. Naked or, and somehow more confronting, naked from the waist down. Splayed across gardens and large rocks in cities that were far away from this one. It was her in the front room, emerging from the dark. My hair was a lot like hers – long and curly and red, messy and broken in a way that made it glow halo-like around my head when he had me in the lighting he wanted. We had the same build too – rounded hips, small waists – but there was an ungraspable grace she had that I lacked.

When he showed me the photographs he almost frightened me. Aside from the print in the front room all of the pictures of her were either in the basement of a gallery in Paddington, or stored in 30x40 archival storage boxes stacked beside the wardrobe in the bedroom.

We were standing looking down at the pictures laid out across the bare mattress: the forms and faint outlines of women, all redheads, mostly Genevieve. The desk by the window was covered with dust and trinkets: lenses, ink, a knife sharpener. There was a Mauser rifle mounted on the wall that his grandfather had stolen off an enemy soldier’s body in 1918.

‘The awful thing is I don’t know that I ever loved her.’ The light was fading and throwing the shadows of gum leaves against the far wall.

I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t meant to.

He pointed to three photographs. ‘See.’

The pictures were tinted blue. Her body was curled up, her arms clutching at her legs. She was very white, and covered in finger-shaped bruises. ‘I made those bruises,’ he said.

In the silence I thought I heard the clamping of the muscles in his throat.

He moved the photographs aside, slowly. He turned to look at me. ‘She hates me now.’ He paused for a moment. Then he began to unbutton his

shirt. His skin was olive, mackled with sparse freckles and tight dark hairs. He pulled the fabric away.

There was the tattoo, red and sore, by his heart. Below that – the thing he wanted me to see – there was a jagged scar that arced across his stomach. It was neat, very purple, and stitched tightly together. ‘This is what she did to me when she left,’ he said. And then he buttoned up his shirt.

By the time I met Genevieve, at the opening of the exhibition towards the end of it all, any shreds of violence she might have once harboured against Rowland were undetectable. She was wearing a pair of pants most easily described as a hybrid of dhoti and jodhpurs, a black cardigan and a brooch constructed out of strung-together safety pins. Her hair was cut at an angle that suggested she had sliced it off in an act of ritual mourning. Her face was pulled into a sort of rictus, although that’s not to say she wasn’t pretty. She was like the Mona Lisa, smiling, very veiled.

I told her that I’d seen the pictures of her, but she cut me off. She said she could barely remember, it had been so long ago. Rowland shot her a look. A chilly, blurred reproach. Their exchange that night was oblique to me. She had some proprietary hold over him, and yet it didn’t occur to me that she might have seen me as a threat or that I had replaced her in some way. But she was old enough to know that these things have limits. She must have seen it then.

It’s interesting to me now, how somebody can move through the world blind, and yet see everything at the same time. Even if I had understood, I don’t know that I would have done anything differently.

Every time I came across something that had once been hers, I thought about the impossibility of my ever having that effect on somebody’s life. Of leaving such an indelible trace that a person might still sleep on the mattress stained by my blood, five years after I had left, and never clean it. My presence wasn’t heavy enough to do that to a person. I stepped lightly upon the world, afraid of waking it.

Earlier that year my school had organised a week of activities to usher in the new school year. Instead of classes, we went to seminars that taught us meditation techniques we could apply to studying; round-circle panels where we were spoken to about sex. Not the pleasure or power or specificity of sex, but about the pill, chlamydia and condoms. We spent

three hours hearing how alcohol would ruin your liver, and cigarettes would kill you. There was a seminar on nutrition where an exiguous, baked-looking woman from Cronulla told us to eat according to colour. Green and orange were good colours. Black and white were not.

Another class was designed to teach us self-defence, and was taught by a man who owned his own personal fitness business and had recently written a book about rape prevention for women. It was held in the dance theatre, with floor-to-ceiling windows through which everyone could see. The man kept the curtains wide open, and asked us to sit in a circle and share our greatest fear with the group. The open glass windows and the circle created a weird sense of motivation, a desire to one-up the girl next to you by having the greatest and most profound potential wound.

‘Being raped,’ said the first girl. ‘Being murdered,’ said the next.

The man affirmed each fear by nodding and making a sound, something between a hum and exhalation.

The third girl, who had had more time to think, said, ‘Being mutilated. After being raped.’

I was next. I had been staring out through the open curtains. Not paying attention. I said what first came to mind. ‘Falling apart. Losing control.’

The man looked at me as though I had failed the test. He didn’t make the noise, but he did when the girl beside me offered up ‘sex slavery’.

Nobody questioned the exercise. The peculiarity of our all sitting there in our blazers and pleated skirts with a middle-aged man in a designer polo shirt as we brainstormed the most gruesome and violent things we could imagine happening to our bodies. The air trembled with all the fear and competition as we rounded the circle. As though we were willing the worst to happen by saying it out loud. Something so devastating that it would rise up and prevent us from facing all the prosaic days ahead, so that the damage would overwhelm everything. Would become infinite and swallow us up. That was when he showed us how to fight.

He began by explaining that one in six women would be victims of sexual assault or rape in their lifetimes. We all nodded in unison. ‘People are going to want to hurt you,’ he said. ‘They will come for you when you least expect it and you need to be prepared.’

He demonstrated. To defend against somebody grabbing your wrist, you break his hold by sweeping your hand underneath and against his. To defend against somebody touching you, grab his hand, peel it from your

body, bend his wrist back and down towards the ground. To defend against somebody catching you in a chokehold from behind, step to the side and backstop his knee, bring your elbow up towards his face and knock him off balance.

We performed fighting him one by one. Then we tried it out on each other. In pairs, one girl would approach another from opposite ends of the studio. The girl playing the victim would look away, pretending to be a woman walking alone at night, but not moving really, just waiting for the attack. When it came, the victim took the other girl by the neck and the aggressor let herself be thrown to the ground, very slowly, with some melodrama. We were giggling as we went through the motions. And the giggling was also a gesture of our dread.

The man never explained what happens when it's not as straightforward as a stranger in an alley with a knife. When it's something ectoplasmic, not so easily parsed. How you defend against a force that isn't even force. When no violence, threat or coercion is even necessary. A circumstance that sweeps you up in the movement of events, into something murky and inarticulate. What manoeuvre do you make? What limb do you hit when it happens?

At the end of the hour the afternoon bell rang, and we all filed out of the dance studio with our backpacks and our blue straw hats in our hands. We dispersed along the concrete passageway. Out into the world, where we could not be protected from all the things we had imagined, and where we were vulnerable to other things we could not so easily define.

A dress had fallen out of the cupboard, an old one that Genevieve had left behind. Rowland liked the flicker of the skirt, the lace panels stitched into the thick linen. He set the camera up far away from the wall, so that I would be small in the frame, engulfed by the room. We had been drinking whiskey in the garden. I hadn't drunk whiskey before. Our mouths were sticky with it. I could feel it in the sweat on my wrists. It was a golden thing he had poured into my glass, and it hurt. I took the first sip, and a burning arm slid down my throat as if the devil were reaching inside to fondle my soul. It was voluptuous. Self-obliterating.

Rowland was playing music loud from the lounge room. He had just bought new speakers and attached them to the turntable he'd been given by someone named Flynn before he checked himself into rehab. The music

pulsed through the house but became more subdued as it drifted through the closed studio door. It was a kind of music I hadn't heard until he played it for me, both violent and beautiful at once. I wanted to marry music like that. I wanted to light it on fire and set it out upon the water to burn. I was drunk.

'Keep doing that,' he shouted over the sound.

'Doing what?' I was swaying to the song as he loaded the film.

'Dancing.'

I laughed, and reached for the glass of whiskey I'd left on the floor. I sipped and closed my eyes to settle myself, not wanting to ruin anything by giggling.

I spun very carefully at first, one foot following another. I was aware of my arms and my legs, my waist and my hips, the balance of them I was trying to maintain. I could see myself as if I was looking at my reflection in a mirror. And then I forgot myself.

I felt as if I was in a state, or in a state that's no longer a state, parallel to my body but on the other side of something. I was still there, somewhere. But it was like it was a thing being jolted, an itch in a limb I'd already lost. I was still working, my mind was still there, but it was somewhere across the room. I was watching myself, watching my body despoiled of its consciousness, more alive for moving without thinking. I spun faster. Frantic. I was half blind.

'That's it,' I heard him call.

I spun for him until he stepped out from behind the camera and stopped me, grabbing me by my shoulders. His eyes darted down to the floorboards. My foot was bleeding. I'd danced through the glass and not even felt it shatter against the soft skin of my feet. I breathed unsteadily, looking up at him dumb, surrendered. I was barely not shaking.

During January, I'd wait for the days when my mother was gone and set out while the light was beginning to thin. I would arrive at Rowland's house with my dress clinging to the sweat of my back, my feet dirty and burning from walking barefoot between my house and his. I wore my hair down, so that it caught the sun. I wanted to be exposed to the light.

There was an old Greek couple who lived next door to him. The old lady made a sound when she saw me, a sigh of disapproval. They had been there since the 1960s, you could tell from all the faded furnishings. While

the couple, well into their seventies, technically lived alone now, every day the place was overrun by their children and their grandchildren, playing beneath the jacaranda tree. Each afternoon they sat in the front yard they'd paved in concrete, and surveyed the street from their plastic outdoor furniture set under the trellised grape vine. When I walked past the old man would nod to me, sometimes say 'hello'. He made me uneasy. He had a limp, and he'd drag his left leg a little behind him as if it was some terrible clinging thing he was trying to get away from.

One afternoon he stopped me as I was opening Rowland's front gate, holding a rake in his hand. 'You tell him that he needs to cut his grass.'

I didn't know what he was talking about for a moment. To me, Rowland was shut in his house, apart from the world. I was confused because it didn't occur to me that anybody else, even the next-door neighbour, might know who he was. I had reduced my sphere of interest to him and me. No one else could penetrate.

'I can see his grass from my place,' the old man interrupted, 'and it's out of control. It's going to attract the snakes.'

'There are snakes here?'

'Where there's water there's snakes,' he said. 'They eat along the river. Don't think that just because you're in the city the animals can't get at you. There have been snakes here every year since we moved in, and he has to cut his grass or else they'll hang about.'

I told Rowland what the man had said. He was drinking on the kitchen steps when I walked around the back. I was hoping he would tell me the old man was paranoid. But he exhaled cigarette smoke and said, 'No, I've seen them before. In the summer sometimes. Once or twice. But he can get fucked. I like that grass long.'

I walked upstairs to change, but my mind was elsewhere. I couldn't fathom Rowland's response. Why wouldn't you cut the grass to keep away snakes? If you knew there was a danger wouldn't you take up arms against it?

Sydney had always felt safe to me. Everything crawling and creepy had been kept at bay by the warehouses and the damp terraces pushing everything out but the cockroaches. I had never seen a snake outside of a zoo, but I was terrified of them. When I was dressed, and my face had tightened, I walked down the stairs and looked out through the screen door into the overgrown garden.

That afternoon Rowland showed me the photograph he had taken of me sleeping. He had just received the test prints back from the developing place he outsourced to, on the other side of the city. The week beforehand in the late afternoon I had fallen asleep on his sofa as the night breeze began to gust through the open windows. I hadn't known he had taken a picture until he showed it to me, huge, the colours coruscated against the wall.

You can use very slow shutter speeds to shoot moving things, so that they appear to adhere to a different law of time. Blurs of trains, figures winking in a lit but empty street, streetlights burning across night skies. In early photography they used to have to constrain people when they sat for portraits. Photographers locked people into posing stands and harnesses to keep them still. The figures always have rigid torsos and pained expressions. They don't smile. As though the past were a more sombre place. But a smile was too risky. Faces can't hold them. You needed to stay still if you were going to produce a clear image. You needed to appear almost dead.

The image he had printed showed my sleeping body cast across the velvet of the sofa. There was a dramatic curve from my hip to my waist I hadn't ever noticed before. The dress I had worn was pulled up around my thighs, my ankles were laced, and my fingers clasped the book I had been holding. My edges were shimmering. As though I were possessed, or filled with some kind of angelic light.

He had set up the camera on the tripod and opened the shutter and let the light in for fifteen minutes before closing it. I hadn't known you could expose film for that long. It was an image of time compressed on one motionless surface, nine hundred seconds of my body.

'I wouldn't have been able to do it if you were conscious,' he said.

He turned away from me to look at the image in the clean light streaming through the window. 'You're malleable,' he said absently.

He had laid out the test prints across the studio floor on old copies of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Seen together, I shifted form from frame to frame, sometimes unrecognisable to myself. I supposed 'malleable' was the right word. When he photographed me I became another person, someone who was at once me and not me. My body stood at the boundary of the spaces he had me inhabit, the rickety rooms of his house with peeling paint and light streaming through high, uncovered windows. It faded into flat

planes, emerging from the environment, or submerged by it. He had me reflected in mirrors, glass, reflective metal, sometimes deliberately blurring my figure so that I resembled a ghost only briefly gracing the room.

‘I look so different in them all,’ I said.

‘It’s because you’re perfect as you are now.’

He brushed his hand against my forearm, barely touching it. He breathed in and he breathed out. He breathed in and he breathed out.

I began to sleep badly. At night my dreams were filled with snakes.

They came in different forms, but the pattern was always the same. The first dream was simple – there was a snake against my window. The house I lived in with my mother was old. It creaked and shifted on its foundations, warping the doors and lifting the lock just slightly above the hole in the doorframe. The sash window above my bed was affected by something similar, and for months it had been jamming three inches from the bottom. In my dream, the snake was heading towards the open space, through which it could enter my room and slither into my bed. I woke up with my heart beating fast, examining the window for shadowy reptile shapes.

In another dream I tripped and fell into a shallow pond, only to realise, once it was too late, that beneath the muddy surface of the water a thousand baby snakes were writhing and slithering together. They would bite me if I moved. Another night a snake engirded my wrist and rendered me paralysed as I willed myself towards my mother, who had her back turned to me in a field of tall pink trees.

One night I went to the Dendy in Newtown with Clemmie. We drank cans of lemonade spiked with vodka in the back row of a movie about a man who forsakes society and wanders the breadth of America before eating a bad flower and dying somewhere in the wilderness. I got home tipsy and fell into a heavy sleep, still clothed. I dreamed that a snake was asleep inside me. Coiled, white and shiny. The only way I could get it out of me was to allow it to slither out from between my legs.

In the dream that frightened me most, I was sitting on the step of a stone path that led down into a garden, the trees high and knitted together to form a canopy. The air was full of near-body smells, rotting leaf litter, bright purple flowers. I liked the shade and the feel of the long skirt I was wearing against my bare ankles. But then I noticed that the leaves weren’t leaves. They were green snakes twisted and threaded along the branches, which

were so heavy with them they were dropping to the ground. I stood up and began to run towards the house, with its clean glass doors and air-conditioned rooms. But the snakes fell from the branches and slithered inside my clothes. Their fangs clamped onto my feet as I ran across them. I woke up heaving, throwing the sheets away from me.

Clemmie wanted to get drunk, and so we went out. The night was hot and wet. I had spent all day reading in bed in front of the fan. But she'd shown up at eight in a short skirt and desert boots with a bottle of Passion Pop hidden in her canvas bag. I put on a dress. I dragged a brush through my hair, but it didn't quite glide through. It was the night, maybe. The damp.

I had been making myself almost sick on reading. I had been alone for days. As we sat on the bus to Newtown, February storms rumbled toward us across the Pacific and urgent conversations taking place in the seats around me blended into the half-remembered pages of novels like milk poured into milk.

They didn't card at the Courthouse, then. We went there for an hour, but we kept running into people we knew, people who neither of us felt like talking to. By the bar we bought Swedish cider, two bottles for her and two bottles for me. I stood in the noise, looking up at the old pictures of Sydney Swans players on the dark-panelled walls, all healthy and yellowing around their dairy-fresh smiles. We didn't have a bottle opener so Clemmie stole one from the bar while nobody was looking. We darted out through the Eliza Street door and into the park.

We sat in the children's playground and drank on the swings. It drizzled a little. We swayed on the slick black curves of rubber, rocking ourselves backwards by the balls of our feet.

Clemmie's hair was wet and sticking to her face, and her eyeliner was smeared. We grinned at one another, and she commented that I had gotten better at drinking. There was something acrid about the sugary cider, although I was making short work of it. In the last months I'd grown accustomed to spirits and wine. The cider seemed like something made for little girls. But Clemmie drank it, and she wasn't a little girl. She was loud and bright and brazen. She was not afraid of things, and I was jealous of how fearless she was.

Around us the trees of the park rustled, spraying raindrops. By the sandstone wall, enclosing the church and the cemetery, two poplar trees

were roped off. They had succumbed to internal decay and become unsightly. They were marked to be cut down. Botanists and council workers had come with trucks and posted notices of their imminent removal. Even though it was the summer the drought broke, all those European trees failed to survive it.

We grew tired of the park and wound our way toward Broadway. We walked in and out of bars that wouldn't have us. The rain began in earnest for a minute near midnight, and I waited under an awning by the corner of Missenden Road as Clemmie flirted with the Iraqi migrant who worked behind the counter in the 7-Eleven. I could see him grow entranced by her. His grin got wider the more she jutted her hip. Teasing him. The thing was, it was partly genuine. She wouldn't take it further than flirting, but she meant everything she said.

I stood beneath the neon, watching people mingle on the veranda of the Marlborough Hotel. I thought about why he hadn't called for me in a week. What he could be doing that let him forget me. Why I was never bold enough to smile and flirt with men behind counters.

The rain let up, and we continued on down King Street until it took on a new name and became City Road. Clemmie thought we could get in to the Lansdowne, if we got the timing right. We took swigs from the warm bottle of Passion Pop. We wove down the street, liquidly, on the verge of something. The edges of the city loomed up ahead of us over the university buildings.

The bubbles in the Passion Pop made me feel as though I were floating, the day's last breath in my sails. I felt adrift. There is no history here, I thought, looking at the skyline. I wasn't in Europe, with its old wars and archives. And I was an ocean away from America, with its manifest destiny and the endless stretch of lights stringing the cities together. Here, nothing was manifest. In my mind I pictured all of Australia clinging to the coast. All of us alone together in a distant watery hemisphere the rest of the world made jokes about, if they thought of us at all. I badly wanted to escape to a country already written, already developed by other peoples' thoughts. I wanted to find myself in the heart of the real thing, relieved of my irrelevance.

By the university we stopped and looked up at the sandstone college where wealthy country boys were sent to live by their wealthy country fathers. Somebody had busted one of the iron railings out of its sockets and

a path was clear into the grounds. We edged into the absence and ran. The branches of hedges slashed at our cheeks and the sweep of manicured grass was all muddy and full of pitfalls as we bounded onto the cricket pitch. In the dark, Newtown was reduced to a presence of light and the distant cries of the taxis skating the slick bitumen of City Road.

We both screamed, just to see what would happen. Clemmie grabbed me round the waist and swung me. We were soaking wet and our naked thighs were covered in mud. She was taller than me, her breasts jutted into my chin. We swung together, hanging off one another. She kissed my ear.

Then men appeared. They stood a ways off, afraid to come any further in case we were wilder than they wanted. 'You called,' one of them said, pretending nonchalance. The blond one shuffled a little. There were three of them, probably five years older than us, if that. They had jumped the wrought iron railings to get to us.

Clemmie did the talking. She knew why they were there. She slid off into the dark of the hedges with one of them, the pretty one. The other two stood there, looking at me, appraising and unsure. They talked among themselves. Trying to decide what to do with me.

I stared back. They were boys, I thought. And I was a menace somehow. I had noticed it all night. All the way down King Street. The way my body seemed to fit uneasily into the stream of people. Like my outline refused to melt into their blur. There was nothing I could think to do about it.

I began to walk away. I couldn't ease the fear that I might overcome them in a flow of myself. A hot core of wanting. I'd lash out. Do something halfway violent. I would scare the boys with their pressed shirts and patchy stubble. I wanted to fight them.

I heard Clemmie giggle in the dark, running behind me. She caught up to me, grinning, mud plastered down the shirt on her back and her breasts naked beneath the fabric. She slung an arm around my waist and we walked back into the streetlights.

We caught the night bus home, and at four in the morning I was still awake. I sat up in bed, reading as our old house creaked. I glanced around the room for the phantom source of the noises. The thunderstorm came back in. The wind rushed through the crack in the window where the sash had stuck. I rolled up a towel from the bathroom floor and wedged it in the gap to protect my quilt from the rain. At every flash of lightning the walls

gleamed like exposed bone. The thunder rolled, the rain came down in torrents, and all night I heard sounds in the dark.

The first time Rowland introduced me to somebody he knew was a weekday afternoon. School had gone back, but I had slipped out the side gate at lunchtime to go home and read *Antony and Cleopatra*. When he called I was alone in the house, lying on my bed. He asked me to come over. Then, just before he hung up, he said, 'There's somebody I'd like you to meet.'

There was a chilly breeze that day, and I wore a jumper over my dress. The air blew the first dead leaves into the gutters. I came down the side of the house where the cracked paving stones levelled out into the garden and entered through the kitchen door. When I walked into the room they were standing at the laminex table under the stairs, and I thought maybe there had been a misunderstanding or some mix-up about the time of day – maybe he had meant for me to arrive later – because both Rowland and the man he wanted me to meet didn't look up, or even acknowledge my entrance. They were both looking through photographs laid out across the table that I'd never seen before.

The man wore black jeans, a black T-shirt. He was all in black. He looked younger than Rowland, although I learned later that they were the same age. He looked slept-in and stubbled. Two deep creases like opened fault lines cut across his brow.

'You can go and change if you want,' Rowland said finally.

The other man looked at me for a long while before he turned back to the photographs on the table. I walked upstairs with my bag and took off the jumper and dress. I changed into tights and a skirt from the pile falling out of the wardrobe. I couldn't bring myself to wear the white dress in front of somebody else. I could hear them talking as I walked barefoot down the stairs.

'You didn't run it through Photoshop or anything?'

'No, I just scanned it from the negative and sent it for printing.'

I was uneasy in the darkening kitchen. Since I had begun working with him, there had never been anybody else in the same room as Rowland and me. Certainly no one had seen the work. I was almost certain.

The man looked at me again as I leaned against the doorframe, then picked up another photograph to study it. Rowland turned to me and passed

me a glass of whiskey he'd poured while I'd been gone.

'We went to art school together,' he whispered to me. 'I told you about him once. The record player belongs to him.'

'How did you get her so focused?' the man asked. 'It's fucking trippy. I've never seen movement so still. It's like she's dissolving.'

Rowland shrugged and handed him another print that had been lost in the clutter. 'I think this one is more interesting.'

I opened the screen door and sat down on the set of concrete steps leading down to the courtyard, as Rowland and the man whose name I hadn't learned yet examined one by one the photographs that Rowland had taken of me dancing.

I had seen it. I had seen the one he thought was more interesting. His camera had pinned me against a part of the wall slashed with black paint and oily residue, but in that light it looked like the scrawling left behind on a prison wall. He had caught me mid-motion, contorted backwards from my waist and blurred, so that the white dress had become indiscernible from my skin. I looked naked. I looked as though I had been struck by some hand just out of frame, had been struck with such force that I was falling. But it wasn't that which upset me. The face was howling, an obscene grimace contorted in panic.

That is not me, I thought. Except it was.

And why did Rowland say that photograph, of all he had taken of me, was more interesting?

I said nothing. I scrutinised the long grass for movement. Between two of the cracked concrete paving slabs by the edge of the grass a garden lizard slipped through a navel of soil into the belly of the earth.

The screen door creaked open behind me. I felt the stale air from the old house gust across my shoulders as a body approached mine from behind. The man was rolling a cigarette. He passed it to me as he came down the steps and stood facing me. I passed the cigarette back to him, and he handed it to Rowland over my head, who must have been standing there at the open door, observing us together. Rowland took the cigarette, but there was something else that passed between them. As though a more consequential exchange had occurred. I turned, and Rowland's eyes darted to the photograph he still held in his hand.

'I'm not sure about the crop,' he said. 'Look at this.'

‘I’ve seen the pictures, Rowland,’ the man said, and never took his eyes from me.

Rowland sat down beside me on the grimy concrete. He moved my hair to the side and placed his hand on the back of my neck.

‘This is Flynn,’ he said.

‘You don’t need to worry about what’s coming,’ Rowland said to me once. ‘When you’re young all you have to do is *be*. You’re a channel for everything that has meaning. All you need to do is move through the world and life will open itself up to you.’

I had been telling him about a picture my grandmother had shown me when I was five or six. It was a yellowed-out snapshot of a little girl with curly hair and freckles sitting on a bench in the Botanic Gardens, her hands on her knees in that unnatural way that children hold themselves when they have been told to sit still by an adult. ‘It’s me,’ she had said pointing to the girl in the photograph. I tried to convey to Rowland the dread that ran through me when I realised the two bodies were the same. That my grandmother had once been a little girl. Worse, because she was sitting there beside me, with her flesh bulging around her wedding ring and her smell of camphor and soap. An adult now. It made me feel suddenly encaged inside my own body, a body that would grow old like hers. It had struck me that I was trapped, forever, in this container of myself. But I wasn’t sure that I wanted to be one body, in one place, doing one thing. I didn’t know what kind of person I wanted to be, and it horrified me that I might have to choose.

I wanted Rowland to know these things about me. Quiet and contained around almost everybody else, with him the stories seeped out of me. I wanted to tell him the whole story. Everything. As though, once he knew it all, I would be completely decipherable, fully formed and whole. I thought that was what a narrative did.

I was young. But I didn’t understand what it was that made me young. I wasn’t able to explain to myself what my desires were with any clarity. I knew, for instance, that I wanted something from Rowland. But it was a nebulous something, which I couldn’t articulate. It wasn’t only that I was quiet and detached, that I kept my nights with him and the photographs to myself, from my mother, from Clemmie, from everyone I could have told. I couldn’t find the words for what I wanted and, without the words, failed to

grasp it. I felt vaporous. Deep down I longed for some change to take place, but what might happen afterwards terrified me. Being with him, working, made me feel as though I had a function, albeit one that was opaque to me.

It was as if, while I was distracted, in the moments that I looked away, Rowland's words were shot up into me one by one and now, silent, hidden in my bloodstream, moved secretly toward some purpose of their own. Because I believed him. It seemed sensible, that I would not have to reach for anything because the world was coming for me. I only needed to be patient and make sure I was prepared for its arrival. I had time, all the time in the world. The narrative would seek me out. It would expand with my shape as we grew, with all the things I could make happen by my just being there.

I have sympathy for myself then. I was frightened by the violence with which, in the deepest part of myself, I wanted things. I was afraid that if the violence went unchecked it would explode. I might overspill the boundaries of myself. I would become vain, frantic, vicious out of control.

Straight out of art school, Rowland and Flynn had been among a group of artists in the early 1990s who had been associated with a movement called Avant Gothic, a movement that nobody identified with but which had been successfully coined by an art critic in the *Age* who enthusiastically encouraged sales, and so nobody complained.

They had lived together above a pharmacy on Oxford Street. A sex shop next door sold them amyl nitrate half price. Junkies tried to sell them methadone a foot from their door. But at some point their lives had diverged. It was unclear to me what Flynn did now. I knew, from what Rowland had said about the record player, that he was just out of rehab from a facility down on the Mornington Peninsula. He seemed to be a labourer, maybe a landscape gardener. He knew about art but he no longer made any. His mother lived in Dulwich Hill and, as he rolled a joint, he explained in detail how the first thing he'd done when he got back into town had been to dig up her garden, re-pave it, and plant native plants and ferns where she had wanted to grow roses.

Late that afternoon I sat on the plastic outdoor chair as they talked. They didn't speak to me, but I could feel the attention of both of them all through the evening. It batted against me like moths careening around light.

Rowland and Flynn were talking about a Swiss painter, who had believed that the essential thing about a person could be found in her movement, her gestures, the lines and forms of her body.

Flynn looked at me then. ‘That picture of you, the dancing one I was looking at earlier.’

I nodded to indicate I knew which one he was talking about.

‘Have you ever heard of St Vitus dance?’

I shook my head.

‘I told Rowland that’s what he should call this series.’

Flynn explained that he had first heard about St Vitus dance a few years ago, when he fled to Berlin, thinking Europe might still have something to offer him. He’d gone on a pilgrimage to the town of Magdeburg, where an undulating pink citadel fitted with golden globes and rooftop gardens had just been built by an architect who believed that a straight line was a godless line. He had walked around the town all day and wound up drinking with a local archivist near the site of what had once been a church. At this lost church, the archivist said, some time in the eleventh century, there had been an outbreak of St Vitus dance. A group of women spilled out of the church on Christmas Eve and made their way down to the graveyard. They tore at their clothes, jumped and shook, hysterical together among the headstones. Musicians accompanied them in an attempt to ward off the hysteria, but the plan backfired when the musicians themselves joined in. The mania, which wasn’t unheard of at the time, lasted days, weeks, even months by some accounts. Dancers were isolated, sometimes exorcised. The medieval explanation was that they were dancing to their own death. The modern medical explanation for what happened is that the group was experiencing Sydenham’s chorea, an involuntary spasming of the feet, hands and face brought on by a bout of rheumatic fever. But, Flynn explained, it wasn’t that simple. ‘People always want to be able to understand things. We want science and medicine to keep our anxieties at bay. But states like that exist – in-between states. Behaviours and frames of mind you cannot explain. And they’re worth paying attention to.’

I realised that it had gone dark, then. Over the rooftop the light of the street lamps was imprisoned within the leaves of the paperbark tree, making golden shadows that stoked ghosts of childhood fears.

Then Rowland interrupted to ask Flynn whether he remembered he had once, six years ago, pushed a woman down a flight of stairs.

Flynn asked, 'Who?'

And Rowland said, 'Madeleine.'

Flynn looked down at the joint he was rolling in his lap, before meeting Rowland's eye again.

'Did I do that?' asked Flynn. 'I can't remember why.'

'Because she wouldn't let you back into the house.'

Rowland shot Flynn a look I couldn't decipher, then stubbed out his cigarette in his glass.

'Well, that I was in Sydney at all six years ago is news to me.'

They went back to talking about the Swiss painter. I excused myself and went upstairs to the bathroom. As I ascended the stairs I thought about the woman. Imagined her blood and her broken limbs. Humpty Dumpty, houses, hand-bones, hearts – some things, I thought, take a very long time to mend.

From the window I could see the lights of the city, very far away, curled up against the river like a wild animal asleep.

There was ipubrofen in the river. There was paracetamol. There was soap and aftershave and those little beads they put in face wash to exfoliate your skin. There were soaky cigarettes and empty bottles of Bulmer's, half-eaten kebabs. There was caffeine that made the fish jumpy. There were anticonvulsants. There was human detritus leaking from the sewers. The clay bed below absorbed it all. The sludge got tangled in the mangroves. The ducks were oily; the fish pale and sickly, although old men in bucket hats still fished for them further west along the river. In the heat, the wind sometimes caught the miasma and it smelt like the decaying of something that has lost its ability to disintegrate, like the smell of something that longs to escape its form but can't. My mother had told me it used to be much worse, when she had first moved to that part of Sydney, when it was still all Greek and Portuguese families, fish-and-chip shops, old people, men in cars with knives.

My uncle, who stayed with us sometimes when he was between jobs, had been predicting for as long as I had known him that one day somebody would find crocodiles in the Cooks River. He watched a lot of nature documentaries, and his disposition was melancholy. He talked about climate change, long before it was fashionable, and he stored dozens of plastic gallon bottles of water in our shed, in preparation for the coming

apocalypse. He said that as the earth warmed, as the waters heated and the cyclones destroyed land and homes up north, the animals would head south. The crocodiles, tucked safely above the Tropic of Capricorn would appear without warning in the temperate states, wend their way into our waterways and hide out in our mangroves, terrorising children and lovers beside the riverbanks.

The stories gave me a sense of disquiet whenever I looked at the river. The kangaroo grass and the mangroves and the birds, the violent summer sunsets that cast everything across Sydney in red light – they made the river beautiful. They made you happy when you looked at it. But that beauty was a mask. It was a trick. Behind it, everything was terrifying, meaningless, uncontrollable, where the happiness of today only provoked the chaos of tomorrow. When I sat out in the garden with Rowland and Flynn that night, I turned my back on it.

They were sitting in the garden when I came back downstairs. There were fresh drinks, and Flynn was inside, rifling through records that reminded them both of living together on Oxford Street. He picked one out and put the needle to the black. I heard the music begin to pipe through the mesh in the screen door.

It was a scratchy recording of two brothers, one named Earl who played guitar and the other named Bill, on the mandolin. Flynn told me about it while Rowland tidied away the contact sheets and took them back into his studio. The song had been recorded in the gutter of the Depression, but on the record sleeve the brothers had all the hallmarks of the nicest insurance salesmen you could ever hope to find on your front doorstep. Their record was all ballads and hymns. Old stuff. They sang about God and marriage and violence and death, in a restrained almost humourless way. They never raised their voices. They played at the pace of an evening stroll.

The song Rowland liked best was called ‘Down on the Banks of the Ohio’. He told me this as he handed me a shot glass of something strong and clear and smelling of elderberries, the same glass I had refused to drink from four months earlier.

In the song a man invited a woman to take a walk down to the river. He told her how happy they’d be on their wedding day and what a lovely home they’d have. The brothers’ voices were spindly, steadily reciting the speech of the man that sounded darkly rehearsed. He called her his ‘love’, and the

singers sucked the word into their chests, suspending it there in ice. She refused his proposal. So he went to cut her throat. The woman begged him for her life, crying out that she wasn't ready to die. But the song continued on, a few small, bright notes on the mandolin moving it towards conclusion, a sense of bureaucratic orderliness to the way the man accounted for his actions. There was a settled, peaceful quality to the violence. Psychotic in its pallidness. Then the man in the song took the woman by her hand. He plunged her into the water. And he watched her as she floated down.

The words of the song hung there between us, dark and heavy like the smell of velvet. 'People used to write a lot of murder ballads like that a hundred years ago,' Rowland explained, as he moved toward the kitchen door to turn the record off. While he was inside I gazed up at the rooms of the house. I thought about the sense of righteousness. How justified the song was in its explanation of what the man had done. He killed her to make sure she would never belong to anyone else if she refused to belong to him.

'It's beautiful,' Flynn said to me, almost smiling. I had forgotten for a moment that he was there. 'Isn't it?'

I couldn't deny that it was beautiful.

Lying in my own bed the next morning words swum in my head, unlocked from something I'd read and half forgotten. Half asleep, I felt myself being gripped by strong hands. 'When you come face to face with me,' the forgotten voice said, 'you're only you. And I don't give a fuck what you are. I'll take you. What're you going to do about that, jitterbug? Who's protecting you, sweetheart?'

It wasn't exactly what Flynn had said to me as he drove me away from Rowland's in his ute, but it felt like maybe it was what he had meant.

We drove down Marrickville Road, and Flynn told me about the second time he tried to kill himself. We rode towards Newtown in his ute with the windows down. It was late in the night. The roads were almost empty. There were buckets of pesticide and bags of soil in the back. His record player was underneath my feet, so that I had to rest my knees against the dashboard. Flynn had offered to give me a lift. But he was driving me further away from home. I didn't think to mention it.

He told me that his father had hung himself when he was nineteen. Returning home after going out surfing at dawn, Flynn had walked into the

room and discovered him. There was still sand on his toes as he cut his father down. He sat in the room with the body for half an hour, not really looking at it, not able to bear it. And then he went to his father's bedside table and took out the antipsychotics he'd kept by the Bible and birth certificates, and he emptied them out onto the bed that hadn't been slept in. He gulped them down dry, all of them. His younger brother had found him like that. Both father and brother, dead and dying, in the front room of a shitty little fibro house in Maroubra. Flynn took my hand and placed it on the back of his skull. I could feel the knotty flesh through his hair. The scar was from the first time he had tried to kill himself.

The drugs came later. He knew for the longest time, in some upper quadrant of his heart, that they were doing him no good, he said. But in the remaining parts of himself his feeling about substance abuse was 'get fucked'. A person needs something for the pain. 'How else,' he asked me, as the lights slipped by, 'do you go through the world as awake as you are without feeling as though you have no skin?'

On another occasion, in some former guise of my self, I might have thought him dangerous. Mothers and teachers warn you off wild men who want you in their cars, from the moment you're old enough to listen. But it was Rowland who'd put me in the car. And I moved where he wanted me. Even if it wasn't safe. I didn't care about 'safe'.

'Rowland is a big deal, you know. Or was,' Flynn said abruptly. 'About to have a resurrection, it looks like.' He swung a wide left into Victoria Road.

I nodded. I thought I knew. A month or so earlier, right before school had gone back, I had uncovered a catalogue essay somebody had written about him. It was tucked under a pile of old negatives and notebooks wedged between yellowing recipe books.

Nye is interested in the lost wildernesses that accumulate in the bodies of young women. The models he works with, largely amateurs, don't understand the camera, or how to conceal themselves from it through perfection. Hence, what is unnerving about his work is the sense of invaded privacy. The women float through his photographs, half-formed, not quite understanding that they're being seen. There is never a lure in his work without some sense of underlying threat. It is this quality that makes Rowland Nye perhaps one of the most important practising artists in this country.

From this I had understood only that I was one of these young women meant to embody somebody else's vision of a lost wilderness. But it never occurred to me that the images would find their way beyond the two of us in his peeling paint rooms. I figured that he was no longer important to anybody except me.

We were stopped at the traffic light at Enmore Road. The pedestrian light blinked red across the empty lanes. I couldn't explain what kept me there. Why I didn't say anything.

Then Flynn touched me. His fingers brushed across my hand. They threaded themselves through the spaces between my fingers, blurring my skin with his. And I trembled. Some uncharted feeling. It ran riot through me.

The lights changed to green, and we moved forward. He took his hand away from mine and placed it on my thigh. He moved it, slowly, down between my legs. I could hear my breathing heavy in the dark. The street slipped past us. His hand went deeper, pressing against me through my black tights. He smelled of cigarettes and aftershave, and his hand moved with a steady single-mindedness that dove down my spine like a seizing pain. I pushed myself into his fingers.

'Good girl,' he whispered.

He took his hand away. The lights glowed on the dashboard. We were parked in a side street behind a pub that faced out onto Enmore Road. A middle-aged woman with peroxide hair was crossing the street, berating her boyfriend for never acting like a man. Flynn pointed to the old brick building across the street where they were screaming. There were bars on the first floor windows and white spray-painted tags fading into the stone brickwork beneath the windowsills.

'See that?' he said. 'This is where I live.'

The old building was a boarding house. It was, Flynn said, the only place he could find after he'd gotten out. The rest of his stuff was with his mother in Dulwich Hill. In the meantime, his flat was the size of a shoebox, a corridor of kitchen leading into a space big enough for a double mattress and not much else. He told me to sit down, and so I sat on the bed.

The flat was on the second floor, and this was its only upside. When I sat on the mattress all I could see were leaves. All at once I was aware of the muted rustling of people alone in equally small rooms all through the

building. The walls were thin. I knew because Flynn was telling me he'd been so angry the week after he'd first moved in that he had punched a hole through the wall. A photograph from his and Rowland's Oxford Street period was hung across it to hide the damage: a black-and-white image of a sandy path down to the beach rippling with the traces of long-gone animals. Flynn had muddy work boots drying on the windowsill. On the chair were prescriptions and a medicine cup with traces of translucent syrup in the contours. Flynn made me a drink in the kitchen, and I watched him from the mattress.

'Can I touch your hair?' he asked. I nodded. He came towards me and drew his hand across my face. He brushed my ears with his fingers. Then he reached around to the back of my head and he let my hair down. It fell around us. He threaded his fingers through my curls and he kissed me and he asked me whether it was all right, and after that we spoke barely at all.

He took my clothes off, and then he removed his. He had scars from bad teenage acne spread across his back like barnacles on rocks. I let myself touch them. From above, he scanned my face, as though he were cataloguing information. Looking, and then nodding, all things confirmed, in order, endorsed. His fingers dug into my flesh and pulled back my hair. I felt as if my body was acquiring form as he touched me. It was gaining solid curves, density and features that were making him breathe heavily. I was *making* him want me, and I wasn't quite sure how. He hooked his arm beneath my knee and drew my leg around him. The skin between us burned.

It made sense. I had let myself be moved through the narrative. I had followed the signs through the sequence of events. From the photographs, to the story of the woman on the stairs, to the drive along Marrickville Road, and now the man above me held a door open into a room I had imagined Rowland could take me into if only I had been different, if only I had known how.

Flynn didn't say 'you're a virgin'. Perhaps he had assumed. I had expected the pain, but it only hurt afterwards. What I noticed was the way that my body moved with his. And the way that I felt whole, myself, despite of it. I climbed up on top of him, and my body knew what to do.

When he finished I lay on the tussled white sheet, naked, belly down. He sat behind me propped up on pillows while he rolled a joint and stroked the skin on my ankle.' Oh, sweetheart,' I heard him say. 'You're bleeding.'

I stood up and walked into the bathroom. I sat down on the toilet seat and opened my legs. He was right. There was blood all over my thighs.

It was a bright, mild day in April. My mother was home. And because I was tired, or because I missed her, I told her about the snake dreams and how they wouldn't go away. I told her nothing about how they had become worse after that night in Enmore. Almost constant. We were sitting at the table that had been by the door to our back veranda since I was little. Its surface was sticky with jam and spilt juice. Outside the fruit trees were yellowing. For as long as we had lived there, there had been two twisted, gnarled trees growing in the garden, one apple and one apricot, and neither of them had ever borne fruit. The garden looked overgrown, because I hadn't known how to take care of it while my mother was away so often.

She sat down and handed me tea, milky and sweet. It was the kind of tea she would make for me when I was small and home sick from school. I looked pale, she said. There were purple bruises under my eyes. She'd barely seen me in six months and felt she'd been neglecting me. It was a Friday afternoon and she had packed her car to drive into the mountains again. She looked tired as well. Her eyes were red, and her face was less vivid somehow. There were times when I didn't exactly love her less. But I didn't love her as well as I should have.

While she made us toast she told me not to worry, that the dreams would go away once my sleeping mind had worked through whatever my conscious mind couldn't. That's what they say. She was silent for a moment, and then said, 'It's funny you should be dreaming of snakes. So is your grandmother.'

The week earlier, my mother had driven up on the Friday afternoon into the Megalong Valley. The same feeling of unease overcame her every time she drove along the road to the property and saw that the house was in shambles, that the daffodils were dead, that her mother had stopped curling her hair and let it grow long and white. When she got out of the car there was no figure waiting on the steps to meet her, which was unusual. She walked down the corridors and checked all the rooms, but her mother wasn't there. When she walked back the way she'd entered, my mother noticed that, scattered across the veranda, and next to the small spaces that led to the crawlspace underneath the house, were saucers of fresh milk. Walking around the back path into the garden she saw a flash of daisy print

fabric tucked beneath a shrub. She found my grandmother there, crouched among the bushes, in a kind of cubby she had clawed out for herself. She was waiting, she explained patiently to my mother. She had put the saucers of milk out for the snakes, and she was waiting for them to come back.

I told this story to Rowland the following evening, while he was setting up the studio. He hadn't mentioned anything about Flynn. Nor asked what had happened after we'd left. Or explained why he had put me in the car with him in the first place.

'That story sounds like "The Drover's Wife",' he said.

'I don't know what that is. It's a book?'

'What are they teaching you in those schools? You don't know who Henry Lawson is?' he said, shaking his head. 'It's a short story.'

He had a mattress laid down on the studio floor and a stepladder at the foot. I lay down. He climbed the ladder so that he was standing above me, looking down. He had the camera raised on a tripod, which was in turn standing on top of a milk crate. The idea was to get as close to me as possible from above. 'Just look at me,' he said.

As I lay there Rowland told me the story. It was about a man, he said, who has left his wife and children in the middle of nowhere while he's away with his sheep. Droving. He's been away for six months without a word. They don't know if he's coming back. One day the children see a long black snake slip into their house. Which is a problem, because there's no one to help them if one of them is bitten. They could die there in the bush and nobody would ever know. So the drover's wife gathers her children. She makes them sleep on the kitchen table so that they'll be safe. She stays up all night. She has a club, and the rain comes down, and she's ready to kill the snake if it comes close. She leaves saucers of milk by the walls and on the floor, to beckon it to come out.

Something about the way I was looking up at him wasn't quite right. He descended the stepladder and came closer to study me. I continued to lie there. He knew every reflection of my skin and every possible movement of my ribs.

'What happens at the end of the story?' I asked him, as he tried to show me how he wanted me to hold my shoulders.

'She kills it,' he said.

He came onto the mattress with me. He bent over my body to twist me into place. He exhaled into my neck and said, 'Good. Hold it like that, but

let go. Like that.'

When I had cleaned the blood off my skin I went back out to Flynn in the bed. He was by the window, smoking a joint. I lay down, looking at the ceiling, which was speckled with grime. I didn't know what to say to him.

He turned from the window, slowly. 'Are you pleased that your pictures are going to be in a gallery?'

I stared back at him, confused. 'They aren't. Nobody but you has seen them before. Rowland doesn't work anymore. Like you.'

He made a sound – a breath and a laugh at once.

'Oh, sweetheart,' he said. 'They're hanging next month. People have already been through and put down money on some of them. Why do you think he isn't teaching anymore? He doesn't need it. The new work he's done is being "eagerly anticipated". More than anybody ever anticipated mine.' There was a look on his face I had never seen anyone make before. He focused on me as though he were on the edge of something. Testing out the margins of himself.

I paused. 'He's showing the photographs of me?'

'Yeah. A gallery in Paddington.'

'Really?'

'No, I'm fucking lying to you for my health.' He turned away.

My mind ran circles around what he'd said. There was an ache and a taste in my throat like burnt coffee. It wasn't quite betrayal, so much as a sense that something had been pulled out from beneath me. Wouldn't he have told me? I didn't know what the photographs meant when they were outside the two of us. I was afraid as I was forced to imagine the prospect of watching the outlines of my body scrutinised and split apart by the eyes of people who didn't know me.

Flynn looked back to me, while I was still thinking, but his face had changed. For a moment I thought maybe the distance had been dissolved. His expression was almost sweet.

'You know when you were bleeding just now?' he said.

'Yes.'

'I liked that.'

'You did? You seemed concerned.'

He turned back to the window. 'Oh, sure. I was. But if you had told me to keep going I would have.'

He exhaled smoke into the windowpane, softly smiling. ‘Yeah. Absolutely.’

I examined the ceiling. The flecks of tobacco in the sheets. My skin was very pale in the dim lighting. Milk-white. Opaque, soft, and easily penetrable.

‘Why did you throw that woman down the stairs?’ I asked.

He grinned, looked at me sideways. ‘You remembered that, huh?’ He laughed, as if to himself. ‘We all want to leave our mark on somebody. Sometimes you don’t know you want to until you’ve already left it.’

Later, as the night slipped into the morning, he lay on the bed beside me with an erection bobbing in the cold draught. I couldn’t sleep. I’d never slept in a bed with anyone but my mother before. I shivered under the grey sheet as a bluish dawn filled the room.

I rolled over, away from him, but he put his hand out to grab my belly and tried to bring me back to his body. I pulled away. I didn’t want him to touch me anymore.

I could feel something stir up in him. ‘There’s no point acting like you’re better than me.’ He spoke the words into the dawn light, not at me, but into the air around me. ‘You don’t know what you’re doing, sweetheart. You barely know yourself. Whether you’re swimming or sinking. We’re the same, you and me. We both want things that aren’t good for us.’ He turned his back to me to face the wall. ‘But fuck off if you want. He told me I could have you. And I’ve had you.’

My skin was tinted a bluish white in the light of his room. I lay there for a moment listening to somebody kicking a garbage bin against a corrugated iron fence in the street below.

I examined the injury. I tried to identify the point at which wanting and being wanted had shifted. Like a change in frequency or cell metabolism or whatever it was that had shipwrecked me there, still lying beside his turned, pitted back, alive as I was and stripped of skin. How the shift could happen in a couple of words and a coarsening of tone before I even realised that he had the ability to hurt me in the first place. That’s when it began to sting.

I wanted to claw at him, to open his skin with my finger-nails. I wanted to erase him. Wanted Rowland, who’d given me to him. Instead, I collected my shoes and my dress from the floor and I left. He called out to me. He only realised I was going as I slammed his door.

I grappled with the dark stairwell. I fumbled with the front door. Shaking. I understood. It was clear to me. At last. The way you can feel something for somebody that's so unghostly and vibrating and deep down, something that makes you so happy and miserable at once, that you'll leave blue bruises, slash out at skin with a knife, throw them down the stairs, just to keep the feeling going. How you surrender yourself reckless to it.

Rowland had told me there was one last shot he wanted to get that afternoon. The image he wanted was already written in his mind but it was unclear, when I arrived, exactly what he wanted me to do. The light was fading quickly. These were the very last days of autumn and the air was wet with cloud. He just needed to find the right habitat for me, he said. I was wearing the white dress, sipping at gin as I sat on a chair by the kitchen door in the long shafts of light leaking through the windows, waiting for him to tell me where to stand. He had the tripod and a piece of wood propped by the door.

Earlier that afternoon, Rowland had asked me what I thought I might do next year. When I would be done with school. I shook my head and said I wasn't sure. That I'd like to go away for a few months. To London, maybe. Berlin and Paris. I wanted to go somewhere very far away, as far away as I could bear to take myself.

He handed me the glass of gin and then walked back through the studio door. 'I can give you some money, if it would help.' His voice was distant across the expanse of the rooms. 'I'm going to be having an exhibition next week. With some of the photos of you. The least I can do is give you a hand with some funds.' He wouldn't meet my eye. Instead he came back into the room and passed me a postcard-sized piece of thick, expensive paper. On one side the invitation listed the name of the exhibition, *St Vitus Dance*, and the Paddington gallery at which it was being shown. Rowland's name was printed in a very large sans-serif typeface over the 'admission by advance reservation' note at the foot of the page. On the other side of the paper, in a deep satin finish, was the photograph of my body falling from the ceiling rafters, my arms open to the dark.

He came back into the kitchen and sat with me at the table. It seemed as if there were shadowy acres of forested terrain between his limbs and mine. I had no idea if he knew about Flynn. He told me he thought that it was a good idea for me to go away. In his lap he was loading the camera with

film, fitting the unexposed tongue into the pick-up reel on the right. He wasn't looking at me. He said that getting out of Australia would be good for me. More to the point, Europe was good for a person.

'The most beautiful thing I ever saw,' he said, 'I saw in Berlin.' He told me he had been crossing over the Oberbaum Bridge from Friedrichshain into Kreuzberg. He looked across the bridge to see a girl in white standing by a streetlight with the river behind her. It was summer, barely evening, a Friday, the streets were emptying before the night flew into action. He crossed the street to get a better look at her. She was looking out west across the Spree. The purpling light slid across the city. There was a sense of humidity, a sultriness, like tender fruit or maybe the sea. Like Sydney smelled when he met me. A smell of promise carried on salty air. And this girl stood there framed by water, not quite looking away from him, beautiful and young, all that raw momentum bottled up inside her, and her body, soft, looking as though it was almost melting into the rippling water. 'And that was it,' he said. 'That was everything.'

He closed the back of the camera, stood up and walked towards the door. I was pleased, because I wanted to leave but I hadn't had the courage to even really articulate the want to myself before now. But then I thought: why is he advocating for it? By convincing me to go to Europe he was also encouraging me to leave Sydney. And wouldn't he miss me?

He attempted to explain to me what he wanted as he opened the screen door to lead me outside. He said something about Ophelia. He motioned towards the rusted trampoline and, further beyond that, through the long grass towards the river. I had never walked through the long grass before, because of the snakes. But Rowland insisted. In light, cold gusts the air tousled the trees, causing leaves to snap loose from the branches and float. The soil was muddy under my feet and wet between my toes. In the distance I heard sirens, racing along Illawarra Road to the places where life was happening. Other lives, with all of their emergencies. Rowland led me down through the garden, to the very bottom, and gestured toward the river.

I walked slowly over the slimy rocks until I received the water at my feet. I glanced back at him. He was standing on a rock, the camera set on the piece of plywood he'd brought down from the house to give him a flat surface. 'Get into the water and lie down,' he said. The moment burned and expanded. He nodded again to the water. 'The light is just right. There's nothing to be afraid of.'

I jumped quickly. I didn't want my feet to touch the bottom. I launched myself from the bank and floated into the river. The water lapped at my feet, seeping into the negative space between my toes. Muddy and alive. My hair fanned out in long red tendrils soaking in the dirty water. It grew heavier, a weight on my head. Rowland was looking through the viewfinder on the bank. I couldn't see his eyes. There were limp straws and chip packets and syringes gathered at the shore. I could hear rustling and writhing in the water, and a thumping deep in my ears. Minutes passed. Sirens wailed. He was still taking my picture. And I felt something. I was sure I felt something. Long and black and slithering across my belly.

I closed my eyes. I unclenched my hands. I breathed in and I breathed out.

Everything in the water was trying to rot, I thought, trying to escape its form. But I wasn't frightened. It was almost a relief. Like surrendering to an army you have no will to fight anymore.

Rowland reached in and hauled me out of the water. I stumbled into the mud, on my knees, and staggered back to the grass. He put his hands out and stopped me. I was dripping wet and shivering. The dress was ruined. The light was almost gone and the roll of film was finished, and on the muddy grass, which stank of the river, he fell to his knees and he buried his head against me. I stroked his hair. Yet even as his warm breath spread across my stomach I felt separate from what he had made me do.

Much later, we sat side by side on the sofa. The conversation had turned to water. It was his way, I realised, of apologising.

'Baptism washes it away,' Rowland said. 'Once you're in the water the body, the spirit, is pure again. It's reborn.' He sighed as he poured out another shot from the bottle of gin. 'Or that's what they say.' He was telling me that his mother, when he was four, had taken him to the River Jordan near where it flows south to Galilee to baptise him in the water where Christ had been anointed. But his mother had lived and died in Sydney. She had never left. I only realised once it was over that he was always lying.

We had been drinking from jam jars. I had taken off the white dress and left it in a sopping pile by the kitchen door. The walls of the front room seemed grubbier than they had during the summer. I noticed the mould along the skirting boards. The scrap of paper from the Menzies Hotel was still tacked to the wall. Years later, I opened a book of poems in a shop and

read those lines Rowland had copied down, so long ago, smacked out and alone and desperate. A poem about a man who ends a woman, and hides the pieces of her body where they may be found. A woman who is never missing.

I sat beside Rowland on the velvet sofa wearing tights, my underwear and a huge cable knit jumper that smelt like him, which he had brought me down from the bedroom. There was no needle to drop on the LPs now that the record player was gone. Wind whistled against the window of the front room. I heard him breathing. The untended emotions rumbling through the room.

‘I’m sorry about the dress,’ he said. ‘And your hair is still dirty.’ He looked across at me and I met his eye. The stubble was growing in brown and grey patches on his chin. I had never noticed.

‘You should have a shower,’ he said. He pressed his leg against mine although I wasn’t sure if it was intentional. I felt something. Like weather, or electricity.

He put his hand on my arm. He squeezed my flesh until it began to pinch. After a long silence Rowland stood up and walked into the kitchen and through to the studio. I heard rattling and the sound of metal things falling; a smoker’s cough. When he came back he was reloading the camera.

He told me to shower again. I didn’t answer. ‘You can’t go home without showering. You’ll feel better,’ he said. And walked away, not waiting for a reply.

I stood up and followed him into the bathroom. The sink was yellow and speckled with toothpaste. There was a layer of dark hair at the bottom of the bathtub. He had turned the water on. The showerhead was fixed to the wall over a claw-footed bath. It sputtered messily and cold from the rusted fitting. And the light was unsparing. Like that cool blue neon they use in Darlington bathrooms to deter junkies because it inhibits your vision.

He stood at the door and held the camera at his chest, but his wrists were loose. As though he wasn’t sure whether he was going to keep going. I pulled my jumper over my shoulders. I laid it across the vinyl chair. I unhooked my bra, then curled my thumbs under my tights and the elastic of my underpants and lowered them down my thighs. I folded them and placed them on top of the dress. I could smell myself, wet. I stepped into the bath

and stood directly under the showerhead. The water was eviscerating. Icy cold. I turned toward the open door. Looking at him. He raised the camera and he began to click. I let the water engulf me. I didn't close my eyes. He shot until the roll of film was done, and then he turned and walked out of the bathroom and left me alone in there.

Later, as I was leaving, Rowland paused in the hallway between me and the locked front door. He opened his arms to embrace me. His body pressed against mine. I was surrounded by him. The smell of him. Deep down in his neck. Warm and rich. He squeezed me as tight as he was able. His face was buried in my wet hair. His grip was so tight I couldn't gasp for breath.

'No,' he whispered in my ear. 'I won't touch you.'

My limbs felt heavy as I walked home that night. I thought, as I walked, that the way it had happened implied either the involvement or the non-existence of fate. The person or thing or idea that you hope to hitch your fate to has, through your wanting it so badly, already dissolved when it occurs to you to try. Bats rose and fell in the air like notes of music from the warehouses the artists were all moving into. I pressed forward under the rasping chill of the breeze and stopped on the bridge across the river to look out at the lights spread across the city, as though it were burning still, but shimmering in the cold night, breaking its parts.

Somebody had placed standing lamps in the corners of the gallery, which sent reflections up the white walls in tall and fractured flickers. Black patent leather heels clacked across the floor, echoing, blending together with the hum of fashionable people greeting one another. The room was concentrated with a smooth, flattened energy.

I hadn't known what to expect. Rowland had told me to come, to wear my hair down. Nice shoes. A dress. It was a clear night, gleaming through the pollution and the glow of the city. The gallery was filled with very white light. People had begun to trickle in, and a man handed me a glass of champagne. I clutched at it, grateful to have something to do with my hands. Flynn wasn't there, but Genevieve was. Every single person was a stranger.

Rowland circulated through the room. I stood alone, against a wall. In the corner of the gallery I saw a very beautiful woman by the table filled

with canapés and bottles of alcohol. I watched her pour white wine into a white plastic cup until it was full to the top.

She turned to the wall, as though she were looking at the photographs everybody was there to see. Rowland had hung the pictures in couples. Twins. The first photograph she was pretending to contemplate was the picture of my body floating in the river. It was coupled with the horrifying photograph of me dancing. Looking just-hit, beautiful and very damaged. The pieces had sold to a merchant banker from Melbourne. I watched the woman as she drank down the entire cup of white wine in a long series of relentless gulps. She couldn't see me. She couldn't see anyone. Wasn't interested in anything but the internal drama of her own reality, the drama that was entirely separate from me and everyone else there in the gallery that night. Her eyes gazed up at the photographs, not seeing them. They were fixed on a far distant point marked on a map of her interior. Then she turned back to the table and began to fill the cup again.

I wondered if she was somebody whose name I should have known. But I knew hardly anyone there. It was a party filled with people who had come especially for him. An old woman with tangerine-coloured hair and a zebra-print dress walked with Rowland across the room. She glanced at me, as though she thought she knew me.

'Who's that girl?' I heard the woman ask Rowland.

He glanced at me. 'Oh, never mind about her.' They walked outside into the laneway that ran down to the cliff, into a group of people holding glasses of champagne and cigarettes between their fingers.

'No,' I thought. 'Nobody knows me here.' The thought felt like armour.

I looked around the white-walled room filled with images of myself. I began to drift. Moving through the room untouchable by people or things. The huge black-and-white photographs obscuring and dissolving and ghosting an idea of a girl just like me. They receded and blurred as I passed them.

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Madeleine Watts' fiction, essays and journalism have been published in the White Review, the Believer, Los Angeles Review of Books, Meanjin and the Lifted Brow, among others. Born and raised in Sydney, she now lives in New York.

PART TWO

ENTER DRYSDALE

THE DROVER'S WIFE

MURRAY BAIL

A note to readers: The opening passage of this story refers to the painting that appears on the front cover of this book.

THERE HAS PERHAPS BEEN a mistake – but of no great importance – made in the denomination of this picture. The woman depicted is not ‘The Drover’s Wife’. She is my wife. We have not seen each other now ... it must be getting on thirty years. This portrait was painted shortly after she left – and had joined him. Notice she has very conveniently hidden her wedding hand. It is a canvas 20 x 24 inches, signed l/r ‘Russell Drysdale’.

I say ‘shortly after’ because she has our small suitcase – Drysdale has made it look like a shopping bag – and she is wearing the sandals she normally wore to the beach. Besides, it is dated 1945.

It is Hazel all right.

How much can you tell by a face? That a woman has left a husband and two children? Here, I think the artist has fallen down (though how was he to know?). He has Hazel with a resigned helpless expression – as if it was all my fault. Or as if she had been a country woman all her ruddy life.

Otherwise the likeness is fair enough.

Hazel was large-boned. Our last argument I remember concerned her weight. She weighed – I have the figures – 12 st. 4 ozs. And she wasn’t exactly tall. I see that she put it back on almost immediately. It doesn’t take long. See her legs.

She had a small, pretty face, I’ll give her that. I was always surprised by her eyes. How solemn they were. The painting shows that. Overall, a gentle face, one that other women liked. How long it must have lasted up in the drought conditions is anybody’s guess.

A drover! Why a drover? It has come as a shock to me.

‘I am just going round the corner,’ she wrote, characteristically. It was a piece of butcher’s paper left on the table.

Then, and this sounded odd at the time: ‘Your tea’s in the oven. Don’t give Trev any carrots.’

Now that sounded as if she wouldn’t be back but, after puzzling over it, I dismissed it.

And I think that is what hurt me most. No ‘Dear’ at the top, not even ‘Gordon’. No ‘love’ at the bottom. Hazel left without so much as a goodbye. We could have talked it over.

Adelaide is a small town. People soon got to know. They ... shied away. I was left alone to bring up Trevor and Kay. It took a long time – years – before, if asked, I could say: ‘She vamoosed. I haven’t a clue to where.’

Fancy coming across her in a painting, one reproduced in colours like that. I suppose in a way that makes Hazel famous.

The picture gives little away though. It is the outback – but where exactly? South Australia? It could easily be Queensland, West Australia, the Northern Territory. We don’t know. You could never find that spot.

He is bending over (feeding?) the horse, so it is around dusk. This is borne out by the length of Hazel’s shadow. It is probably in the region of 5 pm. Probably still over the hundred mark. What a place to spend the night. The silence would have already begun.

Hazel looks unhappy. I can see she is having second thoughts. All right, it was soon after she had left me; but she is standing away, in the foreground, as though they’re not speaking. See that? Distance = doubts. They’ve had an argument.

Of course, I want to know all about him. I don’t even know his name. In Drysdale’s picture he is a silhouette. A completely black figure. He could have been an Aborigine; by the late forties I understand some were employed as drovers.

But I rejected that.

I took a magnifying glass. I wanted to see the expression on his face. What colour is his hair? Magnified, he is nothing but brush strokes. A real mystery man.

It is my opinion, however, that he is a small character. See his size in relation to the horse, to the wheels of the cart. Either that, or it is a ruddy big horse.

It begins to fall into place. I had an argument with our youngest, Kay, the other day. Both she and Trevor sometimes visit me. I might add, she hasn't married and has her mother's general build. She was blaming me, said people said Mum was a good sort.

Right. I nodded.

'Then why did she scoot?'

'Your mother,' I said thinking quickly, 'had a silly streak.'

If looks could kill!

I searched around – 'She liked to paddle in water!'

Kay gave a nasty laugh, 'What? You're the limit. You really are.'

Of course, I hadn't explained properly. And I didn't even know then she had gone off with a drover.

Hazel was basically shy, even with me: quiet, generally non-committal. At the same time, I can imagine her allowing herself to be painted so soon after running off without leaving even a phone number or forwarding address. It fits. It sounds funny, but it does.

This silly streak. Heavy snow covered Mt Barker for the first time and we took the Austin up on the Sunday. From a visual point of view it was certainly remarkable.

Our gum trees and stringy barks somehow do not go with the white stuff, not even the old Ghost Gum. I mentioned this to Hazel but she just ran into it and began chucking snowballs at me. People were laughing. Then she fell in up to her knees, squawking like a schoolgirl. I didn't mean to speak harshly, but I went up to her, 'Come on, don't be stupid. Get up.' She went very quiet. She didn't speak for hours.

Kay of course wouldn't remember that.

With the benefit of hindsight, and looking at this portrait by Drysdale, I can see Hazel had a soft side. I think I let her clumsiness get me down. The sight of sweat patches under her arms, for example, somehow put me in a bad mood. It irritated me the way she chopped wood. I think she enjoyed chopping wood. There was the time I caught her lugging into the house the ice for the ice chest – this is just after the war. The ice man didn't seem to notice, he was just following, working out his change. It somehow made her less attractive in my eyes, I don't know why. And then of course she killed that snake down at the beach shack we took one Christmas. I happened to lift the lid of the incinerator – a black brute, its head bashed in. 'It was under the house,' she explained.

It was a two-roomed shack, bare floorboards. It had a primus stove, and an asbestos toilet down the back. Hazel didn't mind. Quite the contrary; when it came time to leave she was downcast. I had to be at town for work.

The picture reminds me. It was around then Hazel took to wearing just a slip around the house. And bare feet. The dress in the picture looks like a slip. She even used to burn rubbish in it down the back.

I don't know.

'Hello, missus!' I used to say, entering the kitchen. Not perfect perhaps, especially by today's standards, but that is my way of showing affection. I think Hazel understood. Sometimes I could see she was touched.

I mention that to illustrate our marriage was not all nitpicking and argument. When I realised she had gone I sat for nights in the lounge with the lights out. I am a dentist. You can't have shaking hands and be a dentist. The word passed around. Only now, touch wood, has the practice picked up to any extent.

Does this explain at all why she left?

Not really.

To return to the picture. Drysdale has left out the flies. No doubt he didn't want Hazel waving her hand, or them crawling over her face. Nevertheless, this is a serious omission. It is altering the truth for the sake of a pretty picture, or 'composition'. I've been up around there – and there are hundreds of flies. Not necessarily germ carriers, 'bush flies' I think these are called; and they drive you mad. Hazel of course accepted everything without a song and dance. She didn't mind the heat, or the flies.

It was a camping holiday. We had one of those striped beach tents shaped like a bell. I thought at the time it would prove handy – visible from the air – if we got lost. Now that is a point. Although I will never forget the colours and the assortment of rocks I saw up there I have no desire to return, none, I realised one night. Standing a few yards from the tent, the cavernous sky and the silence all around suddenly made me shudder. I felt lost. It defied logic. And during the day the bush, which is small and prickly, offered no help (I was going to say 'sympathy'). It was stinking hot.

Yet Hazel was in her element, so much so she seemed to take no interest in the surroundings. She acted as if she were part of it. I felt ourselves moving apart, as if I didn't belong there, especially with her. I felt left out. My mistake was to believe it was a passing phase, almost a form of indolence on her part.

An unfortunate incident didn't help. We were looking for a camp site. 'Not yet. No, not there,' I kept saying – mainly to myself, for Hazel let me go on, barely saying a word. At last I found a spot. A tree showed in the dark. We bedded down. Past midnight we were woken by a terrifying noise and light. The children all began to cry. I had pitched camp alongside the Adelaide–Port Augusta railway line.

Twenty or thirty miles north of Port Augusta I turned back. I had to. We seemed to be losing our senses. We actually met a drover somewhere around there. He was off on the side making tea. When I asked where were his sheep, or the cattle, he gave a wave of his hand. For some reason this amused Hazel. She squatted down. I can still see her expression, silly girl.

The man didn't say much. He did offer tea though. 'Come on,' said Hazel, smiling up at me. Hazel and her silly streak – she knew I wanted to get back. The drover, a diplomat, poked the fire with a stick.

I said, 'You can if you want. I'll be in the car.'

That is all.

I recall the drover as a thin head in a khaki hat, not talkative, with dusty boots. He is indistinct. Is it him? I don't know. Hazel – it is Hazel and the rotten landscape that dominate everything.

First published in Tabloid Story, June 1975

Murray Bail is an Australian writer of novels, short stories and non-fiction. His most recent book is The Voyage.

THE DRYSDALE/LAWSON MYSTERIES AND THE QUESTION OF THE BIG WOMEN

FRANK MOORHOUSE

Drysdale is the essential Australian painter. Many gifted painters have come out of Australia, and one of them, Sidney Nolan, is a universal figure. But no one except Drysdale gives the same authentic feeling of the resolute humanity that has managed to exist in that terrible continent ...

The art of Russell Drysdale is probably more familiar to the public than that of any other Australian artist of his generation. His images of rural country towns and outback landscapes, often with their inhabitants, were instrumental in defining a national identity at a time of tremendous social change in Australian history spanning depression, war and unprecedented immigration. For audiences in Australia and abroad, Drysdale's paintings of the 1940s to the 1970s reflected the essence of Australia and its people.

This was the assessment of Russell Drysdale by art historian Timothy Potts when, as director of the National Gallery of Victoria, he wrote an introduction to a Drysdale exhibition in 1997. When Drysdale died in 1981, he was regarded as a national hero; he had been knighted and made a Companion of the Order of Australia. Potts wrote, 'He was the first artist of his generation to be honoured during his lifetime with a retrospective exhibition at a major Australian public institution.'

As this book has become, in total, another drover's wife story – a cultural history – that history would be incomplete without a consideration of Drysdale and his 1945 painting *The drover's wife*. If there had been no Drysdale painting, there would have been no Murray Bail story, and, consequently, none of the new drover's wife fiction, artworks and plays, and some of the best Lawson scholarship.

It was Bail who in 1975 shifted the narrative from Lawson to Drysdale, by using a black-and-white reproduction of the Drysdale painting to open his experimental story, also called 'The Drover's Wife', with its wonderful opening line, 'There has perhaps been a mistake – but of no great importance – made in the denomination of this picture. The woman depicted is not "The Drover's Wife". She is my wife.'

Bail's story changed the drover's wife train to a second track: to the Drysdale line. Bail contributed to the familiarity of the public – well, at least the reading public – with the Drysdale drover's wife image, which at the time had been in the Bonython private collection in Adelaide and then in Benno Schmidt's private collection in New York, before it was acquired by the National Gallery of Australia in 1987.

In his 1983 biography, *The Life and Work of Russell Drysdale*, Lou Klepac writes: 'the effect of the painting is undeniable, and the image has entered our consciousness, partly because from the title we associate the woman with Henry Lawson's story. One might think that the painting was inspired by the story, but Drysdale denied this.' However, it appears that Drysdale did not say this to Klepac, and there is no footnote to identify the source of the denial.

In *Artists' Portraits*, a book of interviews by Geoffrey Dutton in which he interviews Drysdale, there is no mention of 'The Drover's Wife' or Lawson; nor is there in Dutton's 1981 biography, *Russell Drysdale: A Biographical and Critical Study*.

Australian historian Humphrey McQueen wrote, in 1997, of one possible connection between Drysdale and Lawson: 'As he developed confidence, Drysdale received an assignment that revolutionised his imagery. Retracing Lawson's 1892 tracks into the far west, Drysdale illustrated reports on the 1944 drought for the *Sydney Morning Herald*.'

Although there is a remarkable parallel between the Drysdale *Sydney Morning Herald*-funded trip in 1944 and Lawson's *Bulletin*-funded trip to Bourke in 1892, I suppose it is possible that it could have been a coincidence. However, it's likely the owner of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Warwick Fairfax, whose idea the Drysdale trip was, would have had in mind the *Bulletin*-Lawson commission and might have mentioned it to Drysdale. Further, a journalist, Keith Newman, accompanied Drysdale on this trip and it is difficult to believe that in the long days they had together in the car driving to Bourke they did not discuss the Lawson precedent. I

suspect that Newman, as the journalist assigned to cover the trip, would have been aware of the Lawson parallel and would have read the related Lawson stories as background.

Drysdale's denial of the association with Lawson could be simple ignorance of the existence of the story, but surely his education at Geelong Grammar would have introduced him to the works of Lawson. It's possible he did not wish to have his work diminished, or considered derivative, by the association with Lawson – a creative vanity not unknown among artists, and young writers, and not-so-young writers, who sometimes resist having their work described as 'inspired by' or 'reminiscent of' another artist.

Regardless, the Lawson story is *coupled*. Consciously or unconsciously, Drysdale invited the connection; Bail made it.

The Drysdale painting evolved from one of the first drawings he made on this trip, *A drovers' camp near Deniliquin* (1944), published in the newspaper after the trip. *The drover's wife* followed a year later, and the striking, emblematic image of women in the bush was to be used in other paintings from this period, such as *Country child* (1948), which includes a lone female figure looming in the foreground, with bare trees and house in the background.

Recently, while I was putting together this book, my attention was drawn to another drover's wife painting by Drysdale, which art dealer Justin Miller was offering for sale. It shows a seated woman who is much better dressed than the iconic drover's wife, who had to battle bushfires, snakes, droughts and rapists. Perhaps Drysdale thought she deserved a rest.

The new painting, which I will call *The drover's wife seated*, was painted in 1945, the same year as the iconic painting. Its original title, presumably the one Drysdale gave it, was *Portrait of a woman*, until 1955, when the National Art Gallery of New South Wales – now the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) – titled it *The drover's wife* for an exhibition of contemporary Australian paintings. Unfortunately, no illustrated catalogue remains from that exhibition, but Eric Riddler, Visual Resources Librarian at the AGNSW, confirmed that the painting of the seated woman was the one that Justin Miller was offering for sale.

I talked with Miller about the painting's name, but he did not know why it had changed. It may now be impossible to find out who made the decision to do so. Perhaps Drysdale was asked by the gallery curator if it was the same woman as his iconic painting, and he responded that yes, it was the

drover's wife, even though, to the lay observer, the resemblance is not that certain.

The naming has caused confusion.

Notes for Justin Miller's sales catalogue description of *The drover's wife seated* were written by Edmund Capon, former director of the AGNSW. Capon writes:

It was this journey into the outback that inspired this gentle but imposing painting of the drover's wife; that small angelic face set upon a young body of strength and resilience, with sturdy arms and hands that could probably wrestle a sheep. The set of her head, the slightly sideways glance and firm expression, betray a resolve and determination without a hint of self-pity, which reveals Drysdale's empathy with and admiration for the drover's wife as she sits in the aura of the artist's distinctive if brooding browns. This is a painting of great compassion, and yet it is one of equal strength, and quite unsentimental. We need feel no sympathy for the drover's wife, despite being acutely aware of her trials and tribulations; we merely sit in admiration of her resolve. Those same qualities are to be seen in the companion picture, also titled *The drover's wife*, in which the subject is seen standing stoically but with perhaps just a hint of uncertainty, in the bleak and drought-ridden landscape. But there is too just a whiff of pathos here as the wife stands in her tidy coat, hat and shoes, a bag in her left hand, out there like a misplaced beacon in the barren land. Drysdale was acutely aware of the realities and hardships of life in rural Australia and he captures the mood and atmosphere with profound, but unsentimental, feeling and compassion.

I corresponded with Capon about the naming of these 'companion' paintings, and he wrote back:

Paintings do have evolving lives, and it is not unusual for a picture to have an alternative title. Clearly, the sitter is the same person; and I think what happened is that when the NGA acquired their major work it became THE Drover's wife, which relegated the other version to a kind of subsidiary status, and so it acquired an

alternative title. But there is absolutely no doubt that it is the same drover's wife in both pictures.

But Drysdale did use the same 'Big Woman' image a number of times.

There was some controversy about the Drysdale images of outback women. Art historian Anne Gray writes of his 1949 painting *Woman in a landscape*, which won the Melrose Prize and was bought by the Art Gallery of South Australia, 'some viewers considered it to be an insult to Australian womanhood. They thought she was a freak, inelegant, ungainly, of hideous proportions.'

One letter published in the *Adelaide Advertiser* read:

Unfortunately for the Commonwealth it will be necessary to prevent this picture appearing in England and Europe, where the effect would certainly defeat the immigration policy, as any decent person would abhor the idea of his wife or mother appearing like the picture a few years after arrival in this country.

Another, written by a lady visiting Adelaide from a station in the Northern Territory, declared:

No outback Australian woman of white blood would be found, except perhaps in the most remote areas of our country, with such hideous proportions and apparel as the artist portrays ... I have never seen a white woman constructed and clad in the manner Russell Drysdale has shown.

Yet another letter, from Mrs A. F. Lord, of Blinman in the Flinders Ranges, is perhaps the first attempt at a story inspired by the Drysdale image, perhaps echoed in the Bail story.

Mrs Lord wrote:

I sacrifice myself on the altar of Art. I am a 'Drysdale'. I can account for the appearance of my sister on canvas. Her somewhat ungainly stance is probably caused by worn sandshoes and a couple of obstinate bunions on her right big toe; the 'simple, unbroken line' of her figure, to the fact that she had not taken her 'Venus Form' tablets lately, and that just when the artist was around, she left off

her corsets. Her lank locks? Well, her perm had only just grown out. The point is that Drysdale caught her off guard. To all the hunters with palette and brush I say, 'Sneak up on them; catch them on the hop and you'll get a dozen Drysdales a week.'

There is also a Drysdale drawing titled *Big Edna*, dated 1967. When asked about the relationship of the image to a living person, Dutton writes that Drysdale laughed it off, saying, 'It's only Big Edna.' Drysdale sometimes called her Elsie as well as Edna.

In her *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry for Drysdale, Mary Eagle writes:

Characteristically, Drysdale remained in touch with his subjects, his mode being the daydream and the doodle by which key characters took on a life of their own. Thus the drover's wife 'Big Edna', for example, had several incarnations in Drysdale's art. By 1950, his practice when planning an exhibition was to use a few completed paintings to 'seed' the titles of other works, which he would then produce.

In 1947, Drysdale wrote to the painter Donald Friend about the gestation of *Woman in a landscape*, 'I am working hard with some measure of success on my second version of the big woman.' Then, in a letter the next year: 'searching around for a canvas and came across the picture of the big woman – it seemed to have possibilities so I redrew portions of it, got to work and am very excited to find I've got a cracking good picture'.

Drysdale, after his initial drawing at Deniliquin in 1944, kept returning to his emblematic 'Big Woman'. Dr Freud wishes to speak ...

Painters have historically worked on the same subject more than once. Monet's water-lily series is perhaps the most famous; there were sixty water-lily paintings by Monet exhibited at the Musée de l'Orangerie in 1999. Likewise, music composers refer to 'variations on a theme'. Fiction writers are not generally granted this privilege but, consciously or unconsciously, they do repeat themselves. When the poet Douglas Stewart edited my book *The Americans, Baby* with A&R in 1971, he pointed out to me that I had unconsciously told the same story twice. He said it was known in publishing as 'a double yoker', and he had me choose which story I wished to go with.

As a footnote to this book of footnotes, in 2013, poet Mark O’Flynn published a poem in the literary magazine *Westerly* titled ‘Big Edna’, included in this book, which begins, ‘No, it’s not Hazel, it’s Hazel’s sister Edna’. The poem plays with the Bail story as well as with the Drysdale paintings.

O’Flynn wrote to me about the genesis of the poem:

I had a residency out at Hill End ... I was aware of the Bail story and always thought it very funny, as, indeed, I knew yours about the Italian lecturer mixing up the various myths ... I would have read them as a student back in the ’80s. Also the Drysdale painting I was familiar with, so I was definitely feeding off all three points of reference as they bounced off each other. Lawson, also.

Then I came across the ‘twin’ painting *Woman in a landscape* ... I call it a twin because it is clearly the same model, a woman who lived at Hill End when Drysdale visited. That was why I called her Hazel’s sister. Her real name was Edna and Drysdale apparently exhorted people not to be scared of her.

I’m afraid I don’t know anything about his denial of the Lawson connection. That’s a happy accident.

There are other contentions about the Drysdale women.

Dr Bronwyn Hanna, in the report for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service’s Gendered Landscapes Project, writes of the Drysdale–Edna connection:

Alex Torrens at the Bathurst Regional Gallery pointed out that the female figure in Donald Friend’s [1948 painting] *Hill End Bacchanal* looks very similar to Big Edna. She also alerted me to the Klepac monograph on Drysdale that discusses the painting in some detail. Klepac writes: ‘*Woman in a landscape* was just the “big woman”, as Drysdale referred to her in a letter, or “Else”, whom they all knew at Hill End, though she is sometimes also called Edna.’

I wondered what ‘Big Edna’ thought about it, all of it. Had the painting affected her life? And how well did it reflect her perceptions of landscape in Hill End? Would it be possible to track down Big Edna and ask her? I asked two local women from Hill

End ‘old families’, Sheena Goodwin and Gwen Eyre, if they knew ‘Big Edna’ or ‘Else’, but neither was aware of anyone with that name. Both thought that the painting was not based on anyone local. Indeed, both thought that this painting was not of Hill End, that it did not *look* like Hill End – too flat, too red – but depicted somewhere further out west towards Bourke. Gavin Wilson, author of *The Artists of Hill End ...* suspected that Big Edna was not a single individual but an amalgam of country women that Drysdale had met. Indeed Drysdale had written at the time that if he was painting a woman, ‘it shouldn’t be Edna or May or what have you, but a sort of archetype’. Wilson also thought that the landscape in the painting was not simply Hill End (although the buildings in the distance have been identified there) but an amalgam of places Drysdale had visited ... The visual similarities between these images suggest that the landscape in *Woman in a landscape* is at least an amalgam of Hill End and Deniliquin. It would seem to be an outsider’s conflation of rural scenery and rural women, rather than a specific portrait of ‘Edna’ in ‘Hill End’.

If Big Edna is an amalgam of country women, surely the way to ask ‘her’ opinion is to ask regional women what they think of *Woman in a landscape* and its characterisation of rural womanhood, and landscape? ... This would be getting at the point of looking at the painting in the first place, to develop a discourse of women’s interpretations of the landscape and of their own place in the landscape.

Of the letter from Mrs Lord of the Flinders Ranges – ‘I sacrifice myself on the altar of Art’ – Dr Hanna writes:

The implication of her critique is ... subtle ... she is not saying Drysdale was wrong, but that he had captured an image of femininity that women usually feel obliged to disguise. The meaning of the joke is uncertain. Is it about being resigned to living in a misogynist culture where men invade women’s privacy, catch them off guard and represent them in ways that might shame them? Is it the irony that women should have to disguise their strength and capability with feminine frippery in the first place?

The assumed direct association between the Drysdale painting and the Lawson story has entered into legend through artworks that both the story and the painting have inspired, either individually or as a coupling. We have the cultural ricochet of a painting, stories, scholarship and gender politics.

New Zealand writer Hamish Clayton, in his fictional memoir 'The Lie of the Land' (2014), originally published in *Griffith Review*, tells of the arrival of the drover's wife images in his family:

It was Jim who sent my grandparents the painting. My mother and aunt remember its arrival and my grandmother unwrapping it on the large kitchen table, witnessing her silent astonishment when she saw who it was. For it was her – Jim's 'wife' – whom my grandmother hadn't seen for what must have been the best part of twenty years.

Clayton then writes of coming across Murray Bail's short stories, either *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* (1975), or the republishing of 'The Drover's Wife' in 1984 as *The Drover's Wife and Other Stories*:

[I] sat at the table with a cup of tea and a packet of biscuits. When I opened the volume, there, staring at me through the screen of a grainy reproduction, like a ghost looking across the years, was our painting of Jim's wife. I've since learned of course that the painting is called *The Drover's Wife*, and that it was painted in 1945 by the Australian painter Russell Drysdale. But I knew her by another name; to me she was and always will be Jim's wife ...

Most recently, when I saw the 2016 Belvoir St Theatre production of Leah Purcell's play *The Drover's Wife*, the sets and props at times reminded me of Drysdale's images of the outback, and of Aboriginal Australians. The program's cover photograph of Purcell, by Brett Boardman, is to me reminiscent of Drysdale's drover's wife, or the 'Big Woman'.

And here is a quote from a 2009 NSW Department of Education guide to teaching *The drover's wife*:

Drysdale based the painting on his own experiences in western NSW, and knew that the title had already been used for an 1892 story by the Australian writer Henry Lawson (1867–1922). Lawson's story and Drysdale's painting have together inspired more

recent writers, such as Murray Bail, Frank Moorhouse and Barbara Jefferis, to extend the tradition with further tales of ‘The drover’s wife’.

Finally, we come to Jeff Carter’s photographs, which dramatically carry the Drysdale–Lawson connection to contemporary reality via photography and journalism.

Carter photographed an actual drover, Ron Kerr, and his wife, Mavis, on the road in 1958 – thirteen years after the Drysdale painting – and titled the photograph *The Drover’s Wife, Urisino Bore*. In 2011, fifty-three years later, reporter Glen Williams interviewed the Kerrs around the time of an exhibition of the photographs in Sydney, and the photograph was recreated. Williams wrote:

The drover’s wife is Mavis Kerr, then a 16½-year-old seated next to husband Ron in ragged shirt and holding baby Johnny, who was three weeks old when Carter immortalised the scene.

Johnny was born on May 3, 1959 – four days after the couple were married in the vicar’s home in Broken Hill. There is no wedding picture. There are not many other family pictures, either. Many were lost when their home was destroyed by Cyclone Kathy in 1984.

They met at a sheep station when Mavis, then 15, accompanied her father, who was having a break from droving to take on the mail round.

Mavis said: ‘I was too embarrassed and too far gone to wear a white wedding frock and go into church. We knew the vicar and his wife and were married at his house.’

Soon after, Ron set out with his truck, droving a mob of 3700 merinos from Tibooburra to Coonamble – a distance of almost 1000 kilometres.

The furthest [Mavis] has travelled is to Orange and Dubbo. She has never been to Sydney and would not make it to the exhibition, called *Beach, Bush and Battlers*. She is not aware that a coffee-table book to coincide with the exhibition features *The Drover’s Wife* on the cover. Her son Johnny is now 51, married and working at one of

the country's leading cattle stations – Delta Downs at Karumba, near the Gulf of Carpentaria in Queensland.

A man of few words and married with two grown-up children of his own, he has worked in the mines and on cattle stations.

He said: 'I get home every couple of years. I knew about the photo and have one blown up in my lounge; Jeff Carter sent it to me four years ago.'

Ron has suffered two strokes and recently came out of hospital and is with his eldest daughter in Darwin – too far away for Mavis to visit from the family home at Borroloola.

Mavis said she had seen a copy of the picture in a book.

So what was in the eyes of teenage Mavis as she sat on that footplate? Well, certainly enduring love because the couple are still happily married.

'I was always happy. When I had babies I didn't know what sort of life it was going to be for them but I got used to it. You just follow your husband around and put up with it ... But I was happy.'

'No use fretting,' as Lawson's drover's wife says.

'She is glad when her husband returns, but she does not gush or make a fuss about it. She gets him something good to eat, and tidies up the children.'

'As a girl-wife she hated it, but now she would feel strange away from it.'

Mavis may not seem to be the feminist daughter of the bushwoman that Louisa Lawson had dreamed of in her essay, but, in the second half of the twentieth century, she has lived out the drover's wife's story.

BIG EDNA

MARK O'FLYNN

After the painting Woman in a landscape by Russell Drysdale (1949):

No, it's not Hazel, it's Hazel's sister Edna, and she's all woman, the way the landscape is all landscape. What's she hiding in her right hand? Knowing Edna it's an Apprehended Violence Order or a piece of her mind in the shape of a rolling pin. In the little house behind her there's no smoke from the chimney. (There's no chimney.) That leafless tree is nothing but a scar. Judging by her shoes Edna has just finished a vigorous game of tennis, except she has no laces. There's only a woman who's all woman looking how far she's whacked the ball over the horizon's rusty wire. Her double chin hasn't changed, her muscles look like she's been helping out with the landscape, or its capitulation.

First published in Westerly, November 2013

Mark O'Flynn writes poetry and fiction. His novel The Last Days of Ava Langdon was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award.

THE LIE OF THE LAND

HAMISH CLAYTON

THIS IS THE BIOGRAPHY of a painting I've known my whole life. At least, there hasn't been a time when I can't remember the painting that used to hang in the long, darkened hallway of my grandparents' house on the farm in northern Hawke's Bay. This was the farm we used to visit as children for what felt like the endless weeks of school holidays. I knew the farm in all its seasons – from its calm, elegiac autumns through cold dark winters, and into the halcyon heat of summer. Because the farm is now only remembered as a fragment in a happy childhood, the richness I've remembered has surely deepened with the years. So the winters of recall are probably colder and more dramatic than they really were, the summers probably longer and hotter, and the magpies waking us in the still mornings more melodic and otherworldly.

How then, I wonder, has the painting which used to hang in the hallway deepened with the years since I last saw it? How have the years I've lived away from her watchful gaze influenced my recall? The shape of her thickset body emerges from the gloom of the spare landscape she stands against; her slab-like feet and hands and her solid, impassive stare; her dress and hat and bag, clearly the accessories of another, previous time. Even then, to the small boy I was, she was a woman who obviously belonged to a bygone age: a woman of some mythic, and in our case, settler past.

What I cannot remember – not quite, not with any clarity – is the first time I was told about that woman and the fragments of her curious history. I do remember, and so do my brother and sister, the legend of her backstory: how she came to be associated with the family through an uncle of my mother's. This was my maternal grandfather's brother, his elder by some years. Jim, despite being the older of the two, was the prodigal son, the family absconder prone to disappearing and reappearing at intervals,

usually unannounced, but always with a story to explain his last period of sustained absence. Or, once, a wife.

There are variations on the story. For some reason it is my older brother's account that has formed definitively in my mind; he tells how Jim appeared in the front door one night just after teatime, during a storm in the depths of winter, and nonchalantly asked my astounded and delighted grandmother if he was in time for pudding. She invited him in from the cold, set him down at the kitchen table and called to our grandfather that they had a visitor. When my grandfather entered the room he barely raised an eyebrow.

'Giddy Jim,' he said and sat down. At that point they hadn't seen one another for two or three years. They sat at the table while my grandmother brought them tea and pikelets with jam and cream and spoke as if they'd seen each other that morning.

After an hour or so of sharing news, the story goes, my great-uncle mentioned he had a wife. This was too much for my grandmother. '*Jim!* Why didn't you say? Where on earth is she?'

'In the truck.'

In later years, this became one of my grandmother's favourite stories, one to which she would return again and again whenever asked, especially in the years after my grandfather died. It was not just the story but her husband also she would remember. It was her way of being happy again. I never told her when I noticed if the details had changed a few degrees.

Jim and his new wife stayed a week and then he was off again, not to return for another ten or fifteen years. He spent most of that time in Australia working as a drover until the work ran out. That must have been sometime in the '60s. By then my mother had been born, the last of my grandparents' three children. She remembers Jim returning for a couple of weeks when she was six or seven, but by that stage the 'wife' had mysteriously disappeared. When I was a teenager I learned that most in the wider family had doubted they'd ever been married. Jim's infrequent missives home mentioned his bride less and less, until eventually all trace of her dropped off altogether. My grandparents surmised that she and Jim had pretended to be married to avoid embarrassing their hosts.

It was Jim who sent my grandparents the painting. My mother and aunt remember its arrival and my grandmother unwrapping it on the large kitchen table, witnessing her silent astonishment when she saw who it was.

For it was her – Jim’s ‘wife’ – whom my grandmother hadn’t seen for what must have been the best part of twenty years. Still, there was no doubt about it. There was no letter of explanation enclosed, just a note, ‘Love Jim’. They hung her in the hallway, at that northern end, in the darkness, away from the sunlight. And there she stayed, on the farm, until my grandfather died and my grandmother moved into a smaller house closer to town. I don’t remember ever seeing the painting of Jim’s wife hung in my grandmother’s new place, but it must have been somewhere. She wouldn’t have discarded it. But nor do I remember it emerging after she’d died and as her children set about dividing her things between them. Somehow it faded out of all reckoning.

But now, and in a curious way that I cannot quite understand, the painting has returned to us again.

First, a confession: I have never stolen anything before in my life. I remember being dared to once in a toy shop and failing utterly to silence the inner conscience and forge the steel will required. But this time the conscience intervened with the opposite effect; I felt I couldn’t *not* take the book with me. Because you’ve heard what the painting meant to me, how it sat like a cornerstone in my private, family mythology, you will, I think, understand.

I’d been tramping through the Egmont National Park in Taranaki, on the west coast of the North Island – the obverse side of the island from the farm where I’d spent those idyllic childhoods. I was all alone. The walking wasn’t too strenuous, and the day was beautiful. The only thing that weighed on my mind came a couple of hours into the walk when I realised I’d forgotten to pack any reading matter. I crossed my fingers there would be something in the hut. Most huts have books left in them by previous trampers for the next to enjoy. My fate was in the hands, or at least the reading habits, of my fellow trampers.

When I got to Kāhui hut it was empty except for me. And a dozen or so books. Thank God, I said aloud to the empty room. I made a cup of tea and changed into warm, dry clothes – there had been a few river crossings through the afternoon and though I wasn’t cold, having walked for six hours, I was soaking below the waist. When I was comfortable, padding about in thick socks, thermal long johns and a couple of jerseys I perused the small shelf by the window.

I was relieved and impressed when I discovered a roll call of surprisingly literary names. Alongside the anticipated Stephen Kings and Wilbur Smiths, there was a Maurice Gee – the *Plumb* trilogy, which I'd read – and next to him a book of Murray Bail's short stories, which I hadn't. I selected the Bail and sat at the table with a cup of tea and a packet of biscuits. When I opened the volume, there, staring at me through the screen of a grainy reproduction, like a ghost looking across the years, was our painting of Jim's wife. I've since learned of course that the painting is called *The Drover's Wife*, and that it was painted in 1945 by the Australian painter Russell Drysdale. But I knew her by another name; to me she was and always will be Jim's wife, that curiously fleeting and yet stable presence in our house and the background of our lives all through the years. In a state of virtual shock I read the short story, which Bail had named after Drysdale's painting and where her reproduction appears. I devoured the words as fast as I could. And then I read it again more slowly; and again, I think, a third time.

You see now why I had to take the book with me.

The story and the painting have become twin obsessions. I had to find out what I could about them, their inceptions and their histories. And of course, I had to find out how Jim was involved, and who that woman really was. I began by saying that this is the biography of a painting; perhaps it is more acute – more trenchant and better directed – to say that this is the biography of a painting and its reception.

I have not visited the National Gallery of Australia, in Canberra, to see where she now hangs. Curiously though, by now I have seen so many copies and reproductions that I am not sure what I would find were I to stand before her in the flesh. I've memorised the details, the composition. I know how many spare lines of trees stand in the middle distance; I know how the vastness of space behind her hangs on the line of land and sky, just as I know the slight tilt of her hat and the stoicism in her softly shaded eyes. And I know too the tiny dark figure beyond, tending to the horse and wagon, which, I suppose, the drover's wife is about to embark within. I can't help wonder if that tiny figure was meant, in some way, to be Jim.

I hazard a guess that the painting is as familiar to many Australians as the works of well-known New Zealand painters like Rita Angus or Colin McCahon are familiar to New Zealanders. Perhaps, as is the case with

Angus and McCahon, there will be those with barely a passing interest in art's role in cultural nationalism but who might be able to tell you that Drysdale and *The Drover's Wife* are 'important', even if they're not able to explain why. I'm interested in that audience and the role they play, vital and inexpert, in the production of a national myth.

For like Angus and McCahon, Drysdale is a painter whose work, it seems to me, has presented certain strains of the national mythos with – we are told – such force and clarity that eventually his work has been allowed to stand in for whichever local reality it was produced in response to. The boundary between the painted landscape and the real one is thus smoothed over, erased, and from here it is hardly surprising when the mythologiser of the land is, in turn, swiftly and inexorably mythologised himself.

A few days after returning from the national park where I came across the Bail story for the first time, I disappeared into a library seeking out other traces of Drysdale. I discovered Geoffrey Dutton, a writer with whom I was not acquainted before, but whose angle on Drysdale was familiar: 'a slow, stubborn and solitary painter of unshakeable integrity [whose] loving vision of Australia [...] is entirely his own'. Except that it *isn't* quite his own, as Dutton's terms also permit: 'There are now many occasions on which an Australian can find himself in front of a man, a town street or a deserted landscape and say, "That's a Russell Drysdale."'”

From the start Bail chooses to wrong-foot us, the implied reader familiar with the painting and, presumably, the place it holds in the Australian cultural psyche. And although I wasn't one of those readers until I'd discovered later for myself something of Drysdale's place in the canon, I felt I understood intuitively the ambit of Bail's story, with its concern to playfully undercut culturally constructed assumptions of identity.

Bail's narrator, the bitter Gordon, starts by addressing the painting itself, or at least its reproduction, sitting above the story's opening lines: 'There has been a mistake – but of no great importance – made in the denomination of this picture. The woman depicted is not "The Drover's Wife". She is my wife.'

Gordon notes the hidden left hand of the woman in the painting and reads sinister import in what we *can't* see: 'This portrait was painted shortly after she left – and had joined him. Notice she has very conveniently hidden her wedding hand.' Our cuckolded narrator goes on, cannily trading further on suggestion and absence: 'I say "shortly after" because she has our small

suitcase – Drysdale has made it look like a shopping bag – and she is wearing the sandals she normally wore to the beach.’

In the space of two paragraphs Bail constructs a version of the painting’s history raucously divergent from any we could expect to receive at the hands of Drysdale’s critics. Gone is the determined Aussie she-battler of the bucolic legend underpinning the drover’s wife and taking her place as an absconding wife and mother. Gone too, for that matter, is Drysdale the honest chronicler of life in the outback; Bail effectively side-lines him, translating him into a mere bit-player, a hapless portraitist limited in range and vision. Although ‘Drysdale’ the fictional painter is excused by Gordon for the liberties he has taken with his subject – ‘the artist has fallen down (though how was he to know?)’ – he stands accused of taking them all the same: ‘He has Hazel with a resigned helpless expression – as if it were all my fault. Or, as if she had been a country woman all her ruddy life.’

From here, Bail’s subversions come thick and fast. Hazel, we are told, struggled with her weight and ‘had a silly streak’. She lacked both class – ‘A drover! Why a drover?’ – and sympathy: her final words to her husband, ‘Don’t give Trev any carrots.’ Through her, Gordon is himself a figure lampooned. He is a dentist – perhaps a career choice as respectably dissonant with the dominant tropes of Australian myth-making as Bail could imagine. And on the subject of landscape itself Bail is committed to the satirist’s edge, disrupting all romantic notions associated with contemporary Australians’ relationship with the land; perhaps most memorably towards the end of the story, when a train barrels along the Adelaide–Port Augusta railway line, tearing Gordon and his family from their sleep where they are camped in the great outdoors.

But underlying Bail’s fun at Gordon’s expense are deeper, more far-reaching ramifications. Gordon is in many respects an unwitting narrator, but it is through him that Bail reminds us of the extent of the drover’s wife myth with a couple of sly nods to Lawson. For one thing, there is the snake which appears under the house in both Bail’s and Lawson’s short stories; although Bail’s tone here is too playful, too mocking of the emasculated Gordon to count as homage; his description of the ‘black brute, its head bashed in’ reminds us of Lawson’s take on the myth. Far more telling is the very final note which Bail strikes. Gordon’s closing thoughts consider how dominant Hazel stands in relation to the ‘rotten landscape’ all around her. Anyone who has read Lawson will recall those native apple trees, ‘stunted,

rotten'. It is as though Bail has not only hand-picked the word that most represented the extent of the feeling he found in Lawson's story and thereby chosen to finish with it, but also that he has deployed it as an insult, flung on behalf of the worsted Gordon, back towards Drysdale himself, that painter of 'rotten' landscapes.

Delicately imbricated into the layers of Bail's treatment, then, are laid these subtle reminders of the power and the place of stories and mythologies as they interact with the real world. All are contingent on recognising the nature of art as artifice. For when Gordon observes of the painting that the landscape 'is the outback – but where exactly? South Australia? It could easily be Queensland, West Australia, the Northern Territory. We don't know. You could never find that spot,' he doesn't only remind us of the reality of the vastness of Australia's great hinterland, but also that Drysdale *was* a painter of mythic proportion; that if his vaunted 'new vision of Australia' has been firmly lodged in the national cultural consciousness, then it has traded on some broader, more abstract value than the particularities of this scene or that subject.

Although the fictional Gordon seems designed to subvert the critically imagined Drysdale, Bail's manoeuvring also reminds us of the reality beyond the frames of both the painting and the story.

When I read Bail's short story I was taken with how the writer had chosen to sit with us, on our side of the painting, inhabiting the same space we inhabit when we stand before it, whether we are in the gallery or looking at it reproduced on the page. Though he makes it an imagined space – situating the fictional, abandoned husband of the painting's subject before the painting itself – it pays to remember that this is a real space in the world as well. As it was, I discovered, a real space for Dutton; as it was once a real space for my great-uncle when he must have stood before it somehow, decades ago.

It was only then, considering how I'd once looked at the painting as a small boy and then again as an adult – and how Dutton had, and Uncle Jim had – that I realised what I thought Bail was really up to with his story. I contended earlier in this essay that with landscape painters of national importance like Drysdale, 'the boundary between the painted landscape and the real one is smoothed over, erased, and from here it is hardly surprising when the mythologiser of the land is, in turn, swiftly and inexorably mythologised himself.' I've realised now that it is the space of that

boundary itself, that field which often seems invisible to us, that Bail writes from within. He stands between us and our perception, intervening in our reception. In becoming a new lens he thus allows that there is no one version of this painting, but potentially as many different versions as there are pairs of eyes that have looked upon it.

What would Jim have made of Bail's story, and its author daring to stand in his shoes? I choose to think he would've liked it, though of course I cannot really say. Whether contemporary literature was an enthusiasm Jim would've held is perhaps doubtful but this seems beside the point to me – from what I think I know of him, he would've approved, staunchly, of the playful humour underpinning Bail's take. He was, as we know, a joker.

But what was really at stake in my interest was her. I had wanted, simply, to discover what had become of Uncle Jim's wife. His 'wife'. It was only after I became frustrated with trying to find out exactly who she was that the extent of the joke dawned on me. That sending this painting back to my grandparents, this painting called *The Drover's Wife*, had been Jim's wry humour again. An acknowledgement of what everyone else had long decided they knew: that that woman hadn't been his wife. Sending that painting was no more than one of his knowing winks. I imagined him coming across a framed reproduction of it somewhere, perhaps on a visit to Sydney during those final years when he himself had been working as a drover. Perhaps he'd walked down the main street on a hot day and seen it hanging in a window. I see him pause before it in the street, struck by the uncanny likeness to a woman he'd known years ago.

I ran this theory past my family. My brother and sister were convinced, my mother and aunt less so. For one thing, they said, the painting was *never* called the *drover's wife*. Always, they insisted, it was *Jim's wife*.

'And besides, she was *convinced* ...' my aunt went on as she described again that moment when my grandmother had unwrapped the painting and seen Jim's wife for the first time in years, staring at her through the picture frame.

'It was *her*,' my mother and aunt implored us, we three children who had never met Jim, far less his mythical wife.

It was only when my mother exclaimed, aiming for the emphatically rhetorical, 'Surely Jim would have explained the joke!' that a pause fell between the two sisters and they looked at each other silently.

I can still see them as they were in that moment, sitting opposite one another at the dinner table, quietly realising that a gap in the family mythology had finally been filled. But I can't help but wonder too if it was only at that moment that they realised the gap had even been there.

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Hamish Clayton was born in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand. He has written two novels, both published by Penguin: Wulf (2011), which won Best First Book at the New Zealand Book Awards, and The Pale North (2015). In March 2017, he completed a PhD in English Literature at Victoria University of Wellington, and is now working on a third novel.

THE DROVER'S WIFE

BARBARA JEFFERIS

IT OUGHT TO BE set straight. All very well for them to spin yarns and make jokes but nobody has written any sense about me. Nobody has even given me a name except one and he got it wrong and said I was called Hazel. The drover's wife, the doctor's wife, the butcher's wife. You wouldn't think of all the countries the one where women are the fewest would be the one where they don't exist, where men'll say 'the missus' sooner than give a name. Small wonder the Eytalian got his facts wrong and said there weren't any women in the country for the first 100 years. I had to laugh. I don't know why; it isn't funny when you think about it.

I better say first who I am. I'm 46 years old. I have four children, all of them boys. My womb has fallen, so've most of my teeth, but I've got a straight back and a good head of hair and I can match anyone on a hard day's work. I know 73 poems off by heart and I'm not afraid of the dark.

I was born somewhere on the stock route between Tibooburra and Broken Hill; nobody ever told me exactly where.

My father was a drover. Times there was no stock to be moved he dug dams or went fencing – hard grafting for very little money. He died quietly one night by his campfire without saying a word to anyone. I was 12.

We weren't on the road with him. We had a shack out of Nyngan – my mother, my two brothers, my sister Bessie and me. Ma was a hard-handed woman. I never saw her after I cleared out with the dentist but sometimes still I dream I run into her. I'm glad to wake up.

The boys cleared out together as soon as the first was old enough. We never did hear what became of them. We had a few acres and three cows and some pigs and fowls. We made do. It wasn't much of a life. Ma took up with a shearer when I was 14 and *she* cleared out for six months. It was better there without her than with her. Then they both came back and the next thing was Bessie ran off with a Bananalander. I'd like to see old Bess

again; I really would, but she was never much for writing letters so there wasn't anything I could do, not knowing where she was. She's 49 now if she's alive.

That left me stuck there two years with them, like a bandicoot on a burnt ridge. I gave as good as I got but I took the first chance that offered to get out of it.

Now it's a matter of what each of them had to say – answering it. Take them as they came. Mr Lawson first. He didn't mean me any harm, far from it. But men can only see women as being heroines when they do something a decent man would do for them if he happened to be around, like killing a snake or an injured calf, or hauling a rotting sheep carcass out of the well.

He was a nice little bloke, Mr Lawson. No bother to anyone, quiet, deaf, drank too much. Every man I've had to do with from my own dad down to the drover drank too much on occasions, but very little was too much for Mr Lawson and it didn't seem to make him happier any longer than the time it took to get it down his gullet. He was a good listener – the best I ever knew in those dry times when there wasn't much listening going begging for ones like me who'd spend weeks talking to the flies on the wall. And he really listened. You could tell because he'd ask things, wanting more.

So I told him a lot. Talked too much – must've – because some of it he took and turned into that story about the snake, as though what I'd really told him wasn't true or wasn't fit. His snake story was true enough. Nobody, man or woman, goes to sleep with a black snake under a floor that's got gaps in it in a room that's full of children. Yes, I watched; yes, I had a candle going and a green sapling close at hand and Alligator in with me because he was a champion snake-dog all his life till a big brown brute got him down at the dam. Mr Lawson made it a great and terrible night. It wasn't. I've spent great and terrible nights.

Like the one I told him about. Joe was droving and the baby was 10 months old the time it happened. He was the one Mr Lawson mentioned that I had without anyone with me, only the old black woman, Mary. I was into my time and Tommy and Billy both in the cot together and me blind silly with the pain and the fear of what'd happen to them if I died, which can happen. And her ugly face came in at the doorway. I screamed, and that set the two kids screaming. Next thing I knew she had her hands on me, and she knew what she was doing.

Only time I worried was when she went off down the cow-yard with a bucket to get some milk for the kids. I thought she mightn't come back, being who she was. It made me feel a bit different about the blacks and Reg was as fine a baby as the others had been, and fatter.

Until he was 10 months old. One moment he was as bonny as usual, the next he was screaming and going into a fit. I got the tub and the hot water the way I'd been told but had never needed before. It was no good. I got the dog in and threw the tub of water on the fire and banged the door and left the kids yelling in the dark hut with only Alligator to mind them.

He took another fit in my arms while I was catching Roley, and another on the ground while I was saddling up. Then I don't know how many more there were. Roley wasn't a fast horse but he was a stayer and we would have made the 19 miles in an hour and a half. We'd gone maybe 10 miles, perhaps 11, when the baby had another fit and right at the height of it everything stopped. I knew he'd gone.

I got down, holding him, and lay down with him behind some bushes. I don't know how long I was there. When I do remember again there was enough light, starlight I suppose, to see Roley, off a hundred yards grazing. I was lucky he'd been trained not to light out for home.

But I wasn't thinking of home. I could only think of the baby crying and talking, kissing him, closing his eyelids and then opening them up again, trying to push my tit into his mouth. You do strange things when you're by yourself at a death. I must have been there a long time. He began to get cold. I put him inside my clothes and caught Roley and went home.

The dog got up when I opened the door, but the boys were asleep with their arms round each other. It was near dawn. I got the spade and went out. It took me a long time to dig deep enough, being a dry year and my head full of strange fears out of things I'd read about vampires and wolves' claws digging him up. It was when I had finished and was making it all tidy that I suddenly felt the pains, and there was no mistaking what they were. I could have gone back, but what was the point? The kids would have woke and asked about their brother. All I could do was what the black gins do – scrape a hole in the ground and squat over it, waiting for what was to come to come. I would have given Roley and his saddle and bridle then for a sight of Black Mary, but there was nothing there but small trees and the dry ground and the grey light that said it was nearly sun-up.

It hurt me a lot for a little thing no bigger than a small peach with the stone out of it. I covered it up and went back, gathering sticks on the way, knowing I'd have a wet stove to work at before I could boil the kettle and start the day. But later, when I had the fire going and the children were fed and playing round the woodheap, what with the sadness and no sleep and the sick fancies I had about wolves and that, I went back and scratched the soil off the hole and took the thing back with me and lifted the lid of the stove and dropped it into the heart of the fire. I don't know why I did it.

That was the story I told Mr Lawson a long time afterwards, or at least the parts of it that were all right to tell a man. Funny the way he was more taken by a snake story, the sort that happens to everyone two or three times in a year. But that was the thing about him. Nervous. A nervous man who could never write about things as they really were but only about how they would have seemed to be if he'd been what he would have liked to be.

Gloomy, that, but I wanted to tell it just to show how wrong they are when they write about us. They don't understand the strength women have got – won't see it, because they think it takes away from them. Not that I'm gloomy much, far from it. Wasn't it the dentist said I had a silly streak? Well, fair enough, if that's his name for someone who laughs a lot and can see the funny side.

Mr Lawson could laugh himself when he felt at his ease and had half a pint of tanglefoot under his belt, but it's a funny thing about humorous men – they don't go much on other people's jokes, only liking to work them over into something funnier for themselves.

He said another thing that wasn't right; he said 'As a girl she built ... the usual air-castles, but all her girlish hopes and aspirations are dead. She finds all the excitement and recreation she needs in the *Young Ladies' Journal*, and, Heaven help her, takes a pleasure in the fashion-plates.'

Who says they're dead? Who thinks that hopes and aspirations have anything much to do with expectations? Even the hardest times don't stop your fancies, don't stop a woman being broody, trying to hatch out stones like an old hen we had when I was a kid. And times haven't all been hard, not by a long chalk.

Hardest thing of all for women is that everything they do is for undoing. It's not like sinking fence-posts or putting up a shed. *They'll* last, maybe 50 years if they don't get burnt. But the work a woman does hardly lasts a minute – if it's not mouths today it's moths or mould tomorrow, and

the whole lot's got to be done over again. You have to laugh sometimes at the way your hard work goes down people's throats or under their dirty boots. Either that, or lash out with the copper stick. Best to laugh if you can and get on with it.

Another thing; didn't he notice the hut was papered floor to roof with pages from the Bushman's Bible? Perhaps he thought I put them up and never looked at them again. I put them up for two reasons – they were all pieces that were worth keeping to read again, and because they were the best thing I had for teaching the boys something a bit better than the simple rubbish out of school readers. Well, for three reasons, the third being that the walls looked better covered than bare.

If he'd looked he would have seen one of his own *Bulletin* stories. There was *Telling Mrs Baker* stuck right along under the shelf we kept the plates on. His idea of a good woman – a fool who'd believe anything she was told even when the truth was plain in front of her face. But I had it up there for the words, and the beautiful way he had of using them.

That's something I got from my dad. He had a way with words and a great belief in them. He used to say, 'No one knows what's coming after you die, or if anything's coming at all. Best you can do is stuff your head with words and poems and things to think about, just in case that's all you're going to have to keep you happy for ever and ever.' Well, he's gone now, so he knows what the answer is. It makes me laugh to think of him up there somewhere, spouting out all those verses from the *Bulletin*, loud-voiced.

Come to think of it, if you count hymns I know a lot more than 73 poems. Some of them must be by poets. Only a poet could have thought of 'blinded sight.' It doesn't make any sense but it's beautiful enough for me to think of it six times a day. And the one that says 'Before the hills in order stood.' I like that. I suppose it's because all around here it's so flat and there's no hills to make you lift up your eyes. I suppose the best thing you could take with you when you die is some words you've put together yourself into a poem. But you try it; it's not as easy as it looks.

I wish they had more poems from women. I don't mean I like them just because they're women's poems, but some of them really get into the heart of things. Everyone says Mrs Browning but for me they're like men's poems, written on ruled lines. Christina Rossetti – there's a name. I wonder if it's made up, like *The Banjo* and *The Breaker* and *Ironbark* and the rest of

them. Not that she's in the *Bulletin*, but I bought a fourpenny *Goblin Market* once in Sydney. Something to think about in the next world, if my dad's right. And I know some others of hers, too. 'Sing no sad songs for me.' That's a fine poem, sad and funny too, if it means what I think it does.

The next one was Mr Drysdale. He did no harm, except to my vanity, which I wouldn't have if all my hopes and aspirations were dead. He knew the place, give him his due. He didn't sit down in George Street and try to imagine it. You can smell the dust and the ants squashed under your feet, and you can hear the crows when you look at it, even though they're not there. He made me into a black dress over a big belly. And the feet! Could have been size 11. And a soft look like butter wouldn't melt to my face. But he knew it; he knew how the ground reaches up into you.

Then there was Murray Bail. I never remember seeing him, though he may have called himself something different then. He doesn't sound like one from our part of the country – more like a cow cocky, from the river areas. He must've known the dentist, but. Don't think much of the company he keeps.

He never could tell the truth. He'd never come right out and tell an honest lie, just say enough to give the wrong idea and then never a word to put it right. Like him saying about me, 'How can you tell by a face? That a woman has left a husband and two children.' I'd left a husband, all right, and *his* children, which is a different thing. Isn't anything a woman can do blacker than leaving her own kids, and that's what he was trying to make you believe.

He was dirty man, the dentist – I didn't like him. I could tell what the night would be like by the way he came home. If his patients had been men, he'd come home wanting his tea. If they'd been women he'd come home with spit in the corners of his mouth and some of the things he wanted, in the dark with the blinds down, would've fetched him a bullet if he'd been an animal wanting them in the farmyard. Should've known, since that's the way I met him, over a rotten tooth that had to come out. Should have had more sense.

People said I'd never last, shut up in a backyard in a town. He had these two kids, poor little buggers. I was 16. Did what I could for them, them having no mother and him what he was. There were times I thought he was more than a bit mad – forever looking out to see who was looking in. He was very ignorant for all he had letters after his name and a brass plate. He

couldn't read more than half a page of a book without getting bored and coming on words that were too big for him. I never knew him read anything much except for the racing pages in the paper and the labels on bottles, to see whether they'd thought up a better germ-killer than the one before.

All my life I never knew anyone who worried so much about germs. He was frightened of flies the way most people are of crocodiles, and a bit of fruit that hadn't been washed or a moth falling into his soup would give him something to talk about for half an hour. He says I was quiet. Well, I was while I was with him. Day to day things are for doing, not talking about, and he had nothing else.

He couldn't abide to see me chop wood or dig a hole to bury a bit of rubbish or a runover dog from the street. He'd do it himself in his good clothes and his white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and his chin stuck up on his starched collar like a sick calf trying to look over a paling fence. Poor job he'd make of it. I never knew him ever put on old clothes for a bit of hard yakka. Too afraid people would see him and think he was used to it.

That he was no bushman you could tell from the stupid thing he said, when he used a magnifying glass on Mr Drysdale's picture to see if he could tell who it was I'd gone off with. He says, 'It's my opinion, however, that he's a small character. See his size in relation to the horse, to the wheels of the cart. Either that, or it's a ruddy big horse.' Any fool could see there were two horses, and that the waggon had a centre pole, not shafts. But that was him – couldn't see what didn't interest him.

That holiday he talks about, up over Port Augusta, that was a disaster. It was supposed to be for me. He never for a moment stopped grouching – the heat, the flies, the dust, the snakes, the flies, the blacks, the cattle, the flies. Frightened. His kids liked it though. He says we only saw the drover once, boiling up on one side of the track. Gordon wanted to know where his cattle were. The drover just waved his arm, gave a grin. He was half-miling them and the grin meant the half-mile had got stretched and they'd be eating someone's good grass four days or more before anyone could cut the travelling brands out from those that belonged to the place.

We'd seen him five days before, a few miles up, and that day too I'd had a mug of tea from his billy with Gordon wandering off, too afraid of germs and the look of the thing. We didn't say much – just enough for him to know the two kids weren't mine and me to know he'd make it into

Adelaide in a month with the cattle. It was how he looked – I knew he'd find me.

It's no surprise the dentist can't understand it. He could never see what it was about the country, so dry that days you could sit looking at it and your mouth would melt for the thought of a peach, maybe, or a tomato. He couldn't understand you could give up a board floor and a bit of carpet and some wax fruit under a glass bell for a shack with no floor at all in the kitchen and water that had to be carried half a mile when the tank ran dry. Lonely at times, yes, but it's quiet, and that's something.

There's more to a man than trimmed nails and a dark suit, and I'd rather have beer fumes breathed in my face than fancy pink mouth-wash.

He's never going to understand it, how I could find the drover superior. Put it down to my silly streak if you like, but we could *laugh*. We used to laugh over something or nothing, it didn't matter; just laughing because we felt good, because our skins liked each other, and our hair and teeth. Laughter doesn't last for ever any more than hair or teeth. But what I'm saying, when it all boils down and you've stopped laughing, he was a good man. Still is, even though his back's gone. And anyway, there are our kids, and bringing them up to know there are two or three more things in the world than how to break a horse and bring down a tree without smashing your fences.

Another thing he said, how a dentist can't afford to have shaky hands and how after I left him he sat for nights in the lounge with the lights out. Heart-rending, that is. Makes me laugh. The lights out and the blinds down too, I'll be bound, so's nobody passing could see the bottle on the table.

There's nothing better than rot-gut to give you a shaky hand next day, particularly if you're not eating right, and he'd never learnt to do for himself the way men learn in the bush. Truth is I worried about those kids of his when I'd left. Kay'd have been all right, but young Kev was a picky little kid, had a weak stomach.

After him, I thought I'd done with them talking about me, but then this Eyetie bloke. Dirty-minded. Hard to tell whether he's had his leg pulled or is trying to pull ours. I'll thank him all the same not to call me a sheep. You have to laugh, though. He's fallen for one of those stories they tell, round the fire. Voices carry a long way at night. I've heard worse than that. You can tell he's a foreigner by the words he uses, like 'interspecies reciprocity.' I had to first look it up and then sit and puzzle it out to mean taking a poke

at a sheep. Any backblocker would have come right out with it, in four letters.

But once you've puzzled it out all you've got is the old story about someone off on his own having to do with a sheep or a pig or a cow. Only when they tell it here it's not a drover, not one of their mates, it's a half-mad manager or some rotten overseer. I don't say it never happened; they say everything you can think of happened somewhere or some time. So they say. But it's not the drovers' way. I don't have to spell it out, do I, more than that he can count on his five fingers?

It's funny to think this Eyetie chap, Franco Casamaggiore, isn't really different from any of the rest of them. Truth is there are many sorts of men, all the same; only one sort of women, all different. We could be a lot fonder of them if only they'd admit how scared they are. Having their sex on the outside leads to a lot of boasting and worrying.

A lot of them cover it up by telling yarns. With our men it's some trollopy girl or a flash barmaid they took up with. With the Eyetalians it's animals. Same difference with the Greeks. It's rams with golden fleeces or it's white bulls or it's swans having their way with young girls. Our fellows don't go as far as that but often enough they talk about women as though they were animals – 'She's in pup,' they'll say, or 'She's running round Bourke like a slut on heat,' or 'Got to get home to the missus, she's due to drop her foal any minute.' Reason's plain enough; these are things you can own, use, brand – better or worse, batter or curse.

I'll say that for the drover, he doesn't talk about me as though I've got four legs and he doesn't think the way to praise a woman is to say she thinks like a man, acts like a man. Perhaps it's why I'm still with him, after so long. That, and the kids.

Worst thing ever happened to me was the day the baby died, losing two of them at once. And never knowing what it was I lost. Mary's black face came in at the door about a week later. I asked her about the thing I'd put in the fire, 'Inside ... little man ... all curled up,' she said. I'd never thought to look.

That started me dreaming. Dreams all mixed up with *Goblin Market* – golden head and long neck, dimples and pink nails. Laura like a leaping flame. One may lead a horse to water, 20 cannot make him drink. I would have called her Laura. More sensible to have called her Lizzie, for the sober sister. Put it down to my silly streak, if you like, but I would have called her

Laura, and hoped she'd have some wildness and wisdom, like Miss C. Rossetti. I suppose I dreamed that dream 20 times before I wore it out. Oh well, dreams go by opposites, they say. Chances are it would have been another boy.

What I meant was to tell not so much about me and the drover and the dentist and the rest of them but about how women have a history, too, and about how the Bushman's Bible and the other papers only tell how half the world lives. You ought to be able to put it down in two words, or 12, so people could remember. Women have a different history. Someone ought to write it down. We're not sheep or shadows, or silly saints the way Mr Lawson would have. There's more to us. More to me than any of them have written, if it comes to that.

The dentist was right about one thing, though. I'm not the drover's wife. Or only in the eyes of God if he's got any, if he's not another one with blinded sight.

First published in the Bulletin, December 1980

Barbara Jefferis AM (1917–2004) was born in Adelaide; she moved to Sydney to take up a job on the Daily News. After several years writing, mainly for radio, she wrote her first novel, Contango Day, to enter the 1953 Sydney Morning Herald competition for an unpublished novel. She was the joint winner, but the book was declined by Australian publishers. It was published in the USA and in Britain, as were the rest of her eight novels, leaving her relatively unknown at home.

Barbara's support for other writers was passionate. She joined the Australian Society of Authors (ASA) in its founding year, 1963, and was on its management committee for most of the rest of her life; she wrote their first book on Australian book contracts, was an important fighter in their successful campaigns for the establishment of the Copyright Agency, PLR and ELR, and was the first woman to chair the Society. The fee for the use of her story in this book has been donated to the ASA to continue Barbara's fight for fair remuneration of authors.

THE DROVER'S WIFE

MANDY SAYER

THERE WERE SEVERAL MISTAKES made, both in the composition of this picture, and all the stories my husband has been spreading about me over the years. Our last argument, for instance, was not about my weight, but about a black lace nightie. And this painting was not painted by Russell Drysdale, but by my husband, Gordon. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the woman in the painting is not the drover's wife. She is me.

I don't blame Russell. He always had a warm spot for Gordon. Loved his little pranks. This painting wasn't the first hoax they'd pulled off. Once the fifteen-year-old Drysdale and the sixteen-year-old Gordon made the crucifix in Geelong Grammar Chapel weep blood for twenty-four hours.

Besides the Drysdales and Gordon, only my daughter Kay knows the truth, and it is she who has urged me to reveal myself. When Kay writes, she likes to address me by my show name. I send her newspaper clippings now and again. Mostly from the country papers. She has kept them over the years in a leather-bound scrapbook. My son, Trevor, still writes to his mother: Mrs Gordon D. Brown.

The profession of Dentistry suited my husband well and, perhaps after he left me, gave him enough time to nurture his dormant imagination while gazing down the slender beam of his headlight and studying the brilliant architecture of some infected double abscess.

Sometimes I used to fantasise about Gordon donning his headlight, spreading my thighs with those smooth, professional hands of his, and coaxing that strong, slender beam into me – the hot bolt of yellow seething into that secret spot the women's magazines only discovered a couple of years ago.

I'm eighty-four years old now and I want to set the record straight before time makes me as silent as that woman in the painting.

Gordon had a persistent fondness for long, phallic instruments, but he always put them in the wrong places. Like in people's mouths. This painting thing he got into, I'm sure he wasn't obsessed with the potential of abstract expressionism or anything. No, it was the long wooden things with the horsehair bristles on the end that probably took his fancy, and the object of his desire was the pouting emptiness of a clean, stretched canvas.

I was always healthy, but not that fat. Gordon's desire, I think, was mostly attuned to that which was diseased – bleeding gums, exposed nerves. Look at the landscape he has placed me in – those thin, dead trees forking into the sky. He deliberately painted them like that in order to make me look even bigger.

But it's only the face which looks like me. Notice my right hand doesn't look like a hand at all, but a whopping back molar. A veritable wisdom tooth.

Gaze at the portrait again. Remove the hat. Put down the suitcase. Slim that woman down twenty or thirty pounds. Take off that sack he has her wearing and those bloody awful sandshoes. Put her in gold, slip-on sandals with two-inch heels, and an ankle-length black lace nightie. Put her auburn hair up in a French roll above the nape of her neck.

That was me in 1945.

I am not bitter. Nor am I silly. All art, perhaps, is motivated by an imperceptible thread of revenge.

In Gordon's continuing gossip, he is right about one thing: the portrait was painted shortly after we had parted. I'd bought the nightie with the change I'd saved from a year's housekeeping allowance. And I had insisted on wearing it to bed on the night of my thirty-second birthday.

I always thought your husband was sort of obligated to make love to you on your birthday, that it was a kind of given, like popping sixpences into the Christmas pudding, or giving silk on your twelfth wedding anniversary.

But not Gordon, no. After I put the children to bed, I changed in the bathroom. I used to spend a bit of time in there while the kids were at school. We had a long mirror hanging by the toilet.

I used to play Jack Teagarden on the gramophone and prance about in front of it in my silk petticoats. It was just something to fill in the afternoons. But I'd never worn anything as revealing as this nightie.

When I appeared in the bedroom doorway, Gordon hardly looked at me. He said it was silly to spend so much money on something you're only going to wear to bed. And anyway, my nightie would be crushed under the weight of the eiderdown. His hands never strayed from the open book of the latest anaesthesia study.

My husband always had a predilection for hoaxes. People only pretend to be other people when they don't like who they are. Like that Helen girl who was in the papers recently. Gordon took a fancy to wearing grey suits for a while there. He'd tell me to turn off the rack of lamb I'd been baking, or the meatloaf or whatever, and take me out to a nice restaurant in town. Dinner would be going along nicely – candlelight, a little white wine – until Gordon would get about halfway through his Steak Diane, wipe his mouth, and call over the head waiter. Then he'd pull out his wallet and produce one of his cards. He had lots of different ones in that little zip-up pocket. He used to get a deal from a printer on the other side of town for ordering in bulk.

He'd hold the card up to the waiter's incredulous face: *Gordon D. Bentley: Health Inspector*. And soon he'd be in the kitchen, investigating the stove tops, the cooking utensils, the number of electrical outlets. He'd walk about with a pad and pen, listing real or invented infringements, making the terrified manager tremble behind his pots of mashed potatoes.

But Gordon D. Bentley was a reasonable man. He'd always let the poor manager off with a warning. He'd return to the table to a fresh plate of Steak Diane and a complimentary bottle of wine. The bill, of course, was always torn up.

Gordon liked to do this a couple of times a year.

But he had all sorts of cards, declaring him everything from a brain surgeon to a professional ballroom dancer. And he knew just enough about each discipline to get him into trouble. Once, he lurched into an Irish Jig with an instructor from The Dance Emporium and ended up twirling her into the open arms of the Dental Association's eight-foot Christmas tree. The poor woman was reduced to a mountain of flashing lights and tinsel.

Well, Gordon used to hint that I was a bit off. *Hazel*, he'd say, *you've got a silly streak*. But, considering what I just told you, that's a bit like a skunk calling a dog smelly.

Sometimes I wished he'd dance with me.

There were, however, things I loved about my husband. The spicy odour of his singlet and shorts. How he'd walk through the door every night and say, *Hello Missus!* It was his way of being cavalier.

To set the record straight, I never ran off with a *drover*. Do you see any sheep in this painting, or a blue cattle dog? This is Gordon's little joke, of course. If that is supposed to be a drover in the background, he only has one sheep to look after, and she is decked out in sandshoes and a tent-of-a-dress and Gordon's gardening hat.

Yes, I admit it: I rather enjoyed chopping wood; I liked to carry my own shopping bags home rather than having them delivered. Is this a crime? Is it wrong for a good wife and mother to enjoy the scent of her own sweat?

Gordon never sweated. He perspired. And the only time Gordon perspired was when he was *Gordon T. Winkler: Professional Golfer and Coach*, striding across the course's green wasteland in his tartan knickerbockers. He certainly loved that Ping three-iron.

The trouble came to a head not long after my birthday. The Christmas holidays and Gordon wanted to paint landscapes *en plein air*. Yes, it was a camping holiday. We had two tents: one for the males and one for the females. After all, said Gordon, Kay is nearly eleven.

We drove North, toward the desert. Or, rather, I drove and Gordon sat beside me with a map blanketing his knees. Russell D. painted the desert and so must Gordon P. But the further we drove into its pale red monotony, the further he sank into his seat. The closest Gordon had ever come to nature was his visit to the Bellevue Golf Club.

But I – to coin a phrase – I was in my element. As the sun went down, I pointed my finger and named the features of my childhood: the yellow Billy Button flowers, the desert rats, the silver cassia pods, the noisy miner birds sucking up wild nectar.

Gordon shifted and cleared his throat when I said that. But I didn't care. I was educating the kids. I was explaining about the *stigma*, which is the section of the female organ of a flower that collects the pollen. The *stamen*, I explained, glancing in the rearview mirror at Kay, the *stamen* is the male organ of a flower; it has the pollen-carrying *anther* with a filament that holds it up.

Turn left here, said Gordon, staring through the wind-screen at the purpling horizon. That's right. Come on, it's getting dark.

He sat erect in his seat and directed us toward a campsite. But he kept changing his mind, circling us back and forth. It became so dark outside he finally exclaimed, Here! Stop here. This will do nicely.

But after we had pitched the tents and had bedded down in the male and female tents we were jolted awake by an eerie roar. Lights flashed and thunder rolled across the desert. The kids began screaming. At first, I thought we were in for a cyclone, but when I stuck my head through the fly I noticed that Gordon had pitched camp alongside the Adelaide–Port Augusta railway line.

We packed up and drove North-West, Gordon spouting directions, the children dozing in the back. We did not meet a drover, as he would have you believe. I finally spotted a covered wagon and two horses. There was a campfire and, beside it, a bowed, slender figure. The man was nice enough to share his billy tea. His voice reminded me of my mother's Dublin cadence. I broke out the rest of the curried egg sandwiches. Gordon pitched the tents again. Kay and Trev were still asleep in the back of the car.

Over the years, I have longed for my children, and used to wonder how they were growing up. But when you deny a need, it grows into an illness. Hunger into anorexia. Exhaustion into insomnia. Kay now has grandkids of her own. We talk on Sundays, when it's the cheaper rate. She visits in the holidays. Trev sends Christmas cards.

That night in the desert, Gordon refused to drink any of the billy tea. When he found out Liam was a side-show man – a snake charmer and exhibitor – all he could do was produce one of his cards: *Gordon C. Wentworth: Veterinary Surgeon*, and rattle on about how the venom from the milking of one tiger snake can kill one hundred and eighteen sheep.

Trev and Kay were still sleeping in the back. I decided not to move them again. Liam was fiddling about with the rigging at the end of his wagon. Gordon was still ruminating by the fire. I bade good night and changed into my nightie behind the car. Why did I bring it on a camping trip? Well, after that last argument, I couldn't very well parade around the house in it any more. The convent tents did have their advantages. As I slipped through the fly, I heard Gordon call that he'd be right there, as if we were at home and about to crawl into our old oak bed.

A kero lamp made shadows against the canvas walls. I lay on my side and dozed on top of my sleeping bag. Soon I could hear Gordon next door, unsnapping his suspenders, gargling with lemon mouthwash. And,

predictably, not five minutes had passed before that God of gold fillings and veterinary trivia, Gordon D. Brown, was reduced to the soft, anxious snoring which defined one third of his life.

But it wasn't long before his sleep-song waned and drifted away. And the steady rhythm of Liam's boots faded into the night. It's a silence that hums and gets into your blood, a stillness that can invite a madness or two if you don't listen to it right. Like that baby and the dingo.

I slipped into the silence. It wrapped its long limbs around me and drew me in. Away from the fire, I was suddenly cold, though I was too tired to crawl into my sleeping bag, and was only vaguely aware of my nipples rising against the lace of my long black gown. I slumbered into the dry earth, her wide, dark mouth. Languished in her grip. Perhaps I was dreaming. Someone was whistling out there in the desert. The rising hair on my arms made my skin tingle. Breath rushed into my lungs and buried itself inside me. Filling me up. The silence humming a tune between my ribs, or was it Liam's dulcet tune?

A most unusual experience, almost hypnotic. My hips began rocking to the music, circling the current. I did not quite recognise myself. My head lolled against a tussock. I inhaled that song which wove its way around my tent.

When I opened my eyes and looked across, I saw it coiled around my arm and slithering into an undulating path around my breasts, the reddish scales creating a kaleidoscope current across my stomach's lacy bed.

The black head slid on, like an inquisitive finger. I lifted my arms and it coiled into the half-light between one wrist and another. Spiralling around my elbow. It was like being licked by a long, thick tongue.

But then it tightened its grip, and was pulling me up. Coiling back around my wrist towards the tent's canvas ceiling, as if there were a desert rat nesting on the rope. And all the while my hips can't stop circling to the desert's relentless howl. I swayed from side to side, rising to my feet, the tongue darting between my fingers, hands, and down, down the back of my neck, around my breasts. I knew at the time it was most unconventional, but, to be perfectly honest, I did not want it to stop. I used to practise in front of the mirror when Gordon was at work. I used to round my shoulders and allow the straps of the silk petticoat to slip down. The creature paused on my left breast, scales glinting against the bugle-beaded edging. Did that cry escape my mouth, or did I merely dream it?

I gripped one of the tent poles. It was nudging its way down between my ribs. A giant's forefinger. Probing me: Hazel Brown. Sliding over my navel, and on, just a fine curtain of black lace between me and the cool, damp scales.

When I looked up, I saw Gordon's terrified face hovering in the open fly of the tent, red and glowing with shock.

It was the only time I ever saw my husband lost for words. He had no card to produce, no alias to help him cope.

He simply turned and ran. I heard the car door slam. He got in the car and drove away with the kids still in the back.

It was only a black-headed python. Five-and-a-half feet. With a cold belly. Completely non-venomous.

Gordon painted the snakes into the crooked black trees, Drysdale only signed it. Russell never went in for pastel skies. It's not an Aborigine in the background. That is Liam feeding the horses. Where are we? South Australia? Queensland? Gordon would have seen us in the papers. We opened for Houdini's second cousin in Broken Hill in 1945. Maybe it's Queensland. But you could never find that spot. And I am in the foreground, swollen with a desire my husband could never quite dull into the brown brushstrokes of the desert.

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Mandy Sayer is a teacher, poet and writer of fiction and non-fiction. Her most recent book is Australian Gypsies: Their Secret History.

THE DROVER'S WIFE

DAVID IRELAND

The Art Gallery:

You have on display to the public a portrait of my mother Dorrie pictured after she was paid up and about to leave Gooligum Station with the few possessions left her after the desertion of her first husband Clarrie.

Clarrie was never a real bushie, just had hallucinations of competence. Mum had to give him directions, correct his mistakes, instruct him in all sorts of elementary things about stock and life on the road, but the real problem was he was bone lazy. Any excuse for a drink and a mag. His favourite speed was stop. He'd have made a great sun-worshipping lizard, she said. He gravitated to other deadbeats, men who'd never saved a penny in their lives. She realized she'd made a big mistake getting married to a man who talked a lot, spouted bush poetry, and wanted to be thought a good bloke among a mob of drinkers, even if it meant a beer biff now and then.

Their last job for Gooligum was droving a mob of sheep to Coonamble. Well short of 'Namble they were joined by a younger man. Mum christened him Treacle, since he was brown and she felt there was something sticky about him. He rode up one Saturday afternoon to their camp on the banks of the Castlereagh. He and Clarrie got on like a house on fire. He'd brought rum in his saddle bags, and Mum had to watch while they got drunk together.

That night she slept alone, feeling disgusted and deserted. Even the darkness felt treacly. She heard their voices into the night, rubbing together like angular pieces of blue metal. On Sunday, after attending to the horses, dogs and sheep, she went looking for Clarrie and found him in the bush with Treacle, both nauseatingly naked and half dead with ecstasy in what she expressed as a compromising position. She would never elaborate. Could have been anything from erogenous tinkering, through the

astronaut's position, to volcanic orgasm, I guess. How would I know? They were a different generation.

She made her feelings known to the pair, though she wasn't entirely sure of them herself, and the lovers ended up riding side by side back north towards Walgett. Mum was alone. She got the mob moving, thanks to the dogs, and had no trouble until Clarrie and Treacle crept back into view like recurring errors. Clarrie tried in fits and starts to do his bit, but Treacle was on his mind and several times a day they'd just ride off into the bush and go to ground.

But when they got up to their tricks right there in the camp, doing with nerve-wracking thoroughness and enthusiasm what came naturally, she took the whip to them both and off they shot bare-arsed into the dawn.

Mum left their things where they dropped them, took half the rations, and got going alone. She never saw them again. It was a good cheque she had in her little case in the picture, money from the previous three jobs.

At Dubbo she got a job in a pub, did the dining room, and was such a good worker that she finally married Dad, who was the publican.

Uncle Russ used to visit every few years. I loved the time he spent with us. Each time he came and Dad said How are you? he'd say I'd hate to be OK and feel like this. He taught me his special arithmetic: troubles multiply, friends subtract, happiness divides, then he said take no notice of an old fool. I remember Adam and Eve. He said they were communists: they had no clothes, only had apples to eat and thought they were in paradise. He painted *The Drover's Wife* picture when I was a boy. It was meant to be a joke. Dad and I didn't think much of it. Old Russ liked desolate landscapes. They sold extra well with the people he wanted to impress, but Gooligum's nothing like that. The house has great shade, with three fine oaks and two old elms, and basket willows along the creek. The shearers' quarters can sleep six, there are twin silos, stockfeed hoppers, and a big machinery shed, as well as tennis court and airstrip.

Mum's gone now. I know she was disappointed in me. She'd have liked grandchildren, but she never once, by so much as a word or a look, hurt my feelings or Rodney's, or expressed the slightest disapprobation. I think she sometimes made herself feel better by thinking of him as a second son.

The old uncle Russ and his shaggy jokes. He knew Clarrie was useless. I just want to set the record straight. Mum was no drover's wife: Mum was the drover.

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David Ireland AM has won the Miles Franklin Award three times. His most recent novel, his first in eighteen years, is The World Repair Video Game.

PART THREE

**‘DROVER’S WIFE’ COMMENTARIES
(INCLUDING FRANCO CASAMAGGIORE)**

THE DROVER'S WIFE

FRANK MOORHOUSE

A paper from a Conference on New Writings in English in Milan presented by the Italian student Franco Casamaggiore

The writing of a story called 'The Drover's Wife', by Henry Lawson, in 1892, the painting of a picture called *The drover's wife*, by Russell Drysdale, in 1945, and the writing of another story by the same name, in 1975, by Murray Bail, draws our attention to what I will argue, in this paper, is an elaborate example of a national culture joke, a joke which has forced its way into high art, unknown perhaps to the artists, they being of course simply 'the instrument in the hand of God' (see Derrida et al.). It is a national culture joke for the people of Australia. Each of these works has the status of an Australian classic and each of these works, I will show, contains a joking wink in the direction of the Australian people which they curiously, I suspect, only dimly understand. Or if they do understand, they are not prepared to tell outsiders of it, to share it with a scholar such as myself. More of this later. A word on the subject of 'canon' (see Felperin et al.). These three works are canon works and as such are culturally selected, for good or for ill, to 'speak' for the culture. All cultures have a need for artworks which speak on their behalf. The cultures do not always understand what is being said on their behalf, at least what is being said on all levels. This is not a problem which concerns me today, it characterises all cultures, the artworks being made serve the role of revelation, the role of ornamentation, and role of concealment. Art also *buries shame* until scholarship disinters it.

It is also fascinating because these works are an example, I will argue, of the cunning folk appropriation of the high art, of those without a voice, claiming a voice through high art. A strategy of subversion (see Eagleton et al.).

The joke in these works under discussion draws on the colloquial Australian humour surrounding the idea of a drover's 'wife'.

First, a few notations of background for those who are unfamiliar with Australian folklore and the occupation of drover, which is a corruption of the word 'driver'. The drover or driver of sheep literally drove the sheep to market. The sheep, because of health regulations governing strictly the towns and cities of Australia, were kept many kilometres inland for the sea-market ports. The sheep had then to be 'driven' by the driver or drover from inland to the towns, often many thousands of kilometres, taking many months. I am told that this practice has ceased, and the sheep are now housed in the cities in high-rise pens.

The method of driving the sheep was that each sheep individually was placed in a wicker basket, on the backs of bullock-drawn wagons known as the woollen wagons. This preserved the sheep in good condition for the market. These bullocks, I am told, could pull the sheep to the coast without human guidance, if need be, the bullocks being guided by the smell of the sea (source see below: conversation with author). But the sheep had to be fed and it was the occupation of the drover or driver to give water and seed to the sheep during the journey.

The wagon in the Drysdale painting is horse-drawn, denoting a poorer peasant-class of drover. The wagon in the painting would probably hold a thousand sheep in wicker baskets (source: conversation with author).

Now the length of the journey and the harshness of conditions precluded the presence of women and the historical fact is that for some time there were no women in this pioneering country and certainly too few to meet the needs of men during the Settlement period. This historically preconditioned the Australian male culture to a gender blindness, preventing them from granting a cultural space to 'women' when women eventually came. The Australian male culture is forever looking 'outback', a rear-sightedness (see Kristeva et al.). The Lawson story is an attempt to claim cultural space for a woman.

Understandably, these early conditions led men to seek other solace in this strange, new country. Australian historians acknowledge the closeness of men under this condition of pioneering and have described it as mateship, or a pledging of unspoken alliance between two men, a marriage with vows unspoken (Ward, Clark, Hughes et al.).

What historians have not been able to incorporate in their description is the special relationship which naturally grew between the drover or driver and his charges, who became an object for emotional and physical drives. This remains unacknowledged for reasons of national revisionist ideology, but is widely acknowledged by the folk culture of Australia, which is without ideology (as formally recognised, more correctly pre-ideological) and without inhibition or morality. Historians were especially blinded by sexual inhibition. I talk of *interspecies reciprocity*.

I foresee that as a Green ideology takes hold in Australia there will be a rewriting of this phase into the national history, which will celebrate interspecies reciprocity, as it is now beginning to celebrate women, hitherto lost to Australian history.

This interspecies reciprocity meantime has to force its entry from oral culture to high culture via coded humour and, until this paper, has been a subject absent from academic purview. If I am wrong, I stand corrected.

I elicited the first inklings of this interspecies reciprocity from answers received to questions asked of Australian visitors to Italia about the sheep droving. First, I should explain. Unfortunately, I am a poor student, living in a humble two-room *turgurio*. It is a necessity for me to work in the bar of the Hotel Principe e Savoia in Milano. If the authorities would provide funds for education in this country, maybe Italia would regain its rightful place at the forefront of world culture. I wander from my point. This experience in the bar work gave me the opportunity on many occasions to talk and question visiting Australians, almost always men. Though Australian women, when questioned, also confirm my hypothesis. More so.

There is an Australian humour of the coarse peasant type not unknown in Italia. Without becoming involved in these details it is necessary for me to document some of the information harvested from contact with the Australian, not having been to the country at first hand – thanks to the insufficiency of funds provided by educational authorities in Italia. My brother Giovanni is living in Adelaide, but scoffs at my letters, and is no help in such matters, knowing nothing of the droving or culture and knowing only of the price of things and the Holden automobile. Knowing nothing of the things of the spirit. You are wrong, Giovanni, wrong.

To continue: my Australian informants tell me that a rubber shoe or boot, used when hunting in wet weather, called the *gum boot* – gum being the soft tissue of the mouth – was used by the drovers or drivers and found

to be a natural love aid while at the same time a symbol used in a gesture of a voluntary, emotional submission of the drover before his charge – a respect was born.

The boots were placed on the hind legs of the favoured sheep. The drover would be shoeless like the sheep and the sheep would ‘wear the boots’ (cf. ‘wearing the pants’ in marriage). The toe of the boots would be turned towards the drover, who would stand on the toes of the boot, thus holding the loved sheep close to him in embrace. These details suffice.

According to my Australian informants in the Hotel Principe e Savoia, the sheep often formed an emotional attachment to the drover, who often reciprocated. The sheep could recognise her lover and vice versa – hence, it became, for the sheep, a wifely relationship, and for the drover, her carer, a husbandly role.

The journey to the coast had its inherent romantic tragedy. The long journey and shared hardship, shared shelter, the kilometres of companionship, as the drover sat on the seat of the wagon with his beloved sheep-wife beside him, daily took them closer to the tragic conclusion with the inevitable death of the loved one through the workings of capitalist market forces. But also the return of the drover’s natural drives towards his own species as he re-entered the world of people. And the world of the anti-life Church.

Comes the question: ‘why not dogs?’ Close questioning of my Australian sources suggests that having dogs as bed companions was characteristic of the Aboriginal and thus for reasons of racial prejudice considered beneath the Australian white man. I would also add that the sheep, which came originally from England, was a link with the homelands from whence the drover had migrated, and further, I speculate that the maternal bulk of the merino sheep, with its woolly coat, large soft eyes, and its comforting bleat, offered more feminine solace than the lean dogs with fleas.

Again, on this and other matters, my brother Giovanni is of no assistance, being concerned only with his Holden automobile and the soccer football. The unimaginative reactions of the educational authorities to my applications for research funding for this project indicts the system of education in Italia.

Returning now to the artworks under study. In Henry Lawson’s story the woman character lives out her life as if she were a sheep. She is not given a

name – in English animal husbandry it is customary to give cows names (from botany) and domestic pets are named, but not sheep.

The scholar Keith Thomas says that a shepherd, however, could recognise his sheep by their faces. My informants assure me that endearments would have been spoken by the drover during the act of love.

Lawson has ‘penned’ his female character in an outback fold, unable to go anywhere. Her routines of the day resemble closely the life of a sheep, and it can be taken that this is a literary transformation by Lawson for the sake of propriety. Or, as with all works of art, it could be that Lawson was unaware of the story he was truly telling.

But I would argue that because Lawson is closer to the facts of pioneering life, he is the only one of the three auteurs under discussion who knew what he was saying. He alone is the ironist. The other two auteurs – Drysdale and Bail – having come much later, were, I suspect, not conscious of the *essential story* being told, they being already victims of suppressed history.

Robert Hughes the historian, in his book *The Fatal Shore*, points out the following historical information of which Bail and Drysdale were not aware. *Numero uno*: the first ship to bring sheep to the shores of Australia was called the *Friendship*; *numero due*: Hughes notes that many of the first male convicts to that country were convicted of illegal relations with sheep. This is decisive evidence about the beginnings of the historical practice.

In the Lawson story the drover’s ‘wife’ tells how she was taken to the city a few times in a ‘compartment’ of a train, as was the sheep in the woollen wagons. In the story, in the absence of her drover husband, she is looked after by a dog, as is a sheep. The climax of the Lawson story is the ‘killing of the snake’ – interpretation of which needs no Doctor Freud – being the expression of a castration-rage by the wife/sheep at her husband’s absence. In Australia, many lethal snakes roam the countryside as protected animals, and the male genitalia is referred to in Australian folklore poetically as the ‘one-eyed trouser snake’. I am told that to this very day, Australian men are forever ‘killing the snake’ – a savage, sex-negative, slang expression containing a sexual-guilt – and their sexual life is still wounded by a fear of exposure of their historical sexual relationships with sheep.

In the Drysdale painting (1945), oddly, and fascinatingly, there are *no sheep*. We realise, uneasily, that it is as if the sheep have been swept up into

a single image overwhelming the foreground – the drover’s ‘wife’. This unusually shaped woman is, on second glance, in the form of a sheep, a merino sheep, the painter having given her the same maternal physical bulk as the merino. Her shadow forms the shape of a sheep. Again, the drover is all but absent. He is a background smudge – as is the history of the male sexual relationship with sheep; it is reduced culturally to a *smudge*.

The snake, you ask? In the trees we find the serpents. They writhe before our eyes. The continent of writhing serpents.

Murray Bail is an outstanding, modern Australian, long removed from the days of pioneering and droving. However, his biographical notes reveal that his father was a drover. Our academic discipline requires us to disregard this biographical fact when considering his work of art. In his contemporary story he pays homage both to the Drysdale painting and the Lawson story, albeit in a covertly subversive, modernist manoeuvre. In the Bail story the woman is referred to as having one defining characteristic, what author Bail calls a ‘silly streak’. This is a characteristic traditionally ascribed to sheep (cf. ‘woolly minded’). The woman in this Bail story, or precisely the ‘sheep image’, wanders in a motiveless way; strays, as it were, away from the city and her dentist husband. Curious it is to note that she flees the man whose work it is to care for the teeth which are the instruments used to eat the sheep; thus, for the sheep, the teeth are symbols of death.

Recall the journey from the inland paradise in the protection of a loving drover to the destination of death in the city slaughterhouse and, finally, destruction by the teeth of the hungry city.

In the Bail story the woman flees from the arms of her eternal enemy, the dentist, the one who cares for the predator’s teeth, into the arms of the natural protector, the drover. The Bail story reverses the tragedy and turns it into a modernist comedy. Again the drover himself is absent from the story. The Bail story also has a ‘killing of the snake’.

So. In all three works of high art under discussion we have three women clearly substituting for sheep, initially for reasons of propriety, and then as an artful affirmation of ‘female absence’ still in their culture. The works are unconsciously coded in such a way as to lead us, through the term ‘drover’s wife’, back into the folk culture to its jokes – and to an historical truth.

And we note that in the three works there is virtually no drover. This is a reversal of situation, an inside-out truth, for we know historically that

there was a drover but, historically, there was *no wife* in the conventional meaning of the word.

The question comes: given that the drover has a thousand sheep in his care, how did the drover choose, from that thousand, just one mate? This question, intriguing and bizarre at the same time, was put to my Australian sources in the bar. Repeatedly, I also asked Giovanni to question the men at the GMH factory, but he has a head that is too full of consumerism to concern himself with exploration of the mythology of his new adopted culture.

How was the sheep chosen? As in all matters of the human emotion the answer is blindingly plain. It was explained to me that it is very much like being in a crowded lift, or in a prison, or on board a ship. In a situation of confinement it is instinctive for people to single out one another from the herd. There is communication by eye, an eye-mating, the search for, firstly, a potential mate. The same it is with sheep. My Australian sources tell me that in the absence of human company, the male eye wanders across species, the eyes meet, the eyes and the ewes (that is an English language pun). When hearing an Australian advertisement on television with Paul Hogan, I, at first, because of my poor grasp of the Australian accent, thought he was saying, as a traditional greeting, the expression, 'Good-Eye Mate'.

Yes, and the question comes: was I being fooled about by these Australian visitors and their peasant humour after they had drunk perhaps too much? Was I being 'taken in' as they, the Australians, say? I ask in return – were the Australian visitors, with their sheep-sex jokes, telling more than they knew or even wanted to tell? The joking is a form of truth-telling, even a form of confession. They were also, by joking with my questions, as I bring them beers, and wipe their table, in my white apron, with pleasing smile, trying to make me *look away* from my secret academic inquiry. They were trying to joke away something that was too painfully embarrassing to be admitted as serious. They were also telling me what they did not wish me to tell – did not wish for an outsider to know. But they were telling without themselves *being a listener*, for the joker cannot hear the truth within the joke. They chose also to believe that I was not able to 'hear' the meaning of the joke.

I think that they also experienced an undefined relief by their joking about such matters – that is, the relief of which comes even from

unconscious confession.

I let them joke at me for it was the joke to which I listened – not them. This is the manoeuvre of the national joke, the telling and the not-telling at the same time. So yes, I was being ‘taken in’ by my Australian sources – *taken in* to their secret.

We learn that humour has within it the three dialogues. The surface dialogue is between the teller and the listener, where the teller is seeking approval by the giving of the gift of a joke. The second dialogue is between the teller’s unconscious mind and his voice, the joke to which the teller cannot always listen. Thirdly, there is a dialogue between the joke-teller and the racial memory, which is embodied in the language and the type of joke the teller chooses (from among thousands) to tell, again a joke which the teller cannot hear – the well of humour from which the joker must draw his bucket of laughter.

Humour is the underground route that taboo material – or material of national shame – must travel.

Today such relations between sheep and men are, of course, rare in Australia. However, the racial memory of those stranger and more primitive days – days closer, can we say, to nature and a state of grace – still lingers.

It is present in a number of ways. As illustrated, it is present in the elaborate cultural joke of high art. The art which winks. It is present in the peasant humour, of the male Australian especially, the joke which confesses. It is present, I would argue (here I work from photographs and cinema) in the weekly folk ritual called ‘mowing the lawn’ (also male slang for sexual intercourse with a woman – the lawn being the pubic hair). On one afternoon of the weekend the Australian male takes off grass from his suburban garden, which in earlier times would have been fodder for the sheep – this is an urban ‘hay-making ritual’, Australian city man’s last connection with agriculture.

But, alas, his sheep is gone, and the grass, the hay, is burned, to a memory of an association all but forgotten.

Finally, I am told (thank you Giovanni, at last, and thank you Julieanne Lamond, a brilliant Australian student whom I met in the bar of the Hotel Principe e Savoia) that there are two Australian national artefacts – the sheepskin with wool attached and the ugg boot. The sheepskin is used as a seat cover in the automobile. Today the Australian driver or drover of a car sits (or lies) with a sheep, as it were, under him, while driving not a flock of

sheep but his family in a modern auto. The ugg boot is a sheepskin turned inside-out to make a warm and comforting boot.

Both artefacts give comfort through racial memory far exceeding the need for warmth in that temperate land. The car sheepskin seat-cover and the ugg boot are both emotional trophies from the sexual underworld of the Australian male past.

The artefacts which remember.

Naturally, all this is still not an open subject for academic explicitness in Australia and it is only here in Italia that such candour can be enjoyed with our perspective from a history going back centuries and hence our world knowledge of such things. However, I foresee that as acceptance comes through the philosophy of the Green movement, this sexual past will be honoured.

Consequently, I say to Australia – be not ashamed of that which is bizarre, seek not always the genteel. Remember that we, the older cultures, have myths which also acknowledge such happenings of interspecies reciprocity (cf. Jason and the Search for the Golden Fleece).

See it as an affirmation of the beautiful Green truth – that we share the planet with animals and we are partners, therefore, in its destiny.

First published in the Bulletin, January 1980

RESPONSES TO FRANCO CASAMAGGIORE

LETTER TO THE GENERAL MANAGER OF THE ABC

Post Office
Coolangatta

To The General Manager
ABC
Sydney

Dear Sir,

I wish to enlighten you as to what is going on over the air, as I am certain you will not stand for it.

On Wednesday night I switched on to radio station 2NR a programme, I think, coming from Sydney, portraying among other things Henry Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife' and Russell Drysdale's painting 'The Drover's Wife'.

The Narrator was introduced as Professor someone and was stated to be an Italian who himself claimed to have worked in bars. This is how it went.

According to this Italian early Australian Drovers were so short of women that they had affairs with sheep ...

... I switched off then – I couldn't stand any more I am so annoyed now 2 days later that I have a job to write.

I am an old drover of sheep and cattle and many of my friends are. I am married with children and grandchildren. These people need kicking out. I've never heard anything so vile and distasteful.

They should never be allowed near a broadcasting microphone to misrepresent decent men and women of Australia.

Sincerely (name withheld)

LETTER TO THE *BULLETIN*

THAT'S WHAT YOU SAY

The Drover's Wife

I refer to the article which appeared in the Centenary Edition of the *Bulletin*, page 160. The article in question is a transcription of a paper on Australian culture given 'excitedly' by an Italian student, one Franco Casamaggiore, at a recent conference on Commonwealth writing in Milan.

Without wishing to pour cold water on any excited students, I do however, wish to draw attention to some obvious fallacies regarding the interpretation of Henry Lawson's story 'The Drover's Wife' presented in this article and therefore at the conference in Milan. Incidentally Mr Lawson's story also appears in this edition of the *Bulletin*, page 257.

Firstly, it is claimed that the woman character lives her life 'as if she were a sheep. She is penned up in her outback fold, unable to go anywhere. Her routines of the day resemble closely the life of a sheep and it can be taken that this is a literary transformation for the sake of propriety. She tells in the story how she was taken to the city a few times in a compartment, as is the sheep. She is looked after by a dog, as is the sheep.'

This is an over-simplification. She is not penned up. She has no buggy, but she has a horse and if she wanted to leave she could. She stays because she is loyal, not because of any fences. Every Sunday she and the children dress up and go for a ritual stroll along the bush track. The bush is vast and sometimes it depresses her, but she is not penned up by it. And how do her daily routines resemble those of a sheep? I have never yet seen a sheep preparing and cooking food; washing or mending clothes or sweeping the floor, let alone reading the *Young Ladies' Journal*. Furthermore I think it highly unlikely that the sleeping compartment of the railway carriage which her husband hired for her trip to the city could be compared to a sheep pen on the same railway even though the occasional grumblings of railway travellers of the day might do so. She and the dog are companions – surely the dog can be a woman's friend as well as a man's. Very different from the working sheepdog.

The article continues ... 'The climax of the Henry Lawson story is the "killing of the snake" which needs no Doctor Freud, being the expression of

a savage and guilt-ridden male detumescence. I am told that to this day, Australian men are forever killing the snake’.

I do not wish to wallow in the mud of Doctor Freud and his followers’ psychological trappings but would just point out that it would seem only common sense for this lady to attempt to dispose of a critter such as the snake in question. I am told that there are people who keep snakes as pets and in fact give them the freedom of the house, but I have not met any.

Finally the paragraph ends with ... ‘The drover is absent from the story, a point to be taken up later.’ The point is indeed taken up later with the words ‘And we note that ... there is no drover. This is a reversal of situation, an inside-out truth, for we know historically that there was a drover but there was historically no wife, not in any acceptable conventional sense.’

But of course there was no drover in the story. The title of the story is ‘The Drover’s *Wife*’. The drover was simply off somewhere droving and his wife remained at home. Just as there are many women today who keep the home together while their husbands are working in Antarctica or Papua New Guinea or simply in prison.

Henry Lawson was usually fair and even sympathetic in his attitude to Australian pioneer women, and did not mistake them for sheep, at least in his literature. Which is more than can be said for a mob of excited Italian students.

Boronia Park, NSW
(name withheld)

LETTER FROM CHINESE STUDENT

Wuhan University
April 14 1984

Respected Suzanne Kiernan,

How do you do? We are strangers to each other, so I should first briefly introduce myself to you. I'm a teacher at Wuhan University, who studied for two years at La Trobe University in Melbourne from 1980 to 1982.

Recently I read the leading magazine of Australia 'the *Bulletin*' in which I came across some problems I can't resolve by myself. That's why I'm writing this letter to you, and I sincerely hope you can give me reply (or the key to the questions I ask) at your earliest convenience. My questions arise from my reading of the following two passages (or notes by the editors):

1. 'Note: A number of European and American universities are now studying literature written in English from the former colonies of the British Empire. This new literature from India, Africa, Canada, Malaysia, the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand and Australia is known as Commonwealth literature.
'This is a transcription of a paper on Australian culture given, excitedly, by an Italian student Franco Casamaggiore, at a recent conference on Commonwealth Writing in Milan. It comes to us from writer Frank Moorhouse and we acknowledge also the inspired assistance of *Suzanne Kiernan* of the Department of Italian, University of Sydney.' (From 'the *Bulletin*', 29 January 1980, p.160.)
2. 'For the *Bulletin* Centenary Issue earlier this year, Frank Moorhouse supplied a transcript of a paper on Australian culture allegedly delivered by an Italian student, Franco Casamaggiore, to a conference on Commonwealth writing in Milan. The excitable Signor Casamaggiore outlined the implications of the Drover's Wife as seen by Henry Lawson, Russell Drysdale and Murray Bail. Here, Barbara Jefferis, journalist, author and former president of the Australian Society of Authors, presents the female side of the picture.' (From the *Bulletin*, 1980. 12. 23-30, p.156.)

Now I have four questions arising from the words underlined in red to ask:

1. What does 'transcription' mean? Does it mean 'translation from Italian to English' or 'a mere copy in the same language'?
2. What does 'excitedly' or 'excitable' mean? Why did the editor say Franco Casamaggiore is 'excitable' or 'excited'?
3. Does 'student' mean 'a person who's studying at school(s) and not yet a graduate'? Or 'a scholar' or 'a person who's a researcher'?
4. Why is the word 'allegedly' used? Are the words in the first quoted passage true or not?

Best wishes to you
from Guo Zhuzhang

LETTER FROM SUZANNE KIERNAN TO
CHINESE STUDENT

The University of Sydney
Sydney 2006
New South Wales
Australia

Department of Italian
11 May 1984

Dear Guo Zhuzhang,

I was very interested to receive your letter in which you ask me if I can throw some light on problems you have encountered in the matter of a piece of writing attributed to one Franco Casamaggiore in the *Bulletin*.

I think I should tell you what I believe you already suspect – that this is a joke on the part of the writer Frank Moorhouse, whose name has been ‘Italianised’ (with a little semantic liberty) to become ‘Franco Casamaggiore’. This was the full extent of what was described as my ‘inspired assistance’ in the introductory remarks, which are the author’s own, and are part of the fiction. (In Italian, ‘casa’ = ‘house’, and ‘maggiore’ = ‘more’ – homophonous with ‘moor’, while not, of course, having the same meaning.)

The use of the words ‘excitedly’ and ‘inspired’ which you single out in the original story by Frank Moorhouse has the function of signalling to the reader that the writer’s intention is ironic and satiric, and that what follows is not necessarily to be taken at face value. The (pseudo) information that the story ‘comes to us from writer Frank Moorhouse’ is knowingly ambiguous, since it could mean that he is simply transmitting it from another source, or that it ‘comes from’ him in that he is its originator.

Thus the story by Frank Moorhouse isn’t a literary hoax in the manner of the famous ‘Ern Malley’ case (which as a scholar of Australian letters you will doubtless be familiar with), but a joke, whose intention is to amuse rather than deceive. And Barbara Jefferis’s use of the word ‘allegedly’ in her rejoinder to the original story indicates that she wishes to write in the same spirit of fun.

Although I teach in a Department of Italian, my interest in Australian literature is by no means secondary, and I would be very interested to hear at some future date about what you are doing in Australian studies at Wuhan University.

With best wishes,
Suzanne Kiernan

THE ORIGINALITY OF HENRY LAWSON

RYAN O'NEILL

The *Bulletin* Style and Australian Short Fiction

For many critics the modern Australian short story began in the pages of the *Bulletin*, specifically in the last decade of the nineteenth century.¹ The importance of the *Bulletin* in the development of the Australian short story cannot be overstated. As Ken Lewis notes, almost all significant Australian writers of the time were associated with the journal in some way. The first issue of the *Bulletin* appeared in January 1880 and contained journalism, cartoons, illustrations, and verse. In the first year of the journal only two short stories were published. This number grew to thirty-four stories in 1889,² but it wasn't until the 1890s that short stories became an integral part of the journal. The founding editors of the *Bulletin* were J. F. Archibald and John Haynes, but it was A. G. Stephens who had the greatest influence on the form and content of the fiction published in its pages. Stephens has been described as 'perhaps the most influential man of letters in the history of Australian writing'³ and realism was his preferred style. In the same way that Émile Zola had used social realism in his fiction as a flag-waver for social and political reform,⁴ Stephens intended to use realism in the pages of the *Bulletin* as a way of constructing a distinctly Australian nationalist literary identity and style.

Stephens recognised that Australian fiction had, until that point, been only nominally Australian, declaring, 'The literary work which is Australian in spirit, as well as in scene or incident, is only beginning to be written.'⁵ Writing in the Red Page of 25 June 1898, Stephens rejected the idea that Australian literature should slavishly follow English literary modes, and argued instead for a wider, international outlook with which to create a national literature.⁶ From 1888, the *Bulletin* published many translations of Maupassant short stories, intending his realist style to serve

as a model for local writers.⁷ At the same time, there was a marked increase in the number of volumes of short fiction and anthologies being published, with forty collections from 1887 to 1894,⁸ though how much of this was due to the *Bulletin's* influence is difficult to determine.

The editors of the *Bulletin* consciously set out to create a new Australian literary tradition which would deal with explicitly Australian themes, drawing from an international literary tradition modelled on such writers as Balzac and Maupassant, rather than an English focus. They had clear ideas of the kinds of stories they were looking for, and expressed their preferences to readers, and potential contributors in the Red Page of the journal. The emphasis was firmly moved from the romance, the gothic and crime story to the realistic story of Australian life. Overt moralising and authorial intrusion were discouraged.⁹ If a story was too long, or had too many incidents, Archibald was always ready with editorial suggestions to 'boil it down' (a favourite *Bulletin* mantra). The *Bulletin's* preference was for *short* stories. The word limit for a story in the *Bulletin* was 3000¹⁰ though editors favoured stories of even half that length.¹¹ Concision was key, the editors claiming that William Shakespeare himself would not have been given three and a half columns¹² in the journal.

This focus on brevity was to have an enormous impact on the development of Australian short fiction. Before the 1890s many Australian short stories began with long digressions on the landscape, often as part of a framing device, or story within a story, a device borrowed from the novel form. Some of these frame stories were actually longer than an entire *Bulletin* short story. By focussing on and promoting brevity in the short story (and by providing models of such brevity, for example, Maupassant), the *Bulletin* effectively re-created the style and structure of the Australian short story. Where once a character might have taken a paragraph to say a simple 'Yes' or 'No', the dialogue in *Bulletin* stories becomes noticeably shorter and more naturalistic. A reduced word count also demanded a simpler, tighter structure. The frame tale, if not done away with, was drastically reduced in length. An authentic Australian setting was also encouraged¹³ and realism became the watchword for the preferred writing style. For Stephens¹⁴ the best *Bulletin* stories were 'branches torn from the Tree of Life, trimmed and dressed with whatever skill the writers possess' and as close to the truth of a real event as possible. This was a repudiation

of the gothic, detective, ghost story and the romance story, which had formed the backbone of Australian short fiction before the *Bulletin*.

The stories that the *Bulletin* published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century proved a decisive break in style, theme and subject matter from most nineteenth-century Australian short fiction that had come before. Stephens stated with some pride that literature in the colonies was ‘suckled at the breast of journalism,’¹⁵ a statement that Patrick White was to echo decades later, as a criticism. Goodwin defines the preferred *Bulletin* formula as follows: ‘Short sketches, with some anecdotal narrative interest (often inconclusive), no words wasted in description or dialogue, no long speeches ... a setting among bush workers ...’¹⁶ Yet the critical consensus for the *Bulletin* stories of the 1890s, with the exception of Barbara Baynton’s and Henry Lawson’s work, has been generally negative.¹⁷ This was something Stephens himself tacitly admitted when he stated, ‘our most talented story writers are still only clever students of the art of writing’.¹⁸ Indeed, apart from Henry Lawson and Steele Rudd, the most popular of the *Bulletin* writers, such as Edward Dyson, Price Warung and Ernest Favenc, are little known or read today. They are, however, still of interest in how their work reflects the tastes of the editors of the journal, and their audience. Dyson displays the nationalism of the *Bulletin* in the anti-Chinese sentiment of his much-anthologised story, ‘A Golden Shanty’. Warung demonstrates the journal’s fascination with Australian history in the many tales of the brutalities of the convict era, and Favenc’s adventure stories transcend earlier examples of the genre by their expert evocation of the Australian landscape.

The *Bulletin*’s unapologetically intrusive editing style and well-publicised submission guidelines helped shift the focus of Australian short fiction from stories of romance, adventure and mystery towards stories more explicitly concerned with ordinary Australian life, and told in a realist fashion. The writer who was able to work most successfully within the constraints and themes of the *Bulletin* short story to produce something original and lasting was Henry Lawson.

Henry Lawson (1867–1922) and the ‘Lawson Tradition’

Fifty-two Henry Lawson short stories were published in the *Bulletin* in the last decade of the nineteenth century and Lawson’s name, and style, were to

be forever linked to the journal. As described above, the *Bulletin* demanded a certain kind of story: realistic, set in Australia¹⁹ and ideally of a short length (under 3000 words). As Bruce Bennett notes: ‘the form of the *Bulletin* short story encouraged the writer to reduce excessive detail ... Contributors strove to economise with words, to create a single incident as the story’s crisis, or turning point.’²⁰ Of all the *Bulletin* writers, except perhaps Barbara Baynton, who only published one story in the journal, Lawson was to prove an expert at working within these parameters. Lawson, while not dispensing entirely with the frame story, radically shortened it. Now, it was no longer two or three pages; in ‘A Camp-fire Yarn’, the frame story is established in six words (‘... said Mitchell, continuing a yarn to his mate ...’), and the story itself is under way.

For Marcus Clarke, the bush was only one of many things he wrote about. For Lawson, it was essentially all he wrote about. Almost all his stories are set in the bush, with a handful set in New Zealand, or in the city. But even those characters not presently in the bush in these stories are ruminating on it. Compared to his contemporaries, Lawson’s prose style appears modern, sometimes startlingly so. At times his stripped-back realism and emphasis on naturalistic dialogue seem to anticipate the work of Ernest Hemingway. Indeed, the editor Edward Garnett believed Lawson to be Hemingway’s superior in his economical style.²¹ Lawson’s characters were rural, working class, laconic; in short, recognisably Australian, even today. There is no explanation of what a selection or a swag is – it is assumed, the reader being Australian, that they will simply know. In ‘The Union Buries its Dead’, Lawson’s skill at establishing character and setting in a few words is clearly demonstrated as the narrator observes the progress of a coffin through a bush town toward the graveyard. Here Lawson explicitly rejects the clichés that had accrued around Australian fiction; he writes about leaving out ‘the wattle’ and ‘the suspicious moisture in the eyes of a bearded bush ruffian called Bill’. Instead Lawson picks out telling details – the drunks attempting to show some respect as the coffin passes, the sycophant holding a sunhat over the head of the oblivious priest. A. A. Phillips has argued that this story, in treatment and theme, belongs more to the mid-twentieth century than the tail end of the nineteenth.²²

Lawson’s early collections, including *While the Billy Boils* (1896) and *Joe Wilson and his Mates* (1901), cemented the themes and realist style that would shape the Australian short story for decades to come. Webby has

drawn parallels between Lawson's stories in the 1890s and the New Writing of the 1970s in that both broke from the established literary forms of the day.²³ Indeed, the difference between Lawson's stories and those of his predecessors and his contemporaries was instantly recognised in Australia.²⁴ Contemporary reviews of *While the Billy Boils* attest to the impact Lawson's stories had at the time, and the special interest paid to his style. In several reviews his stories are compared to photographs²⁵ and are commended for their adherence to reality, with one reviewer stating, 'the ability to produce this sense of objective reality is the surest mark of the true artist, and Mr Lawson possesses it in an exceedingly high degree.'²⁶ In fact, Lawson was commended for not allowing his imagination to intrude on his stories.²⁷ Just as Lawson's 'photographic' realist style was applauded, so were the plots and everyday themes he explored. A review of one of his later collections celebrates it as a refreshing change from 'the stock sensationalism of the average Australian story. In reading them we have never had the questionable pleasure of meeting a bushranger ... and there was not even the robbery of a bank ...'²⁸ Bank robberies and bushranging, staples of Australian short fiction in the nineteenth century, were now something to be sneered at.

A common criticism of Lawson's short stories is that his imaginative vision was too narrow and restricting; that he wrote only about the bush, and only in a realist fashion. This was a claim made by contemporary critics²⁹ and also after his death,³⁰ and eventually echoed by Wilding in the 1970s in his criticisms of the Lawson tradition.³¹ While it is true that Lawson's style and subject matter varied little in his short fiction, it should be remembered that the bush was a subject that had almost never been written about previously in a realist style. Before Lawson, as one contemporary reviewer noted in 1908, Australian literature was made up of 'tame Religious Tract Society authors, weird English and American concocters of shilling shockers and penny dreadfuls ... all swallowed if only they could induce a temporary belief that their "Australian" characters were really Australian'.³² This harsh criticism is to dismiss many fine Australian short-story writers working before Lawson, such as Mary Fortune, but there was an element of truth to it. Lawson's vision may have been narrow, but it was one that had been virtually unexplored since the publication of the first works of Australian fiction in the 1830s, apart from

the 'Bullocktown' stories of Marcus Clarke. Lawson took the editorial impositions of the *Bulletin* in length and subject matter and within these limitations created a number of stories that are almost unmatched for their time in intensity, complexity and characterisation. Kinsella recognises that Lawson's conception of the short story was entirely different from those of his contemporaries such as Price Warung and Louis Becke, for whom short stories were merely another species of telling a yarn.³³

Lawson's radical experimentation with and reinvention of the Australian short story has been obscured by his success. The brevity imposed by the *Bulletin* had the effect on some of his contemporaries of reducing their work to sketches, but for Lawson, at his best, it served to focus his imagination. His style, direct and objective, was also something new in Australian literature, though it is impossible to tell where the Lawson style and the *Bulletin* style began and ended. Whitlock has defined Lawson's realism and that of other short-story writers in other colonies such as Canada as 'colonial realism ... a modest and quite elementary determination to write about life as it was observed in the local sphere', while also stating that Lawson's style was more complex than his contemporaries.³⁴ The style and themes he pioneered were to inaugurate and influence the modern Australian short story for several decades. Before Lawson, Roderick argues, the Australian short story was buried under 'layers of artificiality' more concerned with applying the style and sensibilities of English writers such as Dickens to Australia, rather than creating an Australian style.³⁵ In exploring Australian themes in an economical, realist style, Lawson inspired the writers who came after him with the self-assurance to do the same.³⁶

However, many of these writers mistook Lawson's personal vision of the Australian short story for a universal one. The influence of his 'bush realism' was to be hugely influential in Australian short fiction until the 1960s when, as Dunlevy argues, Australian short story writers 'would still write of the same fictional land and speak the same fictional voice' as Henry Lawson.³⁷ Lawson's experiments with Australian short fiction essentially created a series of conventions for the Australian literary short story. The conventional Australian short story in the first half of the twentieth century is realist, formally conservative, explicitly Australian in theme and content, and brief and economical in characterisation, dialogue and setting. This was the tradition that Patrick White decried with his

famous cry against contemporary Australian fiction, which he called the ‘dreary dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism’,³⁸ and which Bail and Wilding railed against even until the 1970s. Yet the realism of the ‘Lawson tradition’ in these years is not as monolithic as its critics suggest. Short fiction writers would explore and adapt Lawson’s realism, but it was not until the 1970s that these conventions would be seriously questioned.

An extract from Ryan O’Neill’s PhD thesis on experimental Australian short fiction (2014)

Ryan O’Neill’s books include Their Brilliant Careers: The Fantastic Lives of Sixteen Extraordinary Australian Writers, which was shortlisted for the 2017 Miles Franklin Award. He lives in rural NSW and teaches at the University of Newcastle, where he completed his PhD.

Notes

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- ² Lewis, Ken, ‘The Role of the *Bulletin* in Indigenous Short Story Writing During the Eighties and Nineties’, *Southerly*, 11.4 (1950), p. 223
- ³ Lee, Christopher, *City Bushman: Henry Lawson and the Australian Imagination* (Fremantle, W. A.: Curtin University Books; Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2004), p. 29
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21–22
- ⁵ Stephens, A. G., ‘Introductory’, in *The Bulletin Story Book: A Selection of Stories and Literary Sketches from The Bulletin (1881–1901)* (Sydney: *Bulletin* Newspaper, 1901), p. v
- ⁶ Goodwin, Ken, *A History of Australian Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 37
- ⁷ Jarvis, Doug, ‘Lawson, *The Bulletin* and the Short Story’, *Australian Literary Studies* 11.1 (1983), p. 64

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- [9](#) Jarvis, p. 59–60
- [10](#) Bennett, Bruce, 'The Short Story: 1890s to 1950', in Pierce, Peter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 164
- [11](#) Lewis, p. 222
- [12](#) Moore, Tom Inglis, 'The Rise and Fall of Henry Lawson', *Meanjin* 16.4 (1957), p. 319–20
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- [14](#) Stephens, 'Introductory', p. v
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- [16](#) Goodwin, p. 153
- [17](#) Palmer, Vance, *The Legend of the Nineties* (Kingsgrove: Melbourne University Press, 1966), p. 106; Stewart, p. xiii; Hadgraft and Wilson, p. xiii
- [18](#) Stephens, p. v
- [19](#) Jarvis, p. 60, 64
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- [28](#) Anon, 'From the Australian Bush', review of *On the Track and Over the Sliprails* by Henry Lawson, in Roderick, p. 107
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- [32](#) Anon, 'Aspects of Lawson', in Roderick, p. 135
- [33](#) Kinsella, p. 15
- [34](#) Whitlock, p. 37, 41
- [35](#) Roderick, Colin, 'Lawson's Mode and Style', in Roderick, p. 375
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- [37](#) Dunlevy, Maurice, 'Lawson's Archetypes Inspired Stereotypes', in Roderick, p. 410
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HENRY LAWSON, 'THE DROVER'S WIFE' AND THE CRITICS

KAY SCHAFFER

THE 1890s. THE PHRASE resonates with meaning for Australians. It conjures up a particular significance for the decade before Federation – a decade when an Australian ethos takes shape in the form of the bushman as hero with his egalitarian values and ideals of mateship; a decade when the Australian legend is immortalised, at least for modern readers. In one of my favourite descriptions of the era, Harry Heseltine writes that the decade presents us with a unique Australian vision of 'a happy band of brothers marching bravely forward to a political and social Utopia, united in their hatred of tyranny, their love of beer, their rugged manliness and independence'. Heseltine's 'over-the-top' description deliberately borders on the parodic. It was written in an important 1960 essay designed to shift readers' perspectives from a patriotic affiliation with a naive democratic nationalism to a modernist New Critical reappraisal of the Australian tradition. There would be many challenges to the myth in the next 30 years but none would blunt its enduring influence on Australian culture.

It was not until the 1920s and 1930s, in fact, that the reputation which attends the 1890s today began to take shape. In the inter-war years writers for the first time began to take seriously the proposition that Australia was an entity worth writing about, with specific cultural attributes and a unique identity. Nettie Palmer's *Modern Australian Literature* (1924), Keith Hancock's *Australia* (1930) and William Moore's *The Story of Australian Art* (1934) attempt to define the nation and its differences from the British parent culture. These studies select certain themes from the *Bulletin* and certain aspects of the 1890s to construct a sense of national identity. This limited and focused construction then comes to stand for the whole. The texts establish a nascent discourse on national identity.

Other studies, like Vance Palmer's *Legend of the Nineties* (1954), A. A. Phillips's *The Australian Tradition* (1958) and Russel Ward's *The Australian Legend* (1958) follow a generation later. A debate about the meaning and significance of the legend arises. Positions are contested as the voices of modernist new critics replace those of their democratic nationalist brothers. In the 1970s, feminist texts like Anne Summers' *Damned Whores and God's Police* (1975) and Miriam Dixson's *The Real Matilda* (1975) appear. They challenge the masculine biases inherent in the culture and its histories and attempt to reinterpret Australia and women's place differently. A number of feminist literary and historical studies follow. But they will have virtually no impact on the debates between men.

The 1980s give rise to new studies which challenge the legend and the whole concept of national identity from a number of dissident perspectives. Studies like Richard White's *Inventing Australia* (1983), John Docker's *In a Critical Condition* (1984) and Graeme Turner's *National Fictions* (1986) call attention to social and ideological issues. They suggest that national identity is an invention, a cultural construction. Our sense of what it means to be an Australian emanates not from actual historical events but from their representations in literature, history, art, film and the like. What we take to be 'reality' emanates from these discursive materials. Whose 'reality' is given credence depends on the shifting power relations and the interests of dominant groups within the society. Yet these studies, despite their attention to power relations and ideologies, do not seriously attend to questions of gender. It is as if the feminist debate had not occurred; or as if the need to maintain a separate sphere for women overrode the challenge to deconstruct the masculine or phallogocentric assumptions embedded in the myths of a national culture.

In *Women and the Bush* (1988), I attempt to trace the outlines of this discourse on national identity and the place of women within it. I suggest that although women are largely absent from the debates, the idea of Woman (or the feminine) is everywhere present in metaphors of landscape against which the Australian native son measures his identity. In the book, as in virtually every study of Australian culture, Henry Lawson looms large. In my study the focus is not the man himself but the idea of Lawson which has been enlisted in the cause of nationalism throughout the twentieth century. Nationalist writers identify their vision of the Australian character with reference to Lawson's short stories of the 1890s. According to the

tradition, in his writings and those of the *Bulletin* school we find a unique and original Australian creation, 'the voice of the bush', which comes to be equated with the voice of Australia. Here I would like to reiterate and extend some of those arguments with reference to Lawson and his classic short story 'The Drover's Wife', which first appeared in the *Bulletin* in 1892.

The drover's wife is an interesting signifier for Australian culture for several reasons. In the first place, she is a woman in a nationalist tradition in which women rarely appear. Her depiction has been and continues to be viewed as an authentic representation of the pioneering woman's life in the bush. Second, her position as a pioneering hero/victim in the bush reinforces the masculine tradition. That is, she becomes a part of man's battle against the land as a masculine subject. Third, she also maintains and upholds British cultural traditions in the bush in her roles as wife and mother. By studying the critical reputation of 'The Drover's Wife' as a story, through the twentieth century, we can trace shifting ideological perspectives on Australian culture and woman's place within them.

In this chapter I propose, first, to outline the varying critical approaches to 'The Drover's Wife' in an argument which largely follows my discussion in *Women and the Bush*. Then I will extend the argument to include consideration of several fascinating variants, three fictional and one filmic, to the text. These include short stories by Murray Bail, Frank Moorhouse and Barbara Jefferis and the film *Serious Undertakings* by Helen Grace. The creative revisions which have emerged since 1975 secure 'The Drover's Wife' as *the* classic story of the 1890s. They also tell us something about debunking as a specifically Australian form of humour/tribute. And they give evidence to the dissident voices of feminist and deconstructive critique emerging in the 1980s. If it is true that in Australia 'parody is the highest form of praise', Lawson and the drover's wife should be feeling mighty chuffed by now.

Henry Lawson holds pride of place in the Australian legend as Australia's authentic native son – the boy from the bush who alerted Australians to what was unique about the life around them. In most of his stories the characters who struggle against the hostile and alien bush are men, but this is not necessarily the case. The position of 'native son' could, in an exceptional circumstance, be filled by a woman. That is, the bushwoman can stand in place of her husband, lover or brother and take on

masculine attributes of strength, fortitude, courage and the like in her battle with the environment (as long as she also maintains her disguise of femininity). She could be called and have the status of a pioneering hero. This is the position of the drover's wife.

Ideas about women and femininity circulate in the culture in diverse ways. The representation of women's character, like the character of the drover's wife, is one of them. Metaphors of otherness, employed to signify femininity, are another. The land as an object of representation is virtually always represented as feminine. The land functions as a metaphor for Woman – as in father sky to mother earth, colonial master to the plains of promise, native son to the barren bush, contemporary Australians to the red/dead centre. All of these equations reproduce the 'perfect' couple – masculine activity and feminine passivity. Within Lawson's imaginary representations the land is a harsh, cruel, barren and alien environment against which both men and women struggle. His harsh depictions of the bush have become integral to the Australian legend. The writings of Lawson as they have been taken up in the debates on national identity constitute an important site for the construction of femininity in Australia. When one looks at the Australian legend from the perspective of the 1990s these gender-specific inclusions and exclusions in language become relevant to the debates on culture and woman's place.

The classic woman in the bush is Lawson's drover's wife. Although a character in fiction, it is she whom both W. K. Hancock in his history, *Australia* (1930), and Manning Clark in his six-volume appraisal, *The History of Australia* (1973–1988), cite as an authentic historical embodiment of woman's existence. Anne Summers in *Damned Whores and God's Police* recognised her as the classic 'coper', idealised by Clark as the 'bush Mum'. All Australians know her. As children they read of her story in school. As adults they encounter it more often than any other story in anthologies of Australian prose. Lawson must have loved her, because she helped to make his reputation in England.

One can register the ideological significance of the story by tracing its changing reputation within the dominant discourses on national identity as they emerge throughout the twentieth century. The fortunes of Henry Lawson may have waxed and waned through the years but the reputation of the drover's wife has remained secure – although critics have disagreed as to just what she or the story stands for. In the early decades of the century,

when Lawson's prose was deemed 'authentic' by sympathetic reviewers, his 'realistic' short stories were judged to be representative, photographic and sincere. The drover's wife took on the guise of historical truth. In the 1920s, Australia entered a conservative phase. It was an era when the concept of racial purity was enlisted to stand against the Yellow Peril. Lawson-as-cultural-object became the site of an ideological battle among critics intent on bolstering the national image. The bush, through the symbol of the wattle, came to represent the land of joy and wholesomeness. Fred Davison, editor of the monthly journal *Australia*, complained that 'Lawson failed most abjectly to sense that joy and to give it expression'. He 'didn't know Australia – not the real Australia – and couldn't write about it'. But, although critics severely chastise Lawson for his 'woeful' portrayal of bushmen, the drover's wife is spared.

After the First World War the culture enlists Lawson into the cause of mature nationhood. The gold-rush digger, the noble bushman, the Anzac soldier fuse into a single image of manly strength, independence and courage. At the same time critics begin to alter the image of Lawson. His bush becomes the terrain on which national pride is built. The drover's wife becomes a 'large and symbolic figure' who 'opened the eyes of other writers to what is really poignant and dramatic in the life around them'. After both World Wars, the image of manly toughness, 'born of the lean loins of the country itself', would link the academic nationalists to their literary brothers of the 1890s. And the drover's wife, though a woman, is seen to personify these traits.

With a shift of national interests away from the bush and towards the city, away from particular forms of working-class republicanism and towards a so-called universal middle-class culture, Lawson and the literature of the 1890s also experience a reinterpretation. Whereas earlier commentators had described the bush as a physical threat to man's identity, the modernist new critics imagined it as a moral, spiritual and existential threat. When this attitude is explored with reference to 'The Drover's Wife', as in Brian Matthews' *The Receding Wave* (1972), the story is described as one of 'ruthless pessimism' in which the woman confronts the bush as a 'common enemy' to men and women alike. Her life of hardships culminates in a 'sense of spiritual and emotional exhaustion'.

Colin Roderick is one critic whose views on Lawson and 'The Drover's Wife' have changed over time. In the 1960s Roderick described her

situation as that of 'the self-sacrificing lonely life of the bushwoman who in those days helped to lay the foundation of our prosperity'. This position aligns the author with the attitudes of the Democratic Nationalists. But in his study, *The Real Henry Lawson* (1982), Roderick shifts ground and incorporates the metaphysical concerns of the modernist new critics into his narrative. He cites 'The Drover's Wife' as Lawson's 'first short story of high quality' and maintains that the dominant note is one of melancholy. 'The bush suffered a change which reflected his own fears and insecurity. Nothing attractive, nothing lovely, nothing of good to report entered his portrait of it: it was all sinister and destructive. It developed from a mere background into an active alien force against which human fortitude spent itself until it was crushed'.

But Manning Clark has another story to tell. For him, 'The Drover's Wife' presents to Australians an awareness of both a surface heroism and a metaphysical terror. He explains that the surface story tells of a wife's heroism and her sacrifice for her children, but underneath it all she confronts and conquers all the fears of despair and defeat which 'touched him [Lawson] deeply'. He proclaims, 'Lawson knew that her heroism, the halo of glory with which he endowed this bush mum, was of a high order.'

'The Drover's Wife', in the hands of the critics, has been a prized commodity for public consumption. The many interpretations this story has received demonstrate both the evocative, symbolic richness of the text and the ways in which the story as a cultural object has been enlisted in the defence of dominant ideological perspectives concerning the nature of Australian culture. The commentators refer to 'The Drover's Wife' as a cultural entity in three ways. As literature, the story has grown from an artless sketch to a work of high quality. As a figure, the wife has been described as a tough dramatic individual symbolising courage and hope and also one of crushed fortitude exhibiting emotional and spiritual exhaustion. As an image of the Australian character, her situation reflects the nation's prosperity and its pessimism. The former depictions belong to writers associated with the Democratic Nationalists who share a view of progress which celebrates the country's prosperity and initiative. In their view, the literature of the 1890s is realistic. The tough stock of transplanted Britons whom the drover's wife personifies produce for them a national type which will lead the country to maturity as an independent, strong and resourceful nation. Women are pioneers. They function as symbols of hope.

The later depictions emerge out of the writings of critics associated with the bourgeois modernists, who would deny a faith in historical progress. Their construction of the literature of the 1890s emphasises the nihilistic, violent and irrational dark side of the Australian tradition. They decry Australia as a static nation, tied to worldwide economic and political realities which limit future growth. Nationalism as a concept has grown both 'sour and barren'. Women personify the national dilemma. They function symbolically as figures of defeat.

Whether referring to Lawson's story, the figure of the drover's wife as an historical entity, or the woman as a dimension of the national character, the two sides of the argument depend on a series of dichotomies within Western thought. The debate contrasts the objective with the subjective; optimism with pessimism; reason with doubt; realism with romanticism. The former qualities are desired, while the latter are feared; the former associated with the masculine, the latter with the feminine within the critical discourses on Lawson and the Australian tradition. Peter Pierce suggests that the whole construction of this 'literary historiographic melodrama apes the conflicts of convicts against their gaolers, bushrangers against squatters'. It is interesting in this context to note that both the Democratic Nationalists and the New Critics embrace 'The Drover's Wife' in their attempts to define and master the national character.

In *Women and the Bush* I attempt to deconstruct this monolithic bush mum. I analyse her place not as an authentic historical entity (which she is not in any sense beyond imaginary representation) but as a cultural construction. I suggest that the drover's wife is interesting as a signifier in that she has been enlisted into the debates which span the spectrum of ideological perspectives and that within them she occupies both masculine and feminine positions. She represents to the Australian tradition both masculine sameness and feminine otherness. Named only as 'the drover's wife', her existence in the family is defined as that of a wife and mother in relation to man. Although a female, wife and mother, and given attributes similar to those of the bush she inhabits, she takes up a masculine position in the story. When she moves to confront the snake, the evil within, with the help of her son, the dog and a stick, she masters the threat of the bush. She stands in the place of her absent husband. The drover's wife is woman. But heroic status is conferred upon her through her assumption of a masculine identity.

At the same time she acts in the role of God's police within the family, dressing the children for Sunday walks, mending the clothes, and otherwise maintaining a 'proper' respectable life in the bush, without complaint. These feminine attributes link her to a culture and civilisation to be found in the city and, beyond the city, in England. It is a situation from which the bushman seeks escape. In addition she is associated with the landscape and its evil – although she also stands against it. She too is harsh and sunbaked like the land. She too is Eve in a fallen garden, linked to the snake, the black fellow and the evil against which man must struggle. As an object in discourse the drover's wife becomes a pioneering hero. As a hero (and a mother) she is able to mediate the threat of the feminised bush landscape, which is variously represented as wilderness, evil, the snake and the 'original curse' of mankind, in a very specific way.

Through this story Lawson and subsequent critics achieve several contradictory goals. They secure the place of both women and men as masculine subjects within the Australian tradition. They also maintain gender differences between women and men, in which women uphold ties to the father's law and the parent culture, which men resist. In addition, they maintain the category of the feminine as otherness through the sliding signification which links the bush and woman as feminine objects in discourse. 'The Drover's Wife' is a powerful signifier for Australian culture. When we investigate the drover's wife as a cultural construction which comes to be seen as an authentic historical representation of women in the bush we can more fully understand how Manning Clark could maintain that her 'halo of glory ... was of a high order'.

More recently the drover's wife has become something of a national joke. Both Murray Bail and Frank Moorhouse, or his Italian comrade, Franco Casamaggiore, have had a go at her. Not only does Lawson's 1892 story come up for review, but Russell Drysdale's 1945 painting 'The Drover's Wife' gets a bit of a blast as well. What can we make of these changing fortunes for the composite drover's wife? George Bowering, the Canadian critic, has recently written that the tendency to debunk national myths, evident in both Canada and Australia, is a deconstructive instance of postmodernist irony. His essay concerns Murray Bail's 1975 story 'The Drover's Wife' but could be applied to Frank Moorhouse's 1980 story as well. His argument is that the grandsons of the pioneers have begun, once

again, to call the legend into doubt by attempting to topple the monument/the authoritative text/the work of art through their anti-authoritarian gestures of comedy. The effect, he suggests, is to deconstruct the ethos of nationalism to which the originating story gave rise and to presage a new cultural history appropriate to our postmodern era.

This is an interesting argument and one which might carry more conviction if it weren't for the fact that Australian humour has always characteristically debunked cultural heroes and icons from an anti-authoritarian stance. Bowering's conclusions may be a bit premature. In Bail's story the narrator is a dullard of a dentist from Adelaide. He spies the painting and its title and declares that the woman is not the drover's wife – 'She is my wife', who left him and the kids for a drover. The dentist apparently knows nothing of the Drysdale painting nor the Lawson short story which precedes it. He's a city lad for whom the bush is a nuisance (and not a symbol of the Australian ethos). His former wife Hazel's love of it was always a bit of an embarrassment to him. She enjoyed chopping wood at the beach shack where she also killed a snake. These actions made her less attractive to the dentist. He wanted a proper postwar city wife, not a bush-girl 'drover's wife'.

In addition, Bail's dullard of a dentist views art only in concrete referential terms. He chastises Drysdale for leaving out the flies in his painting. Lawson left out the flies as well. Battling flies in the bush somehow cannot equate with the heroism involved in the struggle against floods and bush fires, snakes and loneliness. Bowering sees the narrator's naivety as a ploy on Bail's part through which he creates a postcolonial citizen free from a British colonial history and the icons of Australian cultural identity. He suggests, as well, that the story encourages us to view the Australian legend as the creator as well as the expression of a national ethos – one which it deconstructs through its irony. 'Hazel – it is Hazel and the rotten landscape that dominate everything', the dentist concludes – a statement which can be variously read as referring (in its 'everything') to the Drysdale painting, the dentist's sad life and/or the Australian tradition.

With a differing emphasis Dorothy Jones and Barry Andrews place the story, and that of Frank Moorhouse, squarely within a tradition of national humour. For them the special characteristics which mark Australian humour are a tendency to self-parody, an ironic tone, and an attitude of individuals manipulated by circumstances they are powerless to control. Jones and

Andrews also characterise Australian humour as 'heavily male-oriented'. All of this applies, of course, to the humour in both the Bail and Moorhouse narratives. When women appear at all they are 'perceived as at best outsiders, and at worst the enemy' (somewhat like the metaphorical bush-as-enemy, I would add). One might say that this tendency itself is being parodied in both the Bail and Moorhouse stories.

Frank Moorhouse's story 'The Drover's "Wife"' is ostensibly a transcription of a paper given by an Italian student of Australian literature (Franco Casamaggiore, no doubt an intimate friend of the author) at a conference on Commonwealth Writing in Milan. The graduate student, through a careful process of literary detection, has discovered an 'insider's' joke underlying Lawson's short story, Drysdale's painting and Bail's narrative. The joke is that since it is an 'historical fact' that there were no women in Australia for a century or more of its pioneering history, the Drover's 'Wife' is not a wife at all, but rather a sheep. The story derives its considerable humour from having a go at literary critics and conventions via sexuality (and its absence from the Australian ethos). Jones and Andrews conclude that 'Moorhouse mocks at academic pretensions along with narrowly defined notions of Australian literary culture, while showing how intangible in essence that culture may prove for an outsider'. For them the story both dissolves and augments the literary myth of the bush legend.

Jones and Andrews suggest, however, that the literary myth 'is further deconstructed' by Barbara Jefferis in her story 'The Drover's Wife'. This comment calls for further consideration. Is a feminist version necessarily deconstructive or can it also be seen as constitutive of the myth and the masculinist culture out of which it arises? How can one read 'The Drover's Wife' from a deconstructive position?

Catherine Belsey, in her study *Critical Practice* (1980), describes the deconstructive process in the following way:

The object of deconstructing the text is to examine the *process of its production* – not the private experience of the individual author, but the mode of production, the materials and their arrangement in the work. The aim is to locate the point of contradiction within the text, the point at which it transgresses the limits within which it is constructed, breaks free of the constraints imposed by its own realist form. Composed of contradictions, the text is no longer restricted to

a single, harmonious and authoritative reading. Instead it becomes *plural*, open to re-reading, no longer an object for passive consumption but an object of work by the reader to produce meaning [emphasis in original].

If the terms of an emerging postmodernist debate are deconstruction versus reconstruction of the myth, there are a number of reasons why Jefferis's story, although told from a woman's perspective, might be aligned more closely to a reconstructive defence rather than a deconstruction of the bush legend. In the first place, her narrator is the composite drover's wife of the masculine imagination – the woman or women who are the subjects of the stories of Lawson, Bail and Moorhouse. She attends not to the ways in which the previous stories have been produced but to the absence from them of a woman's perspective. She supplies the missing content. The account is ironic, given woman's relative absence from the tradition, but not parodic of the legend itself. Second, the story conforms to the traditions of realism. Jefferis's version sets the record straight by providing what might be seen (in the terms of narrative realism) as a serious view of the drover's wife as a complex and misunderstood woman. In this the attempt is not unlike that of Kate Grenville in *Joan Makes History* (1988). In both of these texts, pioneering bush wives speak through the narrative space opened for them by their male creators at the end of the nineteenth century. The drover's wife 'knows' Lawson as her 1890s counterpart in Grenville's text, the forlorn wife of Frederick McCubbin's triptych painting 'The Pioneers', 'knows' McCubbin. The references to originating authors serve to validate origins of the myth of the 1890s and to authenticate them through the presence of the woman's voice: 'I was there. I know.'

In these 'realistic' accounts of Jefferis's and Grenville's women the horrors of the bush life for men, as represented in the masculine tradition, are nothing when compared to the fears and sufferings of bush women, particularly in childbirth. Jefferis's drover's wife gently rebukes men for their ignorance of women's lives – they just don't know ... 'they don't understand the strength women have got – won't see it, because they think it takes away from them'. Later in the piece, Jefferis's heroine slides into the late twentieth century and justifies leaving the Adelaide dentist of Bail's story (they were his kids, not hers. And he was a city wimp, not a real man – a bushman). The voice, emphasis and perspective of the narrative are

female but the reading effect reinforces the masculine nationalist tradition all the same – co-opting women into its ethos and the prescribed places for men and women within it. Although it challenges male biases in the Australian bush tradition, the story naturalises rather than problematises the myth as construction. In addition, it is necessary for the reader to know the previous versions of the story to appreciate the wit, the nuances, and the multiple voices it contains. An unproblematic reading of Jefferis’s story positions the reader inside the myth, giving it the substance of the woman’s point of view, the woman who is, ironically, the product of her masculine histories.

This is not the case in the stories of Bail and Moorhouse, each of which, metaphorically speaking, cuts a new path through the scrub, whereas Jefferis’s drover’s wife takes another Sunday walk through it. She waves her hands in the air, demanding that we see, hear and recognise her as a significant presence. At the same time the story is indebted to and dependent upon the three preceding male versions of Lawson, Bail and Moorhouse. This feminist version, therefore, clears a space for women within the ongoing bush legend, while it also preserves the male versions and revitalises the masculine tradition.

Helen Grace’s film *Serious Undertakings* (1983) attempts to deconstruct the Australian tradition from a feminist position different from that of Jefferis. The film attempts to challenge the nationalist ideology of the bush. It shifts viewers’ interest away from the possibility of women making new or supplementing old meanings. Rather it focuses on the role of the spectator in producing and maintaining pre-existing meanings and ideologies. In this way, the film challenges ideologies of the past, while it demands critical attention on the part of the viewer to such issues as viewer position, masculine gaze, narrative form and non-narrative techniques. It opens with a voice-over reading of ‘The Drover’s Wife’ (‘Bush all around – bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance’), while viewers watch rush-hour traffic on modern inner-city freeways heading for the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The film is different in kind not only from Jefferis’s story but from all earlier versions of ‘The Drover’s Wife’. This is so not only because of its medium but also because of the questions it takes up. For Grace the question ‘What is woman’s place?’ might be variously answered as: an empty space, a void of meaning, a space of absence not previously theorised.

The title, 'Serious Undertakings', refers to a statement made by Julia Kristeva, a French feminist theorist, referring to the cultural perception that the work and roles of women (as mothers) are trivial undertakings while the work and roles of non-mothers (that is, men) are perceived as serious undertakings. The film plays with these positions and the 'natural' gender divisions which support them. There is an ironic juxtaposition of male and female roles, of the public and the private sphere, of innocence and violence, of the maternal and the political. The film does not attempt to flesh out the Australian tradition, giving it substance by the inclusion of women in the place of their prior apparent absence. Instead, the boundaries of national identity and gender identity are abolished as fictions. The Australian tradition is seen as a masculine tradition in which the feminine, as distinct from the ways women have been defined by men and male culture, is wholly absent. So, as a voice-over reads again from 'The Drover's Wife', we watch as the pioneering woman depicted in McCubbin's triptych 'The Pioneers' disappears – she is air-brushed out of existence and all that is left in the place of her absence is the bush. In another place in the film the drover's wife's pram, with which she takes the children for Sunday walks, becomes the pram used as a radical political weapon of terrorism by the Baader-Meinhoff gang. We are reminded here and elsewhere of an early sequence in which a new mother in a maternity hospital (a site where innocence is manufactured) speaks of terrorism.

Throughout the film the whole idea of a national history or an 'authentic' Australian culture is questioned and dismantled. The film refuses narrative closure or interpretation in the conventional sense. Its message is playful and open-ended. It takes up a feminist deconstructive position, one which employs different strategies for approaching the culturally constructed category of the feminine beyond previously established masculine positions for Woman or women. A deconstructive position, like Grace's or my own, not only parodies or debunks the tradition; it also attempts to challenge previously received notions of identity, voice and presence. Does this approach presage a new cultural history for the next 100 years? Can it interrupt the power relations and vested economic interests of the dominant interest groups which have been well served by outmoded but prevalent notions of national identity? Only to a minor degree, perhaps, given our history as a colonial nation still searching for national identity in a post-modernist and postcolonial age. The

drover's wife in her many disguises may be with us for a few years yet. Desire, which motivates the debate, continues to urge the settling rather than the deconstruction of questions of national identity – even though we know that this desire can never be satisfied; even though we know that the tradition acts as a supplement to absence. Still, it fills the void. If the past is prologue, the present is plural and the future open and yet to be explored. The drover's wife may have a few lessons to teach us yet. I never despair of the twists and turns of old wives' tales.

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1890s (1993)*

Kay Schaffer is an Emerita Professor in Gender Studies and Social Inquiry in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Adelaide. She works in the areas of gender studies, cultural studies and literary studies. Her most recent work, Women Writers in Postsocialist China (Routledge, 2014, co-authored with Xianlin Song), introduces Western readers to fourteen contemporary Chinese women writers.

ORIGINS OF *THE DROVER'S WIFE*

ANNE GRAY

RUSSELL DRYSDALE CREATED A new vision of Australia, a view of a world where incongruity becomes the accepted commonplace. He painted compassionate images of unheroic women and men in the outback. He also portrayed drought-ridden and eroded landscapes, which seem to have existed before time, as well as seemingly haunted towns with quaint buildings framing gaping streets. For me, Drysdale is like Chekhov, portraying people with compassion, loving their individuality and their peculiarities.

In 1944, Drysdale accepted a commission from the *Sydney Morning Herald* to record the drought devastation and associated soil erosion in western New South Wales. The haunting drawings and the paintings Drysdale subsequently produced on this theme present a reality he had seen. Nonetheless, they resulted in controversy, with some writers believing that the images might upset people who worked on the land and devalue land prices, while others maintained that they would increase sympathy for country people and encourage the government to spend more on solving the causes of soil erosion.

A drovers' camp near Deniliquin (1944), one of the drawings Drysdale made on this journey, shows a sparse landscape with a drover, his wife and their wagon. Soon after, he painted *The drover's wife* (c. 1945, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra) depicting a vast, flat, barren landscape with dead trees and a cloudless sky, and bringing forward and enlarging the drover's wife, making her monumental. Although she has lank hair and wears a drab, unfashionable dress, a nondescript hat and flat lace-up shoes, she stands assuredly, looking out towards the viewer with her feet planted firmly on the ground. There is a gentleness in her face and eyes. The drover is still present, but set back in the background, with his horses and covered wagon.

Drysdale's contemporary, the art critic and artist Paul Haefliger, said that Drysdale 'conveys a difficult and lonely existence, where man constantly battles against the elements'.¹ But is this true? Although his people are often alone, they rarely seem to be lonely; rather, they appear to be in harmony with themselves and their place. The drover's wife is not battling against the elements, or anything else; she stands solidly, content to be where she is, exuding a sense of calm. She appears to be at peace with herself – with who she is and where she is. In her own way, she is heroic.

Drysdale carefully structured his pictures, arranging space and volume and using a luminous, old-masterly approach to his paint. However, unlike those of earlier Australian artists, Drysdale's people are not pioneers struggling to tame the bush or shearers working up a hard sweat; they are strong men and women who are laconically at home in their environment. Unlike other artists of the 1940s, such as John Perceval and Albert Tucker, whose paintings are expressions of anger and frustration, Drysdale showed people who are calm. They are working people located in what might seem to be an inhospitable environment, but who appear perfectly at ease there, as resilient as the environment demands. He created a new sense of what it feels like to live in Australia. Drysdale observed:

To live for any length of time in the far regions of The Centre, camped in a swag and removed from the compass of society, needs a new adjustment ... It is a life that demands a different set of values, a heightened perception which in turn develops a new awareness. What appear at first oddities become almost commonplace through a new interpretation.²

When, in 1949, Drysdale exhibited another image of a large, strong woman in an outback landscape, *Woman in a landscape* (Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide), some viewers considered it to be an insult to Australian womanhood. They thought she was a freak, inelegant, ungainly, of hideous proportions. But although this was never stated, they were probably affronted because Drysdale presented this woman as having a different set of values from their own, of being comfortable in the flat, wide open spaces of the Australian outback.

Drysdale's paintings have had a pervasive impact on the Australian psyche. *The drover's wife* has a specific setting, Deniliquin in western New

South Wales, and is connected to a particular event, the drought, devastation and soil erosion of 1944. But it is much more than this. It is an allegory of the non-Indigenous Australian relationship with this ancient land; about the oddity of our everyday existence as Australians in this wide brown land.

*First published in Australian Art in the National Gallery of Australia
(2002)*

Dr Anne Gray AM was the Head of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Australia. She is a curator, historian and scholar.

Notes

[1](#) *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 January 1948, p. 2

[2](#) Russell Drysdale, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Russell Drysdale* (London: Leicester Galleries, 1965), p. 5

WRITER AND DIRECTOR NOTES: *THE DROVER'S WIFE*

Writer's note by Leah Purcell

Like many Australians, I've grown up with this story and love it. My mother would read or recite it to me, but before she got to that famous last line, I would stop her and say, 'Mother, I won't ever go a drovin'.'

I always wanted to do something with this story with me in it as the drover's wife. There were two forms of inspiration that motivated me to write this play. First came the film idea in 2006, which I wanted to shoot in the Snowy Mountains. That inspiration came when I was filming the feature film *Jindabyne*, directed by Ray Lawrence. Secondly, I was in a writing workshop. I was there as a director, but got frustrated. So I went home and said it was time to write my next play. I looked at my bookshelf and there it was: my little red tattered book of Henry Lawson's short stories. The red cover had now fallen off, its spine thread fraying and my drawings inside as a five-year-old fading.

In the original story, the drover's wife sits at the table waiting for a snake to come out of her bedroom, having gotten in via the wood heap, which a 'blackfella' stacked hollow. While she waits for the snake, she thinks about her life and its hard ships. Her oldest son joins her and she shares her story with him.

This is not my version of 'The Drover's Wife'.

I was heavily influenced by the original story. But I've activated all the characters. In my version, I have brought them to life for the stage and reinvented the conversations and action that might have taken place. Weaving my great-grandfather's story through the play has given it its Aboriginality so to speak, and I've embellished the story to give more depth and drama for the stage.

When I did sit down to start writing, the one thing I was conscious of was wanting to apply the stories of the men from my family. By this, I mean

taking various positive traits from a particular family individual or a story, and embellishing the characters of Yadaka, Danny and the father of the drover's wife with these details.

In Henry Lawson's story, the black man is painted as the antagonist. I thought I would turn that around in my play and have our black man as the hero. With this in mind, I was very conscious of the harshness and brutality of this time. Henry Lawson's short stories, where 'The Drover's Wife' appears, was first published in 1893. This year was also significant because of an event in my great-grandfather's life that brought him to Victoria from far north Queensland, which you hear about in the play.

In one of my earlier drafts, I wasn't happy with the ending and my partner said, 'If we as blackfellas can't tell the truth of our history, then who can?' This opened up the flood-gates, and I wrote like I was riding a wild brumby in the Alpine country, and no apology for the rough ride.

I think of this play as an Australian Western for the stage. I was influenced by the HBO series *Deadwood* and the Quentin Tarantino film *Django Unchained*. I was also influenced by the history that was taken from my great-grandfather's personal papers and the recorded history that was documented by people of authority at this time.

This play has been described as dangerous. I love that it is, and give no apology for it. It is also a romance and a story of a mother's love.

So saddle up and hang on. We are going to come roaring down that mountain, side hit them low flats and rip onto the stage. 'Hip'im Jackson!' as my mum would say.

A massive thank you to the Balnaves Foundation for the 2014 award I received to help bring this play to fruition. I also want to thank Eamon Flack for commissioning my play's premiere season. It was the first play he programmed as Artistic Director at Belvoir, allowing me to continue my 20-year working relationship as actor, writer and director ... It means a lot. Such a lot. Thank you.

Thank you to the amazing and very talented people involved in this production. To my cast for their hard work, knowledge and dedication in bringing these characters to life under the brilliant direction of Leticia Cáceres. Thanks to Leti who brought together a team of generous experts with gentle souls – Stephen Curtis, Tess Schofield, Verity Hampson and Pete Goodwin. Thanks to the wonderful, smart and lovely ladies in stage management, Isabella Kerdijk and Keiren Smith.

To Uncle Hans Pearson and Sean Choolburra of the Guugu Yimithirr, and Paul House, Custodian of the Ngambri Walgalu, a huge thank you and much respect. To my elders Aunty Honor Cleary and Uncle Michael Mace for your permission and support. Acknowledging Nana Hazel Mace, Uncle Michael Mace, Francis Adkins and Lynelle Minnie Mace for your research into our family history.

I must thank my partner in business and in life, Bain Stewart. He is always there and his words of wisdom come at the right time ... I fear nothing knowing he is by my side.

To my grandchildren, Wurume Rafael and Lysander Wahn, and our little Sydney silky terrier Odi: thanks for keeping Nan real.

To my daughter Amanda for putting up with me for far too long.

Thanks to my mum for giving me this story and so much more.

With great respect and appreciation to my ancestors for the stories and the ancient ancestors for their guidance.

Altjeringa yirra Baiame.

Leah Purcell, 2016

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Leah Purcell is an internationally acclaimed, multi-award-winning writer, singer, actor, performer and director. The Drover's Wife won the NSW Premier's Book of the Year award.

Director's note by Leticia Cáceres

The Drover's Wife is a postcolonial and feminist re-imagining of Henry Lawson's short story of the same name. Leah unapologetically claimed this much-loved frontier narrative and infused it with First Nations and Women's history, calling into question the shameful treatment endured by both at the hands of white men. Brutality reels through the writing. Yet this is a work that is steeped in beauty and humanity. Leah's images, her metaphors, her meticulously crafted characters, her interplay between action, humour and drama, come together to deliver theatre at its most potent. What's most exciting about Leah's *The Drover's Wife* (*TDW*) is her command of genre – the Western – its tropes so familiar, yet Leah manages to reinvigorate them so we can bear witness to the atrocities of the past from the perspective of those who have been silenced.

For me, the process of directing *TDW* was primarily about serving Leah's vision and meeting her bravery. I was determined not to get in the way of her truth. I was guided by the voices of our First Nations artists and consultants, who deepened my understanding of the inhumanity and degradation that has scarred this land.

Finding the theatrical language to stage these abuses was perhaps the most challenging aspect of directing this work. As we rehearsed some of these scenes, at times it felt like our own humanity was being tested. What kept us going was the sense of unity in our rehearsal room; the tenacity with which the entire team (creatives and actors) rallied together to tell this most urgent of stories, and the subversive power of Leah's writing.

I want to thank Eamon Flack and the Belvoir team, who showed outstanding commitment to this project. Belvoir has to be commended for demonstrating genuine and ongoing commitment to telling stories by First Nations artists. These plays have continually proven they have great power to entertain, but more importantly, to raise the difficult questions of this country's past, present and future. It is through these works of art and in the act of programming them where reconciliation can take shape, and, in turn, how culture will be transformed.

I want to thank *TDW*'s team: the cast, crew and creatives who worked tirelessly so we could give the best of ourselves to this production. Without their unwavering commitment, we would not have been able to strike the same chord with our audiences.

I also wish to thank Oombarra Productions, and, in particular, producer Bain Stewart who needs to be recognised as instrumental in the success of this work. Oombarra's contribution by way of expertise, consultancy, advocacy and networks guaranteed that we were always given the best advice, and that we were adhering to all cultural protocols.

But mostly, I want to thank Leah Purcell, who is simply phenomenal. It is through her that I learned the true meaning of courage and respect.

Thank you for your faith in me.

Always was
Always will be
Aboriginal land.

Leticia Cáceres, 2017

Leticia Cáceres is a multi-award-winning freelance stage director, with a passion for Australian writing. She is based in Melbourne.

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IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HENRY LAWSON – IF YOU KNOW BOURKE YOU KNOW AUSTRALIA – CONGRATULATIONS, EMILY KING

FRANK MOORHOUSE

WHILE WORKING ON THIS book, I became aware of the connections I have had with Henry Lawson during my writing life. Of course, he was long gone by the time I began writing – he died in 1922. Now, at my age, that time no longer seems such a great distance. I published my first short story when I was eighteen, thirty-five years after his death, meaning that about a generation separated us. Looking back, he played a curious part in the making of me as a writer and I followed in his footsteps, literally, figuratively and historically, throughout my life – to the assembling of this book.

On many nights, as a kindred spirit, I have drunk with Henry Lawson. And, as I discovered with great surprise when researching this book, my personality was closer to his than I had ever realised or imagined.

My first encounter with Lawson's work was in sixth class at Nowra Central Primary School in 1950. The teacher read us 'The Loaded Dog', and I don't think any of us had laughed as hard as we did during the reading of the story.

At sixteen, in 1955, I became a copy boy and then was a seventeen-year-old cadet journalist on the Sydney *Daily Telegraph*. (The old *Telegraph* was designed and edited by the dynamic, legendary editor Brian Penton – it was not the *Telegraph* as it is today, owned by Rupert Murdoch.) The poet Kenneth Slessor was the literary editor and leader writer, and also, independently of the *Telegraph*, editor of the literary magazine *Southerly*. When I was eighteen, in 1957, Slessor published my first short story, 'The Young Girl and the American Sailor', though we did not know each other at

the *Telegraph* – we worked on different floors and I was a mere cadet. *Southerly* is still in existence; I published in it last year.

Slessor and other writers of his generation dissociated themselves from the Lawson bush tradition, as my writer friends and I of the subsequent generation also did, declaring arrogantly, and to a large degree ignorantly, that the bush tradition was dead and that Australia was now a cosmopolitan urban nation. When I arrived to live in Sydney after high school, the city was three times the size of Lawson's, and rapidly evolving as a multicultural city from a program of massive post-World War II migration. Yet the interesting revelation that springs from our disavowal of Lawson was that we thought it *necessary*; that he loomed so large in our understanding of Australian literature. (It also ignored much of the urban writing he had done.) This book shows how Lawson remains an ongoing small fire in our creative make-up.

As a cadet journalist, I secretly saw myself also as a short-story writer – that was my real commitment. For my first vacation, before I felt I needed to disown and distance myself from Lawson, I decided to hitchhike to Bourke 'on the trail of Henry Lawson', camping off the road on the way. I ended up in Coonabarabran, where Lawson had once been. I was drinking in a bar there and the publican asked me what I was doing in town; I told him I was 'looking for Henry Lawson'. He laughed, and said, 'He owes money here.'

I remember I fell in with some shearers and rural workers, and found it curious that they drank beer in a five-ounce glass called a 'lady's waist', because of its womanly shape, whereas my journalist mates and I, back in the city, drank fifteen-ounce schooners or even pints in glass handles or steins, and considered ourselves mighty fine drinkers. The lady's waist seemed rather effete for these bush-hardened men, but they explained to me that in the outback they drank them because the beer in larger glasses warmed too quickly. I slowly realised, also, that they were drinking them in two mouthfuls – four mouthfuls to the middy – much faster than we drank back in the city.

I remember I woke up on the banks of the Castlereagh River in my sleeping bag, very drunk, surrounded by a heavy fog. I even wrote a free-verse poem about the experience, which was later rejected by the poet Douglas Stewart, the literary editor of the *Bulletin* between 1940 and 1961.

The poem was titled 'I thought I saw God on the banks of the Castlereagh'. I *must* have been drunk.

Later, when Stewart was at Angus & Robertson, Lawson's publisher, he edited my book *The Americans, Baby*. It was my second book but, in reality, the first to be published by a mainstream publisher, and I sat in the same offices where Lawson had been edited. Douglas Stewart's daughter, film-maker and writer Meg Stewart, was later to become a close friend. Literary linkage is never broken; we never escape it. No writer is born without literary ancestry.

I also came to write for the *Bulletin* under the editorship of Donald Horne, from 1967 to 1972. I was given a weekly retainer by Horne because he admired my short stories and wanted me to keep writing. I could contribute to the *Bulletin* whenever I felt like it, and I did eventually write columns for the magazine. Back then, I never saw that this paralleled Lawson's career.

As journalists, we drank at the Journalists' Club – open twenty-four hours a day – and in the main bar there was a portrait of Lawson. When it disappeared, we protested and were told it had been stolen. (Slessor bequeathed his private library to the Journalists' Club, and valuable signed copies in his bequest were also stolen from the club library.)

There is an upmarket bar in Sydney called Establishment, which occupies the old *Bulletin* building of Lawson's time. The original pillars are preserved in the bar area, along with some other architectural details. When I take a drink there, I touch one of the pillars and think that Lawson might have touched it, too, on his way out after taking the page of the current *Bulletin*, with his poem or story in it, to the bookkeeper. In the 1960s, the printing presses in the basement could be seen printing the magazine from the street.

The Edinburgh Castle, a hotel on the corner of Pitt and Bathurst Streets, has been a Sydney landmark since 1885. The pub history says that it 'was Henry Lawson's chosen writing nook, quenching his thirst and bearing witness to some of his greatest poems and short stories'. His wife, Bertha, mentioned it in her memoir. He lived there on and off.

I remember, back in my cadet days, doing some drinking in the Sydney CBD, a sort of crawl of Lawson pubs, with my dear friend Richard Hall, a journalist and historian, later to become private secretary to Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. We came to a pub I didn't know and I wondered if Lawson

had drunk there. Richard laughed, and pulled me into the hotel, saying, 'Henry drank in every pub.'

In 1964, I was invited to edit the *Australian Worker*, the fortnightly newspaper of the Australian Workers' Union, which represented rural workers. In 1898, Lawson had hoped to be editor of the newly established *Daily Worker* in Sydney, forerunner of the *Australian Worker*. But he was employed for only a few months in other positions before being let go, probably because the paper was in financial difficulties; it stopped being a daily and became a weekly around this time.

The *Australian Worker* originated out of the Wagga Wagga branches of the Amalgamated Shearers' Union and the General Workers' Union, which from 1891 to 1892 published the socialist newspaper *Hummer*. It is thought that 'hummer' was used as a synonym for bull-roarer, an Aboriginal instrument that may be a call to assemble but is also used in a number of rituals. The *Hummer's* masthead slogan was 'Socialism Is Being Mates'. The *Worker* moved from Wagga to Sydney, where it was edited by William Lane, the great socialist writer, organiser and political philosopher, and, from 1914 to 1943, its editor was Henry Boote, a great labour rights campaigner and journalist. The paper, published to this day, is thought to be the oldest labour newspaper in the world.

When I edited the paper, its offices were in Castlereagh Street. The whole building had been used by the newspaper when it was a daily and then a weekly. During my tenure, there were disused rooms, used as storerooms, with signs reading 'Sub-editors', 'Women's Editor' (where the poet Mary Gilmore would have had her office for many years), 'Mail Room' and so on. The flatbed presses were still in the basement, but were no longer used to print the paper.

In 1964, I was the only staff member. The paper had a very young readership; there were two pages of letters from outback and country kids wanting pen pals and outlining their interests. My editorials, I recall, were based on Penguin Specials, which used the English New Left's cultural analysis to help form the new political radicalism of the 1960s, based around issues such as worker participation in management, nuclear disarmament, the cooperative movement, prison reform, pacifism and conscription.

I used the old swivel chair and roll-top desk once used by Henry Boote. I am sure Lawson would have hung around there after his employment

ceased, through his friendship with Mary Gilmore. I liked to think they both took turns swivelling on the editor's chair that I still used. One night, I took Richard Hall into the offices. We sat in the chair and shared a bottle of beer in the company of the ghosts of literature and labour past.

In 1966, I wrote a short story, 'The Falling of the Star', which was published in the *Bridge*, a Jewish cultural and literary magazine that ran from 1964 to 1973. Given that this book has become a series of footnotes to footnotes, I note that the printer of the *Bridge* was Walter Stone, who printed a few little humanist literary magazines without charge, and whom I had met around the Workers' Educational Association, where I worked in different roles over four years in the 1960s. Stone was a venerable old man. Maybe he had alerted me to the *Bridge* as a new magazine that was publishing short stories.

As I recall, Stone mentioned his bohemian days to me, and his connections to Lawson. According to Alan Ventress, in his *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB)* entry on Stone, his love of books and socialist philosophy began after visits as a young man to Bertha McNamara's bookshop in Sydney, a meeting place for socialists, feminists, anarchists, rationalists and Laborites, as well as literary types.

Lawson visited this bookshop, too.

Bertha McNamara had opened the bookshop with her husband, William McNamara, a leading figure in the foundation of the Australian Socialist League in Sydney in 1887. It was their daughter, Bertha, who married Lawson in 1896.

Bertha Senior also ran a boarding house. In her *ADB* entry on Bertha, Verity Burgmann writes that she 'fed and housed many new migrants from Europe until they found employment'. Her other daughter, Hilda, married Jack Lang, later to become a famous Labor premier of NSW.

I wish I had talked with Stone more, and listened more closely.

The story of mine that was published in the *Bridge* borrows its title from Lawson's poem 'The Cambaroora Star'. My story is about a newspaper editor who, in the eyes of his devoted young reporter, falls from grace. It is based on my time in Wagga Wagga in the early 1960s with the *Riverina Express*, an idealistic weekly newspaper established by David Gyger, my mentor and a close friend from my *Telegraph* cadetship. Gyger had used his inheritance to finance the newspaper, and it eventually had its own printing plant. He also owned a nearby weekly newspaper, the

Lockhart Review, which I edited with my young wife, my girlfriend from my schooldays, Wendy Halloway; Wendy and I had started and edited the *Students' Voice* at Nowra High. The *Riverina Express* ran from 1958 to 1963, a secular-humanist paper that was a model of journalistic ethics.

The story was inspired by a silly argument David and I had about him joining the Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club, which I thought, in my zealous young-socialist way, compromised our independence as a newspaper. David argued that it was essential he become part of the business community if the paper was to attract advertising and survive.

The newspaper was one of the noblest enterprises I have ever been involved with, and he was one of the noblest journalists I have ever worked with.

The opening stanzas of 'The Cambaroora Star' read:

So you're writing for a paper? Well, it's nothing very new
To be writing yards of drivel for a tidy little screw:
You are young and educated, and a clever chap you are,
But you'll never run a paper like the CAMBAROORA STAR.
Though in point of education I am nothing but a dunce,
I myself – you mayn't believe it – helped to run a paper once
With a chap on Cambaroora, by the name of Charlie Brown,
And I'll tell you all about it if you'll take the story down.
On a golden day in summer, when the sunrays were aslant,
Brown arrived in Cambaroora with a little printing plant
And his worldly goods and chattels – rather damaged on the way –
And a weary-looking woman who was following the dray.
He had bought an empty humpy, and, instead of getting tight,
Why, the diggers heard him working like a lunatic all night:
And next day a sign of canvas, writ in characters of tar,
Claimed the humpy as the office of the CAMBAROORA STAR.

Well, I cannot read, that's honest, but I had a digger friend
Who would read the paper to me from the title to the end;
And the STAR contained a leader running thieves and spielers
down

...

Once I showed it to a critic, and he said 'twas very fine

...

So I went where Brown was working in his little hut hard by:
'My old mate has been a-reading of your writings, Brown,' said I –
'I have studied on your leader, I agree with what you say,
'You have struck the bed-rock certain, and there ain't no get-away;
'Your paper's just the thumper for a young and growing land,
'And your principles is honest, Brown; I want to shake your hand,
'And if there's any lumping in connection with the STAR,
'Well, I'll find the time to do it, and I'll help you – there you are!'

...

But the *Cambaroora* petered, and the diggers' sun went down,
And another sort of people came and settled in the town;
The reefing was conducted by a syndicate or two,
And they changed the name to 'Queensville', for their blood was
very blue.

They wanted Brown to help them put the feathers in their nests,
But his leaders went like thunder for their vested interests,
And he fought for right and justice and he raved about the dawn
Of the reign of Man and Reason till his ads were all withdrawn.

'You'll never run a paper like the *Cambaroora Star*.' David Gyger did.

In 1970, I won the Henry Lawson Short Story Competition – my first literary prize. It was run by the Lawson Festival in Grenfell, his birthplace. I received a trophy sculpted by highly respected sculptor the late Alan Ingham, which sits in my study. I learn only now, from the festival's historian, Auburn Carr, that the trophies are interpretations of the drover's wife. The connection had never occurred to me. Ingham also designed a drover's wife sculpture for the Alice Literary Award, organised by the Society of Women Writers and named in memory of Alice Booth, which is awarded biennially to a woman writer for an outstanding long-term contribution to Australian literature.

Michael Mandelc now makes the statuettes for the festival. Their subject is still the drover's wife.

As I continued to write short stories, I realised that, although they were conceived and published as standalone stories, they were related to each other, sometimes having the same characters and sometimes referring to the same incidents – I called the form, for a while, a 'discontinuous narrative'. I

realised that, in finding my way to this form, I had been influenced by the way Lawson had worked with his recurring characters, Joe Wilson, Jack Mitchell, Steelman and Smith, and Dave Regan. I was also more consciously influenced by J. D. Salinger and his stories of the Glass family.

Lawson returned to my life when my friend Murray Bail wrote his great story 'The Drover's Wife' in 1975, which takes off from the Lawson story and the Drysdale painting. I was impressed by Bail's creative move and, in 1980, wrote a drover's wife story, too. Other writers joined in the game and the drover's wife game continues.

Earlier in my life, Sylvia Lawson, an elegant writer, critic and short-story writer, and a relative of the Lawson family, became my friend. She is the author of the prize-winning *The Archibald Paradox: A Strange Case of Authorship* (1983), a history of the *Bulletin* of Henry Lawson's day.

In 1978, Bill Turner, at the University of New England, wrote a thesis, titled 'The Discontinuous Narrative, Moorhouse and Lawson'.

In 2008, fifty-two years after my first attempt as a cadet, I went looking for Henry Lawson again, vaguely, this time travelling by train to Bourke, and then trekking to Mount Gunderbooka, outside Bourke.

While camped at the mountain, freak weather conditions caused the thermometer to jump to forty-two degrees and, although I abandoned camp as soon as I realised the sudden rise in temperature was a dangerous problem, partly because of the sparse tree cover out there, the heat got me in the walk out and I went down with hyperthermia before I reached the car. To my embarrassment and self-disgust, I had to be rescued by Bourke police, the Bourke ambulance service and National Parks officers. They weren't censorious – in fact, they were jubilant with professional satisfaction at having rescued someone from the bush and from possible death. It was the first time I had needed to be rescued in a lifetime of tough wilderness trekking. I wrote about the experience in *Griffith Review* in 2011, in an essay titled, 'If you know Bourke you know Australia: Walpurgis Night on Mount Gunderbooka'. The essay begins with a quote from Lawson's poem 'Sez You', from *In the Days When the World Was Wide* (1896):

When the heavy sand is yielding backward from your blistered feet,
And across the distant timber you can see the flowing heat;
When your head is hot and aching, and the shadeless plain is wide,

And it's fifteen miles to water in the scrub the other side –
Don't give up, don't be down-hearted, to a man's strong heart be
true!

Take the air in through your nostrils [old bush wisdom – to avoid
drying your mouth], set your lips and see it through ...

I think I now know Bourke, Australia and Lawson – somewhat.

While working on this book, I came across the news that a Year 12 student, Emily King, from Coonabarabran High, was awarded a Highly Commended certificate for her entry in the 2016 Henry Lawson Festival's Verse and Short Story Competition, in the secondary section, for students under eighteen.

Congratulations, Emily; you are walking in Lawson's footsteps. Be careful.

PART FOUR

MISCELLANY

A PARLIAMENTARY QUESTION

*Main Committee debate over Appropriation Bill (No. 1) 2011–12
Graham Douglas Perrett (b. 1966), ALP member of the House of
Representatives in the seat of Moreton*

Mr PERRETT (Moreton) (11.58): A fortnight ago I had to go to my mother's funeral. I am one of nine children, and we all had to get together to go over stories for the eulogy. One of the stories that came out was from a time when my mum had only two kids and was out on a farm near St George. She had two of the kids in the bath – in dirty brown water – and a black snake came through a hole in the wall. She, like a good country woman, got a gun and shot the snake.

My siblings were telling that story, and I said, 'It's just like Henry Lawson's "The Drover's Wife".' They said, 'What?' I said, 'Henry Lawson; you would have to read the story.' Seven of my eight siblings are voracious readers, so they all read lots of different things. But they are all readers. I said, 'Henry Lawson; you would have heard of "The Drover's Wife" – it's a great figure from Australian literature,' and none of them knew it. One of them was mentioning that [story] in the eulogy and I said, 'I'll mention that it's just like "The Drover's Wife",' and people in the church will understand.

My mum was seventy-eight, so there was an elderly group, a range of people, in the church. In fact, many Chinese and Taiwanese from my community were there out of respect for me, even though they had not known my mum. I thought, 'They won't understand "The Drover's Wife" story, because it's an Australian historic piece of literature.' I mentioned that and afterwards, when I was doing a bit of a straw poll, I said, 'In the story about my mum, did you understand the reference to "The Drover's Wife"?' They said, 'No.' I thought, 'This is 2011.' I studied it at university. I am sure the minister or anyone who studied literature back in the sixties or

seventies or who read Henry Lawson would have heard of 'The Drover's Wife'. It got me thinking.

Obviously, the new Australians who came from Taiwan or China might not have read the story. Maybe their children will read it. I am not sure what goes on in the English curriculum. But what would our approach be to a national cultural policy to ensure that we include the iconic things that we need to have in the so-called Australian canon?

It also got me thinking: how do we structure things? I am pretty passionate about the publishing industry and about books in particular. I know the industry has had some challenges. We have had some discussions in this party, particularly about parallel imports. The film industry is doing it a bit rough, with the Australian dollar being so high. When it comes to filming, it is hard to compete with places like Taiwan, New Zealand and even Thailand. We have these incredibly skilled people – set dressers, best boys, gaffers and cinematographers – who are rewarded at the Oscars as being world class, world standard, the best in their field –

A division having been called in the House of Representatives, sitting suspended from 12.02 to 12.24

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Ms Vamvakinou): Has the member for Moreton concluded his question to the minister?

Mr PERRETT: No, Madam Deputy Speaker. With our book industry, our film industry and our TV industry under pressure from the high Australian dollar, it is appropriate to ask, because of all the jobs that are associated with the arts sector and the cultural sector, how has this budget supported the arts and cultural sector?

A UNIVERSITY COURSE OUTLINE

From a course on Australian literature and film, conducted by Don Graham at the University of Texas at Austin in 2010

Texts:

Robyn Davidson, *Tracks*
Australian Literature & Film (Co-op packet)
Kate Jennings, *Snake* (Co-op packet)

Films:

Walkabout
The Tracker

Please note: Films and hand-outs carry full weight as texts.

Requirements: Two exams (50% and 29%); one essay (11%); class participation and attendance (10%). Grades will be based on the A–F scale, no pluses or minuses.

Prerequisites: Nine semester hours of coursework in English or Rhetoric & Writing.

Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodation from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 471-6259.

Syllabus

January

19 T: **Intro**

21 Th: **Founding:** Robert Hughes, first chapter from *The Fatal Shore*

26 T: **Tales of the Convicts:** Lecture; **Australia Day**

28 Th: Robyn Davidson, *Tracks*

February

2 T: *Tracks* cont.

4 Th: *Tracks* cont.

9 T: *Walkabout*

11 Th: Film completed

16 T: 'Marrying Eddie'

18 Th: **Federation: January 1, 1901:** A. B. (Banjo) Paterson, 'Clancy of the Overflow', 'Waltzing Matilda'

23 T: **Drover's Wife Sequence:** Louisa Lawson, 'The Australian Bush-Woman'; Henry Lawson, 'The Drover's Wife'; 'Water Them Geraniums'

25 Th: Henry Lawson, 'Telling Mrs Baker'; Edward Dyson, 'The Conquering Bush'; Katherine Mansfield, 'The Woman at the Store'

March

2 T: Russell Drysdale, *The drover's wife* (painting); Murray Bail, 'The Drover's Wife', Frank Moorhouse, 'The Drover's Wife', Barbara Jefferis, 'The Drover's Wife'

4 Th: Anne Gambling, 'The Drover's De Facto', David Ireland, 'The Drover's Wife', Ian Wilkinson, 'The Driver's Wife', Chris Eipper, 'The Wife's Drover', Craig Cormick, 'The Drover's Wife'

9 T: **Exam**

11 **Essay assignment**

16 T: **Spring Break**

18 Th: **Spring Break**

23 T: *The Tracker*

25 Th: *The Tracker* cont.

30 **The Whitlam Era:** Lecture; Michael Wilding, 'Class Feeling'; 'The Sybarites'; 'Joe's Absence'

April

1 Th: 'Bye Jack. See You Soon'; 'In the Penal Colony'

6 T: Wilding, 'The Girl Behind the Bar is Reading Jack Kerouac'; 'Yet Once More'

8 Th: Frank Moorhouse, 'Dell Goes Into Politics'; 'The American Poet's Visit'; A. A. Phillips, 'The Cultural Cringe'

13 T: Moorhouse, 'The Jack Kerouac Wake: The True Story' **Essay Due**

15 Th: Kate Jennings, *Snake*

20 T Jennings cont.

22 Th: [**April 25, Anzac Day**]

27 T: Kate Jennings, *Snake*

29 Th: Don Graham, 'Koka Kola Kulture: Reflections on Things American Down Under'; 'The Voice on the Verandah'; Betsy Berry, 'Sydney in Shadows'

May

4 T: Wrap up

6 Th: **Exam**

The instructor retains the right to vary the syllabus for this class.

LIST OF OTHER DROVER'S WIFE ARTWORKS

***The Drover's Wife*, short film**, 1968, directed by Giancarlo Manara

***Serious Undertakings*, short film**, 1983, directed by Helen Grace

***The Drover's Wife*, short film**, 1985, directed by Sue Brooks

(*Japanese Story*, *Looking for Grace*). Brooks directed the short film while she was a student at AFTRS. The film is online at:

www.aftrs.edu.au/showcase/students-and-films/video/0_xfhyhkn

***The Drover's Wife*, orchestral narration**, 1987, composed by Stephen Cronin

***Slim Dusty Sings Henry Lawson*, album**, 1989 (any and all copyright in this compilation is owned by EMI Music Australia Pty Ltd)

***The Drover's Wives*, contemporary dance/theatre/music work**, first performed 2006, created and directed by Sally Richardson; original score by Iain Grandage

***The Drover's Wives*, short dance film**, 2008, re-cut 2015, concept and direction by Sally Richardson. The film is online at:

<https://vimeo.com/130745478>

***Dances with Devils*, a percussion concerto**, 2015, composed by Iain Grandage

***From Heaven to Hell*, oratorio/opera**, 2016, composed by Andrew Howes, using Louisa Lawson's poems and 'The Drover's Wife'

***The Campfire Yarns of Henry Lawson*, audiobook**, 2016, read by Jack Thompson; the collection includes 'The Drover's Wife'

HENRY LAWSON: A NARRATIVE TIMELINE

- 1867** Henry Lawson is born in the small goldfields settlement of Grenfell, NSW. His family moves to Pipeclay, which becomes Eurunderee.
- 1875–79** Attends Eurunderee Public School, a Catholic school in Mudgee, and has access to the School Arts Library in Mudgee. In these years, his partial deafness is diagnosed.
- 1880** Aged thirteen: Leaves school and works with his father on local contract building jobs in the NSW Blue Mountains.
- 1883** Aged sixteen: Leaves the bush and joins his mother, Louisa, in Sydney in a household of free thinkers, republicans, socialists and feminists. For a time, he is apprenticed to a coach painter and takes night-class study towards matriculation, but he fails the examination.
- 1887** Aged twenty: Publishes his first poem, ‘A Song of the Republic’, in the *Bulletin*. He is also treated at the Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital, Melbourne, for his partial deafness.
- 1888** Aged twenty-one: Publishes his first story, ‘His Father’s Mate’, in the *Bulletin*.
- 1889** Aged twenty-two: Louisa Lawson publishes ‘The Australian Bush-Woman’ in the *Boston Woman’s Journal* and London *Englishwoman’s Review*, which becomes a source of inspiration for ‘The Drover’s Wife’.
- 1890** Aged twenty-three: Builds his reputation as a writer of verse, such as ‘Faces in the Street’, ‘Andy’s Gone with Cattle’ and ‘The Watch on the Kerb’. He begins a relationship with the young poet Mary Gilmore; she writes of an unofficial engagement and Lawson’s wish to marry her. But Gilmore breaks it off, and Lawson goes to Western Australia for six

- months with his brother Peter. When he returns, he works as a labourer and finds accommodation apart from his mother.
- 1891** Lawson is offered journalistic work on the Brisbane-based *Boomerang*. He contributes prose and rhymes there, and also to William Lane's *Worker* for six months.
- 1892** Aged twenty-five: 'The Drover's Wife' is published in the *Bulletin*. The magazine pays for Lawson to travel to Bourke, where he works as a house painter. He walks with a swag from Bourke to Hungerford, on the NSW–Queensland border, and back, a distance of almost 450 kilometres.
- 1893** Returns to Sydney and lives with his Aunt Emma, before travelling to New Zealand for six months, where he works as a telegraph linesman.
- 1894** Publishes the first selection of his work, *Short stories in prose and verse*, which contains a re-edited version of 'The Drover's Wife'.
- 1896** Aged twenty-nine: *While the Billy Boils*, Lawson's first major short-story collection, is published, with further changes to 'The Drover's Wife'. He marries Bertha McNamara Bredt, daughter of Matilda Emilie Bertha McNamara (1853–1931), a socialist agitator, feminist and bookshop owner. He also publishes *In the Days when the World Was Wide and Other Verses*. The Lawsons spend some months in Western Australia, where they live for a time in a government camp in Perth, before returning in October.
- 1897** Assisted by J. F. Archibald, editor of the *Bulletin*, the Lawsons move to Mangamaunu in the South Island of New Zealand, where they both teach at a Maori school.
- 1898** The Lawsons return to Sydney and Lawson is briefly admitted to a home for inebriates. His son, Joseph, is born, and Lawson is given a job in the NSW government's Statisticians' Office.
- 1899** Publishes an article in the *Bulletin*, 'Pursuing Literature in Australia', about the trials of being a writer. Temporarily abstemious, he works on *On the Track* and *Over the Sliprails* (stories), and *Verses, Popular and Humorous*.

- 1900** Aged thirty-three: With Bertha, Joseph and his newborn daughter, also named Bertha, he leaves for England. In London, he retains an agent, J. B. Pinker, and mixes with a literary circle, including the critic Edward Garnett and William Blackwood, editor of *Blackwood's Magazine*. Bertha suffers from mental problems, and is treated at a private clinic.
- 1901** Blackwood publishes *The Country I Come From* and *Joe Wilson and His Mates*. Bertha spends three months in Bethlem Royal Hospital.
- 1902** Aged thirty-five: Blackwood publishes *Children of the Bush*. Bertha returns to Sydney with the children, in the company of Mary Gilmore and her husband, and Lawson follows soon after. Bertha obtains a decree for judicial separation, after six years of marriage. In December, Lawson is admitted to hospital for alcoholism and, after he is discharged, he lives on the streets, drinking heavily.
- 1903–07** He is frequently gaoled for failure to pay maintenance for his children.
- 1903** Aged thirty-six: Buys a room at Isabel Byers' Coffee Palace in North Sydney, which is also a boarding house, beginning a twenty-year friendship between him and Byers (aged fifty-five), who becomes his manager.
- 1906–11** Lawson is a voluntary patient at the Darlinghurst Mental Hospital.
- 1910** Aged forty-three: His friends arrange retreats at Mallacoota, Victoria. *The Skyline Riders and Other Verses* is published.
- 1913** *Triangles of Life and Other Stories* is published.
- 1915** *My Army, O, My Army! and Other Songs* is published.
- 1916** With assistance from friends and the NSW government, gets a house and a writing commission in Leeton; Mrs Byers accompanies him there.
- 1918** After twenty months, returns to Sydney, where he is repeatedly hospitalised for mental illness.
- 1920** Aged fifty-three: The Commonwealth Literary Fund grants

him one pound a week as a pension.

- 1921** Leaves Mrs Byers and lives an itinerant life in Sydney and the Blue Mountains.
- 1922** Aged fifty-five: Dies of cerebral haemorrhage at Abbotsford on 2 September, in the care of Mrs Byers.
- 1931** George Lambert statue of Lawson erected in Royal Botanic Garden, Sydney.
- 1949** Honoured with a 2½d postage stamp, the standard letter rate at the time.
- 1966–93** Featured on the first Australian ten-dollar note after decimal currency is introduced.

LAWSON SITES OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Lawson archives

The Mitchell Library holds some of the most important of Lawson's extant documents, including his revised manuscripts for *While the Billy Boils* (1896). These are held in two volumes, MLA 1867 and MLA 1868. 'The Drover's Wife' forms a part of this collection and is held in MLA 1867. The library describes these as 'manuscripts', although they are not holographs, in the main. For simplicity's sake, I will use this classification. They are, in fact, mostly clippings of stories taken from various newspaper publications of the 1890s, such as the *Worker* and the *Bulletin*, which have been pasted onto sheets of paper.

There appears to have been no method to this procedure. The paper seems to have been gathered from whatever was at hand over a period of time, consistent with the stories being gathered and prepared for a collection. For example, all but the first page of 'The Drover's Wife', taken from *Short stories in prose and verse* (1894), have been cut and pasted on the reverse side of advertising brochures for 'Heinemann's empire library of standard works' (the first page is pasted on a sheet of red-and-blue lined paper).

Lawson's walking stick and shirt are in the State Library of Victoria. In mid-2003, the items were added to the existing archive of material held in the library's Australian Manuscripts Collection.

Lawson likenesses

A portrait of Lawson by John Longstaff may be viewed in the Art Gallery of NSW.

A portrait by Norman Carter is at Parliament House, Canberra.

In the State Library of NSW, there is a gold cast of Henry Lawson's writing hand and a 'death mask', both sculpted by his friend Nelson Illingworth.

Finally, there is the statue of Lawson in the Sydney Botanic Garden by George Lambert, unveiled in 1931.

Place of birth

The Henry Lawson Festival is held each year on the June long weekend in Grenfell, Lawson's birthplace, in central west NSW.

North Sydney

Lawson was never in one place for long. He lived in a number of houses in the area: for example, one in Charles Street, where his daughter, Bertha, was born, and the Coffee Palace, run by Isabel Byers. There were other houses in Euroka, Lord and William Streets.

The local hotels no doubt saw a lot of Henry, as a patron if not a resident. For example, he described the Fig Tree Inn at the bottom of Blues Point Road, next door to the current site of Blues Point Tower.

Place of death

Henry Lawson lived in Abbotsford for a short time before his death and died in a house on Great North Road, opposite Abbotsford Public School, in 1922.

Henry Lawson Park was dedicated on 3 September 1938. At the dedication ceremony, three trees were planted by the poet's widow, Bertha Lawson, and Dame Mary Gilmore.

Abbotsford Public School has a Henry Lawson Community Hall, completed in 2002.

Other markers

There is a plaque on the Dominion Building on the corner of Forbes and Burton Streets in Darlinghurst, Sydney, where Lawson was gaoled and hospitalised.

The house in Leeton where Lawson lived for a time in his later years is now used as a nurses' residence.

Lawson's grave is in Waverley Cemetery, Sydney.

Pubs and bars

The Henry Sports Club on Henry Lawson Avenue, Werrington County, NSW

The Loaded Dog Hotel, a historic bar in Tarago, NSW, established in 1848

Edinburgh Castle Hotel on Pitt St, Sydney, where Lawson wrote, drank and, for a time, had a room

Lawson Park Hotel, in Mudgee, NSW

Henry Lawson Club, a bar at the Australian High Commission in New Delhi

Parks

Canada Bay, NSW

Como, NSW

Ipswich, Queensland

Mudgee, NSW

Yass, NSW

Louisa Lawson memorials

The Louisa Lawson Reserve in Marrickville, NSW, is named in her honour. The park has a mosaic of the front cover of the *Dawn*, and a plaque that reads, ‘Louisa Lawson (1848–1920), social reformer, writer, feminist and mother of Henry Lawson. These stones are all that remain from the walls of her home in Renwick Street, Marrickville.’

There is a block of Housing Commission flats at North Bondi named after Louisa.

There is a Louisa Lawson Circuit in Gilmore, ACT.

In 2016, the 26,000-square-metre Louisa Lawson office block in Tuggeranong, ACT, which was custom-built in 2013 for the Department of Human Services, sold for \$225m to Korean investors.

The suburb of Lawson

The suburb in Canberra has street names that echo Lawson’s life and writings, such as Bulletin Street, Dawn Crescent and Drover Rise. The street names and their origins can be found online at:

www.legislation.act.gov.au/di/2013-228/current/pdf/2013-228.pdf

‘... Here is a Lawson joke for you, made at lunch with the Williamsons yesterday by Angela. David displayed his new watch, a something-or-other DROVER, given to him by his son-in-law. It features a tiny glass container of dust from the Red Centre, which can be seen when watch looked at side-on. It is enormous. Angela asked if there was a woman’s watch, smaller, called The Drover’s Wife?’

As told to the editor by Dr Don Anderson



Henry Lawson, as depicted on the 2½d stamp in 1949. Note his luxuriant moustache.

© Australian Postal Corporation. Designer: Frank Manley; engraver: E. R. M. Jones



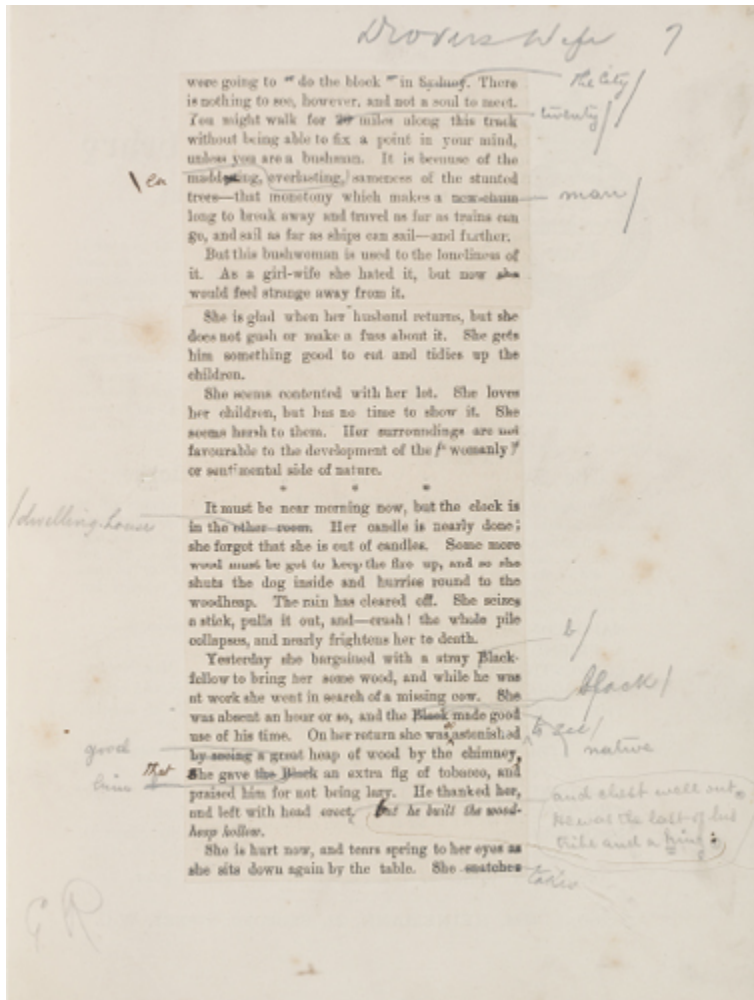
Lawson on the ten-dollar banknote in the first decimal series, issued between 1966 and 1993.

Lawson drawing © Sir Lionel Lindsay



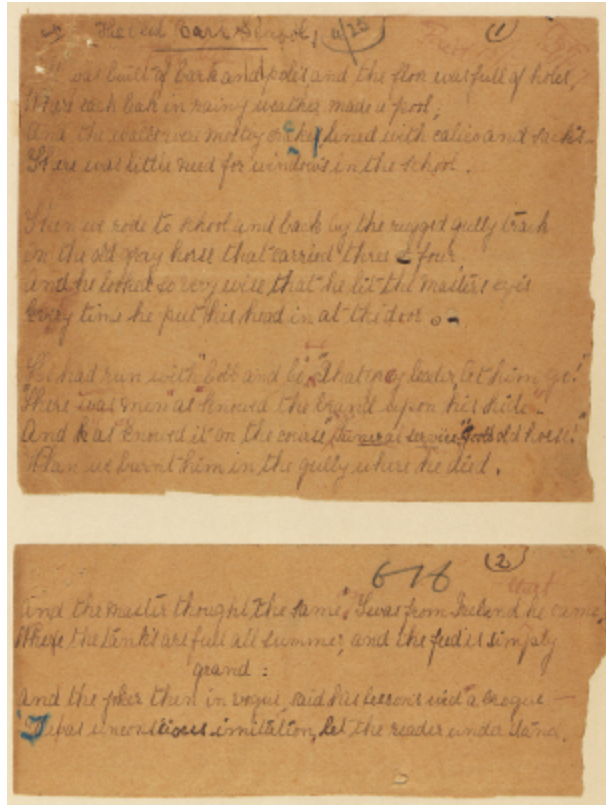
Lawson's mother, Louisa, on a 1975 stamp series honouring famous Australian women. Louisa, a writer, publisher and feminist, was a strong influence on his early work.

© *Australian Postal Corporation. Designers: Des and Jackie O'Brien*



The edited manuscript of the third version of 'The Drover's Wife', as it appeared in *While the Billy Boils* (Angus & Robertson, 1896). The editor – perhaps Lawson – has changed to a lower-case 'b' for 'blackfellow', and has made the Aboriginal man who gathers wood for the drover's wife into a caricature, with his 'chest well out. He was the last of his tribe and a King.'

Courtesy State Library of NSW (A 1867)



Manuscript for the first four stanzas of Lawson's poem 'The Old Bark School', in his handwriting.

Courtesy Rare Books and Special Collections, University of Sydney Library

*It was built of bark and poles, and the floor was full of holes,
Where each leak in rainy weather made a pool;
And the walls were mostly cracks lined with calico and sacks –
There was little need for windows in the school.*

*Then we rode to school and back by the rugged gully track,
On the old grey horse that carried three or four;
And he looked so very wise that he lit the master's eyes
Every time he put his head in at the door.*

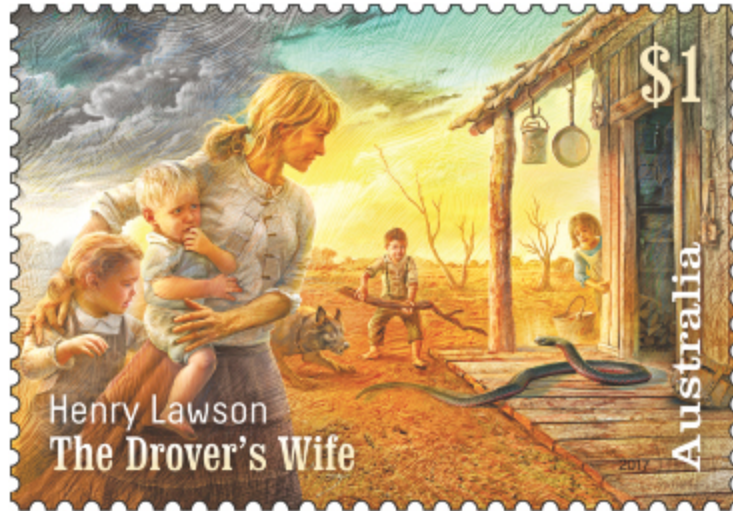
*He had run with Cobb and Co. – 'That grey leader, let him go!'
There were men 'as knowed the brand upon his hide',
And 'as knowed it on the course'. Funeral service: 'Good old
horse!'*

When we burnt him in the gully where he died.

*And the master thought the same. 'Twas from Ireland that he came,
Where the tanks are full all summer, and the feed is simply grand:
And the joker then in vogue said his lessons wid a brogue –
'Twas unconscious imitation, let the reader understand.*



The dream: the drover's wife 'finds all the excitement and recreation she needs in the *Young Ladies' Journal*, and, Heaven help her! takes a pleasure in the fashion-plates'.



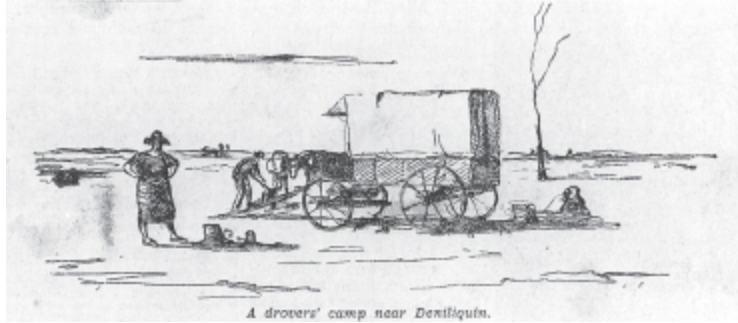
The reality: the drover's wife protects her family against the snake while a storm looms overhead. This tableau was printed on a 2017 stamp celebrating the sesquicentenary of Lawson's birth.

© Australian Postal Corporation. Designers: Jamie and Leanne Tufrey



Russell Drysdale in the late 1940s. Photographer unknown; possibly a self-portrait.

© *Estate of Russell Drysdale. Courtesy The Beagle Press*



The first of Drysdale's emblematic 'Big Woman' artworks: *A drovers' camp near Deniliquin* (1944).

© Estate of Russell Drysdale. Courtesy The Beagle Press



Another of the Big Women, as depicted in Drysdale's *Back verandah* (1942), on a 1995 stamp.

© Australian Postal Corporation. Designer: Allnutt Graphics Pty Ltd



Woman in a landscape (1949, Sydney)

Oil on composition board

101.0 × 66.3 cm

South Australian Government Grant 1949

Courtesy Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide (0.1404)

© *Estate of Russell Drysdale*



Big Edna (1967)
Pen and ink, and coloured wash
44.3 × 28.4 cm
Private collection

© Estate of Russell Drysdale. Courtesy The Beagle Press



Jeff Carter (1928–2010)

The Drover's Wife, Urisino Bore (1958)

Portrait of drover Ronald Kerr, wife Mavis and baby Johnny

Gelatin silver photograph

Printed image 27.9 × 27.7 cm; sheet 33.5 × 30.5 cm

National Gallery of Australia, NGA 2000.205

© *Estate of Jeff Carter*



Ron and Mavis Kerr in 2011

© *David Hahn/bauersyndication.com.au*



The Drover's Wife, Urandangie Stock Route, West Qld. (1990)

Oil on canvas 50 × 60 cm

Courtesy Elder Fine Art, Adelaide

© *Estate of Hugh Sawrey*

Hugh Sawrey called this painting 'a tribute to all the women who pioneered the outback'. A self-taught painter, Sawrey documented the working people of the Queensland and NT outback, and some called him 'Banjo Paterson with a paintbrush'.



The Drover's Wife (2013)
Acrylic on canvas 61.5 × 76.5 cm

© *Dell Plummer*

Dell Plummer writes, 'I love the intrigue of the Australian outback, with its sense of overwhelming space, stark beauty and harshness. I tried to capture the loneliness and determination of early settlers to survive so far from any urban support. The painting is a minimalist contemporary tribute to Drysdale's 1945 original.'



Leah Purcell as the drover's wife, for the 2016 Belvoir St Theatre production of her play.

© *Brett Boardman*



An image from the performance, reminiscent of Drysdale's paintings:
gnarled tree branches, coarse sand and sparse backdrops.

© *Brett Boardman*



Stills and promotional material from *The Drover's Wives*, a contemporary work combining dance, theatre and music, created and directed by Sally Richardson. The work premiered in Perth in 2006 and toured China in 2007.

Richardson's literary influences included the Lawson story, Barbara Baynton's 'The Chosen Vessel' (1896) and Edward Dyson's 'The Conquering Bush' (1898). Painting influences included Drysdale's drover's wife, in addition to Tom Roberts' *Lost* (1886) and Frederick McCubbin's *Down on His Luck* (1889).

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A Year 8 English Essay: A Reinterpretation

What narrative techniques does Lawson use to shape the reader's perception of the Drover's Wife?

'The Drover's Wife' by Henry Lawson (2005) is ~~set~~ an Australian novel set in Australia featuring the wife of a Drover. It is an historical story. Most historical stories take place in the past, and so does this one. A drover according to the Oxford English Dictionary is 'one who drives sheep' and a wife is a 'married woman' so as we can see, the themes of 'sheep' and marriage run deep throughout the story. Henry Lawson uses myriads of multiple narrative techniques throughout the novel which shape the reader's perception of the drover's wife. For example, flashbacks, description, humor and sarcasm. //

The first technique Lawson uses to illustrate the drover's wife is flashbacks. The story is set a long time ago with the wife looking back on her life and when a black snake viciously attacked her children. On p3 of the story she thinks back to floods & bushfires & being attacked by Aboriginal people. She also thinks about her husband who always treats her like a 'princess'. As we can see from this quote, the writer shows us lots about the drover's wife's past so we will know more about her. // Secondly, there is description like 'It is not a very beautiful day, and the light shows numerous old hands where the hair will not grow.' (p5) Here they are talking about their dog Alligator, who has severely fought the snake and got it and so his hair is falling out. The description 'Her husband is an Australian and so is she' is also vital as it lets the reader know that the story is set in Australia, and not America,

for example. Finally, ~~the~~ an "evil pair of small, light ~~blue~~ 'head-like eyes' demonstrates that the snake is evil. Thus, description is an important narrative technique in the book.

Humour is furthermore a vital part of the novel. The driver's wife's children have Aspergers and are comic relief. They say things like 'I'd like to screw their slinky necks' and 'Blast,' which makes the wife laugh and the reader. Also, the dog is called 'Alligator', which is a funny name for a dog. And the wife pokes herself with her finger and laughs. These examples clearly demonstrate that the Driver's wife is funny.

On the other hand sadness. There are several very tragic parts of the book such as when the wife cries after finding the shark man's wood. And when she is missing her driver who is far away in Ireland. Also when there was a flood and a bridge over the snake. But at the end after killing the snake, the driver's wife has a cuddle with her son and feels better so it's not all sad. // In conclusion, the Driver's wife in 'The Driver's Wife' is well portrayed by flesh-like description, humour and sadness, and makes Henry Lawson, as one of the greatest living Australian writers.

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Walter Syer sketch of Lawson courtesy Dixon Galleries, State Library of NSW.

George Lambert’s sketch for the Lawson statue, [here](#), from the Lionel Lindsay Gallery and Library Collection 385, Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery.

Photograph of 'King' Mickey Johnson [here](#) from the collections of the Wollongong City Libraries and the Illawarra Historical Society.

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About the Author

Frank Moorhouse was born in the coastal town of Nowra, NSW. He worked as an editor of small-town newspapers and as an administrator and tutor for the Workers' Educational Association, and in the 1970s became a full-time writer. He has written prize-winning fiction, non-fiction and essays. He is best known for the highly acclaimed Edith trilogy, *Grand Days*, *Dark Palace* and *Cold Light*, novels that follow the career of an Australian woman in the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s through to the International Atomic Energy Agency in the 1970s. Frank has been awarded a number of fellowships, including writer-in-residence at King's College, Cambridge, a Fulbright Fellowship and a fellowship at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington. His work has been translated into several languages. He was made a member of the Order of Australia for services to literature in 1985, and was made a Doctor of the University by Griffith University in 1997 and a Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) by the University of Sydney in 2015.

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