Point of no return: Exploring katabatic narrative and deterritorialisation in the Australian outback novel

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Art (Creative Writing and Research).

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Keywords

Katabasis, territoriality, deterritorialisation, outback fiction, hero’s journey
Abstract

This thesis consists of the novel *Brolga* and an exegesis examining in what ways the ideas of katabasis and deterritorialisation inform an understanding of descent narratives in contemporary Australian outback fiction. When writing the creative piece, it was observed that Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey was an imprecise model for my manuscript and indeed for many of the contemporary novels I had read written in similar outback settings. On analysis a better fit lies in the idea of a heroic journey from which there is no clear return from the underworld. This narrative form is defined in this thesis as a katabatic narrative. To unpack this narrative trope, the inverse of territoriality, deterritorialisation, is used as a lens to examine the complex thematic and symbolic resonances of the outback in both Brolga and analogous works of contemporary outback fiction.
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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature:

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Creative Work

BROlGA

A novel by Brendan Telford

‘A man’s past is not simply a dead history…it is a still quivering part of himself, bringing shudders and bitter flavours and the tinglings of a merited shame.’

George Eliot
ONE

He let his forehead rest against the bus window, looking through himself at the blurred shapes beyond. Not much could be made out, the night blending with the landscape to become one black anomaly. The coolness of the glass soothed his aching body.

The bus interior was dark, the only illumination coming from the luminescent digital clock at the front above the windshield. Music from an iPod floated faintly from somewhere across the aisle. A small girl no older than five occupied the seat opposite. At the beginning of the journey, she had been a ball of combustible energy. She now lay snuggled into the chair, quiet, the occasional infantile murmur passing her lips as she slept.

He had been at the bus terminal two hours before the departure time printed on his ticket. He sat close to the glass doors, watching the comings and goings of the passengers and their various acquaintances. How would each embrace, handshake, lingering kiss shape the overall paths of these strangers’ lives? Was this a last goodbye? The first of many happy reunions? Were the lesbians who verged on heavy petting gratuitously in lust for each other, or desperate in the realisation that their parting once again left them alone? Was the man with the red silk tie happy because of the journey that lay ahead, or because of what he was leaving behind?

He wiped a sweaty palm across his face, the stubble rasping against his skin. Light filtered through one of the station windows. He stared at the motes of matter that danced in the golden rays, dirt mixing with dead skin, dust melding with discarded particles, memories, all forgotten.

He had alighted his bus without fanfare. His departure from this world was without fuss. There was no party, big send-off, or last hurrah to mark his inception into the ‘real world’, one seen as working five days a week for the majority of the calendar year, having responsibilities such as car and home loans, union fees, and beer other than XXXX Bitter. “We don’t want you forgetting what you’re leaving behind, y’know!”
He looked at the clock. The party would have been winding down about now, everyone making plans to head out into the city. If they bothered to have the party. They probably would have. Without him there, they would have had to think up another reason to drink, which would inevitably be that he wasn’t there.

He stretched his legs as far under the seat in front of him as he could, trying as he did so to work the knot out of the middle of his back. He tried to make as little noise or movement as possible, but before long the girl stirred from her sleep, opening her eyes to look at him. She yawned, rubbing her half-opened eyes with tiny fists.

“Sorry,” he whispered. “Go back to sleep.”

“What time is it?” the girl mumbled.

“Two in the morning.”

“Oh.” She straightened a little in her seat, still gazing bleary-eyed at him. “That’s pretty early, hey?”

“Hey,” Amos replied softly. “Go back to sleep.”

“How come you aren’t sleeping?” the girl asked.

He looked at her. The girl’s face was purity – pink rosy cheeks framed by red curls, large blue eyes, the lightest touch of freckles across the bridge of her nose. He looked at her and felt the emptiness open wide inside him. His mouth quivered, his tongue unsure of its proper movements. He rested his head against the glass.

“Just go back to sleep,” he whispered.

The bus travelled on through the night.

____________________

Thump.
He started, swivelling around in fuzzy awareness, looking for eyes in the darkness, piercing his fragile exterior. No one stirred. The girl had acquired a blanket, huddling beneath it, a protective shell to the night. Her chest rose in quick heaves, deflated in rapid troughs.

He eased over her, out into the aisle. The only light came from the runners along the floor, a lone iPod’s LCD screen, and the digital clock above the bus driver’s head: 2.32am. He staggered to the back of the bus and opened the toilet door, the sickly interior light washing over him like soapy water. His eyes became slits as he stumbled forward, a weary zombie, and eased the door shut behind him.

He looked into the mirror, inhaled, dry retched. He looked again. His light blue shirt clung to him, an opaque film wrap, his bulky frame pressing against the fabric. Mushroom clouds had formed underneath his armpits. The stubble of a number of days looked unkempt when framed by his dark eyes, his limp hair, his furrowed brow.

“Fuck.”

The water dribbled from the thin faucet, pooling in the lines of his palms. He patted his face lightly, dragged his hands roughly, pushed his knuckles into his eyes. Rinse and repeat.

Rinse and repeat.

Rinse and repeat.

He looked in the mirror.

Rinse and repeat.

Water spattered the front of his shirt, the faded blue finding some of its former glory. Droplets hung from his whiskers, his jaw, like quivering stalagmites, before spearing onto the floor.

He jammed his hand into his pocket, his fingers clasping the cylindrical object and fighting with it. It did not want to leave the safety of the alcove. He fumbled, strained, cursed, until it gave, flying from the safety of the dark recesses of his trousers, fleeing from the frantic clutches of his grasp, ricocheting of the roof before clattering off the corner of the basin and into the bowl of the toilet.
“Shit!”

He dropped to his knees and pulled the container out of the tepid water, giving it one shake to get rid of the water, then two, three, four.

“Shit!”

He strained at the cap, his fingernails working under the lid, attempting to gain a good grasp. The satisfying pop of the cap’s release. He shook the bottle at his shaking hand, inviting, hoping praying.

Nothing came.

“Fuck!”

He threw the container against the door of the cubicle, slumping to sit on the floor, the lip of the toilet digging into his back. The bottle rolled along the floor with the rhythms of the bus, the label seesawing in and out of view. He hit his shoe and came to a momentary halt.

30 Amitriptyline (ELAVIL) 50mg Tabs

Take ONE tablet THREE times a day. Take with or after food.

MR AMOS KANE

A muffled voice came from outside the door.

Amos didn’t answer.

The voice sounded again, closer, more urgent.

Amos grunted, imitating an affirmative.

*Thump.*

The bus travelled on through the night.
The hiss of the hydraulics pierced the uneasy silence within the bus carriage. Amos shook his head, struggling to awaken, to recognise, to escape. He looked around him blearily at the other passengers, unfurling themselves from their seats, stretching themselves in synchronised feline movements. The girl had moved into the aisle, moving towards the front door. Amos let his head drop back to the seat rest, exhaustion seeping into the marrow of his bones.

He made his way off the coach after it had emptied. He came around the open door and was hit with a light shower of water glancing off the front of the coach. The bus driver stood with a fire hose in his hand, a steady blast of white water hitting the windshield, the grill, the bulbar. Streams of murky red floated past his pristine black shoes, ebbing and flowing against the soles without notice. The sun reflected off his large sunglasses.

“Had a rough night mate?” The laughter rumbled from his chest in malicious rolls.

Amos said nothing.

“Look.” The driver gestured at the bus with his hose, his eyes never leaving the task at hand. “Fucking ‘roos. Gotta go straight mate. Otherwise we’re gone. Thirteen of ‘em.”

A chunk of meat and fur plopped to the bitumen, an island in a sea of red.

Amos was met with a blast of refrigerated air as he walked through the doors of the roadhouse. The passengers queued at the counter, their arms full with unsavoury foodstuffs and beverages. The staples of the roadhouse – Chiko Rolls, Corn Jacks, pies, sausage rolls, toasted ham and congealed cheese sandwiches, beef burgers swimming in oil, the buns shining in the fluorescent light. Amos grabbed a Coke and joined the line-up. His eyes remained averted. His fingers brushed the cylindrical shape in his pocket.
The television screen crackled to life, continued to crackle as the tape flushed out some unwanted dirt. It wasn’t long before the cabin was filled with the orchestral sounds of an obnoxious movie studio, its flamboyant colours and images drawing all attention to it.

Amos looked out the bus window, impervious. The light bleached all colour from the little plant life that forced its way out of the reddening earth; the sky’s blue so beautiful in its harshness, its disdain. Fences leaned, wilted, staggered and fell, an ineffective marker of ineffective man. Carcasses lined the highway, dotted the dotted line. A crow, so used to the methodical comings and goings of motor vehicles, hopped to the sides of the road, letting the rumbling metal beast glide past before resuming their rotting meals.

“What you looking at?”

The girl was kneeling on her seat, peering around Amos’ frame, trying to make sense of it. He shook his head.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Her head to the side, incredulous.

“Mmm.”

“Why would you look at nothing?”

“Because that’s all there is to look at.”

She pointed to the television, the screen crowded by loud children and even louder adults. “What about that?”

“No thanks.”

“It’s not nothing though!”

Amos smiled crookedly. “Actually, it is nothing. Trust me.”

The girl smiled back. She pointed past his shoulder. “What about that? That’s something.”
Amos turned back around. In the middle distance between the road and a hazy outline of a low rock outcropping, a mob of kangaroos bounced in unison, their muscles rippling under their hide, their tails arced, their snouts pointed forward, seemingly nonplussed by the lumbering vehicle that broke the silence.

Amos smiled again. “Yeah. That’s something.”

The little girl laughed and clapped her hands.

The bus rumbled on.

The bus pulled into Longreach with little fanfare, docking into the nondescript station with the customary screech of hydraulics. The driver announced an hour break, and everyone filed off listlessly.

Amos sat in the shade of a large bottle tree that grew on the corner, the base of its trunk surrounded with wooden benches. A plaque dulled by time and weather went unnoticed. He looked back down the main street. The gentle hubbub of the lunchtime ‘crowds’ had the tinge of nostalgia about it, a watercolour painting of the 1930s, the picture altered only by the introduction of bitumen to the road’s surface and the advancement of vehicular technology.

Amos put the bag between his legs, slid his hand within. He felt around the meagre belongings – shirts, toiletries bag, a lone book. Without needing to look Amos moved his hand past, grasping the plastic sleeve at the bottom of the pack. He pulled it out, flipping the flap of the bag closed, and moved back, resting his back against the tree and his hands in his lap. He gently upturned the sleeve, letting its precious cargo slide out, smoothed the sleeve and placed it beside him, immediately forgotten.

His eyes remained transfixed on the wallet that lay in his lap. The wallet had its own leather slip, an added protection from the elements. After all these years the leather had remained soft, retained its smell. The golden emblem embossed in the centre of
the slip had not lost its lustre. He traced the embossed shield and lettering with his thumb, a rhythmic, habitual pattern.

Amos took a deep breath, let it out with some effort, then slid the wallet out of its protective slip. The aroma of rich leather, the faint scent of polish, reminiscent of a new car interior, or knowledge of the past. He closed his eyes tightly shut, a wilful desperation, before he opened them again. His eyes were moist, but did not overflow.

He flipped the wallet open, the click of the silver clasp muted by the stillness of the air. He blindly caressed the card holders, each change of the surface a hidden story in Braille.

His fingers faltered as they trailed the circular blemish in the left corner of the coin compartment. The fingers trembled as they fidgeted with the small brown zipper. Each tooth could be heard as they separated from each other, a mark of the zip’s lack of use. He searched blindly for the treasure within, until in one swift movement they were free, the penny clasped, tips of the fingers white from the pressure.

Amos refused to look at it at first. He placed the wallet on the plastic sleeve beside him, holding the penny just outside his field of vision. When he focused on the coin, his face shifted, trembled, crumbled, rebuilt. He swallowed, failed, tried again. His fingers raced over the coin’s raised surface, hungry to be reacquainted. And yet the penny in literal terms was a paradox – used as a symbol of wealth, of avoiding poverty, yet in itself ineffectual, no longer a viable currency.

He shook his head, a droplet of sweat flying from his fringe, landing on the wallet beside him. Seeing this, he hurriedly picked it up, wiping the surface with his shirt, hand movements frantic. Amos held the wallet up to his eyes, checking the surface for any residual moisture. Warily satisfied, he placed the penny back in its place, clasped the wallet shut, and placed it inside the leather slip, inside the plastic sleeve, inside the bag – his own Russian doll.

Amos made his way back to the station, moving onto the bus and sitting in his seat in the cramped heat, waiting sullenly for the hour to be up.

The bus rolled on, head on into the sun, and to Brolga.
The overhead speakers crackled as the bus driver’s voice broke through the static.

“We are approaching the outskirts of Brolga. All passengers disembarking at Brolga please have your personal effects ready.”

Amos stirred, his head rising from its resting place against the bus window. He stretched, forcing his shoulders back. An audible crack was muffled by the seat. He looked beside him at the aisle seat. Empty. He looked up above the bus driver’s head where the fluorescent clock shimmered: 2.33pm. He had been asleep for close to three hours. The girl must have gotten off at an earlier stop.

He peered over rows of heads to the front. A movie played on the television screen. *House II*, a horror/comedy from the late 1980s. He watched with amazement as the hero came face to face with a caveman, his look of exaggerated horror as he scrambled away, a skull charm held firmly in his fist, the epitome of hackneyed student acting.

Amos turned to the window, suddenly all fidgets, squirms and sweats. The bus passed a rusted metal sign attached to similarly weathered star pickets, welcoming passengers to the town of Brolga. Emblazoned across the mottled surface of the once-white sign was a faded painting of two brolgas, one leg off the ground, poised against the middle joint of the other leg. The brolgas bookended the words, *Tidy Town Winner 1959-1973-1992*. White tufts of grass made a valiant attempt to hide the sign, but could only tickle the bottom of it before losing the will to live. The landscape beyond the sign was red dust and nothingness. The shadow of what was Brolga loomed in the distance, a water tower the only break from the horizon’s monotony.

The town looked larger than 1,100, the population that the sign insisted lived there. The town sprawled from left to right, giving itself room for the baby boom that never eventuated.

Amos looked down to his twitching hands, his palms scraping across the metal stubs bordering the pockets of his jeans. His fingertips played at the bulge that lay dormant in his right pocket. He looked at the bag at his feet, lines furrowing his forehead. He
heaved the bag to his lap, the weight inherent rather than literal. The bag did not hold much at all, but it held enough.

Signs came along with more frequency as the bus reached the outskirts of Brolga, all of them in varying degrees of wear and tear. The colours, once vibrant, were pale imitations of their former selves.

_Jonnop’s BP Servo and Café, Helping You on Your Way._

_Brolga Hotel-Motel, Three Star Service._

_Brolga Racecourse. Next Meet 23rd Jan 2003._

The sign proclaiming God’s message to travellers was riddled with bullet holes.


Brolga welcomed the bus with barely a whimper. Amos counted three people as the bus worked its way to the centre of the town. Two boys threw sticks at a mangy dog, then turned their attention to the bus as it drove past. They jogged behind for thirty metres, realised the heat was not worth it, turning back to the dog, before realising that it had slunk away. A lady was taking washing off a rusted Hills Hoist that stood at an angle at the side of a beaten weatherboard shack. Her eyes narrowed to slits as the bus rolled past, through suspicion, anger or the sun Amos was not able to tell.

The bus moved on.

Making a wide turn, the bus entered the main street of Brolga. The dying landscape of the past few hours disappeared. The main street was quite wide, with the two lane blacktop road broken up by traffic islands that spanned the length of the street, close to two hundred metres. Seas of lush green kikuyu grass, black sprinkler heads peering out from the undergrowth, were hemmed by large slate stones, with two eucalypt trees at either end, casting the islands in smatterings of shade. The scene created a sense of promise, of growth and renewal, an oasis in the desert, something that stood at odds with the rest of the street.

Many of the shops’ facades harked back to the days of the town’s inception, the sun shining on the glass windows, hiding the contents within. Cars were scattered up and
down the street, noses pointing out into the street, their owners nowhere to be seen. The street itself appeared to be spotless, freshly swept of all debris. The end of the street was the beginning of the highway as it continued on its lonely journey to the Northern Territory border and beyond.

The hydraulic hiss of the opening door accompanied the slight jerk of the park brake being applied, signalling the end of the line. Amos stood up, his legs threatening to be uncooperative. He waited until a small lady smelling of talcum powder moved past him, then shuffled into the aisle, reaching up into the overhead shelf to grab his carry bag. He slung it over his shoulder, flicking someone’s arm. He mumbled an apology as he hurried to the front of the bus, descended the stairs and welcomed Brolga.

The heat hit Amos, a sledgehammer blow to his system. His lungs ached. The air shimmered above the surface of the footpath. His scalp prickled with sweat. He looked around and was relieved to see similar grimaces from the fellow passengers that waited for the bus driver to drag their bags from underneath the bus. He hustled to stand underneath the awning of the closest shop front, thankful for the sliver of shade it provided. From his safe vantage point, Amos observed the other Brolga visitors. All three of them had people waiting for them – the elderly lady that smelt of talcum powder was surrounded by a young couple and their two young children, the man holding a faded red umbrella over her wispy white hair. A man in a blue singlet and jeans was pulling a swag and a battered backpack from the collection that the bus driver had piled up besides the bus. His buddy, dressed in similar clothes, came up and slapped him on the back, the sound sending a charge echoing off the storefronts. His sunglasses hid his eyes, but as he gazed up and down the street Amos was certain that he was scouring Brolga for the nearest pub. The mate tapped his shoulder and pointed then started to walk off. The man hoisted the swag over his shoulder and headed towards the closest one, the name Transcontinental Hotel slathered in brown paint on the awning out the front, an unlit crumpled cigarette clenched firmly between his teeth. The third person was a girl, possibly sixteen but probably younger, her hands at her blossoming belly, her thin cardigan not hiding the parcel within. Two other girls, sisters, rushed out of the store that Amos stood in front of and shrieked with joy, group hugging the girl. Her hands remained on her stomach, as much a comforting gesture as a protective stance. Her furtive glances suggested that trouble awaited her here, yet for the time being she smiled wanly at the jubilant cries of her
friends. Both of the girls looked wiry and drawn despite their happiness at seeing their friend. The situation, the vibrant gaiety, rang false – one or both of them could face a similar situation before their school years were out. Amos grimaced and looked away, busying himself with collecting his own possessions.

Once the driver checked that everything was done and accounted for, he hurried to be back in his seat, the hydraulics of the door sounding out a sigh of relief. The bus jerked away from the curb, a blurt of exhaust fumes flowing behind it as it made to continue its journey, its conclusion in Mt Isa half a day away. The family climbed into a Holden Commodore and sped to more friendly confines; the man had already disappeared to his watering hole; and the girls hastened up the street, their skittery laughter making faint impressions on the still air. A few minutes and Amos stood alone on the footpath, his bags pooling at his feet.

A brittle crack, shadowed by rough laughter, brought Amos’ attention to the pub that the man with the swag had gone to. The Transcontinental Hotel. The same name as the pub where he had started the journey, aeons ago now. Such symmetry in a town built on random and wanton actions. He laughed to himself, gathered his bags, moved to the hotel.
THREE

Cigarette smoke and stale beer assailed his nostrils as he entered the door of the pub. The contrast of the hotel from the glare of the street made Amos squint, struggling to make out anything before him. The quiet murmur of locals acting as an undercurrent to the Cold Chisel song that blared from speakers at his right, a subtle bass line that tickled his ears; the clink of one pool ball hitting another coincided with the scrapes of the soles of his shoes across the concrete floor. He stumbled forward until his eyes adjusted, moving to the bar between two burly men, also in singlets, one white and one blue. Their glares drew sweat from the nape of his neck. He kept his eyes focused on the bartender.

The red streaks that mingled with her shoulder-length black hair screamed out, demanded attention, expected it. She ignored him at first, attending to the men either side of him, yet her determined look, her focus on the person she was serving, belied her forced restraint. Her curiosity had been piqued, hidden thinly in an air of indifference and servitude. The act might have had something to do with the local clientele, one of which had moved closer to him so that he could feel his breath against his arm.

“Got a problem, mate?”

Amos finally turned to take the man in. Hair thrived on all surfaces of his skin, surprisingly lush curly black hair, most prominently on his face and arms. He wore the seemingly obligatory uniform of a blue singlet, the pockets of his black King Gees torn off, the patches darker than the rest of the worn fabric. Whilst the rims of his eyes were red from abuse, his pupils were intent and lucid. A potato chip crumb nestled in his beard under his bottom lip.

Before Amos could think of anything with which to reply, she intervened. “Now, now, Bongo, let’s play nice for a change.”

Amos and Bongo kept eye contact for a while longer, before Bongo sat back down with a huff, grumbling something that made the man next to him scratch out a laugh. Amos turned to her, impassiveness flickering, a mirage.
She tried on a coquettish grin, her face a mischievous enigma, her pale blue eyes giving away nothing. “So stranger, what’ll it be?”

Amos let a smile break through his defences. “Ah, actually I was after a room.”

Gruff laughter broke out along the bar. Amos’ smile slipped from view. He hadn’t noticed the bar of eavesdroppers. The droplets of sweat trickled down the back of his shirt. His shoulder blades shifted, his shoulders dipped and rose, his face trembling to hold its impassive air.

Bongo cleared his throat, announcing his turn to speak. “Yeah, mate, you might be in the wrong place. Try somewhere else. Like, anywhere else!”

He threw back his head and roared, looking around the bar to make sure everyone else joined in on the joke. Amos saw the guy from the bus in the murky corner of the bar, a toothy grin shining from the darkness.

Amos turned back to her, his mouth set in stone, his jaw tightening. “So, do you have a room or not?”

She grinned, both at the display from the patrons and from Amos’ steadfastness. “Ok, mate. Sure, we have a room. But I’ll tell you something for free. It ain’t the Ritz!”

The laughter crashed over the bar again. Amos bent to pick up his bag. A cool hand slid over his wrist, fingertips brushing against the hidden story that nestled there.

“How about I get you a drink and I’ll go get Alby to set something up. XXXX, ok?”

Amos looked up into her blue eyes. They glittered, saying something before clouding over again. He nodded. “Heavy, thanks.”

Bongo chuckled in derision. “Heavy, thanks,” he mimicked, and his companions laughed, staring at Amos’ profile. She pulled him a pot of beer and slid it in front of him, moving through a door and out of sight. Amos threw some loose change on the counter, grabbed the beer and his bags and moved to a vacant table, out of Bongo’s way.
Amos savoured the taste of the ice cold beer, a stark contrast to the weather outside the pub. He licked the foam from his lip and scanned the room, careful to not let his eyes wander anywhere in the vicinity of Bongo and his mates.
“You after a room?”

Amos looked up from his beer. A man, presumably the man she called Alby, stood before him. He was stocky, a beer gut stressing his blue and red chequered shirt. His brown hair was fashioned in a comb over.

“Yeah,” Amos murmured.

“Follow me,” Alby grunted, turning around and walking through a doorway at the side of the room. Amos gulped down the rest of his beer, gathered his bags and followed. Tractor beams followed his every step until they turned a corner and the line was broken.

The doorway led to a room decked out with four small tables, green plastic tablecloths over each. Alby was moving up a staircase to the next floor, the steps creaking after each footstep. He led Amos down a narrow hallway to a door at the far end, turning to face him.

“Room 6’ll do ya. Now, how long’re you likely to stay?”

Amos shrugged. “I don’t know, two weeks at the most.”

“Two weeks, huh? You…sure you want to stay here?”

The question was posed more out of incredulity than any malice or dislike. Amos nodded.

“Ok. Well, it’s fifteen a night, but for a week we can make it ninety bucks. That OK with you?”

Amos nodded again.

“How’re you intending to pay?”

“Cash.”
“Good. We like cash here.” Alby laughed. It sounded forced, like he was unsure how mirth should sound. He handed Amos a key, attached to a large piece of wood, the Roman numerals VI stamped into it. He moved his head indicating down the hall.

“Toilets and showers are at the other end on the left. Enjoy.”

He laughed again, then moved to the staircase. He turned. “Can you pay today?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Good. Well, I’ll see you then.”

Alby disappeared down the stairs.

Amos fumbled with the key, taking three turns before unlocking the door. The door swung open, and Amos stumbled through. The room itself was small, twelve feet by eight. A single cast iron bed was positioned in the corner. A basin lay underneath a large window, opening out onto the wall of the adjacent building, allowing minimal light through. A small wardrobe without doors or drawers was at his right. A chair sat in the corner, sulking. The mattress of the bed was bare, two tears in the fabric revealing the foam base. The walls were grimy.

The crucifix was nailed above the door. It was slightly crooked; a white outline blasted in grime a degree to the left of its current position. He moved slowly, deliberately, pushing closed the door, moving to the chair, placing it down underneath the figure without scraping the feet across the door. He raised his foot on the chair and stood, a fluid motion, calculated. Careful.

Amos cocked his head to the left. Jesus stared back at him, his face caught somewhere between agony and ecstasy. The gash at his side. The rivulets of blood from his crown. The holes in his palms, crudely filled with roughly hewn metal.

Pleasure.

Pain.

Pain.

Pleasure.
“Home sweet home,” Amos muttered. He nudged the crucifix back into its rightful, upright position. Jesus’ face remained transfixed in a mute mewl, his mouth neither raised nor down-turned. The blood froze on his forehead.

Amos fell on the bed, a small cloud of dust escaping into the air. The light from the window lit the particles up, floating lights in the sunbeams. More symmetry. Amos put his hands underneath his head and stared up at the high ceiling.

“What have you got yourself into, Amos?” he muttered, closing his eyes with a sigh.

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A small knock at the door aroused Amos. He let out a groan, his eyelids flickering open. The room had darkened somewhat, most of the sun having disappeared over the top of the hotel on its descent towards night. He sat up, and a weight slid from his chest towards the floor. His eyes opened wide, and a mad clutch at the object proved successful. He looked at the wallet held in his fingertips. He hurriedly put it back in the sleeve and slid it under the pillow as the knocking came again, more insistent. He stumbled to the door, rubbing his face vigorously, struggling to get the sleep out of his eyes, the weariness from his expression.

She stood at the door, white bed sheets in her hands. Her skin was pale against her dark hair and red singlet. Celtic symbols roped around both biceps. Chinese letters embossed the underside of her right forearm. A few pieces of black string dangled around her left wrist. Intense blue eyes. Amos smiled.

Without waiting for an invite, she stepped into the room. She took in the sparse surroundings, smiled.

“I like what you’ve done with the place.”

“I do what I can.”

Her laughter echoed off the naked walls. “I can see that.”

She moved forward and threw the sheets onto the bed. She stood still for a few moments, then faced him, a question mark burning in her eyes.

“What are you doing here?”

Amos hunched his shoulders, his smile evening out into a thin line.

“I’m on holiday…”

She shook her head, a strand of hair falling across her face.

“No, no. What are you doing here? In this pub? There are many places you could stay around here. Too many, really. So why here?” She finished by tucking the
rogue strand of hair behind her ear, her fingertips brushing the sleepers embedded along the outer cartilage.

“I don’t know. It was just the first place I saw.”

This time a hint of cynicism coloured the lilt of her laugh. Her eyes never left his. “But surely you realised what this place would be like from downstairs? Fuck, everyone knows what this place is like on their first visit. Usually they make it their last.”

Amos smiled. “I know. That just made me want to stay more.”

She smiled back, stepped towards him. Stopped in front of him, a Cheshire grin painted across her crimson lips. She raised her hand, and despite of his attraction, Amos flinched slightly. Her grin widened, her eyes glinting. Her hand continued until her palm rested on his cheek, her fingertips at the edge of his eye.

“Hold still,” she whispered, and her fingertips traced his cheek bone and came to the bridge of his nose. She wiped at the corner of his eye, then the hand came away.

She looked at the tip of her fingers, rubbing them together. “You had a duck in your eye.”

“Duck?”

“Yeah.” She held up her fingers. Gritty yellow mucus balanced there. She spoke without her eyes leaving her fingers. “My mother always used to call them ducks. It made us laugh. Then she left. But I kept on calling them ducks.”

The smile never left her lips, yet the glint in her eyes dulled for a moment. It was back quickly. She wiped her hand on her jeans. Suddenly she hooked a thumb at the bed.

“So you were sleeping on that?”

Amos nodded. She screwed up her face in mock disgust.

“Gross, mate! You have no idea what has been spilled on these mattresses! I mean, have you looked at it? Rips, stains…” She wiped her hands more vigorously on her
jeans, eyeing Amos’s reaction. He stayed still, his lips smiling, his feet stirring the dust from the bare floorboards. She slapped him on the shoulder.

“Just kidding!” She watched him, delighting in his awkwardness. Then just like that, the spell was broken.

She moved into the hallway and walked towards the stairs, her black sneakers scuffing on the worn carpet. Amos glimpsed an intricate pattern in black canvassed across her lower back. She looked over her shoulder.

“Toilets and showers are…”

“…at the other end on the left. Got it.” He nodded, hands in pockets, shoulders hunched again. She gave a small laugh, a sharp expulsion of air from her nose.

“Yeah, well, I’ll see you around, OK?”

And with that she disappeared down to the bar.

Amos leant against the doorway for a moment, then moved back into his room. His eyes fell to the sheets. He picked them up, slowly bringing them up to his face. He breathed in. Amongst the scents of lavender and bleach wafted another, something more feminine, primal.

He looked over the sheets at the mattress. He dropped the sheets, riffled through his bags, grabbed the towel and quickly moved to the bathroom.

SIX

The aroma of sizzling meat assailed Amos as he moved down the stairs. Steam made its way out of the side door, the kitchen’s announcement that dinners were being served. He peered through as he walked past. A large man with a white apron wrapped around his blue jeans stood over a stove top. Steaks groaned and sausages popped.

A droplet of water trickled down from Amos’ hairline. He wiped it away absently with the back of his hand, running his hand through his hair, his palm damp.
The eating area was empty. Amos steadied himself as he approached the door leading into the main bar. He took two deep breaths, nodded and walked through the doorway.

The bar was nearly empty. Amos looked up at the black XXXX wall clock above the spirit pourers: 7.31pm. The man from the bus remained at the corner of the bar, and eyed him as he approached the row of stools. His mate, a wiry old guy with leathery tanned skin and amateurish tattoos staining his arms, hunkered over the pool table, sizing up a shot at the corner pocket.

“Hey there stranger!” Her voice brought his attention back to the bar. She stood in front of him, drying a pot glass with a teacloth. “Settling in?”

“As much as can be expected.”

She held the glass up to the light, satisfied. “So what’ll it be?”

“A heavy thanks.”

She smiled as she threw the cloth over her shoulder and turned to the tap. “You’re very polite when ordering alcohol, you know that?”

Amos laughed. “I guess.”

The beer bubbled against the tilted glass, immediately frosting it. She moved it upright at the last moment, allowing a minimal head, then placed it on a battered coaster in front of him. Amos scrunched some loose change from his pocket, placed it on the counter and started sorting through an assortment of gold and silver coins.

She waved her hand. “Don’t worry about this one. It’s on the house, considering your introduction to the place.”

“Thanks.”

“And the name’s Lavinia.”

“Lavinia? Amos.”
Amos stuck his hand out in between them. Lavinia laughed, but took his hand anyway. They locked eyes, the hands moving in tandem between them before she let go. Amos’ hand floated back to earth.

He brought the beer to his lips, the bitter liquid cooling him down. He gestured at the empty room. “Where is everyone? I’d’ve guessed that Bongo and his boys were here for the long haul.”

Lavinia shook her head. “No, this is the usual for during the week. The place is busy around lunch and the afternoon, then the ‘roos take our clients away, if you can call them that.”

“‘Roos?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Most of the guys are setting up for ‘roo-shooting. Didn’t you notice their bloodstained clothes?”

“No.” Amos smiled. “I thought that was just the fashion.”

Lavinia laughed, her teeth brilliant white. “Good one! But I wouldn’t be saying those things when they come back.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve taken the hint.” Amos nodded his head towards the kitchen door. “Is dinner still available?”

She nodded. “Til eight. Want something?”

He smiled. “What can you recommend?”

She leaned closer, her elbows on the counter, a conspiratorial smirk on her face. “Well, I would have to say either meat, meat or meat.”

He laughed. “Lucky I’m not a vegetarian then.”

“Yeah. You can get salad with your meat, though.”

“Chips?”

“Of course! We’d be out of business if we didn’t!”

“OK, I’ll have a steak then. Do you do medium rare?”
She leaned back, smiling. “Maybe. It’s a lottery.”

“Alright then. It’s settled.”

Lavinia turned around and walked to the kitchen door. “Mal, steak.” A grumble was her reply.

Amos’ attention on Lavinia was interrupted by the scrape of the stool next to him. The wiry guy from the pool table had taken the place beside him, his elbows perched on the edge of the counter, in the midst of rolling a cigarette. A tuft of tobacco poked out from the tip. He smoothed the paper with his fingers, then licked the paper. The cigarette was bent and crumpled, but he seemed happy. He planted it between his cracked lips and turned to Amos.

“How’s light?”

Amos had left his cigarettes in his room. He shook his head in apology.

The man nodded. “No worries. Lavinia love, gotta light for Leo?”

Lavinia gave a wide grin. “For you Leo, anything.” She reached under the bar and brought up a pack of matches. Striking one, the sulphur filling the air between them, she held it out for Leo. He cupped his hands around the flame, inhaling until the cigarette lit, then moved away blowing smoke to the ceiling. Racking coughs followed, Leo teetering on the stool as he attempted to quell the attack on his lungs.

Lavinia shook her head, worry crossing her face. “I keep telling you Leo, those things’ll kill you.”


She held up her hands in surrender as she moved to pour him a beer. “I’m just saying.”

Leo turned to Amos, his eyes red from the coughing attack. “Who are you?”

Amos blinked. “Sorry?”

Leo pointed at him with his cigarette. “You. Who are you?”
Amos scratched his head. “Umm, I’m Amos.”

Leo scratched his head also, thinking. “Amos, hey? Amos…”

A leathery hand snaked out to hover before him. “Name’s Leo. Glad to make your acquaintance.” Leo tipped his hand forward in acknowledgement as Amos took his hand in his own. As quick as it was there, Leo’s hand retracted to the bar, a cold beer in waiting.

“Thought I might’ve known you, ’s all,” he muttered into his glass.

Amos looked to Lavinia with raised eyebrows. She shrugged and returned to drying more glasses.

“So,” Leo said, his attention now back to Amos, “what brings you to Brolga?”

“He’s a mate of Bongo’s,” echoed a voice from the pool table. They looked over at the guy from the bus, bent over his pool cue, mouth open in a crowded grin. Leo turned again to Amos, his turn to raise his eyebrows.

“Really?”

Lavinia huffed. “Bongo gave Amos here one of his trademark welcomes.”

Leo hacked out a laugh. “Bongo! He’s a stupid fuck, mate. Don’t worry about him,” he arched a bushy eyebrow, “too much anyway. Just stay out of his way, and he’ll stay out of yours.”

Lavinia huffed again. “If he wants to.”

“So you’re not part of his support group then?” Amos asked.

“Ahh, he’s a dickhead, but he’s alright. No different to no one else around here. Just stay out of his way.”

Amos nodded. “Done, don’t worry about that.”

“Good. But you haven’t answered my question.”
The jukebox clicked over, a twanging guitar echoing across the bar. Before the music could start, Leo began to laugh. Lavinia groaned and walked through the kitchen door.

“Listen to this, mate. You heard of Chad Morgan?”

Amos shook his head. They sat there as the lyrics flowed from the speaker.

‘I’m my own Grandpa/It’s sounds funny, I know/But it really is so/I’m my own Grandpa...’

As the song progressed, Leo chuckled, mouthing the words every now and then. As the story progressed, about mother’s mothers and daughters and wives who were grandmothers of their husbands, a smile crept across Amos’ face also.

As the song finished and Jimmy Barnes began to wail, Leo turned to Amos again.

“Chad Morgan, mate. Bloody funny guy! A good country and western singer too, no doubt about it.”

“No doubt,” Amos muttered and took a quick gulp of beer.

Leo’s hand clamped on Amos’ shoulder. “Are you ignoring me?”

Amos wheeled around. Leo’s eyes were rheumy and bloodshot, the smell of recently consumed alcohol wafting from him. His face was set in a scowl, not happy at being snubbed.

“N-no, mate.”

Leo faltered, his face relaxing. “Good. I may be an old bastard, but I’m still here, y’know!”

“We know,” Lavinia replied, leaning against the doorway. “Otherwise how would we be able to pay the rent around here?”

He laughed, a grin escaping from under his beard. His face took on an impish impression as he winked at her. “You’re a cheeky one, Lavinia.” He turned to Amos, the grin wider. “You watch this one Amos. She kisses the boys and makes ‘em cry.”
“Oh get off it Leo!” she cried, hitting him playfully with the teacloth. “Besides, I may be easy, but I’m not cheap!” She sauntered to the other end of the bar, giving Amos a knowing glance as she did so. Leo hollered and clapped his hands.

“A firebrand, is what she is! Love of my life you are!”

“Oh Leo, you say that to all the girls,” she called out, lighting a cigarette and leaning against the bar.

Leo’s chuckle began to peter out as he took a draw from his cigarette. He nodded to himself, laughing quietly on occasion, staring off into the past.

The guy from the bus threw down his pool cue, clattering on the felt table. “Hey old timer! You gunner bring my beer and finish this game or what?”

Leo jumped, pulled from his reverie. He looked down the bar at Lavinia, but she was ahead of him, already pouring a pot.

“Come over Amos, we’ll talk,” Leo said, and shuffled away, collecting the beer on his way. Amos looked at Lavinia.

“I’ll call out when your food is ready. Won’t be long,” she said.

Amos nodded and moved over to join the two men. The young man had picked up the cue and handed it to Leo. Leo moved to the table then turned around.

“Introduce yourself ya rude bastard!”

The young man laughed and stuck out his hand. “You were on the bus today weren’t ya? Curt. How’s it hangin’?”

Amos nodded, shaking Curt’s hand in return. “‘Amos.”

Curt grinned. “Like in the Bible?”

Amos laughed. “Yeah. Something like that.”

Curt shook his finger at Amos. “Didn’t think I’d pick it did you? Well, you’re lookin’ at a real believer.”

Leo snorted, blue smoke floating from his nostrils.
Curt screwed his face. “What? I am!”

Leo shook his head, taking his shot. The white ball missed the red ball, ricocheting of the shoulder of the table and finally dropped into one of the middle pockets.

Curt whooped a victory cry. “Ha! Two shots! Serves you right. That’s God’s will right there.”

Curt snatched the cue from Leo and moved to the end of the table, grabbing the white ball as it dropped out the chute. He slapped the ball on the table, a sharp retort ringing out.

“The only things you know about God is what was beatin’ into ya in juvie, you cheeky little shit,” Leo spat as he plonked down on a stool next to Amos. He shot Curt the bird, bringing a laugh in return.

“So, wanna cigarette?” Leo asked Amos. Amos nodded. Leo leaned over to the adjacent table where Curt’s beer and pack of Winfield Golds sat, flicking a cigarette from the pack and handing it to him. “There you go.”

Curt looked up, catching the exchange. He came around the pool table.

“Now listen here you old bastard…”

Leo stood and placed his hand on Curt’s chest. “Settle down short stuff. It’s a bloody cigarette is all.”

“Yeah, and it’s my bloody cigarette, is all,” Curt said, anger cutting the air.

Amos leaned forward and dropped it on the table. “It’s alright. I can buy my own.”

“Fuckin’ oath you can buy your own.”

Leo brought his hand down on Curt’s shoulder and squeezed. Curt crumpled to the floor, yelping in agony, Leo standing over him.

“Don’t talk to someone like that, especially a nice young bloke like Amos here. He can have the cigarette, can’t he?”

“Fuck off, let me go you old cunt! Arrrgghh!”
Leo pushed him down further, Curt in a praying position. “Can’t he?”

Air hissed through Curt’s lips. “Yes,” he whispered.

Leo let go of Curt’s shoulder, and he crumpled to the floor, clutching his arm. Leo turned to Amos and handed him the cigarette.

“These young buggers, the height of rudeness, I tell you!”

Amos nodded stiffly. He leaned against the wall, shrinking away from both men as innocuously as possible.

“Young buggers! Meat’s ready!”

Amos jumped off the stool, nodded quickly to Leo and the resurfacing and cowed Curt, and shuffled to the dining area as fast as politely possible.

He sat down at a table next to a window opening out onto the street. He patted down the plastic tablecloth and placed his beer down.

Alby brought the meal out himself. He placed a large plate in front of him along with a knife and fork wrapped in a green napkin. A basic salad fought a losing battle for territory with a mountain of fried chips. Amos looked up at Alby.

“Where is the steak?” he asked.

“It’ll be out in a minute,” he replied and returned to the kitchen.

Amos picked up a chip and put it in his mouth, promptly burning his tongue. He spat the mashed chip onto his plate and placed his tongue in the beer, looking around to make sure no one saw this display. Satisfied that his tongue was relatively cooled down, he stared out the window.

The street was quiet. Across the street a café’s bare light bulbs flickered intermittently, the sign promising delicious coffee, sandwiches, burgers and cakes. Cars were parked in front of the King’s Crown Hotel, a larger and more approachable looking hotel, crowd noise emanating softly from within. Everything else hulked in the darkness.
His attention was broken by Alby as he dropped an oval plate in front of him. On the plate was half a cow. The steak, one and half inches thick, took up the entire plate and then some, each edge dripping blood onto the table cloth. Alby left bottles of tomato, barbecue and Worcestershire sauce, and with a gruff “bon appetit” moved through the doorway into the bar.

Amos poked the steak with his knife. No mewl of complaint, or any other sign of life. Picking up his fork, he cut a small triangle of meat and looked at it. A thin strip of pink smiled at him. Satisfied, he popped the slice into his mouth. The meat dissolved in his mouth. The next mouthful was in before the last had been swallowed. He placed some lettuce and chips on top of the steak and began eating in earnest.

He hadn’t eaten since the roadhouse raisin toast. Even so, the steak defeated him. Adding tomato sauce as lubricant could not do enough. By the time Lavinia came over, two beer bottles and a cigarette pack in hand, he had given up, half a steak and two dozen chips abandoned, wading in a morass of sauce, oil and blood.

“What’s the matter? Wasn’t the meal good enough for you?” Lavinia placed one beer in front of him and sat down. His straining eyes and waistline answered her. She laughed, leaning over in another conspiratorial huddle. “You know you have to finish that. Alby’s proud of his steaks, and he will be offended that you didn’t like his cooking. Might even be angry.”

He groaned, his chin dropping to his chest, setting Lavinia off again. She shook her head and picked a chip off his plate, eating it quickly before placing a cigarette between her grinning lips. Amos cut off another slice of steak, his hands trembling as he brought it to his mouth, chewing slowly, the flavour no longer encouraging. He swallowed the half chewed meat and washed it down with beer.

Lavinia tipped her beer to his, the chink of glass echoing across the room. “That’s the way. You’ll make your mother proud.”

She sensed a change in his expression before he could check himself. She put down her glass in a hurry. “Oh sorry, is something…”

Amos quickly waved her comments away. “No, no. You’re fine. No harm done.”
She nodded, but was quiet for a while. Amos pointed at the beer bottle, eager to kick start the conversation.

“What’s with the Beck’s? Special occasion?”

Lavinia smiled. “Sort of. Knock off time.”

“Ah,” Amos nodded. “Fair enough.”

She blew out a jet of smoke, proffering the cigarette pack to Amos. She held out her lighter as he lit one, blowing the smoke towards the ceiling.

“It’s like sex, isn’t it?”

Amos’ forehead creased. She took another pull on the cigarette and pointed at his plate. “One of Alby’s steaks. You need a cigarette after one of those.”

Amos laughed. “Definitely. It was good, very good. But…”

“You won’t be having one any time soon?” Lavinia laughed. “That’s it, hey? The blokes who eat here only do so once a week, it takes so long to digest. It’s a shame, really.”

“Why?”

“Because of the business. As you’ve seen we aren’t the most popular place in town.” She hooked a thumb across the road at the King’s Crown as evidence.

“Fair enough. Then how can he afford to put on such huge steaks? Must cost a fortune.”

Lavinia shook her head. “Not really. Mal, Alby’s brother. Owns the butcher’s. They own the pub together.”

She leaned over, grabbing another chip. He pushed the plate towards her.

“It’s all yours.”

She smiled as she dabbed the chip in tomato sauce. “Thanks. I shouldn’t, but thanks. So, what do you think? Brolga all’s it cracked up to be?”

He shrugged. “Well, apart from the bus drive in, I haven’t seen much.”
“Not much to see,” she said around a mouthful of potato. “How about Leo?”

“What about him?”

“He’s a funny guy. He’s an old shearer, lived here his whole life. Spends most his time either here, the RSL or the TAB. I keep telling Alby we need Pub TAB here, make a killing, but he won’t have none of it. Too much hassle.” She waved her hand at the surroundings. “As you can see.”

“How about him.”

“Anyway, Leo. Good old guy. Knows everything there is to know about the place. You ask him anything, he’ll know it.”

Amos looked towards the doorway, tapping the flat side of his knife gently, a silver staccato.

“He looks like Iggy Pop with a beard.”

Lavinia burst out laughing, bits of chip falling onto the plate. “That’s a good one! I haven’t heard that one, but it’s true! Shit, I’d tell him, but he wouldn’t know who that was.”

“He knows who Chad Morgan is.”

She rolled her eyes. “Tell me about it. I have to listen to that shit every other day. Country and western, can’t stand it. Ol’ Chad least of all.”

Amos laughed. “So, what do you like?”

Lavinia arched her eyebrows, her lips taking on the Cheshire cat grin from earlier that day. “Oh, how subtle, Amos! Sussing me out already?”

Amos’s face betrayed his embarrassment, Lavinia squealing with delight. She patted him on the shoulder in condolence, but her hand lingered there. Her blue eyes glittered wickedly. Amos lost himself in their translucent beauty. He took a quick gulp of beer as she flicked her hair out of her face and looked out at the street.

She turned to him, her face set.

“I like a lot of things. You’ll just have to get to know me.”
She looked down at her empty beer. “Well that’s me,’ she huffed. She leaned over and ground her cigarette into the remains of Amos’ steak. She stood up. “I’ll see you later.” As she walked past she leant down and whispered in his ear, her breath filling his body. “You better not let Alby see what you did to his precious steak.”

Lavinia winked at him as she walked out into the bar. He heard her call out, “Hey Curt ya big stud, give us some lovin’!” before she disappeared from sight.

Amos peered down at his now defiled meal. Looking around, he scraped as much ash as he could off the steak, then piled the remaining chips on top. Grabbing his half-finished beer, he moved up the stairs quickly, avoiding Alby, Leo, Curt. Especially Lavinia.

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Amos stared at himself in the pockmarked mirror, his mouth smeared with light blue toothpaste. He brushed methodically, eight strokes of the brush for each tooth. He ran the bristles over his gums and the roof of his mouth, then spat into the basin, a thin strand of opaque spittle stretching from his lips to the ceramic. He spat again, yet the spittle remained, bouncing back and forth like a bungy cord. Amos grabbed the spittle from his lips with his thumb and forefinger, gingerly washing it under the faucet before rinsing his mouth out with cold water.

He rubbed his towel over his damp face and made for the door before he noted voices echoing up the stairway. The noise was loud and indistinguishable, slurred words clashing with slurred words, abrasive laughter becoming exclamation points. Slow heavy footsteps stopped halfway up the stairs, as did the noises, save for murmurings and giggles. Amos looked around the bathroom, then the hallway, unsure of what to do. The faceless couple decided for him, as a whoop of laughter heralded hurried footsteps. Two shadows staggered to the landing, merged into one as they fought with each other’s limbs, each other’s clothes. Their rough kissing could be heard from Amos’ vantage point, the constant smacking of lips and heavy nasal breathing making him wince.
He was still unable to make out the two figures, until Lavinia’s voice cut through the heavy petting.

“Curt, you dirty fucker, can’t you wait till we get to my room?”

Curt huffed, a hand sliding from under her shirt and continuing down between her legs. “God, I haven’t tasted you for a long time.”

Lavinia laughed, a gunshot in the hallway.

Curt huffed again, pushing Lavinia against the wall. The mirror next to Amos rattled from the impact. Amos could sense the clashing of teeth as they brought their mouths together. They gyrated in the dark for some time, Lavinia letting out a breathy moan before she pushed Curt away. She unlocked the door, Curt corralling her in, the door slamming behind them. Muffled squeals of laughter accompanied the squeal of complaining bedsprings.

Amos slinked along the hallway, fighting the urge to tiptoe. He closed his door behind him without a sound and sank onto the freshly-made bed. He stared at the ceiling, hands under his head, and closed his eyes.

Lavinia and Curt chased any chance of sleep away. They were unforgiving, relentless. Amos lay still for some time, desperately willing sleep to come. The constant squeaks, thumps, moans and grunts won out. He dressed quickly, slipping out of his room and the pub, onto the streets of Brolga.
Amos wandered down the pathway, past the Transcontinental. A newsagency, clothing store and Laundromat sat side by side, their interiors made impenetrable by the shadows within. On the corner stood The Min Min Hotel, a carbon copy of the Transcontinental; beyond, the road leading into the desert. The town ended suddenly, an invisible line separating civilisation from desolation. Tufts of spinifex sprouted at irregular intervals from the barren earth; clusters of scrub brush darkened the horizon. Amos absorbing the fresh scent of emptiness. The urge to step beyond, to walk into the unknown of the desert, gripped him.

Amos thrust his hands into his jacket pockets, his hand brushing the cold surface of his mobile phone. He fished it out, flicked it open. He searched through the address book, quickly coming to Angela’s number. He pressed Send and waited. Before long a beep - no signal.

Holding the mobile high in the air in a futile attempt to catch some passing reception, Amos looked down the intersecting street, Jameson Street, the unofficial border of Brolga. To the left, The Min Min Hotel gave way to a gravel car park, twin circular ruts marring the earth where heavy traffic drove up to the hotel’s hole in the wall so that the vehicles’ occupants could buy their travellers before heading off for a night of drunken shooting. Beyond were storage sheds and shadows, the ‘backyards’ of the businesses on the main street. The road continued south, unabated, into the night. To the right Brolga’s hardware store sat on the opposite corner, a large shed towering over it. Beyond the residential sector of Brolga stretched away.

Amos hunched his shoulders and took the left turn. Two rows of ten small huts, the sheds resembled a graveyard, the blue-black shadows stretching away from the headstones. They were new, the cyclone fence gleaming in the wan moonlight, razor wire bristling on top.

The illuminated mobile screen lighting his way, Amos walked to the corner of the storage sheds, where Jameson Street ended and a dusty road began, travelling south. A rusted street sign proclaimed the laneway that moved at right angles with Jameson St as Strahan Way. Amos scuffed his shoes on the bitumen. The lane travelled
parallel to the main strip, taking the length of the town. The left side opened onto the back of the shopfronts, whilst the right was open countryside interspersed with the occasional mechanic’s shed, spare parts shop or enclosed space. A couple of white weatherboard houses raised on stilts hulked at the end of the lane.

The only building of significance was a small tin shed some fifty metres from the corner. A flimsy chicken wire fence was attached to the side of the shed, forming a crude rectangular yard, bare and empty. A long piece of corrugated iron jutted out waist high the length of the shed, wooden struts struck diagonally into the earth at even intervals along the wall to support it. Amos could make out hessian bags and other darker shapes. He moved closer, trying to make out what lay in the shadows.

Movement. Amos swung to his right. A primal snarl was emitted before a silky shape leapt at him, gnashing fangs thwarted by the chicken wire. Amos jumped back into the street, his legs scissoring frantically, copper floating on the tip of his tongue. The mobile clattered to the ground. The dog barked, the retort obscenely loud in the still night. Amos’ lungs heaved, struggling to capture enough oxygen to replace the expulsion of air that the dog had torn from him. The dog remained a shadow, stalking the fence line, growling. Another defied yelp escaped its lips.

The shadows that lay amongst the hessian sacks came to life, joining their brother by the fence line. By then Amos had regained composure, although his lips and mouth remained dry. He counted at least sixteen animals; he could not be sure if they were all dogs, if that indeed was what they were. Some of them nipped at each other, no longer interested in his presence. A few joined in the barking, a cacophony that would warrant undue attention after a few minutes. Amos backed away, moving as calmly as his tangled feet would allow. He was sure that his attacker continued to eyeball him, silver rivulets of saliva gleaming from an open maw, well after the shadows melded together, the noise died down, and Amos turned his back on them all.

He came to the end of Strahan Way, turning left once more. Marcy Street carried the length of the town, parallel with Jameson, boxing the town in. Beyond the houses on the other side of the street was the eternal presence of the desert, broken ground and rugged shrubs. Each house along here had the same look; the panel board exterior alluding to a housing commission, boxes the occupants lived their lives in. Each
backyard cluttered with familial paraphernalia – toys, bicycles, car parts, neglected water hoses, cages for pig dogs. Four wheel drive utes littered the driveways, their trays rigged up with a frame to cart kangaroo carcasses into town.

Amos stumbled back to the main street. He walked over to the island in the middle of the blacktop and sat down. He stared at his surroundings through splayed fingers, a small moan escaping his throat.

“What the fuck am I doing here?”

He dropped onto the grass, the kikuyu prickling his skin through his shirt. His eyes lifted to the night sky, and everything ebbed away. The darkness was crowded with stars, constellations, galaxies that he had never seen before. There were more stars in the sky than he thought possible. The universe swirled around him.
EIGHT

Amos looked down at his plate. A watercolour painting of a stockman astride a horse flailing a whip peeked out through smeared egg yolk. He speared a piece of toast with his fork and swabbed at the yolk, popping it into his mouth.

The Western Star Café was crowded, both by people and paraphernalia. It was little more than a long and narrow room, four small tables up against the far wall. Each table was taken, as were the three plastic tables out on the footpath. Most of the customers were elderly women, nursing cups of tea and talking animatedly. A few younger women pushed strollers back and forth. Apart from the owner behind the counter, Amos was the only man there. The walls and ceiling were adorned with various aged talismans earmarking the changes that have occurred since the inception of Brolga. A battered pan used to sift for kernels of gold lay beside a chipped and hatcheted piece of iron that had once been part of a horse-drawn plough. Blackened sheep shears. An akubra so worn that its peak had been held together by pop rivets. No one liked to let go of the past, it seemed.

Amos dabbed at his lips and stood, the clattering of steel on china marking the end of his meal. He moved past the counter, giving a wave and a smile to the owner as he walked through the door. All eyes watched his progress, curiosity burning, before the women resumed their conversations.

Amos stared down the main street of Brolga, his hands probing the small of his back. Lavinia and Curt started round two sometime before dawn. The mattress itched. The heat of the day had fled, leaving a bitter cold that bit through the meagre blanket that the accommodation offered.

Amos rammed his hands in his pockets. His left hand seemed to have more room to move than usual. Last night. The storage sheds, the chicken wire fence, the dogs… he had dropped his phone when the first one had leapt at him. He uttered a soft expletive under his breath, causing an elderly woman who was window-shopping to turn, her eyes narrowed in disgust. Amos mouthed his apologies and hastened to move past her, moving down to the corner of Jameson Street.
He stared at the empty space in the morning light. The heat already dried out his skin, although sweat had not yet become a problem. The dry earth was bleached white, the dark foliage of last night a dusty grey in the sunlight. The ground was pockmarked with stones, somehow giving the landscape a wider sense of alien desolation. A kilometre down the highway he could make out the remains of an old pickup truck, its rounded body scorched, the dull red interspersed with rust, the glass gone. The windows were holes, eye sockets staring back at him, a reminder of the civilisation it was once a part of. It had been there for some time, a fixture of the landscape for thirty years or more. The fact that no one had bothered to take the hulking wreck away added to the barrenness of the horizon.

Amos walked past the storage sheds and turned onto Strahan Way. The shed with its chicken wire fenced yard was not hard to find. Amos took in the low-lying structure, the corrugated iron roof sagging in the middle. The door was partitioned, resembling that of a horse stable. Both sections of the door remained closed. A sign, also of corrugated iron, hung from the eave above the door. Painted in black boot polish the sign read:

**TRACKER'S TREASURES**

Amos walked towards the shed, cautious steps, remaining on the other side of the lane until he was safely past the yard. The dogs lay in the shade of the shed, lethargic, not seeming to know or care that a stranger was in their vicinity. He approached the door, fist raised, then hesitated. His fist stuttered, finally meeting the metal, giving one, two knocks. The hollow sound rang out through the shed. Amos snatched his hand back. His knuckles smarted, the heat already captured within the corrugated iron. He waited for a retort from one of the dogs. Other than the twitch of one dog’s ear, none came.

The unlatching of a lock from behind the door brought Amos’ attention back. He took a step back, pensive, making to walk away. Run. The scratching continued for a few moments, and before Amos could change his mind, the top partition of the door swung open, and he came face to face with Tracker.
“You after vegies? ‘M not open yet. Can deliver ‘em if you want…”

Amos shook his head. “No, nothing like that. Um actually, I dropped a phone last night…” He trailed off, embarrassed at the recollection

Tracker stared at him, the whites of his eyes stark in the dimly lit room.

“You stir up my dogs last night?”

Amos flinched. “No! Well, I didn’t mean to. I was just walking…”

“Jus’ walkin. Yeah, jus’ walkin. Bet you threw rocks at ‘em too, didn’ya? Stirred up, they wouldn’ go ta sleep. Fuckin’ council warn me ‘bout my dogs, I tells ‘em they doin no harm. Then fuckers like you stir ‘em up.”

Amos swallowed, straining not to look away, straining not to appear impolite. The awkwardness hung in the air like a fetid bubble, with the slightest provocation causing it to bust, spewing out guilt, anger. The tips of Amos’ ears glowed. Tracker continued to glower.

“Honestly, sir, I’m not here to cause trouble. I’m new here, and I was walking around last night…”

A grin materialised on Tracker’s lips. The lips cracked, brilliant white teeth appearing in their place. A low rumble filtered from them, growing steadily until Tracker was bent over, his shoulders wracked with uncontrollable laughter. Amos continued to stand in the doorway, unsure of what was happening. He had felt guilty, such was Tracker’s disdain for his story, that he was no longer sure whether he had intentionally gone close to the fence to start the dogs off or not. He kept his weight on the balls of his feet, ready to take flight at the least movement.

Tracker stood up, tears dampening his weathered cheeks. His grin remained as he said, “You new oright! No one neva call me sir! Neva!”

He continued to chuckle as he shuffled away from Amos into the bowels of the shed. Amos watched him, his hands fluttering helpless at his side. Tracker moved to the back of the shed, pausing at a gauze screen door before turning to Amos.

“I got yer phone. Be back inna minute.”
The screen door swung behind Tracker as he disappeared out the back into more gloominess.

Amos moved out of the doorway, stepping into the shed. Bullet holes of light pierced the darkness, their trajectories uninterrupted save for helixes of dust particles floating in the air. The iron walls were multi-coloured from rust and age. Boxes littered the floor and some makeshift shelves at the back of the shed. Many of the boxes were covered with hessian sacks. Amos fingered one close to him, his fingertip coming away damp.

The shed centred on a long table that was set up as a bench. The table was a worn and splintered door perched on two work horses. An old fashioned cash register balanced at one end of the table, a relic of the pre-metric era. A relatively new ceiling fan hung from an overhanging beam just above the table, yet far as Amos could tell, it was not connected to anything.

The clang of the screen door brought his attention back to Tracker shuffling his way amongst the scattered boxes. He reached the table and dropped Amos’ phone on the surface, the phone skittering across to Amos’ outstretched hand.

“You oughta be careful wi’ yo poezessions, sir.” Tracker’s eyes squinted tight with mirth.

Amos nodded, inching his way backwards towards the open doorway. “Well, thank you…”

“Sir!” Tracker finished, laughing.

An uneasy smile wormed its way onto Amos’ face. “Yes.”

Tracker nodded. He threw his hand forward in the gloominess, and before Amos could react a solid object hit him full in the chest. His hand flailed in front of him, closing around the object before it could hit the ground.

“Cum back when you need vegies.”

The object nestled in Amos’ palm was a mango.
Amos lay on the bed, the springs protesting from the slightest movement. The wallet lay on his chest, rising and falling after each breath. A few coin shaped spots of mildew huddled together near the light socket on the ceiling. Amos stared at the spots until they blurred together, an inkblot of stasis.

He sat up, letting the wallet slide into his lap, intentional this time around. His fingers performed their usual trick, flicking it open and fingering the penny held within. He stared out the window at the adjacent building’s wall, the flaking paint. The sun hit the wall at a forty-five degree angle – light green, dark green. Interest in the view waned.

He looked up at the crucifix. Still looking at the figure, his hand dug into his pocket, pulling out his mobile, none worse for wear for its night time adventure. He looked at the screen, cycling quickly through the contacts. Angela’s number flashed up on the screen. His thumb hovered over the call button. He chewed the inside of his cheek. He hit the menu button, locked the phone, jammed it back into his pocket.

His fingers made their instinctive creep over his other pocket, this time traversing a flat plain. He looked down at his pocket, his hand diving in, searching to no avail. His head swivelled, eyes frantic, bottom lip stuck to his teeth.

He dropped to his knees, his cheek to the dusty floorboards, and peered under the bed. Apart from a corner where all dust motes come to die, he didn’t see anything at first. His eyes strained. Up against the far wall, an object. He honed in, arm out stretched, shoulder twisting. His fingers encircled it, trapping it, dragged it to shore.

His elbow bumped another, larger object. Amos put the container on the bed, reached under again and pulled it out. It was a book. Leather bound. Elegant script on the spine. Amos smiled derisively as he turned it over, the golden letters blazing out at him.

*The Good News Bible.*
He slumped against the bed, flicking through the pages, a methodical action, the wind generated blowing his fringe up, then down again. The text blurred as it raced by his face, lines upon lines of interchangeable letters, their meanings racing beyond his comprehension. He rested his elbows on his knees, the book becoming still.

In one sudden vicious movement he flung the book against the far wall. It connected with a slap, pages fluttering akimbo, and fell to the floor, coming to rest underneath the wardrobe. A corner of the book remained in the line of sight, open at the Book of Revelations.

Amos hugged his knees and looked away, back out the window, and the non-view.
Amos locked the door of his room and made his way back out into the sunlight. With purpose he walked down the footpath to the newsagent. He walked up to the counter and waited while the girl behind the counter finished giving a grizzled old man his OzLotto Quickpick, then asked her for a street map of Brolga. Her laughter sent him out into the heat again, a bottle of water his only purchase.

He wandered the streets of Brolga, staring at each house as he passed, hoping to catch something that would trigger a memory of his short lifetime here. Every street turned up fruitless. His water bottle emptied before he had done five blocks. Each street made his clothes a little heavier. His eyes stung from staring at lives other than his own.

Amos looked up to see he had walked to the edge of town. He had wandered off the road and stood in the middle of a large patch of red dust and random tufts of stubborn grass, stoically defying the heat that relentlessly sought to beat it down. In front of him stood the skeletal edifice of the local stockyards. The seemingly haphazard slats of metal and wood took on a life of its own, alluding to a level of importance and meaning higher than its physical attributes could display. The yards were empty, giving more emphasis to the ghostly image. The ground within was pockmarked from the trampling of the weekly livestock populations and manure. He breathed in the smell – cattle, sawdust, stale urine, leather. It was intoxicating, an indication of the allure that draws a person into a life of living off the land.

Balancing on his haunches, Amos knelt down and scooped up a handful of dirt. He held his clenched fist up in front of his eyes, looking at the follicles of hair on his knuckles, the darkness of them against his skin. He loosened the fist, a fine line of dirt cascading between his fingers. The dirt was fine, grains of it sticking in the cracks and crevices of his palm. He scooped up another handful of dirt and repeated the process.

“Yep, sure is dry out here.”
Amos spun around. A man stood behind him, smiling benignly. His body blocked the sun, making it hard to discern details. The man’s hat, a Stetson, somehow seemed both out of place – American apparel in a harsh Colonial setting – and perfectly at home on the man’s head, the surrounding environment succumbing to its familiarity. He wore trousers, even in the summer heat, a sign that this attire was his yearly attire. Black suspenders stretched from the trousers over his shoulders, a stark contrast to the light blue shirt he wore, a Bic pen lid and small spiral notebook visible from the breast pocket. A jacket hung over one shoulder, deflated as its purpose lay unfulfilled.

The man stuck out his hand. Amos pushed up off his legs, a small pop rifling from his left knee, and took the hand in his own, squinting at the sudden presence of the sun in his eyes, black and white dots dancing across his field of vision. The handshake was warm, short, with no machismo on display. He looked into the man’s face. He was an elderly man, worn lines marking his eyes and the edges of his mouth, whilst the rest of his skin was relatively unmarred. Thin white sideburns crept out from under his hat, tickling the edges of his ears. His blue eyes twinkled, defying his body’s surrender to age.

As he pulled his hand away Amos remembered the dirt, and hurriedly wiped his hand on his shorts. The man looked on, bemused.

Amos noticed the look. “Sorry about the dirt…”

The man laughed, a rich laugh that complemented his voice, a gentle baritone. “Oh, don’t worry about it. I just thought you were wiping my handshake away on your pants there.”

Amos smiled wanly and shook his head. “Oh no, I didn’t mean anything…”

Bemusement continued to play at the corners of the man’s eyes. ‘Don’t worry, son. Name’s Tom Lehmann, by the by.”

Amos stared for a moment, then thrust his hand out again. “Amos.”

Tom ignored the hand. “Yes, I’ve heard about you. Tell me, are you always this nervous around people you’ve just met?”
Amos retracted his hand, a jerky movement of slight rejection. “Only when they sneak up on me.”

Tom laughed again. “Ah yes, sorry about that. I was just curious to see what a young man like yourself was up to, playing in the dirt and such.”

Amos looked down at the ground, then at his hand. Tom laughed again, shaking his head. “Don’t worry about it son.” He gestured towards the stockyards. “So, would you like a tour?”

Tom led Amos to the chute of the stockyard. Tom lifted a foot onto the lowest rung of the yard, and hoisted himself, air expelled in short huffs. Amos stood there, looking at the monolithic structure, shielding his eyes.

“C’mon mate! I won’t bite!”

Amos climbed up alongside Tom, almost toppling forward from the decline of the chute. Small crumblings of long discarded manure trickled down into the waiting trough.

“You don’t have your legs out here, do ya?” Flies darted in around Tom’s crow’s feet, sticking there like raisins. He pulled up a rolled up exercise book from his back jeans pocket and swished in front of his face. The flies barely moved.

Tom looked around the ‘arena’, his eyes surveying countless memories of years gone by. His eyes watered slightly, irritated from the sudden swirling dust and the past. Amos left him in his reverie, taking a casual stroll around one of the holding pens. He kicked up the dirt with his shoes every few steps, taking in the atmosphere until he arrived at the crush. As he studied its metallic walls, the lever with the rubber grip, slight scorch marks on the bars, he caught the faintest whiff of burning flesh.

“Oh, it’s not that bad.”

Tom’s voice startled him once again, causing Tom to chuckle to himself. “You really are a jumpy one, aren’t ya?”

This time Amos looked Tom square in the face. “Not really. I guess I just get caught up in things.”
Tom nodded, touching the brim of his hat absently with a stubby forefinger. “Yes. Yes, I could see that. Hmm.” He continued to walk past until he reached the crush’s lever, leaning against it, his right hand casually clasping the grip. “Well, the crush is a relatively harmless part of the mustering process. It’s a pain in the bum for sure, but more so for the workers than for the cattle.” He chuckled. “Though I’m sure the cattle would differ, if they could.”

He shrugged, looking over the crush as if a calf had been trapped in there, ready for the next stage. “Yep, it’s a handy little contraption this one. Makes branding that much easier. Crutching too for that matter, doesn’t matter whether you rubber band ‘em or cut ‘em out.” He looked up at Amos, a brief reproachful look clouding his face. “And it isn’t inhumane.”

Amos stood there in silence, stuffing his hands in his pockets. A wistful smile crossed Tom’s face. “Sorry Amos. It’s just that we have tourists come through, city types, who have no idea, no idea at all. Some of them have no idea that milk comes from cows! Not these cows obviously, but they think that milk comes from a bottle, that it’s made in a factory somewhere! Some of them think we are real primitive, us out in the outback I mean.”

Amos shrugged. “People who think that ‘real life’ is watching reality television, where they can ring up to cast a vote on who gets voted off.”

Tom nodded, smiling, but his thoughts were elsewhere. Amos stared up at the sky. No change in the weather.

“Tom, can ask you a question?”

Tom nodded, a thumb now tucked behind a suspender. “Sure mate. What is it?”

“You said before that you had heard of me.”

Tom laughed, running his thumb up and down the suspender as he did so. “This is Brolga! You can’t get away with anything in this town, I can tell you!”

Amos nodded, his head down.

Tom noted his dejection and added, “Actually, your name has been bandied about a bit at the Brolga Hotel.”
Amos looked at Tom, eyebrows raised, mouth agape. Tom held out his hand to stop Amos from saying anything.

“Don’t worry; the gossip mill hasn’t started grinding you up yet. However, you’re new meat, and you’re staying at the Transcontinental. That is a juicy piece of information for the barfly crowd.”

Tom laughed, and Amos joined in. He was afraid that his laughter would ring as hollow as the echoes ringing off the metal posts that stood like sentinels around them.
ELEVEN

Tom pushed through the doors of the Brolga Hotel, holding them ajar to allow Amos through. The Brolga was the only pub not on the main street. Despite this fact, or perhaps because of it, it was popular for the family set and the more casual drinker. The walls were plastered with a mixture of outback and rugby league paraphernalia, signed posters of Wally Lewis and Trevor Gillmeister beside rusted metal wheel cranks and canvas water bags. Wires ran from one side of the pub to the other, maroon and yellow XXXX flags hanging limp. Three worn leather saddles hung from fine galvanised chains above the bar, which was a horseshoe construction that centred the room. Directly above the bar were photos of the Brolga A Grade cricket side from the past ten years, alongside three wooden shields outlining Best Batsman, Best Bowler and Cricketer of the Year, dating back to 1966.

Tom moved to the two closest barstools at the bar, sliding onto the vinyl seat with a huff. Amos sidled next to him, his knees brushing against the corrugated iron face of the bar. He stuck his hand in his pocket, struggling to free his wallet. Tom stayed his hand, placing a yellow note on the bar.

“The first one’s on me.”

He nodded as Tom looked around the bar. The men nodded at Tom in warm recognition, giving Amos a cursory glance before returning to their conversations and their drinks.

The yellow door of the cold room slid open, a woman with her arms balancing a tray of beer glasses backing out. She placed them at the fridge underneath the spirit pourers and turned, a tired grimace washing away into a grin at the sight of Tom. She moved to the bar to stand in front of him, her hands on her hips.

“It’s a little early for you isn’t it Tommy? Better make it a lemon squash.” Her voice held a soft accent.

“Not if there’s no rum in it!” They both laughed, affection in their gazes. The woman leaned forward and took the note. “I’ll get you a drink.”
“And one for the young fella here.” Tom turned to Amos. “I hope that doesn’t offend you any.”

Amos shook his head. “No offence taken.”

The woman returned with two glasses of beer, foam trickling down the frosted glass of one which she placed in front of Amos, giving it a quick twist on the ratty bar towel before placing the other down in front of Tom. Two red notes and a small pile of gold and silver appeared next to Tom’s glass.

“Thank you darling,” Tom said. The woman smiled shyly and reddened, embarrassed, then shot an inquiring gaze Amos’ way. Tom caught it.

“How rude of me. Amber, this is Amos.”

Amber smiled and stuck out her hand. Amos returned the favour. “G’day,” Amos said.

Amber laughed. “Hell, even the newbies say g’day! Well, g’day to you too!” Her voice held a lilt that denoted a British background, her accent now a bastardised version of what it had once been.

Amos smiled crookedly. “Newbie?”

Amber shrugged. “A new one to the town. Not many newbies come in here, is all.”

Tom laughed. “Don’t take any notice. Trust me, she’s nice once you get to know her.”

Amber took a dishtowel from the counter and flicked it in Tom’s direction. Tom waved it away, laughter emanating from other quarters of the bar. Amber turned back to her trays of glasses, and Tom turned back to Amos.

“So. What does bring you to us out here?”

Amos looked into his pot of beer. He picked it up, swirled the contents for a bit, then raised the glass to his mouth. He swallowed the rest of the beer and placed the glass back down, his lips pared back, a hiss uttered. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand. Finally he shrugged.
“I don’t know, really. A change of scenery.”

Tom laughed at that, rocking back slightly on his stool. Amber looked over at them both, bemusement flickering in her smile.

“A change of…? That, that’s a good one. That’s one I haven’t heard before!” Tom continued to chuckle, a smile playing across Amos’ lips.

Tom finished his laughter as Amber brought the new glasses over to Amos, placing one next to the empty and one next to Tom’s pile of money. Her eyebrows raised, a query shot at both men. Amos looked at Tom, Tom at the empty.

“Lordy, someone’s in a hurry.” He swallowed the rest of his beer as Amos placed a twenty dollar bill on the counter. Tom brought the glass down emphatically on the bar, the sound heightened by an exaggerated gasp of appreciation. Amber took the two glasses and Amos’ note and walked away.

Tom wiped his hands on his trousers and looked at Amos. “So? How’s the scenery looking?”

Amos shrugged. “Yeah, alright. Hot, dry.”

Tom laughed again. “Yeah, well, you’ll get plenty of that out here, believe you me! If that is what you’re after, you couldn’t have come to a better place!”

Amos smiled over his beer. “I guess.”

“So where have you escaped from?” Tom asked, turning as Amber returned with his beer, giving a ‘thanks love’ before turning back to Amos.

Amos flinched, thinking of what Leo said about Curt last night. Tom’s eyes widened.

“Sorry mate, I didn’t mean to pry…”

Amos waved the comment away. “No, nothing like that, it’s just… I thought you were implying…”

“That you just got out of prison? No! You really are a jumpy one, aren’t you?”

Amos looked down at the floor. “No. I don’t know. I guess I’m just unsure of what I’m doing here.”
Tom pondered on that, taking a sip of his beer. He nodded his head to two men who walked through the front door.

“Brisbane.”

Tom turned his attention back to Amos. He looked blankly then lit up as he picked back up on their conversation.

“Brisbane, hey? So how is Brisbane, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Brisbane…is…green…”

Tom laughed again, slapping Amos slightly on the shoulder. “I bet it is! A real change of scenery then! Well, here’s to the change of scenery!”

They both laughed as Amber approached with another round of drinks.

Amos had met the clientele of the Brolga Hotel by the time his tab had dwindled to two ten cent pieces. Tom’s face became ruddy from the alcohol, and halfway through the rounds had begun to add a nip of sarsaparilla to his pot, “for the added flavour.” They had moved from their position at the front of the bar to the left side, where he met Jackie Rickson and Marley. Jackie was a ‘cockie’, a life-long station hand with palms as rough as sandpaper when he shook his hand. Marley ran the hardware store. His conversations were punctuated with frenetic hand movements, so that even the mildest story took on a comical colour. They entertained Amos with various town yarns, usually coming from the younger days. Pranks played on the night soil man, shooting stories, mustering stories. It was alien to Amos, their tales as foreign as the folklore of an ancient civilisation. Yet he was drawn to the stories, his body leaning into the circle, soaking the language up.

Marley initiated the pool games, which turned into a mini tournament including the other five patrons and Amber. Bets were placed on the final outcome, Tom scratching
the odds on a blackboard next the dartboard. Jackie was a clear priced favourite, but
was knocked out in the first round by Marley, who didn’t stop talking about it for the
next hour. Beers were shouted, cues were jostled, the jukebox kicked in, and the
jovial noise flowed out onto the street, drawing in more customers. The afternoon
merged with dusk before moving on into night.

Amos lurched to the bar as the overhead lights flickered on, the neon sizzling in the
XXXX sign above the bar. Amber was leaning over his tab, her finger moving from one silver piece to the other.

“Hmm, don’t know what I can get you for twenty cents Amos,” she tut-tutted.

Amos shook his head. “No, I dunno either. I guess this is it for me.”

One of the men lining up a shot at the pool table heard him. “Oi fellas, the young one is pulling up stumps!”

A howl of cheery indignation came up from the small congregation. Tom looked up from his perch at the side of the bar. His tab had dwindled also and was in the process of drawing another note from his battered leather wallet.

“No, no, we’ll have none of that! We’ve only just made your acquaintance! Here Amber, give this to Amos!” He waved the note in the air, a truce being sent up.

Amos backed away, his hands out in front of him. “No Tom, I can’t…”

Tom hopped off his stool and shuffled over to Amos, the note clenched firmly between his stubby fingers. He attempted to stuff it into Amos shirt pocket, Amos pushing his hand away, a ping pong match of offers and denials.

Amber’s hand snaked over the bar to rest on Tom’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, Tom. I’ve got it covered.”

Rejection flickered over Tom’s face before he shrugged and crumpled the note into his own pocket. “Well, I offered. Can’t do any more ‘an that.”

Amos began to stutter an apology as Amber’s hand shifted from Tom’s shoulder to his own.

“Don’t worry about it. Come over to the side here.”
Amber moved to the right side of the bar where the barstools were vacant, Amos following suit. He sat at one of the stools as Amber flicked open a worn out notebook, its red cover scuffed from much handling, the edges dog-eared many times over. She laid it open at a fresh page.

“Look, I haven’t seen Tommy this happy for a few months, so here’s what I’ll do. This here’s the tab book. Only people that Noel knows and knows well usually can have a tab. But here’s what we’ll do.”

“Noel?”

Amber shook her head in slight annoyance. Amos stopped his question, cowed. Her head lowered over the bar, urging Amos to bring his head to hers. She smiled as she went on in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Tonight I’ll mark up your drinks in here, and for every two you have I’ll put down one. Then I want you to come over tomorrow and pay what you owe.”

Amos whispered back. “I can pay…”

Amber straightened a little, a smile curling her lips. “I said you can fix it up tomorrow, OK?”

Amos smiled back. “OK”

“That’s settled then.” She snapped the notebook shut and spun around, her auburn hair flowing in her wake. She served a customer at the other end of the bar.

By the time that Amos left the bar, the kitchen had closed and the few families that had utilised it come and gone. The insides of Amos’ mouth had pruned from the intake of so much liquid. His arms around Marley and Jackie, he hollered out the lyrics to half a dozen Aussie pub rock songs, all ones that he normally hated and yet still knew the words to. He missed the dartboard more often than not in a game of
Around the World. He confessed his undying love of all things Brolga. He vomited in the toilets. He kept drinking.

Last drinks came and went, and the last group of men straggled from the hotel, a motley crew of pickled patrons. Tom had left sometime earlier, sneaking out under the pretence of going to the toilet. Jackie attempted to give Amber a kiss as he left which she evaded with a gentle shove and a laugh. Amos tried to make eye contact with her, but she was all business. Everyone shouted their goodbyes as they stumbled out into the street. The doors clattered shut behind them.

The moon sat pregnant above the rooftops. Amos wavered in the cool night air, his face raised to the sky. Millions of pinpoints of light stared back at him. He tried to find the constellations from last night, but his vision blurred, the galaxies merging into each other. The moonlight guided his way home.
TWELVE

Red light seeped in through Amos’ eyelids, forcing them open. Immediately a jackhammer went off in his forehead, a groan escaping his parched lips. He wrestled with his pillow, trying to escape the daylight, but it was no use.

Amos slumped out of bed onto the floor, his legs tangled up in the twisted bed sheets. The thud to the floor brought a welcome physical pain that momentarily eased the pounding in his head. He crawled to the window, reaching up to draw the curtains. The light dimmed, but the pain remained.

It took an hour before Amos made it out on the street. It was past midday, judging from the height of the sun and heat rising from the ground. He bought a pair of cheap sunglasses from the Western Star Café. They did little to alleviate the throbbing behind his eyes. He ordered a coffee and sat at one of the sidewalk tables, sipping the brew without milk whilst he weighed up his options.

Amos walked along the main street in a daze, looking for a teller machine. He found one at the brick post office next to the local pool. The echoes of children splashing the heat away mingled with the chirping of the machine as he checked his account balance. He withdrew some money, using the receipt to wipe the perspiration from his forehead.

By the time he reached the Brolga Hotel his tongue was sticking to the roof of his mouth. The dimness of the bar did as much for his headache as the slightly cooler temperature, allowing him to take off his sunglasses. A few men littered the room, all of them from the night before. Looks and smiles of recognition passed between them, and Amos exchanged salutations with them. He made his way to the bar and sat down, looking around for Amber.

After a few moments she appeared from the cold room, reminiscent of the first time he met her yesterday. She rolled out an empty metal keg, the ever present tea towel over her shoulder. She took it around the corner and out of view, a clanging sound as she placed it down. She came back out to the bar, a blank look on her face before
breaking out into a smile. She wiped her hands on the towel as she made her way to Amos.

“Well, how are we this afternoon? You’re looking good.”

Amos gave a wan smile, instinctively wiping his hand over his face. “Thanks for the compliment.”

“Not a problem. Beer?”

Amos shook his head. “Water. The biggest…thing of water you can find.”

She laughed and turned to the fridge. She returned with a frosted pint glass and a carafe. Amos poured himself a glass, the water level half way down the glass in one gulp.

“You really are thirsty!”

Amos wiped away a dribble of water that had escaped his lips with the back of his hand. “It is a hot day.”

“Aren’t they all?” Amber stood silent for a moment, then turned to the back of the bar. “Noel, can you take the bar? I’m going outside for a fag.”

A grunt was her reply. She nodded her head for Amos to follow her as she moved to the right side of the bar, grabbing a packet of cigarettes, a lighter and the notebook as she went. She lifted up the trapdoor at the end of the bar and moved to an open door next to the jukebox that led out to a grassy area equipped with four wooden tables and benches. She sat at the table furthest from the door, Amos sitting opposite from her.

Amber tapped out a cigarette and lit it. She blew a fume of smoke over her shoulder, offering the packet to Amos as she did so. Amos lit a cigarette and did likewise.

“Ok.” Amber opened the notebook, flicking through the pages until she reached Amos’ tab. She slid the book over to Amos, placing her index finger at the final figure at the bottom of the page. Amos studied her fine handwriting, the numbers scratched lightly on each blue line. In silence he handed over the money.

“Thanks for that. Don’t worry about the change.”
Amber smiled. “Cool. Tips don’t come often around here. Now remember, this is just between you and me.”

Amos nodded as he put his wallet back into his pocket. Amber closed the notebook and placed it beside her cigarette packet. She ashed on the ground, looking past the fence that encircled the area to the houses beyond.

“Amber?”

She blew out another plume of smoke before answering in a strained tone. “Yes?”

“Your accent. I hope I’m not being rude…”

Amber smiled. “Ah yes. The accent. It throws people a bit. I was born in Canada, and my parents moved to Manchester when I was eleven. So yeah. Still some Canuck there.”

Amos nodded. “So how long have you been here?”

“Here as in Brolga, or Australia?”

“Either.”

“Australia, close to three years. Brolga, eleven months yesterday.”

Amos nodded. “Congratulations.”

Amber gave a short laugh, its edges tainted by derision. “Yeah. The anniversary party is tomorrow.”

Amos pursed his lips and followed Amber’s suit, staring out over the rooftops. The glare of the sun caught him unawares, and he beat a hasty retreat behind his sunglasses. He drained the rest of the water and reached for the carafe.

“So…” Amber drawled. “What brings you to Brolga?”

“A change of scenery.” Amos’ answer was automatic, like he had rehearsed it for some time in the mirror since the last time he had used it.

Derision re-entered Amber’s eyes as she looked at him. “Yeah, I heard that one yesterday. Didn’t like it then either.”
Amos leaned back on his seat. His hairline prickled. The heat was getting to him. Amber rested her elbows on the table, placing her chin in her hands.

“I didn’t mean anything by it. Sorry. If it’s a touchy subject…”

Amos shook his head, slightly relieved but still reproachful. “No, it’s OK.” He took another puff of his cigarette before answering.

“To be honest, I’m not real sure.”

Amber laughed, the mockery having disappeared. “What, did you stab your finger at a road map and land on Brolga? God, I feel sorry for you.”

Amos laughed. “No, it wasn’t quite like that. I guess I’m looking for something. Or someone. Something like that.”

Amber gave a smile that somehow became a frown at the same time. At that moment Amos took her in for the first time.

“You are secretive now aren’t you? But then again, I barely know you. I’m sorry if I’m intruding. It’s just, you know…”

“You don’t get many newbies around here?”

They laughed. She flicked the stub of her cigarette over the fence into the neighbouring backyard and lit a new one. “Yeah, something like that.”

Amos finished his cigarette, stubbing it out on the underside of the table. He poured another glass of water, shaking his head when Amber offered another cigarette. He sipped the cool water, feeling it soothe his lips, cool the inside of his throat.

Amos went to say something, then decided better of it.

“What is it?” Amber asked.

Amos looked back over the fence, chewing his lower lip in thought. He leaned over the table, lowering his voice although there was no one else in the beer garden.

“Can you keep a secret?”
Amber arched her eyebrows, her lips flattening into a conspiratorial grin. “Bartenders are always keeping secrets.”

Amos faltered for a moment. His indecision wiped Amber’s smile away, and her face dissolved into a stern mask of seriousness.

“You can keep a secret, Amos.”

Amos looked over her shoulder absently, then spoke. “I’m looking for my parents.”

Amber looked at him, her face shivering with uncertainty. “Your…parents?”

Amos nodded. “I know it doesn’t sound like a secret, but I’d rather not have anyone know about it. I guess I don’t know where to look, and, umm, I don’t know. I guess I want to keep it to myself, work things out myself, but I don’t know what to work out, or at least where to start.”

Amber nodded through a cloud of smoke. “And why do you think you’ll find answers here?”

Amos shrugged. “This place is all I really know about them.”

“Were you born here?”

Amos continued to chew his lip. “No. Actually, I was born in Longreach. Apparently.”

“What do you mean, apparently?”

“I don’t exactly remember being born, so…”

Amber stared at him for a moment before bursting out with laughter, a breathy sound that brought a smile to his face. Her teeth shone in the harsh sunlight.

“Don’t you? Funny, I remember being born like it was yesterday.”

“Maybe my birth is a repressed memory.”

They laughed in unison. It petered out after a few moments.

“Maybe you should try Longreach first.”
Amos nodded, looking into his glass for answers. “Maybe.”

Amber’s eyes lit up, a light bulb lighting up behind her eyes. “When did you move here?”

“I don’t know that. But I left sometime around ’84 or ’85.”

“Well, there’s a start right there. Maybe you could check census reports, birth records… There’s a lot you can do.”

Amos nodded again. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Tell you what, why don’t you travel down to the police station? It’s across the street from the pool. They might be able to help you. That’s their job, anyway. Not like they have much to do during the week.” She rolled her eyes. “The only things the police are useful for out here are breaking up brawls, throwing people into the drunk tank on a weekend, and the occasional large vehicle escort.”

“What would I tell them?”

“What you told me.”

Amos nodded again. Amber flicked the rest of the cigarette over the fence and pushed up off the table. “Anyway, I best be getting back in. The clock’s a ticking.”

Amber picked up the carafe as Amos drained the last of the water, then handed her the glass. “Thanks for that.”

“Hey, no worries. Any time.”

He followed her back into the pub, taking his sunglasses off as the sun abated once more. Amber slid under the bar.

“What are you doing tonight?”

Amos rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, his hands shoved firmly in his pockets. “Oh, I don’t know. I’ll have to check my planner. Why?”

Amber laughed. “Well, I can see that you’re a busy fellow, but if you get peckish, the chicken Kiev isn’t half bad. Or the snapper.”
“You mean the fish out of the deep freezer where it has sat for months, or the Kiev from its cardboard box?”

Amber said nothing.

He shrugged. “Sounds good.”

Amber cocked her head to one side. “Don’t be a stranger.”

Amos nodded, turned for the door and entered the world of light, his body once again encased in a fine film of sweat.
THIRTEEN

The police station was of the same design as the post office diagonally across the road, except the station had some semblance of a garden on either side of the steps leading to the front door. Bottle brushes struggled to survive the heat, the red combs of foliage almost fully retracted, ashamed. A bird of paradise plant flowered at the foot of the steps, defiant against the will of the environment around it. Much time had to be taken to ensure such lush survival.

The pole to the left of the footpath leading to the steps was once white but now was streaked with dirt and rust. The small black sign on top read ‘PO ICE’, what looked like a bullet hole having obliterated the place where the L had been. The blue globe on top of the sign was filled with cobwebs, small insects perennially suspended in the snare that the resident spider had set up and subsequently left to its own devices.

Amos made his way up the stairs and pushed open the door, the hydraulic hinge hissing slightly at the effort. He was hit with a blast of manufactured air, his skin becoming sticky from the drying perspiration. He was in a small waiting room. His footsteps echoed off the vinyl floor as he made his way to the counter. A sheet of glass covered the top two thirds of the opening, the counter stretching out considerably on the other side, ensuring that extreme effort could still not bring harm to the people inside the station. A desk cluttered with various pieces of paper was in the cubicle behind the glass, a telephone and a pile of folders on another and a potted fern sat next to a filing cabinet in the corner. No one occupied the office.

Amos’s hand hovered above the bell on the counter, bringing it down quickly and away, as if it might be electrified. The ringing echoed in the stillness, yet was muffled by the understated whirr of the air conditioning. He stood there for a few moments, then shuffled back to a chair to the right of the front door, picking up an old issue of *Australian Geographic* to flick through as he waited.

It was some time before a middle-aged woman shuffled to the counter. Amos did not notice her at first, engrossed in an article surrounding the archaeological finds of unique dinosaur remains in Muttaburra.
The woman cleared her throat, causing Amos to close the magazine with a snap in surprise. She smiled, a shining light set against the dullness of her eyes. Amos noticed the lines that gathered around her eyes and cheeks. The smile implied that she would not break, no matter what life threw at her. Amos suspected that life had thrown a lot at her, and wasn’t finished yet.

“Can I help you?” the woman rasped.

Amos nodded. “I was after some…help.” He moved to get out of the chair.

Without a word the woman turned and disappeared out the back. Amos slid slowly back down, his hands folding into themselves in his lap. Before long a police officer appeared at the counter, the woman hovering behind him. His uniform was cleanly pressed and cut, as if it was new out of the wrapping. He fit the stereotypical rural police officer appearance: his blond hair was kept a few millimetres above the scalp; the break from tradition sideburns that travelled to just below the earlobe; barrel-chested, stuck out like a strutting rooster; boots shined within an inch of their lives. The police officer sized Amos for a moment two before he turned to the woman and whispered to her. She shrugged and turned to sit at the desk. The officer held up his hand to Amos and moved out of the office. A click emanated from a grey door at the end of the room, and the officer appeared. Amos rose from his seat as the officer strode forward, his hand extended a good three metres before they met. Amos read the officer’s name off the badge on his breast pocket before the officer introduced himself.

“Sergeant Roary.”

Amos pumped his hand. “Amos.”

“Pleased to meet you Amos. Now, Mel tells me you are after some help?”

Amos nodded, then looked through the glass into the office. Mel turned away, yet Amos picked up that much of Brolga’s rumour mill could well stem from this building.

“Could we speak in private?”
“Sure, sure.” Sgt Roary guided Amos over to the grey door, a large hand on his shoulder the whole time. He reached for his belt. Next to his empty holster, a key ring holding keys of all various shapes and sizes. Sgt Roary caught Amos’ attention.

“The keys? Well, we have the security aspect of town covered too. We don’t get paid any extra but.” A guffaw huffed from the police officer as he ushered Amos past various rooms that branched off the hallway that the grey door concealed. One room was another office; another, once a kitchen/dining area, now a converted staff area; a room filled with filing cabinets and two computers. Sgt Roary showed Amos into his own office. Amos stood near the door as the police officer moved behind his small desk. It was cluttered with reports, articles, memos and butcher paper, the aftermath of many a bought lunch from the roadhouse on the edge of town.

Sgt Roary sat down, motioning at a chair in front of the desk with hand outstretched, like he was shaking the hand of an invisible colleague. Amos took the seat. It was an ergonomic seat, forcing him to sit upright. Slanted slices of wan sunlight filtered through the Venetian blinds that covered the only window into the room.

Sgt Roary tapped on the edge of the desk with his index fingers, an informal drum roll. “So, what can I do you for?”

Amos could feel a ball of pain making its presence known in the small of his back. He fidgeted, trying to find a comfortable position, but the ergonomic chair was having none of it.

“Well, I’m looking for someone.”

“Uh-huh,” Sgt Roary murmured, reaching forward to grab a pen and paper. “So, who’s the missing person?”

Amos laughed nervously. “Oh no! They aren’t really missing, as such.”

Sgt Roary arched his eyebrows. “But you said you were looking for someone…”

Amos nodded, his lips pursed. “Yep. That’s pretty much it. I’m looking for two people.”

Sgt Roary tapped the edge of the desk with his pen, a staccato rat-tat-tatting to an off-kilter military beat. “Ok. Names?”
The nervous laugh again. “Umm…Yeah. About that. I don’t really know their names.”

The pen halted a few inches above the desk. The silence was only broken from the sapling of a eucalyptus tree scraping on the glass of the window behind the blinds.

“I know it’s a long shot, but I know these people were here the last time I knew them, and I thought I could start hunting them down from here.”

“Ok…So when were they here? As far as you can tell?”

“Well, I was taken away sometime in 1984, or maybe 1985. I haven’t heard from them since then.”

Sgt Roary stared at Amos for a few seconds, then his eyes widened. “So…you were taken away from your parents! From here, Brolga!”

“Yes.”

“Shit, why didn’t you say so in the first place? I had no idea what you were going on about!” The rhythmic tapping resumed.

“Ahh, sorry about that. I guess I didn’t know how to put it. I’m not sure how it all happened myself. It was so long ago.”

Roary nodded to himself, rocking back on his chair, brow furrowed in thought. Amos looked on blankly.

“So, you wouldn’t have their names by any chance?” Roary asked.

“No.”

“Nah, didn’t think so. To be honest, there’s not a lot we can do. We can try and hunt down any reports written up around the two years you mentioned and find instances where children were taken from their families. Domestics and the like. But most of that is handwritten. In the files.” Roary hitched his thumb at the door, towards the adjacent room with the filing cabinets.
“I’ve only been out here eighteen months meself. Meandarra for four years, Dalby for three. So I don’t know much of what’s gone on in Brolga before I came here.” Roary tapped the side of his head with the pen. The pad in front of him remained blank.

“Sgt Goodwin is out at the moment at the Norville station. He’s been out here on the job for three years, but he comes from around the place. He might know more.”

Sgt Roary put down the pen, his face conveying his belief that he had done all he could. Amos frowned.

“Well, is that it then?”

A confused expression washed over Roary’s face, soon complemented by an apologetic tone. “Oh, no! Listen…Amos, isn’t it…”

Amos nodded.

“Amos, yeah. I’ll level with you. I wouldn’t know where to start looking. Mel on the other hand, she’s a bloody godsend! She’s been here pretty much since she finished high school, so she’s almost like the boss around here!”

Sgt Roary laughed, his eyes squinting. Amos heard the floor creak outside. He looked out the doorway, but couldn’t see anyone.

“So I can ask her about it for you. And I’ll talk to Sgt Goodwin about it too, see what he reckons.” He scratched his head again. “Have you thought of contacting Adoption Services and the like?”

Amos shifted in his chair. “I sort of wanted to find out on my own, if I could. Maybe find people here who knew my parents, I don’t know.” He shrugged.

“Well, listen, I’ll get you to write a statement, we’ll get your details, and we’ll let you know what we find, OK?”

Sgt Roary stood. Amos followed suit. The police officer moved around the desk and stuck his hand out again. Amos looked at it, shaking it as an afterthought.

“It must be tough. Not knowing who your parents are.”

“I guess.”
Roary’s hand patted Amos’ shoulder again. Roary smiled.

‘No worries then. Let’s head out to Mel and get all this sorted then.’
FOURTEEN

Amos looked down at his plate. The café had given him another water-colour china plate, a staple curio of the establishment, but it was swamped by the meal placed upon it. The menu called it the ‘All Day Meat Works Burger’. Amos wasn’t sure whether the title referred to how it took major work to eat the burger or if eating it lasted all day. His fingers stretched outward to hold the burger in his hands. A butterfly filleted beef sausage, ham pattie, a thin slice of steak and two rashers of bacon were trapped within the two thick slices of toasted bread, barely held together by an extra-long toothpick, its end proudly waving a paper Australian flag. Amongst the meat he could just make out the green of lettuce, the red of tomato, the purple of beetroot and the yellow of cheese. Barbecue sauce oozed out between the layers like crude oil. He put the burger back down on the plate, its weight making the china chatter on the table. He asked the waitress for a knife, fork, and the largest jug of water she could find.

Amos’ meeting with Roary had ended on a somewhat sour note. When filling out a form to note the circumstances of Amos’ enquiries, Mel mentioned that the information would not be available for him to get without addressing the Freedom Act, something that needed to go through the courts. Roary agreed, adding that the process could take some time.

“Well, you’d have to do it through Longreach. Not that they’re a bustling city or anything, but the whole thing could take six to eight weeks, maybe more. I can put a word in for you, but I can’t promise anything.” He then winked, a stuttering laugh flying from his lips. “All that rigmarole, running you through the governmental wringer, all for information we have right here in our filing cabinets! It makes you sick, don’t it?” They finished the meeting with Roary maintaining that he would refer to Sgt Goodwin about how to proceed with the matter.

Amos felt the knife bite through the toast, meat and meagre salad. He brought the food to his lips. The meats all competed for his attention, cheese and sauce underlying everything. The mouthful half chewed, he swilled some water, hoping to break down the food some. The waitress looked at him from behind the counter in
bemusement. Amos paid for the meal and left with a third of the burger remaining on the plate.

Amos walked down the street, passing the King’s Crown Hotel on his way. It was the most developed of the pubs in Brolga as far as he could tell. The pub was part of a larger brick building that stood predominantly in the centre of the street. The other sections of the building were taken up by a department store, its contents, from what Amos could discern, coming from the 1970s. The two stores bookended the King’s Crown, although the pub was the main attraction. The white stone front was accentuated by the red brick that surrounded it. Peering through the window he could see the newish blue-grey carpet, the recently upholstered stools and chairs, the fresh paint job. New management. Either that or the owners made enough money from their patrons to regularly upkeep the establishment. From the clusters of people crowded around the table, Amos could believe either to be the case.

Amos staggered across the road and through into the Transcontinental, his stomach pressing urgently against his shirt. He made his way across to the bar, slumping unceremoniously onto a stool. Lavinia looked over at him as she pulled a pot of beer for Leo, who was perched at the other end of the bar. Leo tipped his battered hat at him through a cloud of smoke from his hand rolled cigarette. She put the pot in front of him, took his change, and sauntered over to stand in front of Amos.

“Hello stranger,” she replied, an enigmatic grin painted on her face.

“What happened? Tell me.”

Amos shook his head. “What do you mean?”

“Have you got a cigarette?”

The grin softened. “Good, then?” She turned and walked down the bar, crouching down behind the counter to grab her cigarette pack and lighter. She tapped two out. Amos allowed Lavinia to light his. He could smell her perfume from her wrist as she held up the lighter. He drew the smoke in and nodded. Lavinia moved the lighter to her cigarette.

“So what happened? Tell me.”

Amos shook his head. “What do you mean?”

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked, more amusement than concern colouring her voice.
“Is it that obvious?”

Lavinia’s eyebrows arched with impatience.

Amos hooked his thumb over his shoulder towards the door. “Have you ever eaten one of those All Day Meat Works Burgers?”

A wide smile washed over Lavinia’s face. She turned around. “Hey, Leo, Amos tried to eat the Star’s Works Burger!”

Leo hacked out a staccato laugh. He rocked back and forth on the stool, teetering close to falling over before righting himself again.

“Ha! How’d you go?”

Amos just looked at him, which set both Lavinia and Leo off into a whirlwind of laughter.

Lavinia’s eyes twinkled. “You’re not having too much luck with the local cuisine are you?”

Amos smiled weakly, shaking a finger at the beer tap. “Can I please have a beer?”

Lavinia smiled as she picked up another glass. “Come on down the bar here with Leo and me,” she said, motioning with her head towards the end of the bar as she did so.

Amos sat down on the stool next to Leo. He gestured at the empty bar.

“Another wild night at the Trans, hey?”

Leo frowned. “Yeah, well, count your lucky stars mate. When it is going, you’d do best to be not here. Bongo ‘n’ his mates are gunning for you.”

Amos stared at Leo, concern washing his face. “Serious?”

Leo nodded, once. “Tha’s Bongo. Everything in its right place, and he’s happy. If things are shaken up… I wouldn’t be too worried. He’s a shit stirrer to be sure, but if you stay out of his way he won’t fuck around with yer.”
Amos nodded thoughtfully, ashing his cigarette in the ashtray. Lavinia put Amos’ beer on the bar mat, foam flowing down the outer glass onto the towelling. “Sorry about that.”

Amos shrugged and pulled out a note. Lavinia turned away to the register.

“So, what have you been up to? Seeing the sights of our lovely township?” Leo chuckled.

“Nothing much. I guess there’s nothing much to see.”

Leo laughed. “You got that right! We aren’t the arsehole of the world, but we sure are rimming it!”

Amos chuckled at the crudity of the comment despite himself, the rock in his stomach momentarily forgotten. He puffed on his cigarette.

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

“Hey?” Amos asked.

“From the other night. Why are you here? You have already said how shit the place is…”

“Now hang on, I didn’t…”

“…and you’ve been here – what, two days?”

“Three, but…”

“Three. People don’t come out here for much. We’re a stop gap. The drought’s fucked up most shearing. Thank fuck I’m retired. There’s not much to do other than shoot ‘roos and wait for death. So which is it?”

Amos took a deep pull on his cigarette, the smoke hitting his lungs hard. He peered up at the exposed beams supporting the ceiling, then back at Leo, who stared at him with his lips stretched thin, his eyes unreadable.

“I’m looking for someone.”
“Ah!” Leo slapped his knee with delight, his lines of his face scrunched together as he grinned. “Now we’re getting somewhere!”

Amos shook his head, a tick in his jaw setting him on edge. “Anyway, I don’t mean to sound rude or anything, but what is it to you?”

Lavinia came over to the two of them, dragging a rusty stool with her, and perched up on the other side of the bar. “Are you hassling Amos here with your Brolga stories, Leo?”

Leo smiled at her. “No, I’m faking him.”

“Faking him?”

“Faking me?” Amos echoed.

“I love this place. Do you really think I’m just waiting for ol’ Death to come and collect me? No bloody fear! I have too much to live for!”

“Too much to drink for, more’s like it,” Lavinia muttered, a wry grin giving her away.

“Oy, enough from you!” Leo countered. He looked at Amos as he pointed at Lavinia. “See what I mean? A real livewire, she is! The love of my life! Anyway, I faked ya by telling ya the bad things, makin’ you feel bad, so’s you’d tell me your problems.”

Lavinia looked on with her mouth agape. “Leo, you devilish bastard! You’ve just gotta know everything, don’t you?”

She turned to Amos, seriousness marking her face. “If it’s none of our business, we’ll butt right out.” As she finished she glared at Leo. Leo’s withered hands came up beside him, denying any culpability.

“Hey, nothing wrong with talking.”

Amos drank a mouthful of beer. “So what’s so good about the place?”

Leo, having taken cue from Amos, finished his beer before answering. “Brolga?”

Amos nodded.
“Shit boy, what I was sayin’ before wasn’t far off the truth. We are a stop gap. We don’t get much in the way of settlers here, starting a new business or raising their families. If you’re born here, more often ‘n not you stay here. Shearers are fucked, what with the sheep dwindling and all. Shootin’s good. Everyone gets by. That’s about all.”

“It’s not that bad, Leo!” Lavinia said.

“Hang on love, I’m not finished. It’s not bad at all. Brolga is what Brolga is. A community. And it’s a community with history. And that’s what I live for.” Leo leaned back, taking another puff of smoke into his lungs as he crushed the filter into the ashtray. “Fuckin’ history.”

Lavinia looked from Leo to Amos, then began to laugh, the sound sweeping away any misgivings. Amos smiled. Leo barked a laugh.

“I’m telling ya,” Leo continued, “you young ones don’t know shit about history. Not that crap they teach you in school or your bloody universities. The real history is never shown, never talked about. Captain Cook, my arse!”

That had them all laughing, though Leo kept his serious expression.

“Well, thank God for us young uns that we have Leo to shine the way,” Lavinia said.

Leo shook a crooked finger. “Ah, you joke, but ‘tis true. Love, its fuckin’ lucky you have me, the near misses I’ve had.” He lifted his Jackie Howe singlet to show a ropy white scar that travelled from his left nipple to just below his clearly defined ribcage. Amos winced; the scar was angry despite its age. “This fucker comes from rodeoing in the Isa back when I was your age. That’s a story right there.”

Lavinia rolled her eyes. “Here we go. C’mon Leo, put it away before I lose my dinner.”

Leo chuckled. “You’ve seen it a thousand times, what’re ya whingeing about?” He looked over at Amos. “You ginger about the new one here?”

Lavinia looked at Amos. “A little.”
Leo grudgingly pulled the singlet back over his chest. “All’s I’m sayin’ is there’s history in everything.”

Lavinia nodded. “How’d we get onto this again?”

The confused expression on Leo said it all. It was quickly replaced by frustration and Lavinia and Amos began laughing again.

“Young one, I don’t fucking know,” he muttered into his beer.
Amos placed the pool cue into the holder next to the jukebox, finishing off his beer at the same time. Leo picked up his battered Akubra, shoving his tobacco pouch into his jeans pocket.

“Thanks for the games Amos.”

Amos nodded in acceptance. Leo made for the door before thinking better of it, weaving his way back to Amos’ side, leaning in and cocking his head to Amos’ ear.

“Lavinia…Lav Inia is a good one.” He leaned away a couple of inches, moving his head aside to belch, the smell of stale alcohol and tobacco smoke filling the space between them. He leaned forward again.

“She likes you.”

Amos nodded, his expression clouded. “Does she now?”

“Yep.” Leo’s lips smacked together at the end of the word, sounding like a popping balloon. Amos’ head felt hot from too much beer.

“Mmm.”

Leo leaned even closer, his hand resting on Amos’ shoulder, the heat of his breath brushing the hair around his ears.

“An’ I never meant nothing about it.”

Amos looked down at him. “What?”

“Why you’re here. If she’s none of my business, she’s none of my business. But if you wanna talk, ‘bout anything, you know where to find me.”

Leo moved away, his eyebrows arched in a conspiratorial expression. He winked at Amos, no mirth entering his eyes. He walked to the bar where Lavinia watched on. He leaned over and gave her a sloppy kiss on the cheek.
“One a these days I’m gonna steal you away a nd we’ll elope. Get away from this fuckin’ place.”

Lavinia laughed like she had heard it all before. She waved her arms to take in the bar and its surroundings. “What, and leave all this history behind?”

Leo grunted. “Yeah, well, I’ll tell you something for nothin’. I love this town, you can say all you want. I do. But history’s also what you make it.”

“Don’t you mean life’s what you make it?” Lavinia asked.

Leo leaned back, his eyes squinting. “Whaz the difference?”

Lavinia came around the bar and helped Leo stagger through the door, her hand on his back, whispering affectionately to him until he was on his way up the footpath. She turned and looked at Amos with her hands on her hips, laughter rushing from her lips in an exhausted rush.

“Leo! I love him.”

Amos nodded dumbly. “Yeah, he’s a nice guy.”


Amos muttered, affecting a baritone and accentuating his accent, “With a heart the size of Phar Lap.”

Lavinia laughed, the hint of exhaustion gone, her eyes twinkling in the dull light. She dug him in the ribs with her elbow as he walked past.

“What? You started in with the clichés.”

She shook her head as she locked the door, her fringe barely concealing the grin on her face. She turned to see Amos walking towards the staircase.

“Wait a minute! Where you heading off to?”

Amos turned and shrugged. He scratched his head in drunken confusion. “Bed?”
She walked over to be standing in front of him. She grabbed his arm, her hand cold against the soft skin of his elbow.

“Uh-uh. I feel like more drinks, and I'm not going alone.”

“Umm, I'm not sure I should have any more…”

Lavinia looked shocked. “Are you telling me you are passing on free drinks with the hottest girl in Brolga?” She winked and pulled him to the bar. “I don’t think so mister!”

“Someone’s got tickets on themselves…”

“Damn straight! Don’t open any windows!”

“Why?”

She dug him in the ribs again, rolling her eyes. “Cos they’ll fly out!”

Amos groaned, his turn to roll his eyes, a grin spreading across his lips.

Lavinia slipped back behind the bar and poured them rum and Cokes. They raised their glasses, bringing them together with a clink.

“To good times,” Lavinia murmured, her eyes blue fire, before half the drink was gone in one shot.

Amos sipped his, eyeing her over the rim of his glass. Lavinia leaned over the bar, swirling the ice in her glass, smiling. Her blue eyes hardened a little as a smile creased her lips. Putting down her drink, she placed both hands flat on the bar and hoisted herself up. Hopping down on the other side she headed towards the jukebox, throwing a backward glance at Amos as she did so. He took her in: the tight black jeans; the red singlet that clung to her body, inching up, the black ink peering out like a beacon; her black hair with the red streaks. He coughed, shifting on his stool.

Lavinia turned as the first strands of the song started up. It didn’t take long before he picked The Cure’s Love Cats. She moved slowly, her eyes never leaving him, beaming an enigmatic smile. She hopped back up on the bar and started to dance, her body writhing to the beat. She giggled as she looked down at him through her hair.
Amos laughed, running his hand through his hair. “Are you serious? Coyote Ugly?”

She pouted. “What, don’t you like my dancing?”

Amos shook his head, smiling. “I bet you do this to all the boys.”

Lavinia moved to stand right in front of him, their drinks between her boots. “Do what?” she asked with a coy lilt, her hips swaying frenetically to the staccato beat.

Amos’ face tingled. “Come on down from there. You drive a man to drink!”

She laughed but continued. “What’s wrong? Getting a little hot under the collar?”

Amos smiled at her until she stopped abruptly and jumped down, taking the seat next to him.

“You’re no fun!” she pouted, yet the sly smile remained.

“Good choice of song, by the way,” Amos said as he took another cigarette out and planted it between his lips.

“Thank you,” she said. She leaned over and took the cigarette out of his mouth and snapped it in half. Amos looked at her with shock. She continued to smile as she leant in, her lips meeting his. She kissed him soft, her lips slightly parted. Her tongue entered his mouth, a cool intruder. He reciprocated.

They met each other in a fierce embrace, the softness of the first kiss quickly forgotten. Amos let the alcohol wash over him, his desire for her heightened. His hands pressed against the small of her back, crushing her against him in a sudden movement. She let out a little squeal, quickly followed by a short giggle.

“You’re room or mine?”

Amos had the door open before they began again, their tongues fighting for supremacy. He kissed her neck hard, Lavinia moaning with pleasure. Amos fumbled with the door, ending up slamming it shut. They groped hungrily for each other’s belts, Amos fumbling with the buttons on her jeans, their mouths never parting. Shoes were thrown off, clattering against the wall. They shuffled towards the bed.

There was a wet noise, and then, “Gross! What the fuck was that?”
They stopped for a moment until Amos started to laugh. “Shit! You must’ve stood on the mango!”

“Mango? You have mangoes lying around on the floor?”

Amos continued to laugh. “No, just the one, I promise.”

Lavinia stopped their movement, pulling away from him to push down his jeans. She looked down, her grin barely perceptible in the pale moonlight.

“Oh, what do we have here?” she muttered as she sank to her knees.

Amos leant back, his mouth slack, his hands caught up in Lavinia’s hair.

Before long Lavinia stood up again, her eyes sharp.

“Fuck me.”

She pushed Amos onto the bed, the mattress springs groaning from the impact. She stood over his prone body, admiring it for a few moments before she crossed her arms and pulled off her singlet, her breasts silhouetted against the window. A glimmer of light showed shadows brushing her ribcage.

She knelt on top of him, lowering herself onto him. They sighed in unison. She ground on him quickly, moans fleeing her lips. Amos grabbed her breasts and forced himself further inside her. The room swirled and turned. Lavinia placed her hand over Amos’ face, his mouth, his eyes, before grabbing his hair and pushing him into the pillow.

“Don’t stop! Don’t fucking stop!”

Amos didn’t stop.
Banging on the door.

Amos opened his eyes. Light filtered into the room from the window, which was open. The curtains remained still, which wasn’t much of a surprise. From the length of the strip of sunlight creeping its way from the window across the floor, just licking at the mashed mango, Amos guessed it to be mid-morning. He looked around the room blearily. Apart from the mango and the faint odour of sex, Lavinia was gone.

“Police! Open up please!”

The fog that had hung thick over Amos’ perceptions dissipated. He looked around. Apart from the open window, everything was intact. He sat up quickly. The movement brought a sharp jab of pain straight into the front of Amos’ brain, eliciting an involuntary groan. He brought his hands to his head.

The banging started up again. “Please sir, don’t make this harder than it needs to be!”

Despite his headache Amos stood up. He didn’t recognise the voice as Sgt. Roary’s, exacerbating his concerns further. Looking frantically for some clothes, he settled for his towel. He jogged to the door and opened it.

“Yes off…icer?”

Standing in the doorway stood a police officer, his face lit up in a brilliant grin. His green eyes sparked brilliantly.

“Fuck, it really is you! With a name like that, it is pretty hard to be wrong, is it?”

The look of shock and confusion etched on Amos’ pallid face brought the man to tears, his laughter echoing down the hallway and into the bar below. Before he could recover, Amos found himself crushed in a bear hug, his bare back slapped affectionately.

“Paul?” Amos croaked.
“The one and only!” Paul finally registered Amos’ discomfort. “Oh sorry mate,” he replied, breaking off the embrace. As he did Amos’ hold on his towel loosened, leaving it in a crumpled pile in the space between them, which brought forth another peal of laughter.

“C’mon mate, no need to show off! I know it’s been a long time between drinks, but, honestly…”

Amos smiled weakly, crouching down to regather his towel and dignity, scouting the hallway as he did so. Roary stood at the head of the stairs, laughing quietly.

The towel bunched in front of him, Amos meekly hooked a thumb over the shoulder. “I’ll just…”

Another booming laugh. “No rush mate! We’ll be downstairs rustling up some of Alby’s famous bacon and spuds! Shit!”

He wiped the tears from his eyes as he walked to the stairway, his shoulders shaking from the mirth. Amos eased the door closed behind them.

Amos was in the dining room in ten minutes, having had a shower and cleaned up the mango as best he could with toilet paper. Paul and Roary were the only two people there. Amos wondered whether it was because no one was around or the fact that the two men were in their full police uniforms. He took a seat between the two of them. Paul gave him another clap on the back.

“Well I’ll be, ay? What’re the chances? The last time I saw you, what, three years ago?”

“Think it’d be closer to five.”

Paul leaned back and pursed his lips together, letting out a low whistle between his teeth. “Bullshit! Is that right? I’ve been out here that long?” Immediately he shook his head. “No of course, the two years in Emerald. But shit! Time flies!” His wide grin dimmed as he became serious. “I got Alby to cook you up some bread too.”

At the sound of his voice a clatter came from the kitchen, followed by Alby appearing with a plate pilled with bacon, eggs and a crispy potato stuffed with more bacon and
sour cream. He peered through the door way into the bar proper, trying to catch a glimpse of Lavinia. He couldn’t see her.

“Well, tuck in!” Paul enthused, turning back to his own meal. He pushed some egg into his mouth, then pointed his knife at Amos.

“What subject was it? That I…”

“Introduction to Psychology.”

“That’s it! PY101!” Paul turned to Roary. “I tutored this young whippersnapper back then, when I was finishing up my Masters.”

Roary nodded, his mouth crammed full of bacon and egg.

“So,” Paul continued, “what have you been up to? You still with…” He waved his hand around, his eyes closing in concentration. “Sally?”

“Carly. And no, that’s some time ago, that one.”

“Carly, yeah, that’s right! She was alright.”

Amos nodded, chewing slowly on a piece of toast. “She probably still is.”

Paul laughed. “Playing the field then, ay?”

Amos shrugged, his eyes flickering towards the bar again. “Yeah, something like that.”

“That’s the way! You and the women always did alright.”

Amos shrugged again, uncomfortable.

“So what else? Last I heard you finished uni.”

“Yeah.”

Paul turned to Roary, taking side glances at Amos as he spoke. “Amos here is one smart bastard, let me tell you! He’d sit up the back of the tutorials, never saying much, then he’d raise his hand and would come forth with this brilliant anecdote or idea, and everyone would turn with their mouths open, like who the fuck is this, you know?”
“So how’d you two, y’know, hook up?” Roary asked, his eyes more focused on the last morsels of meat on his plate.

“Actually, I can’t remember how…How did we end up becoming friends? I remember it had something to do with alcohol…”

Amos smirked. “Everything at uni has to do with alcohol.”

“True, very true!” Paul nodded, memories of past endeavours flashing behind his eyes.

“It was after I handed in that assignment on the effects of alcohol on young women, actually. You asked me to have celebratory drinks…”

“At Rosie’s, that’s right! Geez, that was a shitfight that night!”

“Rosie’s was a shithole, too.”

Paul straightened up, his expression stern with a glimmer of a smile remaining in his eyes. “Hey, I didn’t hear any complaints from you when I wangled all those free spirits!”

Amos threw up his arms in mock surrender. “Hey, I have had some of my greatest memories in shitholes like Rosie’s. And worse. Remember Alice’s?”

Paul’s booming laugh startled Roary, his fork clattering against his plate. “Oh, Alice’s man! Student night on Thursdays, dollar full nips, all those shit covers bands, the floor so sticky you’d snap your pluggers…”

“And the beers served through dirty taps into jam jars!”

“They did look like jam jars, didn’t they?”

“I’m pretty sure I found a glob of Vegemite at the bottom of mine one night.”

The three of them laughed hard. Amos stopped abruptly, wincing, his hand going to his temple. Paul put his hand on Amos’ shoulder.

“You right mate?”

Amos nodded, his eyes staying focused on the table. “Sort of. I need a coffee.”
Paul sniggered. “Yeah, Alby said that you have been fitting in around here! You make friends fast too.”

Amos shot Paul a quick glance, his face going pale. “Hey?”

“Yeah, word is that you took over the Brolga the other night, drank half the blokes there under the table!”

Amos relaxed a little. “Yeah. Word gets around fast.”

“It sure does, you’re not wrong there!”

Roary tapped his knife to the tip of his nose, speaking through the last vestiges of his breakfast. “But a true policeman never gives away his sources!”

Paul and Amos laughed, Paul slapping Roary lightly over the head. “Don’t speak with your mouth full! Honestly, Ant here is a prototype. Human garbage disposal unit. I swear, you throw him anything and it’s inhaled, ingested or absorbed in the blink of an eye!”

Roary grumbled an illiterate response. Amos looked down at his breakfast.

“On that note, I don’t think I can finish this. No offence.”

“No offence? I’m not the one you should be apologising to.”

“I’ve heard. Alby gets upset if his meals aren’t finished.”

Roary motioned to Amos, waving at him to slide his plate over. Amos obliged.

“Shit Ant, you’re not gonna eat that too, are ya? You gotta be some semblance of fit for the first cricket match next month!”

“That’s next month,” Roary replied, his fork piercing the potato, sour cream billowing forth like white lava.

“Shit it’s good to see you Amos! What a small world. I don’t really catch up with many people from the old uni days anymore. Except for Garros. You know Garros?” Paul asked.

Amos scratched his head, nodding slightly. “I think so…the French guy right?”
Paul nodded. “Yeah. His name was Andre, but we all called him Garros after Roland Garros.”

“Yeah, I remember him.”

“Yeah, he emails me from time to time. Last I heard he was in Norway, hitchhiking around Scandinavia, chasing Swedish tail.” Paul laughed. “Some things never change!”

Roary polished off the rest of the potato and eggs, dropping his cutlery with a clatter. “Stick a fork in me, I’m done!”

Paul slapped his hands on his knees in an expression of decisiveness. “Right! We’ll head over to the Star, get that coffee to spark up those fractured brain cells of yours, and then I’ll give you a tour of the town, hey?”

“Sounds good,” Amos said.

Paul grabbed Amos’ plate and slid it over to him, giving a wink as he hollered, “Hey Alby! Thanks for the tucker mate!”

Alby appeared at the table as if on cue, collecting each plate, eyeing Amos cautiously before he pirouetted and disappeared back out into the kitchen.

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Armed with a paper cup filled with black coffee, Amos followed Paul and Roary back to the police station. There were more people out on the street than since he had arrived. Most parking spaces were taken up by battered and dust-coated Land Cruiser and Patrol utes, their trays backed up over the footpath. Roary noted Amos’ attention was elsewhere.

“It’s Friday mate. Mondays and Fridays are the busiest times of the week. All the families out on the properties come in. Supplies and ‘a weekend in’ on Fridays, just supplies on Mondays.”

“Or pick up the kids from the boarding house on Fridays, drop ‘em back on Mondays,” Paul countered. “That’s pretty much how this town operates, except for special occasions.”
“Special occasions?” Amos asked.

“Yeah,” Roary replied. Weddings, parties, cricket or footy finals. The biggun is the Brolga Festival in June. The liveliest you’ll see the region. Bloody good week that one.”

“And the busiest as far as we’re concerned,” Paul countered. “When we’re not escorting vehicles in and out of Brolga, we’re ’crowd control’.“ He emphasised the last two words by using his index and middle fingers of each hand as inverted commas, his hands near his ears. Amos was reminded of Angela, how she’d make Isaac laugh when he was a baby by pretending to be a rabbit. A glimmer of a smile touched his lips.

The three men walked through the gate at the police station, up the path and into the coolness of the waiting room. Paul turned to Amos as Roary went about unlocking the door into the station proper.

“We’ve just gotta do a couple things before I can show you round. You don’t mind waiting for five, ten minutes?”

Amos shook his head, then his eyes lit up. “Actually, could I make a phone call?”

Paul balked. “Mate! We’re not throwing you in the slammer, whadaya take us for?”

He laughed. “Sure. Mel?”

Mel’s pointed face snuck out into view behind the Perspex window, her reading glasses halfway down the bridge of her nose. Her look of surprise thinly disguised the fact that she has been eavesdropping.

“Amos here needs to make a call. Can you do that for him? And maybe we could get a cuppa if that’s not too much hassle.”

Mel gave him a sidelong glance, her mouth puckering in slight admonition before she turned, the phone sliding out underneath the gap to the other side of the counter. Paul gave Amos a grin and a wink.

“Be with you soon mate.” He disappeared behind the door, the lock fastening behind him.
Amos moved over the counter. Mel stood at the door to the office, watching him. He looked at her until she moved away, a mouse caught in the spotlight. He picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Angela.”

“Amos! I was wondering if you’d ever call…”

“C’mon! Of course I was going to call. I’m calling now aren’t I?”


“Hot. Dusty. Everything you’d expect.”

“You know what I mean.” Amos picked up the coldness at the edge of her voice.

“Not so good. I'm not real sure how to start.”

Silence.

“How’s Isaac?”

“You’ve only been away for a week…”

“Four days!”

“I haven’t heard from you in a week.”

“How’s Isaac?”

“He’s fine. You thought things would change because you went away for a while? He’s at school.”

Amos nodded. “Good.”

A sharp intake of breath. “Look Amos…”

“Angela.”

“You don’t have to do this.”

Amos pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes squinted shut. “Angela…”
“You could’ve done this from home, you know! You could’ve…”

“You know I have to do this.”

A pause. “I know. I just wish we could have talked this through more.”

Amos changed the subject. “You won’t believe who is out here. Paul Goodwin.”

Another pause. “Who?”

“Paul Goodwin. You know, from my first year at uni? He was my tutor in a psychology class; I used to hang out with him a bit. He came over a few times…”

“Paul, Paul. Yes, I remember. What is he doing out there?”

“He’s a police officer. Actually I'm at the police station right now.”

“Oh Amos…”

“C'mon! It’s not like that! I'm waiting for him to finish up some stuff before he shows me around the town.”

Another pause. “How long have you been out there? Four days, you said? And you haven’t seen the town? What on earth have you been doing?”

“I’ve seen the town, Angela. Relatively anyway. He just wants to take me around, show Brolga to me properly, you know?”

There was no response.

“Umm, Angela, I might need you to send me some more money.”

No response.

“Angela?”

“How much?” Her voice seemed tired.

“How much.”

“How much, Amos?”

“Five hundred maybe?”
“*Five hundred*?”

“Look, whatever!”

A sharp exhalation of breath. “I’ll be in town tomorrow lunch. Will that be OK?”

“Sure.”

Silence.

“Thanks Angela. I…”

“We miss you.”

Amos slumped against the counter, a grimace washing across his face. “I know. Look, things are set in motion. I won’t be out here long, OK?”

Amos heard murmuring from further inside the police station, the voices coming closer.

“Look, I have to go. I’ll ring you soon, OK?”

“Oh-huh.”

“Thanks again. For the money and all.”

“Sure.” A pause. “I love you.”

Amos heard the lock of the far door clicking over.

“Yeah, me too.” He hung up the phone and slid it back under the Perspex as the door swung open, Paul striding through with Roary in tow.

“You all set to go?”

Amos jammed his hands in his pockets and nodded. “Sure.”

They left the police station, following the path that moved around to the back of the building. Two Land Cruiser police vehicles sat side by side, the tyre tracks in the gravel and red dust coating the sides of each signifying little regard for their welfare. A smaller building adjoined the back of the station, bars at the top of the wall just under the overhanging gutters. A large water tank sat beside it.
“That’s the drunk tank,” Paul said. “Looks alright from the outside. Inside there’s one bed and a tin loo. Concrete floor. It gets a bit of usage, mainly around Festival time.”

“So you don’t have many hassles with drunken fights?” Amos asked.

“Well, yeah, just about every second Friday something’s going on. But usually we get called down to break it up, then drive the offenders home.”

Roary moved to the closest vehicle. “Paul, I’ll head out to Redemption Creek and see ol’ Davies about that cattle rustling call. Anything else I need to do while I’m out there?”

Paul scratched his head. “Nah.” He clicked his fingers sharply, his head jogging forward in memory. “Actually, check out at the Norville property. Make sure everything’s set up for the next few nights.”

Roary grinned and nodded. “No worries. And Pete?”

Paul grinned back. “Stinkos? I’ll drop by myself.”

Roary took a sidelong glance at Amos, his grin broadening. “You taking Amos here along?”

Paul shrugged. “Why not? He hasn’t met the locals until he’s met Pete!”

They both chuckled as Roary fired up the Land Cruiser. Paul moved out of the way as Roary roared the engine, tyres spinning as he slammed the gear box into reverse. Gravel ground underneath as the vehicle lurched out onto the street and disappeared.

Amos watched as Paul made his way towards the other Land Cruiser. He walked slowly to the other side of the vehicle, opening the passenger door. Paul peered at him.

“Is something up?”

Amos paused before shaking his head. “No, not really.” Then, “Who’s ’Stinkos’?”
Paul laughed. “Oh mate, don’t worry, we’re not playing any tricks on you. No hazing or initiations, fuck! Stinky Pete’s just a mate of ours. Bit of a dickhead, but in a good way, y’know? Don’t worry, you’ll see soon enough. Hop in!”

Paul turned right out of the driveway, heading away from the main street. “I’m sure you’ve seen enough of the main street. Actually, most of the hustle and bustle happens there, but believe it or not there are some interesting aspects to Brolga.”

Amos watched the houses crawl by, their lawns nothing more than straw and the occasional sickly green weed. The heat crackled off the bitumen, puddles materialising in front of the Land Cruiser that disappeared as they approached them.

“Why was the town called Brolga?”

Paul glanced over at him in incredulity. “Are you serious?”

“Oh, I mean I know that a brolga is a bird, but I haven’t seen any since I’ve been here. Why Brolga, and not some other animal?”

Paul laughed, gesturing at the land through his windshield. “Mate, we’re in a drought. Brolgas, any form of wildlife, needs water, and they’ll go to where the water is. Besides, brolgas are shy birds. They don’t just waltz up the street!”

Amos smiled. “I guess not.”

“Have you ever seen one?”

“A brolga? No. Well, in photos, but not up close.”

Paul nodded. “Well, we’ll see what we can rustle up, won’t we?”

Paul turned down Merriman Street at a crawl.

“Look, Roary told me about you coming to him yesterday. About your parents.”

Amos looked at him, silent.

“I don’t know how much you know about my family Amos, but the Goodwins are generational Brolga residents. The family tree has been sprouting out here for over a hundred fifty years, before the turn of the nineteen hundreds. Us Goodwins, along
with the Sturgesses, the Cunninghams and the Ricksons, plus a few smaller families. People who end up out here tend not to leave. Not until it’s too late anyway.”

Paul’s brow furrowed after the last remark, his face darkening. Amos chose to turn away, look up at the perennially cloudless sky, its pure blueness both a beautiful and forbidding colour.

“What I’m saying,” Paul finally continued, “is that Brolga is a small town with a lot going on. Nevertheless, we know each other. A tight-knit community, to use a well-worn cliché. And we look after our own.”

Amos frowned, unsure how any of this related to his parents, but he stayed quiet, pursing his lips and allowing Paul to continue.

“Anyway, that’s beside the point. Your situation is not as bad as you may think.”

“No?”

“No. As I said, this is a small community. Everyone knows everyone, and many of Brolga’s fine specimens have been here since 1985. So I’m sure we’ll turn up something.”

“What about the Freedom Act? Mel said…”

“Yeah, well, rules were made to be broken, ay?” The darkness had fled from Paul’s face, replaced with the familiar joyful grin. “Mel may be a stickler for following the line of the law, and thank the Lord for it. But as I mentioned, us Brolgas help each other out.” A hand slid off the steering wheel to squeeze down lightly on Amos’ shoulder. “And you’re one of us, s’far as I’m concerned.”

The Land Cruiser rumbled down the street, its progress bringing forth a volley of shouts as the dogs were awakened from their stupor. Paul laughed.

“They always say that dogs have the life. Imagine getting pissed off every time a car drives past you! Sometimes you’d get so angry for no particular reason, you decide to try and bite their tyres! No, dogs are good, but fuck that!”
The Land Cruiser pulled up outside Jonnop’s BP Servo & Café. A solitary truck trailer was positioned to the side on the red dirt, abandoned of its duties. Flecks of rust watercoloured its white metallic sides, its cartographic swirls mirrored by the Rorschach blotches that stained the concrete forecourt, where above the archaic dome-headed fuel bowsers, flags advertising ice creams bent limply in the insipid wind. The forecourt was deserted.

Paul turned to Amos. “Here is the first stop on the sights,” he said, a gleam in his eye.

There was silence in the cab. Paul waited expectantly.

“OK, I’ll bite – why?”

“Because this is where it all began, my friend!” Paul slapped Amos’ shoulder and jumped out of the vehicle. Amos followed suit, almost jogging to catch up to Paul and his long, confident strides. He didn’t look at the building that squatted on the other side of the forecourt, its windows dim and caked in grease and dust. Amos peered inside. Orange plastic chairs were tucked underneath basic Formica tables an unmanned counter with an empty bain marie and two aisles crammed with basic automotive paraphernalia and general bric-a-brac. There was no one inside that could be seen.

“Where’s Jonnop?”

“Dead, most likely.”

Amos looked at Paul furtively. Paul laughed.

“Not as in, on the floor of the servo! Jesus! No, Lionel Jonnop packed up shop some ten, eleven years ago. Not long before I left actually.” He shrugged. “The Twoomeys run it now – apparently. The main roadhouse up past the Trans there on the other side of town picks up the travellers now. As it should – all’s you get here is dirty fuel and some *e. Coli*.”
Paul led Amos past the trailer and towards a kaffir tree, offering the only semblance of natural shade. He stopped and pointed down the highway that led back the way Amos had come only four days before.

“See?”

Amos peered, his face screwed up in concentration, then exasperation.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Exactly!” Paul’s arm swept slowly around them. “Brolga springs up out of the earth out of nowhere. It’s so defined. An outpost of civilisation in a landscape where there is none. I don’t mean to get all verbose Amos, but there is something awe-inspiring about this place. This…juxtaposition.”

Amos looked at Paul, whose eyes continued to sweep the dead plains beyond. He shook his head and faced him, taking off his aviators as he did so.

“I was born and raised in this place. It was all I knew for a very long time. Even when Dad took us out to the properties, even the Norvilles’, it felt like the world was pretty small. There was only so far that you could go before everything just…stopped.”

Amos looked out at the world beyond the kaffir tree. Nothing moved. The only noise breaking the silence was the rustling of the dried out kikuyu grass and spinifex.

“It’s like…a frontier town, y’know? Like the last bastion of civilisation. A forgotten cosmopolis.” Paul laughed. “A forgotten venture. We got this far, then realised there was nowhere else to go. This is the Outback’s place, not ours.”

A flash of light came off the horizon. Amos cupped his hand to his eyes. Paul followed suit.

“See? Then a car comes through town. A truck. A bus. We kids used to see them forward past the house in such a hurry like they couldn’t wait to see the back of us. For some time we used to run after them, shouting and whooping, every one of us kids did. Then after a while one comes through and you don’t look up. It’s just part of what happens here.”
He laughed suddenly. “But not me. I got on one of those buses and left here, never looking back.”

Paul put his aviators back on in a quick, rushed movement. “Let’s go. Next stop.”

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The Land Cruiser pulled up with a quiet swish of gravel. Amos and Paul got out. In front of them, backed by the unlikely existence of a couple of wizened wattles, almost like a floral amphitheatre, lay a stone statue. Two tall, spindly birds adorned a small block, their thin necks entwined, their heads facing the sky.

“Our namesake,” Paul announced. “Not that you see ‘em around anymore.”

Amos looked at Paul. “Why not?”

“Used to be that there was water here. Hard to imagine, I know. And brolgas were one of the first creatures that the first stakeholders to the land laid their eyes on. They’re grey birds, like a crane, but they have this red streak of feathers on their head that strikes the eye. Must have made quite the impression.”

“Are there still brolgas?”

Paul scratched his head. “Sure. Just not around these parts. Brolgas are migratory, like most I suppose, and there used to be hundreds of ‘em come here in the wet season as the waters from the Gulf came across the floodplains. I still remember seeing them as a kid. Not many, but they were around. But,” Paul sighed, “things change. The water’s dried up, so the birds stay away.”

Amos stared at the statue. “Shame.”

Paul cocked an eyebrow, amused. “I guess so. To be honest I forget. I used to love it when we saw them, but now, it’s just…Brolga.”
They stood there in the dust for a few moments before Paul clapped his hands together, a sharp sound in the stillness of the clearing. Amos looked around. There was no rush of wings sluicing through the air, just silence.

Paul steered the Land Cruiser down a dirt road that ran just beyond the saleyard, heading out of town. The wheels humped over the ruts in the track, causing Paul’s voice to waver as he spoke.

“Not that you’d think it, but there isn’t much interesting to see in Brolga. Shock horror, I know. Well, there is history everywhere, of course, and you should probably check out the museum on the main drag. But this is something special.”

Amos looked through the insect-flecked windshield. Looming on the right was a small squat wooden hut, in a serious state of disrepair. A makeshift chain-link fence ran the perimeter, imprisoning the building.

Paul pulled up at the front. Amos pulled the handle on the door and opened it, making to get out, before realising that Paul was sitting still, his hands on the steering wheel, looking out into the middle distance. Amos stared out at the horizon, yet it was the usual blank desolate canvas. He eased back into his seat, waited.

Whatever reverie Paul was having ended, and he turned to Amos.

“This place is a funny one,” he said slowly. “This is the last standing relic of the first settlement of Brolga from all the way back in 1836. Well, it’s probably sometime after that, no one knows for sure, but it’s the oldest building by decades.” Paul sighed. “It’s a ruin now. Timber shack like that, it’s amazing that it’s stood the test of time this far.”

“So what’s with the fence?”

“Ah, it’s been sitting out here without a thought for decades, then Joyce who runs the museum has a small Conservation Society set up in town, and decided she wants to
restore it. There is opposition by the council though, and now that the shires have been amalgamated and the council chambers are in Longreach, it’s pretty low on their food chain. Still, the Society came out to look at it, and it was full of graffiti and beer cans and shit amongst the dead bird carcasses and dust, so they erected that.” He pointed towards the side of the fence. “There’s a gate, which we have to have locked. But,” he laughed, “if kids wanna get in, they’ll get in. They know how to climb a fence!”

Paul still made no effort to leave the vehicle.

“So,” Amos started slowly, “are we getting out?”

Paul shrugged, suddenly flippant. “Not much else to see, really.”

Amos sat still for a few moments.

“We can get out if you want,” Paul offered.

“No, no, it’s fine,” Amos replied, closing the door.

Paul started the engine and turned the vehicle around, leaving the derelict shack behind.
Paul pulled the ute to the side of the road, stopping in front of a sprawling house. Most of the paint had been stripped from the exterior walls, making the house look a brown-green. Scaffolding precariously stood against half of the front of the house, nestled there like it had been there for years, yet no actual painting had begun. The front of the house was marked by a small porch that covered the other half, its surface littered with deckchairs, children’s toys and beer bottles. A massive weathervane stood at the peak of the roof, the kangaroo and emu emulating the coat of arms. The kangaroo had on boxing gloves; the emu what looked like a baggy green cricket cap.

“So here ends the guided tour of Brolga, huh?” Amos smiled.


They hopped out of the ute. The heat was even more oppressive, a sweaty sheen developing on Amos’ face almost instantly. They walked through the rusty gate, its hinges whining without acknowledgement. The lawn was ankle length, a sickly green yet still alive. The blades reached out at Amos, itching his shins.

Paul stepped up on to the porch as the front door creaked open, his police cap twirling off an index finger. A bear of a man barrelled out. Amos took a step back despite himself, unsure of what to do if this was an attack. But as the man gripped Paul in a bear hug, growling and laughter intermingling, Amos relaxed some, a wan smile showing. He held his hand to his eyes and peered down the road. Two girls were at the corner, sitting on the seats of their bicycles. The bicycles were worse for wear – rust overpowering the actual colour of the frame. They stared at him, their white teeth flashing as they whispered to each other, laughing.

“Come up here Amos and meet a good friend of mine!”

Amos shook his head and turned from the glare of the street to the shadows cast by the porch. He stepped up alongside Paul almost running into an outthrust hand. He took it, feeling his bones grind together as the man’s hand enclosed his. He didn’t wince, tried to squeeze back without appearing uncomfortable. He smelt a faint odour come of the man, a sweet smell that rankled, though he could not pick the scent right
away. The man let go of his hand and laughed, a crack of thunder in the stillness of the afternoon.

“Well met, Amos, well met!” he boomed.

“Amos, this is Pete Cunningham, otherwise known as Stinky Pete.”

Stinky Pete laughed at the cowed expression on Amos’ face. “Don’t worry, it’s my name! Anyway, come in, come in!”

Stinky Pete ushered Paul and Amos into his house. The hallway, a tongue and groove affair, its walls crowded with framed photographs of Pete and his family, a wife and two young boys, as well as Pete smiling alongside culled kangaroos and boars. Amos studied one of them. Pete was lying on one side, had his forearm around the bulbous neck of a huge boar, its snout muddied with blood. A pig dog sat beside him, its tongue lolling in happiness. Underneath the photograph was the inscription,

_Boar King! Woy Woy, 4th May 2005, 899kg._

“Come through here mate!” Pete hollered out amicably, Amos following the echo into the kitchen. Pete and Paul sat on vinyl covered steel chairs at a Formica table, two open stubbies of Victoria Bitter in front of them, Pete offering him a third.

“Don’t mind a VB, do ya?” Pete asked.

Amos took the proffered stubby, twisting the lid off with a satisfying hiss. “I always say, a free beer’s a good beer.”

Pete and Paul laughed in unison, as Amos took a seat between them. “Whoever said it was free mate?” Pete barked. “Five dollars. The money jar’s up there on top of the fridge!”

Amos smiled as he brought the beer to his lips, the coldness of the liquid making his teeth tingle. He let out a sigh of satisfaction, rolling the stubby across his forehead in relief.

Paul nodded. “Yeah, it’s hot out there.”

Pete nodded back. “As hot as yesterday, but not as hot as tomorrow, hey?”
Paul leaned forward on the table, his weight resting on his arms. “So Pete, Amos here is a mate of mine from the Brissy days. Thought he’d come out and check out the sights.”

Pete leant back, his arm hanging over the back rest of the chair. “Is that right?”

“Yeah, so far I’ve shown him the sights, but I thought maybe I’d forgotten something.”

Pete’s large index finger scratched at the ginger stubble jutting out from his chin. “Hmmm. Well, I guess there’s the Shed of Wonder.”

Paul nodded, the seriousness on his face underscored by a gleam in his eyes. “Yeah, I thought about that, but…”

Pete looked at Paul, his eyes wide. “But what?”

Paul shrugged. “I just thought that you should show ‘im yourself. It is your shed after all.”

Pete beamed. “Wouldn’ have it any other way.” His chair scraped across the vinyl floor, the rubber stoppers on the chair legs screeching in protest. “Well then, let’s go do it.”

Amos looked at from one man to the other, a smile thinly veiling his apprehension. “What is this? I thought you said no hazing?”

Paul laughed, shaking his head. “No, mate! Nothing of the sort. I told you. But honestly, if you’re gonna be a Brolgan, you’ve gotta see everything.”

“Which means the Shed of Wonders!” Pete added, his voice booming, his barrel chest puffed out with theatricality.

Amos carefully stood up. “Brolgan?”

“That’s us! Us Brolganites…”

“Brolgaderos…”

“Brolgarians…”
Pete and Paul looked at each other, their faces straining, until they doubled over, hands on knees, air ejecting from their lungs in hacking fits, their laughter deafening in the small kitchen. Amos shook his head, a wry grin showing despite his misgivings.

Pete led them through the kitchen to the laundry, a small crowded room with a battered washing machine and a ceramic basin stained off-white over the years of dirt, mud and blood that had been washed away there. He opened up the fly-screen door and moved into the back yard.

The backyard was strewn with more children’s toys: pushbikes with training wheels, footballs, various playground equipment, abandoned like a battlefield in the aftermath of war. Pete’s ute was to the left, the yellow duco pockmarked with outbreaks of rust, the tray sparkling from a thin layer of water. The cage resting on the tray was rusted and stained from use. The garden hose lay discarded on the ground, the nozzle drowning in a miniature lake of water as it continued to dribble. Pete cursed and raced to the side of the house, twisting the tap until his knuckles went white with the strain.

Paul smirked. “Lucky! I could slap you with a fine for such flagrant water wastage.”

Pete grumbled, his hammy fist shaking in Paul’s direction, giving him the forks.

“I was getting the rig all set up for you ya ungrateful bastard!”

He grabbed the hose and flung it out of the way, the nozzle getting caught up in the fluorescent orange seat of the swing set, the chain link chattering as they hit each other. He moved forward to the front of the ute, its bulbar a few feet clear of the doors of an old wooden shed, the planks warped and discoloured, grey, black, brown. The doors to the shed looked out of place, as if they had been stolen from another, equally rundown shed. A brand new padlock, the silver sparkling in the sunlight, hung from the latch of the shed doors.

Pete swung around, his hand fishing in his dirty blue Ruggers for something, finally producing a key ring with several copper keys attached. He smiled, his top teeth showing.
'Welcome to the *Shed of Wonders!*' he announced before swinging around to fiddle with the padlock, his shorts barely concealing the top of his arse. A soft click, the lock came free, and Pete swung the doors open with a flourish.

The smell assailed Amos’ nostrils almost immediately. Before he could stop himself he was reaching for his nose, covering it with his arm, his eyes watering. Pete rocked back on the heels of his feet, his arms crossed, holding his stomach as he bellowed. Paul stood a safe distance away, the stubby at his lips, his eyes gleaming with mirth.

“Now you know why his name’s Stinky Pete!” Paul muttered, his mouth still half filled with beer, a fine spray of the liquid spewing forth as he choked from his laughter.

Amos, intent not to balk from their trick, ventured into the shed, the neck of his shirt pulled over his face. As he crossed the threshold, the sickly sweet smell of decay intensified, heightened by the blackness that pervaded as he stepped out of the sunlight. He took short breaths, taking in air without breathing in, and waited until his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness. Small pockets of light came from the ceiling, making shadows of the bulky shapes that lurked further within the shed. He felt Paul and Pete enter after him. He stayed in front of them, his eyes making out the bodies that hung from the ceiling.

“Yeah, I gut ‘em and skin ‘em in here,” Pete said.

Amos went to speak and coughed. “You don’t say?” he muttered harshly.

Paul laughed, his hand to his face also. “Ah! He got you there, Stinkos!”

Pete leaned to the left of the doors and moved his hand along the wooden strut until fluorescent light splashed down from the tubes attached to the exposed beams overhead. Amos could see the translucent corrugated iron that allowed sunlight into the shed, explaining the pockets of light. He could also see the three carcasses hung from hooks, suspended from the beams, the remains of kangaroos. A low bench was off to the right, various skinning utensils strewn across the wooden surface. Hessian was strung over the walls, keeping the heat to a slightly less unbearable temperature. Cured kangaroo skins hung at the back of the shed.
Pete slung an arm around Amos’ shoulders, peering down at him. “You right mate?” A barely concealed chuckle behind his voice.

Amos nodded, noticing that seven similar hooks were hanging from the beams, unattended.

“Pete’s profession,” Paul said. “The *Shed of Wonders* is his domain.”

“Ah, the life of a ‘roo shooter, hey? It’s not the most lucrative, but it has its perks!”

Amos turned to look at both of them. “So what is this? A trick you play on all newbies?”

Pete arched his eyebrows. “Newbies?”

Amos lowered his eyes, shook his head. “Just something that was mentioned over at the Brolga Hotel the other night.”

Paul said, moving towards one of the carcasses, “It gives most newcomers a bit of a shock. I thought you could handle it.”

Amos walked up to the nearest carcass. He peered inside its ribcage, the meat a deep maroon, almost bled out. Flies billowed away from the dead kangaroo, taking lazy flight. The dirt beneath was a dark pool of sticky mud.

“How are the neighbours?”

Pete’s booming laugh sounded like a shotgun in the confined shed. “The hessian does its best, but yeah, it’s a problem at times. This shed’s as far from everyone that it can be. They’re all understanding though. They go shooting with me every second time.”

“The flies can’t complain either!” Paul commented.

Amos took a deep slug of his stubby, sucking the glass opening until the bottle was dry. He shook the empty at the two men.

“Got another?”
“Pete’s a professional licensed kangaroo shooter,” Paul said as they drove away from Pete’s house. “There’s probably thirty of them in our district alone. I know what everyone says, about the drought and all, but the kangaroos, they’re everywhere. Many more go out shooting though, on the stations around the town, up closer to Cloncurry, Boulia, wherever they can. From Charleville onwards it’s open season, 365 days a year.”

“So why get a licence?”

“They say that if every shooter in Charleville went out on a given night and clipped thirty ‘roos, that’d be ten thousand dead Skippys,” Paul muttered. “Not exactly the kind of statistic that animal activists are fond of. So, the license serves as a measure of control. So they say.”

Amos nodded, watching as they drove past the saleyards. The saleyards were masked by billowing clouds of dust, the pens filled with cattle. A few trucks milled around near the gates and rushes, waiting to unload their produce. He looked at the demountable where Tom worked, but couldn’t see him.

“So what now? I s’pose you have work you need to attend to.”

Paul grinned. “Mate, it’s not often a Brisbanite is in town! Work can wait. I have the radio, Mel or Ant can get a hold of me any time they want. Fancy a spot of golf?”

Paul pulled the ute into the dirt car park of the Brolga Golf Club. Amos looked out past the clubhouse, nothing more than a Queenslander with a ramp leading up to the front doors. Nine faded yellow flags were spaced intermittently in the dirt, flaccid against their poles, waiting for a gust of wind that never came.

“Not much to look at, is it?” Paul said as he hopped out of the Land Cruiser. Amos followed suit. “But you need to keep it up, can’t let the handicap fall!”

They entered the clubhouse. A few patrons sat at the bar, in their polo shirts, buckled shorts and knee high socks. If the buildings had no windows, Amos could believe he
was at a golf course anywhere, emerald green fairways, water hazards and large sand bunkers just beyond the walls.

Paul sauntered up to the bar, everyone giving him cheery salutations as he moved along. Amos saw their reactions, genuinely happy to see him.

Amos walked over to the closest wall, adorned with photographs and wooden shields proclaiming winners in past years for various competitions. *P. Goodwin* was etched on a couple in golden lettering, covering the last few years. He noticed the names Goodwin and Cunningham appearing further up the list, dating back to the 1960s.

A sharp whistle brought Amos back. Paul had a Styrofoam esky and a set of golf clubs waiting at a side door, gesturing maniacally. Amos shook his head, a grin appearing as he paced over to the door, Paul already on his way out.

“So you are the P. Goodwin on the shield?” Amos asked as they made their way to the tee off for the first hole, only recognisable from the small tin sign signifying it as such. Paul nodded, flinging him a floppy hat he pulled from one of the many pockets of the golf bag. Amos jammed it down on his head.

“The one and only! Not that the opposition’s Pro Tour level or anything!” He took off his shirt, replacing it with a washed out T-shirt with frayed edges he had produced from another compartment of the bag. “I mostly play two man Ambrose with Ant—we’re unstoppable baby!”

They looked down the ‘fairway’, the red dirt broken up by the irregular sprouting of spinifex. Three hundred metres away sat the green—a small lake of compacted soil.

“Now, the key is to hit it about two thirds of the way and let the hard earth do the rest. No wind, so aim directly at the pin.”

Amos grabbed a driver and began to take the guard off the head. Paul stayed his hand.

“Didn’t you hear me? You get a hold of that, we’ll have to Drive up to Kynuna to find your ball!”

“Then why have it?”
Paul gave him a disappointed look. “This is an expensive set! I bought it when I played at up at Coolum all the time. Don’t you play much golf?”

Amos shook his head.

Paul nodded, then grabbed the three iron. “This is what you’re after. Now take your time, hit it at the pin. You’ll be right.”

Amos placed a golf ball on the ground, turning to Paul. “No tee?”

“Oh.” Paul reached into yet another compartment of his bag, producing a half full bottle of water. He leaned down and tipped some water on the earth. He dug into the pocket of his pants and handed him a tee.

“There you are mate.”

Amos jammed it in, the tee sinking into the ground with some force. He set his ball on top, took aim, began his backswing.

Chhsssttt!

Amos half turned, his ball skewing out to the left. He watched it bounce off into the distance. He looked at Paul, a newly opened can of XXXX in his hand.

“Sorry, mate!” he said, then burst out laughing. “Gotta play it where it lies!”

Amos shook his head. “No wonder your name’s up there so many times, you bloody cheater!”

Paul laughed, slapping Amos on the back as he reached into the esky for his own beer. Amos smiled at Paul, enjoying himself.
“Then on the 17th, Amos grabs the three wood. I say, ‘Mate, that one’s gonna scrape the bottom of the Hubble telescope!’ And he says, ‘Fuck off, I’ve been hitting like shit all day, what difference will it make?’ So he takes his swing, strikes, and BAM! Cleanest shot out of both of us all day! The ball soars, keeps going, and’s probably stirring up Sawyer’s Brahmans at the saleyards as we speak!”

The bar at the Brolga Hotel erupted in laughter, hands raining down on Paul’s and Amos’ backs as the beer continued to flow. Amos grinned, shaking his head. “Laugh all you want, you should’ve seen him on the 12th!”

Ant guffawed. “Ooo, the 12th! Sounds like your unlucky number Paul!”

Paul looked at Amos with mock embarrassment. “I told you not to tell anyone! Now they all know my secret!” The laughter continued.

The same crowd from the other night were at the pub, and accosted Amos as he made his way to the bar. Jackie Rickson grabbed him by the shoulder as he tried to gain Amber’s attention.

“Amos! We’re about to start up some pool! Keen?”

“Rack ‘em up!” Amos called out, his hand raised up in the air. Jackie slapped him on the back heartily, gesticulating at the two men at the pool table that Amos was on board, stomping over to make sure that the game was ready for his arrival.

“Gee, you sure don’t waste time!” Amber remarked, a big grin on her face as she delivered Amos a pot of beer.

“Hey?”

“You haven’t been here a week and you’re already hobnobbing with the golden boy of Brolga!”

Amos looked over at Jackie, his profile displaying a concave ribcage, his scrawny frame merely a coat hanger for his flannelette shirt.
Amber tut-tutted. “Not Jackie, Paul Goodwin! Resident local copper, star athlete, larrkin, all round good guy Paul!” She hooked her finger up at the cricket shields for emphasis, Amos seeing Paul’s name etched there several times also. “You really know how to get around!”

Amos grinned. “Actually, I went to uni with Paul, back in the day.”

Amber rolled her shoulders, her eyes wide. “‘Back in the day’! How old are you, grandpa?”

“Just give me my bloody beer, will you?” Amber handed it to Amos, then snatched it from his grasp at the last moment.

“Hey…”, Amos drawled, a laconic grin showing. She returned it in kind, along with the beer.

“Enjoy.”

Amos finished off the game with Jackie Victors, Jackie pumping his fist in the air and barbing his opponents with jibes. Amos was laughing at him when a hand clapped down on his shoulder.

“C’mon mate, we have to go,” Paul said, turning for the door before Amos could reply.

“Ya can’t leave yet! These fucks want to be humiliated again!” Jackie called out, a schoolboy pleading to his parents for his best friend to stay a few more minutes. Paul continued his march to the door.

Amos held his arms out and shrugged, defenceless. “I just hold you back Jackie! You’ll be right!” He followed Paul to the door, giving Amber a quick wave as he did so. She waved back, her smile clouded. Amos hardly noticed.

Amos caught up to Paul as he reached the Land Cruiser. “Hey Paul, where we going? I was just lining up another game.”

Paul opened the driver side door. “I have a few things to do before we can really settle into drinking. Like get your stuff from the Transcontinental.”

“Hey?”
“C’mon, you can’t live in that hole! Alby’s a decent bloke, a better cook, but he doesn’t believe in comfort over the value of the green! So, you’re moving in with me.”

Amos looked on, incredulous. “You serious? Mate, I can’t…”

“Bullshit! Can’t nothing, there’s heaps of room, you’re moving in. I’d be a rude fuck not to offer, even ruder to make ya.” He grinned, slapping the steering wheel. “So get in, let’s go.”

Amos hopped in, closing the door as Paul ignited the engine and took off, dirt spewing from underneath the carriage.

“You come from here.”

Paul nodded curtly. “Yeah, born and bred, you know that.”

“Yeah, well, you said no one leaves Brolga, and I see your name – your last name – everywhere. I thought your family was in Brisbane.”

Paul nodded again. “Yeah. They…they had had enough.” He shrugged, his eyes on the road. “Fair enough too, I guess.” He became animated again. “Not me though. I love the place. It’s funny. When it came time, I couldn’t wait to see the back of the place. Brisbane was something else, wasn’t it? And when I made it through the academy, I did my stint in Emerald – it was good you know? Easy living, a rich little town that one. I didn’t know it then, but it was all to get back out here. Which wasn’t too hard, to be honest. No one’s breaking their balls to serve their time out in Brolga. But I love it.” His smile stretched and lingered

“Amber called you the golden boy.”

Paul laughed, a short bark, more like a cough. “She did, did she?” He laughed again, then left it at that.
TWENTY ONE

Amos scooped his things together, jammed them into his bag. He looked around the spare room, last night superimposing itself. He closed his eyes, breathing in the mustiness. He made the bed, looking down at the faint stain on the floorboards from the squashed mango. He thought about giving it another clean, considered the state of the rest of the room, decided not to bother. He locked the door and moved down the staircase.

Paul was talking to Alby as he came into the bar. The bar was filled with the same clientele from when he arrived, some four days earlier. Bongo took pride of place at the centre of the bar, his booming voice invading the cramped space, regaling his mates about a sordid tale from his last visit to Mt Isa.

“The stupid slut had the balls to call me hairy! What the fuck? I wanted to back hand the bitch, but instead I put it in her arse when she wasn’t ready! Screamed bloody murder, but she loved it, she always does!”

Raucous laughter, mainly from Bongo himself, ensued. Lavinia, serving one of his mates, frowned, her eyes dark.

“For fuck’s sake Bongo, you can’t ever keep your tales slightly clean, can ya? Believe it or not, mistreatment of a female does not turn me on.” She looked up as Amos entered, her gaze frozen on his before moving away. Bongo saw her glance, shifting his considerable weight on the bar stool to look at what caught her attention.

“What – Ah! Our great friend! Don’t be getting all dainty for his sake, the fucking poofter!” He grinned, his yellow teeth gleaming, amused with aggression lurking underneath.

Amos shook his head, moving towards Alby, his arm outstretched with his room key in hand. Bongo continued to stare at him.

“Can’t handle the heat, fag? Then get back in the kitchen where ya belong!”

Bongo’s voice finally caught the men’s attention. Alby cursed. “What’re ya sayin’ Bongo, ya dumb fuck? That I’m a fag?”
Bongo looked at him, that aggressive smile still playing on his lips. “Wasn’t talking to you Alby. I was talking to that faggot there.”

“She’s Bongo,” Lavinia muttered.

Bongo spun around, the grin gone, his eyes two small black holes. “What?”

“Listen Bongo, no harm is being done, so go back to your drinking hey?”

Bongo turned to take in Paul, leaning nonchalantly against the bar, unnoticed until then. Alby remained stock still behind the bar with his arms crossed. He glowered.

“You protectin’ him are ya, Cuntstable? Gee, sorry, didn’t know he was royalty, Cuntstable.”

The men around Bongo sniggered. Paul stood up, walking slowly to within four feet of Bongo. Lavinia looked on, her eyes darting between the two men. Amos made to move forward, but Alby stayed his arm, a curt shake of the head stalling his movement.

“Tell me what’s on your mind, Bongo. Come on, don’t hold back. What do you really think?” Paul’s voice calm, his shoulders tense, arms still at his sides.

The bar went silent except for the jukebox, Khe Sanh echoing off the walls. The men playing pool, one of them Curt, leant on their cues, watching.

Bongo stared at Paul, then looked at Lavinia. He stared at Amos the longest, Amos staring straight ahead, not wanting to get caught in his gaze.

Bongo grunted, turning to face the bar again. The silence slowly dissipated as chatter began again, yet all eyes remained furtively on the bar. Paul continued to stand there, then turned to Alby.

“Alright if we organise Amos’ tab tomorrow?”

Alby nodded once, wiped his hands on his apron.

Lavinia caught Amos’ gaze. Her eyes looked down at Amos’ possessions then back at him, impassive. She swallowed.

“Where you off to Amos? Leaving us already?” Lavinia asked, noncommittal.
“Good fucken’ riddance,” was Bongo’s muttered reply.

Amos glanced at Bongo for a moment then answered, ignoring him. “No, Paul asked me to stay at his place til I… you know, sort things out.”

She nodded, her head down, then, “Righto then.” She turned to the other end of the bar. “Anyone for a drink?”

A couple voices hollered assent. She moved to the tap, beer glasses in hand.

Amos hoisted his bag back over his shoulder, took one last unreciprocated glance at Lavinia, nodded to Alby, then followed Paul out of the bar.

They walked in silence to the Land Cruiser. Paul opened his mouth to say something, but was interrupted by scuffing footsteps, thongs on the footpath. Amos turned to see Leo, his face set in a grimace.

“Don’t worry about that fuckwit son. Trust me, his bark is worse than ‘is bite. He don’t start nothing, just likes to assert his authority.”

Paul nodded. “I was just about to say that Leo. Thanks mate.”

Amos nodded also. “Yeah thanks Leo. I’ll see you around, hey?”

Leo nodded. “Bongo isn’t Brolga, OK? Go to the King’s Crown or the Brolga Hotel, good people there. See you then?”

“See you then,” Amos echoed.

They watched Leo nod then turn on his heel and head back into the pub. They hopped into the ute.

“You know Leo then?”

Amos nodded. “A good old guy.”

“Sure is. One of the best around here, apart from his vices, but don’t we all? He talk to you about the history of the place?”

Amos smiled. “Sort of.”
“Yeah, well, a lot has happened out here in Brolga’s hundred-odd years. Us Goodwins have been around for the most part. So we’re wrapped up in it all, for better or for worse.” He nodded his head towards the open door of the pub. “A lot of that ‘history’ was there too. Don’t worry about it.”

As Paul pulled away from in front of the Transcontinental Hotel, Amos stared out the window, watching the men drinking their beers, regaling each other with drunken tales. He saw Bongo, hunched over his beer, his exuberant belligerence momentarily dissipated. And he thought of the last four days. Of his elusive parents. And of Lavinia.
This concludes the examinable portion of the novel, *Brolga*.

An exegetical discussion follows, after which the remainder of the novel is appended.
Exegesis

1. Introduction

I started work on what would become *Brolga* in 2004 with a visit to my grandmother’s station in the central western Queensland town of Winton, where much of my childhood is rooted. I hadn’t been back for a number of years and this was my first return as an adult. I was able to engage as an outsider, not just the town’s history and existence, but with the way the town’s community conversed with the vast wilderness that hemmed it in on all sides. It was a town that felt to me frozen in time, both a capsule of times gone by and a town in stasis.

Surrounding Winton are bleak, harsh, rolling expanses of desert foliage and red dirt. Winton is a town that called to me on a number of levels, its myriad stories vying for attention. My response to all of this was to create a story of my own, one that was entirely fictional yet steeped in the conflicting emotions and images that assaulted me on that trip.

The parallels between this vision and the town represented in my novel are straightforward. *Brolga* tells the story of Amos, a young man who has spent his childhood in a religious foster home, where he felt at once loved and distant. His constant sense of unease has led to years of medicated anxiety. He embarks on a journey to the central Queensland hamlet of Brolga, where he endeavours to both discover and understand the events that left him in the state foster system twenty years before. As he tries to re-inhabit this weather-worn, dying town, he meets an array of colourful and harsh characters that shape and are shaped by frontier life. His search for his family history is half-hearted; his attempts to connect fruitless – until a community catastrophe turns Brolga in on itself, setting Amos on a search for the truth buried at the very heart of the town and indeed himself.

There is a harsh and oft-mythologised beauty inherent in such an isolated, barren landscape and I wanted to explore this in a narrative that mirrored my outsider’s perspective. How do we, as urban or Eurocentric outsiders, make sense of it all? How do we make place out of space? My initial theme of truth and whether it is better to discover truth or to believe the lie, still permeates the novel. Yet, as I wrote, I found myself gravitating towards the darkness of Self, and how this interacts with others, with a wider community, and indeed with the environment itself. This intrigued me, as it has numerous other Australian writers. It was through writing *Brolga* that I began to notice the similarities in narrative and theme with other contemporary Australian fiction that utilised the Outback landscape.

That said, it must be noted that indigenous positions relating to the Australian landscape (and/or its representations in fiction) is not a direct focus of this thesis. I recognise the
absence or omission of non-European Australians can be seen as a dangerous oversight; however, this is a different factor that …(I don’t know how to word this? We spoke about bringing this up for further analysis. I’m also unsure exactly where this needs to be threaded into the thesis? I have made some attempts, as you will see).

This practice-led research journey, of writing and researching in an action-research spiral, culminated in a central question:

In what ways do the ideas of katabasis and deterritorialisation inform an understanding of descent narratives in contemporary Australian outback fiction?

It is this question that the exegesis seeks to explore.
2. THE HERO’S JOURNEY

I finished the first draft of Brolga in the early months of 2011. Whilst writing the novel and beginning the investigation that crystallizes in this exegesis, I noticed the similarities that the narrative took with that of the hero’s quest, a structure that has been much espoused by the likes of populist theorist Joseph Campbell (1993) and has been retrodden a thousand times over in the media of our age. This is a well-worn path but also the first step on my own research journey, so it deserves a brief unpacking here.

As noted in Lance Lee’s 2005 exploration of the narrative structure The Death and Life of Drama: Reflections on Writing and Human Nature, the hero’s journey requires a mythological hero to be lured or carried away into the process of adventure. As an adventurer, the hero is very much the outsider, entering into an environment or situation that is alien to them, thus crossing a threshold into an underworld wherein they face a series of obstacles or ‘tests’ in order to achieve an ultimate goal. At the threshold of adventure the hero encounters a guardian which they must defeat or conciliate although, mythologically, winning or losing comes to the same. Win and the hero continues on alive; lose, they fall into the underworld and have their adventure there. The hero finds themselves in a strange land once across the threshold and is tested severely. At the nadir of their fortunes, the hero obtains the greatest gift, the ultimate reward which the ordeal carries as its prize. The hero returns. At the edge of the strange land the hero must overcome any obstacles in their way before returning to familiar ground (Lee 2005, 155).

Lee extrapolates and inflects Campbell’s structure further. In his reading, The past contains all the previous experience of the characters, including unresolved problems more or less unknown, preceding the immediate action. However the past is held in memory, a modus vivendi exists at the start of the immediate action in the beginning. Into that stasis, conflict-causing problems occur, including sooner the inciting event of the narrative. Resolving this event will inevitably require the past problem to be resolved at the same time. The protagonist initially makes false moves in dealing with that problem then, at the end of the beginning, settles on or is driven into a line of action she or he thinks will solve the problem. The middle pursues that line of action until it reaches the crisis at the end when the attempted solution fails, or looks like it is about to fail, which proves to be the emotional nadir for the hero. Thus the end represents the final climactic, cathartic, and intensely focused action on the part of the protagonist. This action succeeds in resolving the problem in the form it took in the crisis. In any event, that problem with its fusion of past and present is solved, in a tale of moral
redemption. All is made clear, with the final values of the story asserted by its outcome. A new story begins (Lee 2005, 164).

_Brolga_ holds many of these identifiable tropes. The protagonist, Amos, is drawn into the wilderness of western Queensland, to the fictional town of Brolga, in the hope that he can find out the history of his family and ultimately discover why he entered the foster care system at a young age. He leaves behind a loving family in the guise of his foster mother Angela, whose telephone calls with Amos provide the link back to the ‘real world’ and who lies as a reminder as to what he has left behind. He, in effect, discovers two guardians: Leo, who stands as a sage whose wealth of knowledge about the history of the land and Brolga’s inhabitants will prove vital for the completion of Amos’ quest; and Tom Lehmann, a surrogate father figure whose calming presence Amos gravitates towards. There are obstacles to overcome – his dependence on self-medication, his subsequent indulgences in alcohol to temper his temptations, a love interest in the form of Lavinia (bartender at the Transcontinental Hotel), the varying degrees of hostility that come from other members of the Brolga community, the spectre of death and, ultimately the Outback itself, whose overarching presence remains ambient throughout. Amos’ past – his religious foster family, his deference to pharmaceutical medication, his abhorrence of making life-altering decisions, his gravitation towards ‘father figures’ like Lehmann and indeed his friend Paul – informs both his actions and the consequences of those actions in regards to the completion of his ultimate goal.

However this initial journey alters halfway through the narrative when one of the main characters, Paul Goodwin, dies. The hero’s journey, as laid out by Campbell (1993) and subsequent annotators like Lee (2005), no longer began to feel as if it fitted my story. The redemptive aspects of the hero’s journey, in particular, seemed at odds here with my desire to defy this kind of resolution. This was a dynamic that I felt was also evident in a number of contemporary Australian novels that utilized the outback as its setting, such as Kenneth Cook’s _Wake in Fright_ (1961), Janette Turner Hospital’s _Oyster_ (1996) and Andrew McGahan’s _The White Earth_ (2004). With _Brolga_ pulling itself in a different direction and the darkness of tone and the overall outcome of the denouement of _Brolga_ becoming more apparent, I felt it necessary for me to consider other narrative shapes in order to inform my plotting and writing process.
3. KATABASIS AND DESCENT NARRATIVE

By this stage of my process, I had begun to conceive of my novel as being more about descent into an underworld than a return from it. It correspondingly became imperative to define for myself as a writer what the dynamics and thematics of a descent narrative were.

The journey into the underworld is an integral part of the hero’s journey as labelled by Campbell (1993), yet it is often framed as a journey rather than a descent. For me, a descent holds different connotations. Descent by nature is to move downwards, a lowering or decline in either status or level. It can also be referenced as being an attack or an onslaught. Thus my initial conception of a descent narrative felt congruous with the idea of the hero staple sliding downwards into the depths and avarice of the underworld where their senses are attacked by the obstacles and obscenities contained therein. The definition veers from the hero’s journey in that the narrative concludes without the traditional return.

This led me to the writings of Raymond Clark whose studies of ancient myth in his text *Catabasis: Vergil and the Wisdom-Tradition* (1979) introduced me to the term catabasis, which he defines as being descent (1979, 32). The term intrigued me as its exclusivity felt right in examining this style of narrative structure. The idea of a descent or catabatic narrative proved more appealing to me than the histrionics of the hero’s journey and, on initial investigation, appeared to fit my studies. However, Clark’s definition was that the hero’s journey be “a Journey of the Dead, made by a living person in the flesh who returns to our world to tell the tale” (Clark 1979, 32). As with Campbell, this definition holds true to the inherent notion of the hero returning in order for the journey to be complete. The inferences that these are not metaphorical or figurative journeys but physical ventures into the underworld where the dead exist (Clark 1979, 33) also appeared at odds with my definition.

My initial definition of the descent narrative maintains that the hero does not return or, if indeed they leave the underworld, they are not intact, thus leaving a part of themselves behind. Furthermore, I found that whilst my analysis of narratives in contemporary Australian fiction that used the outback as its setting fitted the general structure of such a journey, the obstacles and characters the hero faced were real, living people, although ones forced or actively seeking to exist on the periphery of ‘the outside world’. Moreover, much of the descent in these novels happen internally, inferring the journey can be figurative or metaphorical in tone. Such a reading led me to the writings of narratologist Rachel Falconer, which in turn led to my introduction to her slightly altered term, katabasis.
Katabasis is a term that Falconer uses in her 2005 book *Hell in Contemporary Fiction: Western Descent Narratives Since 1945* to refer to a journey of the Self that descends into darkness. As with Clark, the term is derived from Ancient Greek, literally translating to ‘a going down’ (Liddell and Scott 1982). Falconer (2005) argues that the form of this narrative often holds similar parallels with the hero’s journey. This narrative can be split into four ‘stages’ – descent (which includes the threshold crossing from the ‘living world’ to the underworld); dissolution of selfhood; zero point (or the nadir of the journey, which invites either an inversion or conversion of the self); and return (Falconer 2005, 133-34). However one key difference is that Falconer maintains that these principles aren’t always rigidly defined, in so far that returning from the underworld is not guaranteed as a success. Falconer argues that the descent narrative invariably acts like a hinge or spring, “there is always a kick-back movement, generated by the force of an underworld encounter” (2005, 45). Furthermore, descent narratives (seen as the nadir) are often only part of a wider, more expansive narrative. That said, the descent will invariably have the revelatory turning point, by which the whole of the hero’s life will be illuminated (Falconer 2005, 46). Highlighting this “nadir” within Western narratives are regular katabatic devices – Falconer numbers sixteen – of which one or more must appear in order for the descent into the underworld to take place (2005, 43). In fact, it is initially intimated that it is highly unlikely for the protagonist of such a narrative to return at all or, if indeed they do, they return irrevocably changed or altered, disillusioned, their ideals surpassed by an altered reality that they know they must come to terms with, if not wrest control over. When it comes time to exit the underworld (if indeed the hero does return), it is through relative ease (Falconer 2005, 44). Such an exit is true even of my creative piece: Amos only has to catch a bus back to Brisbane for him to cross the threshold once more into his world of the living.

Falconer, along with Clark, makes extensive reference to this style of narrative in contemporary literature. The fact that their focus is contemporary fiction was also an exciting notion in relation to my own research. The same issue appeared to crop up, a notion in both Falconer’s and Clark’s works, that seemed at odds with my novel – the insistence on the return of the protagonist in some form or another or, at least, a narrator privy to the protagonist’s journey into hell (Clark 1979, 34; Falconer 2005, 45). In fact it appeared that my novel represents a reversal of the katabatic objective – whereas most narratives in this mould can be argued to make of their protagonist a true, heroic self, Amos becomes further dispossessed, succumbing to his physical ailment (his debilitating depression) whilst his yearning to belong, to become ensconced in a community that he finds value in, proves to be a delusion. Furthermore, Falconer maintains that, in order to return, there must be a conversion of the Self, in some ways a redemptive measure or undertaking that needs to
commence before such a return was possible. Therefore, I felt that this model of descent narrative (to be referred to as katabatic narrative from now on) was closer to what I felt was being employed by many works of contemporary Australian outback fiction (including the aforementioned *Wake In Fright, Oyster* and *The White Earth*, alongside Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006) springs to mind), yet as the writer of *Brolga*, Falconer’s definition in this respect seemed problematic.

It is true in part that the protagonist in my creative piece, Amos, does indeed finish out the narrative by departing the underworld that is Brolga, yet it remains unclear as to whether there is any true conversion of the self, or any wisdom embedded in Amos’ person that will be narrated in the future. It could be argued that whilst the physical movement away from Brolga towards Brisbane denotes departure from the underworld, thus outwardly reaching the final depths of Hell and surviving, I would argue that this is not my preferred interpretation. For me, Amos never leaves the underworld. He continues to inhabit the underworld figuratively, his experience in the outback and the events preceding his departure lying within him and irrevocably altering his inner self. This is a story not of Amos leaving the outback, but rather of it refusing to leave him.

I would hazard to suggest that Amos cannot leave the underworld, as he is now a part of it – a “dispossession without return” (Lyotard 1977, 405). This echoes Doctorow’s warning throughout his novel *The Book Of Daniel* (1971) that once the trapdoor to that other, deeper reality is opened it can never be closed, hence the task of the protagonist to acquire the ability to either live in this reality – the underworld – or to stand astride both. In this way the protagonist never effectively leaves hell which is intrinsically tethered to them for the rest of their life.

Although some of the particulars did not fit with my own narrative I still found myself gravitating back towards Falconer’s broader notion of the descent narrative. There was a chapter in her text on East/West narratives and, in particular, its brief references to Francis Ford Coppola’s seminal anti-Vietnam War movie *Apocalypse Now* (1979) whereby Falconer mentioned this reversal of katabatic principle that she had been espousing for much of her argument and it was this variant that resonated for me. Falconer states that this reversal outlines the hero’s journey not as a discovery of the true, heroic self, but that they “come to know that they are dispossessed, that their dream of impregnable selfhood is a delusion” (Falconer 2005, 197). Indeed, the hero ultimately finds that the demonic lies within them, not in the underworld at all. It felt to me that this was the true descent narrative, mirroring my own creative piece.
My notion of a working katabatic narrative, informed by Falconer, became one that has the hero entering the underworld (either willingly or through force or duress) and, due to the nature of the descent, realising that their dream of self is an illusion. This realisation renders them unable to effectively convert themselves to a truer, more heroic self, thus they remain stuck in the underworld (or conversely, the underworld remains embedded in them). The katabatic journey, as I will now define it for the remainder of this exegesis, does not have a return.

Having come to terms with this definition of the katabatic narrative, I was able to continue and look for exemplars of these thematic and narrative dynamics outside my own work. Taking into account the inverse parallels that a katabatic narrative has with the tropes of the hero’s journey and the initial seed of the idea coming from a text about Apocalypse Now, my initial exemplar was unsurprising - Joseph Conrad’s seminal novel on imperialism, *Heart of Darkness* (1903).
4. HEART OF DARKNESS AS KATABATIC NARRATIVE

It was important from the onset that I used Heart of Darkness as ‘ground zero’ for my interpretation of the katabatic narrative to lead my study into its adherence in contemporary Australian fiction. While it is true that Heart of Darkness is an indictment on imperialism, on a baser level it is a journey that highlights the notion of being invaded by outside forces, to be repelled by the ultimate goal, and to be drawn to lost causes. Furthermore it was consistent with my interpretation of katabasis that the protagonist of the text, Marlow, inevitably sees the demon within. In Marlow, “Conrad has created a conflicted psychological hero, one whose identity is irrevocably changed by his journey, a journey that is as much about an existential sojourn into an indifferent world as it is about a lonely boat trip” (Harpham 2006, 27). Marlow fumbles for the words to describe the otherness of his experiences, such as when he describes the earth as “unearthly” (Conrad 1903, 96), denoting a sense that the environment was alien to anything that he had encountered in the past. This is his underworld and the constant bombardment from within and without on his sense of self ultimately returns him to ‘civilisation’ an irrevocably changed man. Walter Allen highlights this notion in The English Novel when he states that Heart of Darkness is about “the heart of Africa, the nihilistic, corrupt and malign nature of evil, and indeed the heart of man himself” (Allen 1954, 291).

Moreover, Conrad sees that truth on earth will always be a series of disillusionments for those who are willing to let their perceptions of reality continue to incorporate new information (Morzinski 2002, 230). Those whose perceptions are based on belief or faith, on the other hand, are less likely to withstand the brilliant glare of changing realities thus either hiding behind their unwavering beliefs despite being privy to information contradictory to their thought processes or, to crumble into an emotional, mental or spiritual abyss. This, in effect, is mirrored throughout my creative piece. Amos’ initial action – to head to Brolga in order to discover the history of his lineage – is a last gasp effort to redefine his life, without much forethought. The difficulties of his situation and his inherent indecision force him to redefine his ultimate goal to the point that his perceptions and beliefs are irrevocably changed. It can now be asserted that Amos’ crossing of the threshold into Brolga (the underworld) is driven just as much by his own internal demons as the prize that lay at the end of the journey, if not more so. Furthermore, as his relationships with the people and the town spark then falter, his disillusionment with the self intensifies until everything he holds dear is destroyed. He exits, with more questions than answers, a broken man.
In many ways, *Brolga* is a Bildungsroman that echoes *Heart of Darkness* – an initiation into darkness and chaos, framed by a prologue and epilogue albeit without the additional diegetic layers introduced by Conrad’s more complex use of frame narrators. In *Brolga*’s case, the beginning and end mirror each other – the journey to and from the eponymous town bookending the dark journey that the protagonist, Amos, is forced to embark upon. The journey itself is both literal and internal, symbolic of a psychological journey undertaken by the protagonist, the threshold crossing. However, as the story progresses, we see that every person who is bound to Brolga is living in a “heart of darkness”; all are looking at the idea of truth versus myth. Lavinia is bound to Brolga and the persona she has come to inhabit as it is the only way she knows how to interact with this, or indeed, any world. Her view that Amos would be her redemption is tempered by the notion that her fate has been made. Paul’s hallowed status within the town disguises his fear of dislocation and his increased efforts to become a part of the history of Brolga perversely distance him ever further from his Self. Even an opaque character such as the antagonistic Bongo feels threatened by the sudden presence of Amos, perceiving an inexplicable encroachment upon his territory that he fights with initially feeble yet increasingly potent verbal stoushes that lead ultimately to violent actions.

Moreover, as Amos moves deeper into both the integration of Brolga and his own psyche, events become more feral, untamed and dark. These events are mirrored by the starker images that the surrounding environment imprints upon Amos. Amos’ first impression of the town is as his bus approaches the outskirts of Brolga. The town huddles on the horizon of a flat, red, arid terrain, sprawling like a shadow across the earth, anticipating urban growth that never comes to pass. It appears a stagnant town in Amos’ eyes, a façade and an attempt at survival in an unforgiving landscape. Yet as he becomes embroiled in the community and, especially after Paul’s death, both the town and the land take on darker, more ominous images. The historical austerity of the old sale yards becomes a skeletal Stonehenge with the ghostly remnants of generations of farmers and their cattle; the prickly acacia bushes possess long white thorns that rake the flesh; the astrological beauty of the crowded night sky becomes overwhelming, unreal, disorienting. Even the man-made turkey’s nest on Richard Norville’s farm becomes rife with danger; housing the only reservoir of water in miles, Amos finds himself on the verge of drowning in it, a solitary bird circling overhead.

These are not incidental details of nature’s elements, but are conscious efforts on my behalf as author to ratchet up the tension that the central character is encountering – a physical manifestation of his rising inner turmoil. The use of dreams throughout the novel are a further indication of this tumultuous tussle with the self and his physical and mental displacement is further amplified by the alienness of the ancient outback. This method is accentuated by
Eagleton’s (1996) notion that any body of theory concerned with human meaning, value, language, feeling and experience will inevitably engage with broader, deeper beliefs about the nature of human individuals and societies, problems of power and sexuality, interpretations of past history, versions of the present and hopes for the future.

Falconer refers to *Heart of Darkness* when aligning her katabatic model to *Apocalypse Now*, whereby she states that “Africa fades into a metaphor for the darkness of the European soul” (2005, 198), which correlates with Marlow’s own view of the Congo, that it is “something great and invincible, like evil or truth, waiting patiently for the passing away of this fantastic invasion” (Conrad 1903, 85). The outback, I believe, frequently serves the same function within the aforementioned examples of contemporary Australian fiction.

It must be noted that the idea of Africa, the Congo and the Australian outback all being unknowable are as much about ‘the white man’s gaze’ as they are about the terrain itself. In David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon* (1994), Gemmy views the landscape in a spiritual light, and on numerous occasions is able to “read” it; however the botanist’s view is hindered in comparison, only wanting to catalogue it, thus proving himself to be an insubstantial spiritual shape himself. Gemmy’s connection with the land is central to the plot of *Remembering Babylon*. My connection with these contemporary Australian narratives is that of the outsider – notably, the urban Australian, whose historical roots lie outside the realms of native Australia, just as Marlow has no historical ties to the Congo river down which he sails.

As I noticed these correlations between the ideas of the katabatic narrative, the *Heart of Darkness* archetype and my own *Brolga*, more examples of katabatic narrative in contemporary Australian fiction came to mind. Furthermore, most of these fictional accounts utilized the outback as a pivotal backdrop and setting, into which the protagonist would descend into his own heart of darkness. One of the katabatic “world-views” as stated by Falconer is that the hero’s “moral goods (or evils) are to be found underground, rather than in the heavens or the familiar, daylight world” (Falconer 2005, 45). This research led me to believe that the outback was indeed the underworld of the katabatic model and I then felt that I needed to know what it was about the outback that lends itself to such a particular narrative device. Understanding the ominous nature of the physical environment was paramount to understanding the outback’s position as the underworld in contemporary outback fiction.
5. THE OUTBACK

The majority of contemporary Australian fiction that used the outback as its pivotal backdrop appeared to follow this common trajectory into some sort of hell. The katabatic narrative then follows the aforementioned three stages of descent, dissolution of the self and zero point, foregoing the necessity of a return. Furthermore, by using Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as the archetypal katabatic narrative reading, I noted enough prevalent similarities in this text and many contemporary Australian texts that further investigation was warranted. The common trope for me in reading the outback as katabatic underworld was a depiction of the physical environment as both ominous and mirroring or actively contributing to the protagonist’s or other pivotal character’s downfall.

5.1 Defining the Outback

By this stage I noted the importance of the Australian wilderness – the outback – as an active agent in the formation of the descent narrative in my own creative piece and, indeed, in the narratives of much contemporary Australian fiction that engaged the outback as its central setting.

Before I could go any further, it was imperative that the outback have a concrete definition. Central to this is the understanding of where this outback physically exists – where Australia’s civilised boundaries end and its ungoverned boundaries begin. John Kinsella (2008) noted that the outback is often a shifting paradigm depending on where one ‘stands’ – where a particular person exists. Once a person has laid claim to a space – investing it with certain memories and events that form a history with which that person identifies and becomes one with – then and only then does it exist as a place. So to a person whose existence is situated in the urban centres of Australia – located on the coastal fringes – then it is the towns beyond the boundaries of those centres that take on the idea of the outback. However, the people who live in those regional towns are themselves inclined to look beyond, to the pastoral fields, farmhouses and stations as being part of the outback. The people whose experiences tie them to these properties will look to the semi-arid/arid zones even further inland as defining where the outback begins (Kinsella 2008, 34-39).

This idea of a perceptual shifting of sands that makes defining the outback both tricky and subjective, a difficulty that is mirrored in many contemporary Australian novels. Andrew McGahan’s 2006 novel *Underground* has his main character, Leo James, ruminating his abhorrence of the outback, yet is unsure what the term actually encapsulates:
OK, so I’m not even sure that a thousand miles of sand and scrub in the north-west corner of New South Wales is the Outback…But it sure felt like it to me…We had a mere scrap of food and a drop of water on which to survive, and we were alone in a place so big and empty so that we could wander there until we collapsed and died, and our bodies might not be found by another passing soul for months – for years. To me, that was alien. That was scary (McGahan 2006, 169).

Likewise, the opening of David Malouf’s Remembering Babylon (1994) represents the environment as something so outside the realms of civilised experience as to render it beyond redemption: “out of a world over there, beyond the no-man’s land of the swamp, that was the abode of everything savage and fearsome, and since it lay so far beyond experience of nightmare, rumours, superstitions and all that belonged to Absolute Dark…” (Malouf 1994, 2-3).

Furthermore, this dark mythological representation that has built up around the outback is a product of a Eurocentric worldview, one that existed in colonial times and now permeates the urbanized centres of coastal Australia where the vast majority of Australia’s population resides. The one constant that remains via this Eurocentricism is that the outback is perceived as one that instils fear and anxieties into all that deign to lay governance upon it.

It can be therefore posited that the outback exists as a form of frontier, the outpost to civilised Australia as is seen by those who live on the urban fringes. In this paradigm, the outback can be read as a squalid and bleak place. The land itself is unyielding, incapable of growing enough food to sell, to live off. The wildlife has adapted to this alien landscape and is likewise alien in appearance and existence to what European experiences had previously encountered. These elements create an unknown, indefinable entity, for which experience has no counter, thus invoking an innate fear.

An additional distinction here is that the outback is unpopulated. People fight to survive, not because of the pressures of possession that occur when others attempt to territorialise their own perceived notions of their space; they fight to imprint themselves on the space itself. The fight is the relentless struggle to make space into place. Its remoteness is central: it is remote not only from major world populations and power bases, but from Australia’s own concentration of population. The terms ‘back of Bourke’, ‘back of beyond’, ‘beyond the Black Stump’ all allude to a desire to put this unfathomable landscape at the very perimeters of settlement and perception – basically, to put it out back.
The underworld, often seen as a personal or metaphysical hell, is a culturally defined timespace, whose physical and moral topographies are constantly developing and changing. The modern notion of hell is focused on the suffering of the damned (Falconer 2005, 18). In this kind of underworld, cut off from any interaction with the outside world and with no future orientation, the self is destroyed from within.

Separateness is key here. The underworld is separate from the world, just as the ‘Outback’, subjectively defined, implies a separateness of it from settlement. In both cases, the idea of boundaries is central to the ability to differentiate between these spaces.

5.2 Outback as frontier – notions of boundaries

With having the outback as analogous to the underworld of the Falconer/Clark katabasis model, it then becomes important to define the notion of boundaries, as boundaries delineate between the world and the underworld. The hero needs to be cut off from the ‘normal’ – the world from whence he came. Therefore, what these boundaries are and how they effectively work in relation to the specific instance of the outback must be analysed.

Vincent Pecora (1989, 116) focuses on Conrad’s obsession with boundaries, the idea being that imperialism was about shaping the space around one and making it their own, governing it. It was this notion that I felt needed to be explored more thoroughly, with particular emphasis on the representation of the outback landscape in contemporary Australian fiction. It is clear that the outback, like Marlow’s jungle and the river that ran through it, was an important factor to the darkness that permeated these narratives. The common reoccurrence of these dark despairing descents into personal, physical and psychological torment in the sparseness of the Australian outback lends itself to closer scrutiny.

My initial searches on boundaries of the environment in narrative fiction, rather than focusing exclusively on Australian fiction, turned to critical analyses of American frontier fiction where the phenomenon is more extensively discussed. Some interesting correlations began to come to light. Although frontier fiction in essence is governed by time – the frontier wilderness exists within the timeline of expansionism, which effectively finished in American in the 1890s – there is still a small canon of work that mines the area. Foremost in the caravan of modern American frontier fiction is Cormac McCarthy, whose No Country for Old Men (2005) is essentially an existential Western set in modern, amoral times, eschewing the tropes of the genre by focusing on the decline of the rules and morals of Westerns so rigidly held up to that time. So with that in mind, it can be noted that there are many similarities here.
History and mythology dictate that European settlers arrived predominantly in Eastern Australia, where the land’s fertility was rife and much the same as the pastoral landscapes of domesticated Europe. Yet there is only so much space to be inhabited on the eastern coastal regions, making views of expansion Westward inevitable. It is here that the frontier era and the colonial era find other similarities, as this push for control over their surrounding landscape had the settlers struggling against the intensification of the harsh and difficult terrain. Due to this expanse of land remaining relatively uninhabited, the outback maintains a prolonged status as a frontier yet to be breached. Edward Said (1978) commented on the construction of US culture in that it is intrinsically linked with the mythic structure of the American frontier; the same must be said of Australian culture and the insistence of its connection to the outback myth. We see the continuing strength of the ‘underdog’ and the ‘battler’, two Australian idealized stereotypes that are inherently rooted in colonial times, yet are firmly entwined, and are borne from, man’s battle with the force that is the outback. As has already been stated, it is the human influence that struggles to take root in the alien outback wilderness; the human psyche that takes the blows; the human condition is overcome, thus set to crumble.

The outback, as is the frontier, is as much held in an engrossed yet reviled fascination, even as it is romanticized. The communities that sprung up during this time were often hastily erected, an attempt to pin down the notion that the area had been taken, and was governed, by the settlers. Yet what can also be seen is the sense of lawlessness that these communities inherently developed and how many saw these frontier towns as areas of avarice and sin. This runs on into the world of the literary form. Bennett (1985) states that the writer writes about the bush in their effort to creatively inhabit that elusive entity that they physically cannot. Falkiner (1992, 92) concurs, stating that in much of contemporary outback fiction an actual terrain is cast as the setting, yet acts as a double metaphor as the author elevates the landscape to a landscape of the soul, which is allowed to reflect the metaphysical concerns of the author. This sentiment lends itself to authors using the descent narrative within the context of the outback, whilst also being something that I can personally lay claim to. Before the idea for this exegesis had germinated, I had set up Brolga to be less about the literal journey and/or destination, but about the journey and/or destination that lay within Amos and the turbulent changes of both over time. The fact that the town’s name, Brolga, also emblazons the front cover of my creative piece highlights the notion of frontier and boundaries, as Brolga becomes the last bastion of ‘civilization’ for Amos and indeed, the other characters at play within the narrative, before the harsh terrain that surrounds them on all sides. All forays away from the town – the kangaroo hunt, the drunken pursuit of Stinky Pete, the visits to Richard Norville’s farm – are fraught with danger and are the true moments when Amos is out of his
depth. Thus Brolga becomes the frontier, the last stand of defence as far as his idea of
civilisation is concerned.

It can also be stated that the frontier includes the civilised outposts that are left in its wake as
expansionism moves forth – the frontier towns, shanties and outposts that expressly mark the
territory that has now been laid claim to by an individual or community, therefore is no longer
emptiable space but indeed a place – a space that is inexorably linked by history and
experience and cannot readily be denied. This then must also be stated for the small
communities, farms and stations that litter the outback, bastions of civilised space that prove
to be bastions to the existence of place within the Australian wilderness. Whilst these
boundaries exist, they are flimsy, barely keeping out the anxieties and fears of the unknown
that haunt the individuals who are striving to lay claim to some governance in this seemingly
boundless land of extremes and are thus always struggling with their sense of place in this
world.

5.3 Boundaries in contemporary Australian fiction and in

Brolga

‘The Outback’ represents the ominous nature of the ancient Australian physical environment,
one which Western civilization attempts to assert control over and inhabit, yet invariably fails
to do so. Europeans either leave a broken shell of their ambition, or are altered by the process
and unable to leave the land of their downfall. Also imperative to the understanding of the
outback, and its connection to the katabatic narrative, is where it is – where Australia’s
“civilized” boundaries end and its “ungoverned” boundaries begin. It became obvious that
Western civilization for hundreds of years had succeeded in shaping the space that they
entered to their own ends, asserting their control over it and making it their own, governable
territory. Yet the operating factors of post-colonial guilt, the complicity in the colonial project
and the failures that occurred during these times brought a darkness over such imperialistic
virtues. Likewise, contemporary outback fiction relies on the darkness that permeates these
narratives, how the hero spirals into personal, physical and psychological torment in the
sparseness of the Australian outback. This implies that they are not able to assert themselves
on their environment; they are not able to build their own boundaries; they are not able to
make place out of space. The environment does not yield. It refuses to yield and so the attempt to make place out of space fails. ¹

This idea of place within the space that is the outback can only be defined by the way in which one creates their own personal sense of experience, deriving boundaries that cut them off from the unknown expanse of terrain and come to be irresolutely theirs. Place is readily recognized when it is written on identity, when meaning is to be made in the existence of a particular space. That said, the inverse must also be true – that identity is formed only when one can lay claim to belong, to claim a place within a given environment. The boundaries, whether figurative or literal, symbolize the border between ‘civilised’ and ‘primitive’, two entirely different ways of being. The primitive is always intimated to be that which is unknown, therefore the emphasis is to create the known in order to lay claim to the environment. To maintain the idea of civilisation and, indeed, to lay root in a particular Space and make it Place, it is important to assert control over the space, an initial site of dominance, whilst also providing identity via the creation of structures of governance of space whence control is asserted.

Boundaries are prevalent throughout contemporary Australian fiction in many guises. Nick Cave’s brutal colonial saga *The Proposition* (2006) has the British settler Captain Stanley creating his boundary by surrounding his homestead with a white picket fence which anchors his place both in the literal environment whilst also harking back to his European experience. The fence serves to hermetically seal identity into the space that Stanley has laid claim to, a physical manifestation of identity and governance of place. This sense of literal definition of the boundary of space is held in novels as disparate as contemporary takes on colonial history, such as Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River* (2006) whereby recently freed colonial convict William Thornhill takes a tract of land on the banks of the Hawkesbury River. All along those river banks were likeminded settlers, carving out their own identity on what they saw was emptiable land, and socially constructing their own meaning. By building walls, fences and sheds, the Thornhills were asserting their control on the area, claiming their own place upon it, yet were always fearful of both the literal environment, and what lay, thinly veiled, beyond it. Grenville is successful of dismantling the privileged European gaze, as the Thornhills’ misunderstanding the actions of the indigenous makes clear.

The literal definition of the boundary of space is also prevalent in more modern tales. Douglas Kennedy’s *The Dead Heart* (1994) has the dead mining community of Wollanup

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¹ It must be noted that the realities of territoriality within Australian history is more complex and contested than it is here, and thus is libelous in its simplicity. I must stress that such notions as are pertaining to this thesis are of course talking about an Eurocentric perception to land and territory.
existing within the pit of the new dry quarry; the sheer rock walls serving to both designate the boundaries of their existence whilst also effectively cutting them off from the rest of the world. This is also true of the community of Outer Maroo in Janette Turner Hospital’s *Oyster* (1996), where the roads have been written off the maps, their boundaries held in a militaristic fashion that borders on desperation. The town Desperance in Alexis Wright’s 2006 novel *Carpentaria* is defined by its claimed existence on the banks of the river yet, when that river changes course in one particularly tumultuous wet season, the town loses its identity, thus struggling to cement itself within the surrounding environment and to readily define its existence, its sense of place.

*Brolga* too has examples of boundaries set in place within both the titular town and within the identities of certain inhabitants within the town. The signposts leading into the town of Brolga state for all and sundry that this town exists – it has its place on the land. Religious slogans further act as boundaries, stating that the Church, and God, will be found here. This is also true of some of the characters depicted in the novel. The character Tracker has his house and shop in a back alley at the outskirts of the town, and it is iconic in its dilapidated state. Yet it is this seemingly haphazard structure that defines Tracker in this community – he is the strange indigenous man with all the dogs and the fresh fruit and vegetables. His identity is placed in possession – he possesses many artefacts within his house, as well as his multitude of dogs and sellable goods, that set up the boundaries of who he is. Richard Norville’s property is subsumed by encroaching prickly acacia bushes, at times almost impenetrable, but the sudden appearance of the buildings in this desolate environment, the way they form a circle of buildings, is a defiant exclamation that this is where Norville lives – this is his stand.

In saying that, though, it is always about creating a boundary that defines, both as an individual and as a community, a sense of place, of belonging. The novels that give a representation of the outback appear to label this space as one that is anxiously guarded against the environment and those who belong to it, as if beyond the borders they have created is boundless, borderless danger. Such a summation may seem extravagant, yet the representation of the outback has proven to be of the expanse of open, ungovernable space that defies not just categorisation, but true governance. This places fear into those who dwell on the outskirts of it, as the failure to exert control over the land invariably points to failure of the individual or community to create an identifiable place in the space they reside in, thus failing to create and impose their own history upon the land.

This idea intrigued me greatly. By pinpointing this aspect I hit upon the term territoriality and saw how its inclusion into my katabatic descent narrative model could explain why the return from the Underworld proved so problematic.
6. TERRITORIALITY

It is necessary to ascertain the reasons why this particular slant on the hero’s journey narrative is common in contemporary Australian fiction whereby the outback is the main setting – the underworld. The outback is defined by many parameters, but the clearest notion is that of boundaries. The outback is deemed a borderless realm, thus in a katabatic narrative the outback must encapsulate the crossing of the threshold from a space of origin whereby the protagonist is rooted in experience that is deemed recognisable – civilisation – and into a space that is unknown and unfathomable – primitive. It was during some reading of postcolonial studies that I came across the notion of territoriality. Whilst it is a term that is utilised in a wide and varying array of fields of study, I felt that it might be the key that would open up an understanding of why a particular narrative would permeate such a body of contemporary Australian fiction and indeed, my own creative piece.

6.1 Definition of territoriality

For the purpose of this exegesis, it is imperative that a simple, succinct yet all-encompassing definition for the term of territoriality is established. This proved problematic due to the fact that the idea of territoriality has been applied to such a disparate array of fields of study – cognitive, religious, economic, workplace management, semantics, anthropology – in which the definition takes on different nuances relative to the area to which it is applied. Therefore territoriality had to be applied to the environment itself, along with the naked focus of it being humankind’s emphasis on territoriality. One of the leading theorists in the field of human territoriality, Robert Sack, laid out its definition simply as the effort by humanity to suppose control over an area or a person (Sack 1985). As I am intimating that it is the environment itself that is the focal point, then the definition of territoriality within contemporary Australian outback fiction stands as humankind’s innate attempts to affect, influence or control the surrounding environment in a bid to claim sovereignty over the land – to make it an extension of themselves and their own place of experience. The creation of built environments, roads and self-governable property are acts of territoriality. These actions actively enforce upon the individual and the wider community that the land is now ‘theirs’, and that they are now free to impose upon the land their own unique history that ties them to it, and vice versa.
With this basic definition, the concept of territoriality stood as a useful lens for understanding why the outback is perceived as such a negative, menacing presence in contemporary Australian fiction, inevitably leading to an inverse hero’s journey narrative, something more akin to katabasis. Yet I felt that a further breakdown of the term was necessary for its application to this argument. Therefore it can be identified that territoriality has three main components – area, boundary, control (Sack 1985, 28). Firstly the area needs to be designated and, in most cases, determined to be emptiable space.

The term emptiable space could be a problematic one due to its insinuation that the indigenous inhabitants of Australia had no claim to the land before European settlement. In the case of territoriality, and indeed this argument, I am instead referring to a social construct, whereby the land is devoid of what Europeans assess as being socially or economically valuable things that could be obtained and controlled (Sack, 34). As they did in the Americas, European settlers laid claim to the land due to the assertion that the vast, distant, unknown and novel space of Australia was uninhabited, designated the area empty, and proceeded to create territories in order to organise and effectively fill it up. This can still of course be done by physical force, even if established territories exist in the space.

The issue of boundary is the next stage of territoriality. Boundaries offer clear communications to all about the existence of an inhabited space, an environment which someone has claimed governance over, thereby claiming place. Boundaries are also outward defences of one’s territory (Sack 1985, 220) – the walls of a house; the fence around a property; the paved bitumen of the roads that link one boundary to the next. It is this territorial fixity that the boundaries demarcate, thus rendering the once empty space definable and much easier to control. Therefore the demarcation of boundary is the pivotal stage in successfully implementing territoriality in any given situation.

When there is a physical presence created, an area is determined and clearly definable boundaries are in place, that it is possible to lay governance over the newly defined space, to create a history or reality that incorporates the space into the new world of experience. Only then can it be stated that there is governance over the space, thus turning space into place.
6.2 Failure of territoriality in contemporary Australian outback fiction

I needed to see whether this idea of territoriality could be effectively used in relation to contemporary Australian outback fiction. Immediately I noticed there appeared a common trend within contemporary Australian outback fiction that was in parallel with the katabatic narrative, and that was in the failure of the protagonist to effectively territorialise his environment. Focusing on the texts that I have mentioned thus far, it became clear that not only was the environment an ever present ominous force, but that it was the lack of will by the protagonist that lent to his destruction.

In Andrew McGahan’s *The White Earth* (2004), each of the focal characters – William, his neurasthenic mother, his uncle John McIvor, even the White family who start *Kuran* station – struggle and ultimately fail to wrest control over the land. For McIvor and indeed the White family this is a failure to territorialise – the Whites intended to create a pastoral ‘dynasty’, but it did not exist beyond a second generation. Similarly, even though McIvor proclaims “This is where I belong. It’s where I was raised. I was taught all about it by my father, and he spent most of his life here too”, he struggles to maintain control over his allotment, both through Native Title claims and his own sense of false grandeur. There the boundaries shift throughout the history of Kuran station: the initial multitude of space collected by the White family is sold off over time; while pockets of land are discovered to be inscribed by indigenous social monoliths previously unknown to McIvor. Ultimately, despite the fabric of his existence being rooted in the territory, he never has control over it and is ultimately undone.

Kenneth Cook’s *Wake in Fright* (1961) is another piece that sees the protagonist break under the weight of the oppressive nature of the environment, both in its physical sense and also by those who had already been adversely affected by its negative countenance. John Grant’s history lies in Sydney. Although he had spent a year teaching in Tiboonda, he had not laid claim to the area, thus it still remains an indefinable, undesirable space for him. His sole purpose is to get back to ‘civilisation’, yet his defeat in Bundanyabba shows a capitulation to the oppressive nature of his environment and its inhabitants. Every character takes on a grotesque nature, seemingly extrapolated by the isolation and desolation that the outback imposes upon them and ultimately Grant succumbs also.

Within *Oyster* (Hospital 1996) is the ultimate destruction of a community that used territoriality as a militaristic, dictatorial measure to keep the inhabitants of Outer Maroo in
place and to keep all unwanted elements from the outside world out. This sense of territoriality cultivated by the hard-living, broken, secretive ‘bushfolk’ and the teetotaller God-fearing community is volatile and overtly antagonistic to all that lay beyond their realm of experience, unwilling to extend their points of knowledge beyond their self-made boundaries. Even when Oyster comes to town, he is generally left to his own whims due to the fact that he creates his commune out in the breakaways commonly referred to as Oyster’s Reef – out of sight, out of mind. However, his actions, compounded by the ever increasing tensions created by the supposed encroachment of the land on all sides of Outer Maroo, has the community moving closer to delirium, with ultimately only two of its members – innocent Mercy Given and silent Old Jess – given a glimpse of redemption. Mercy in particular is the true protagonist here, her iron will inherent in her belief of claiming governance over her own territory even if, in the end, it is her steadfast mental conviction that needs to be defended from displacement, disorientation and destruction, not her physical state.

In *Carpentaria* (Wright 2006) we see the strongest emphasis yet on the Outback’s resistance to human territoriality, as the elements of water, earth, fire and air combine in a furious materiality to effectively resist attempts by various groups to claim, know and control the region. The volatile environment in Wright’s novel continually rises up to foil attempts by outside forces to take governance in the region. Wright presents the environment almost as though it was a person, with agency and intent, heavily influenced by the connections that indigenous Australians have with the land, yet is also prevalent when viewing the white population of the town of Desperance’s interactions with and attempt to harness the land. We see the river shift to systematically end Desperance’s aspirations to be a profitable mining town; the constant debris washed up on shore from wrecked ships that hit the gulf’s sea reefs; the monumental monsoonal weather shifts forcing construction sites to be summarily abandoned due to capricious flooding. Yet the white population is adamant that Desperance will become the profitable Place they have always envisioned it to be, creating their boundaries so that their roots can be planted in a space of experience:

Nothing but no good was coming out of puerile dreams of stone wall, big locked gates, barred windows, barbed wire rolled around the top to lock out the menace of the black demon...Then the folk Uptown showed their boundaries which they said had been created since the beginning of their time. The town boundary that they showed the Pricklebush mob was there and there, on paper, thus turning to open-shaft mining. To prove what they were saying, they said it was invisibly defined on the surface of the earth by the old surveying methods, methods long in the
grave with the original surveyors, when the original pioneers came along and developed the town (59).

Nevertheless there is very little to cheer for here, as the people collectively known as ‘living Uptown’ are thwarted by the elements, the mine that could prove to be the town’s saving grace as a profitable frontier is blown up and, in one final act of total submission, the whole town itself is flattened by cyclonic conditions. No character who takes on the true element of Eurocentric human territoriality comes out triumphant or indeed, unscathed. They are subservient to the volatile, enigmatic, dangerous environment.

To a lesser extent, McGahan’s *Underground* (2006), although a farce that aims at striking terror at the state of today’s global politics, also underscores the notion of how little anyone has control over their surroundings once they leave their own backyard or, when indeed, their own backyard is not as impenetrable as first thought. By the end of the novel the protagonist Leo James discovers the atrocities that lie at the heart of his brother’s dystopian Australia yet is powerless to stop it. Indeed, dystopian novels permeate Australian fiction, from Dorothy Cotterell’s *Earth Battle* (1930) to more contemporary efforts such as Patrick White’s *Voss* (1957), Kenneth Cook’s *Wake in Fright* (1961), Janette Turner Hospel’s *Oyster* (1996) and most recently the likes of Rodney Hall’s 2004 novel *The Last Love Story*. This is also intriguing as dystopian novels invoke a sense of dread and fear of the faceless Other – the difference being that the Other in this case is generally human and, to some extent, known to the protagonist. However, in all of these examples, it is the imposing nature of the environment that heightens the anxieties of the protagonist and work against him overcoming the odds, rectifying the situation, taking governance of the underworld and becoming the eponymous hero.

Within all of these fictional works, the protagonists are ultimately at the whim of an environment they have not been able to effectively influence or control. They thus have no entry point to create experience on the land, to claim governance over the land and arise successfully from the underworld. Whilst designating area is invariably accepted, it is the demarcation of boundaries and then holding those boundaries firm in order to create a sense of history, identity and belonging on the environment that fails to occur.
6.3 Effect of territoriality in *Brolga*

This failure by the protagonist to effectively territorialise his surroundings, thus failing to claim the title of hero and becoming ultimately altered by this failure, permeates my own creative piece also. The existence of this failure was evident even before I had started to put a name to it. For Amos to be the protagonist of a hero’s journey, he would have to achieve or obtain the ‘prize’ for which he set forth in the first place – namely, his familial history. His actions veer away for the majority of this journey, however – firstly as a lackadaisical application to the task at hand, then Paul’s death taking precedence. It can still be claimed that these are merely more obstacles in Amos achieving the ultimate goal. Finally, though, he gets the opportunity to obtain the ‘prize’, yet refuses the opportunity at the last moment, receiving one glimpse of his past (the fact that his mother had been killed at the hands of his father) and it colours his future, regardless of not knowing the extenuating circumstances. This alone is a step removed from the Hero’s Journey as the prize ends up being the opposite. However, if the ‘prize’ can be ascertained as being a discovery of the Self, it fits in a better mould considering the context of Amos’ journey. His relationship with Lavinia, combined with his eventual usurping of his dependence on painkillers, offers a redemptive entry point into a new beginning that ultimately could see Amos as a hero reborn. He also overcomes all obstacles put in his way. The issue with this reading is that the relationship has a definitive end – Lavinia remains inextricably tied to her surroundings. Although there is enlightenment, Amos leaves the underworld with a sense of knowledge, one that, whilst necessary for his rebirth, is nonetheless a heavy burden to bear. Ultimately Amos does not succeed. His is a tragic tale, one that is often signposted by the ever encroaching wildness of the surrounding outback.

Furthermore, the antagonistic characters of Brolga – the brutish Bongo, the hard-bitten Norville, even the bitter side of Lavinia – are evident in how the environment they are shackled to has inherently coloured their personality and disposition. Paul, the perceived ‘golden boy’ at the beginning of the novel, is as much an oppressed member of this isolated community as any of these other characters. This would suggest that none of these characters have successfully territorialised their place in this world. The only thing that remains unchanged is the outback itself, highlighted in the final passage as the religious slogan emblazoned across a signpost on the outskirts of town has disappeared, swallowed up the alien, ancient landscape.
7. DETERRITORIALISATION

Whilst I began my creative piece under the impression that it was following a hero’s journey narrative, it has now become clear that, due to its placement within the Australian outback, it inevitably altered to be truer to the inverse of this, the katabatic model more akin with Conrad’s (1903) *Heart of Darkness*. Furthermore, it became clear under closer inspection that a number of works of contemporary Australian fiction, when using the outback as its fictional backdrop, share similar tropes. Further inspection also led me to believe that it was the failure of the protagonist to effectively territorialise the environment – by designating the pivotal, emptiable area, demarcate boundaries, and thus take control, laying down an individual history on the space in order to turn it into an identifiable place – that led these fictional pieces down this path, irrespective of the authors’ wildly varied intentions. Having pinpointed this train of thought, my final act of investigation was to discover why it was that the protagonist seemed predestined to travel down this path and to give the reasons for this.

7.1 Definition of deterritorialisation

As has been ascertained thus far, the katabatic narrative as held in contemporary Australian fiction when the outback is the setting for the underworld (herein referred to as contemporary Australian outback fiction) maintains that it is the outback that prevails. This doomed journey is ultimately decided by the fact that the protagonist is unable to make place out of space – they are unable to govern and control the space by imparting meaning upon it, and thus find themselves displaced, rudderless, unable to define the area they have trespassed into, to delineate the boundaries that set this world from their own, or to transcend these internal, subjective spaces of identity with the external, geographical spaces of the outback. This failure to assert dominance and lay down their own sense of self on the space creates insecurity, a trait that must be absent for the hero to succeed. Instead anxieties and fears are fuelled, about identity and belonging, and indeed about their own place within the scheme of their own existence. This is paramount to the discussion at hand, because it is this sense of identity and belonging that is invariably the prize the hero seeks when they venture beyond the Threshold and into the underworld. Lisa Fiander (2003, 157) maintains that it is the enduring legacy of Australia as a settler colony, combined with its global isolation and its interior geographical impenetrability, that holds this notion true. Australians are seen as
insatiable travellers, both on the global stage and within their own country, both due to the literal distance between destinations and due to the indefatigable search for a sense of place.

This, in turn, fuels the insistence of a katabatic narrative permeating contemporary Australian fiction where the Outback plays the role of the Underworld. Linking the Hero’s Journey with Vladimir Propp’s (1968) morphology of the fairy tale, Fiander (2003) asserts that fiction writers are drawn to this format due to anxieties held by the writer when framing their creative work with a subject that creates cultural anxieties. These narratives are often used to chart the movements of lonely characters into a community that they have no history with – they are the true outsider seeking a sense of self (Fiander 2003, 158). The Outback is a perfect backdrop for such a doomed journey as its ethereal presence and sense of the unknown is a character trope continually upheld when describing the Outback. Due to its alien nature and perception, it becomes divorced from reality, thus breeding these inherent anxieties.

Furthermore, as Susan Lever has stated, many Australian authors may start their careers as realists yet find themselves “gradually moving to speculate about a metaphysical or spiritual dimension beyond the parameters of the observed material world” (1998, 329) – and never moreso is this prevalent than in Outback fiction.

Contemporary Outback fiction often highlights the outsider as being ‘marked’ – where their journey into the Underworld is doomed, poised for failure, from the outset. The protagonist is no longer romanticized as a Campbellesque hero who remains triumphant in his innocence, but is indelibly altered by the Outback and those who have been adversely touched by its presence. The experience garnered on the protagonist’s journey shapes both the individual’s and society’s identity, providing the mirror that brings out the darker elements of the Self. Nature in the Outback’s instance is at once the Other and the Self or, more pointedly, the Other contained within the Self. Most narratives in contemporary Outback fiction are emblematic of this, that the darkness within the protagonist is there before the journey takes place. It is the unyielding nature of the Outback that causes the deterritorialisation necessary to break down any walls left standing and that darkness then permeates the protagonist, becoming the Self. Having fully entered, the Other becomes the Self, therefore forever changed, marked or polluted from having been in the place of power and danger from which one is normally isolated and protected from by the established climes of civilisation (Spurgeon 2005, 66). Once touched, the Self is unable to return to the Before and is therefore unable to correct itself to culturally accepted norms. James Fernandez (1984, 32) maintains that people are inherently influenced by the environment, taking qualities of the environment into themselves, and predicating upon themselves objects from other, non-literal domains of experience. Place is a social construct, created by the people who live in it and know it. The fact that the Outback, in essence, is borderless – it is difficult to ascertain where one person’s
place finishes and another begins, if it is indeed able to be ascertained – can be pointed out as an example of placeless existence – that men finds themselves in the Underworld, but rather than governing it or being able to carry on back over the threshold into ‘civilisation’, they find themselves subservient to it.

There is precedent here in Conrad literary theory. Amar Acheraiou (2009, 173) uses the term deterritorialisation to describe the feeling of fragmentation, disorder and discontinuity that a given environment could enforce on a human subject and their subsequent reactions to this as they sought to escape from coercive social, ideological, and linguistic codes understood symbolically as territory.

This in turn leads to an examination of the first use of the word in French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their work on schizoanalysis. Deterritorialisation as first envisioned was coined to designate the freeing of labour-power from specific means of production; that is, deterritorialisation may mean to take the control and order away from a land or place (territory) that is already established. It is to undo what has been done. Yet it has always been Deleuze’s philosophy that their concepts could be reinterpreted for senses other than what they were originally created for, intimating that they didn’t believe in the idea of “original sense”; that a concept could be utilised and reinterpreted for any subject (Massumi, 5-7). Therefore although Deleuze and Guattari may have coined the phrase of deterritorialisation as part of a wider philosophical debate about the ability to combat the desire to control and dominate others, its usage is not important insofar as my appropriation of the term.

Taking this cue, what I had already gleaned from my research on territoriality and the purpose for this thesis, I have appropriated the idea of deterritorialisation on the premise that it was the implacability, the immovability, the impossibility of the Australian outback that may have led to contemporary authors creating descent narratives within their novels, based on the human notion of deterritorialisation. My definition of the term though is this: deterritorialisation is the countermeasure to territoriality. It is the failure of the human to adequately affect, influence or control the environment into which he has stepped. This failure to impose himself upon space, thus not identifying experience within the dimensions of space and making it his own, leaves him without history, without relation, without purpose – without place. It is this notion that leads the protagonist to falter, to allow anxieties and fears to consume him, setting in motion the spiral towards a descent from which he will not be able to recover.

Therefore it is necessary to pinpoint the notion whereby the hero that embarks on the hero’s journey inevitably fails in his quest, thus returning empty-handed or irrevocably change; or
being unable or unwilling to return, his sense of self resolutely shattered. This aspect appears to be an inherent part of contemporary outback fiction – this inability to assert territoriality over the outback, thus their sense of identity is altered to the point of governance by the environment. The term deterritorialisation will henceforth be utilized as the term to describe this inherent aspect of contemporary Australian fiction which uses the Australian natural environment, namely the outback, as its ‘underworld’.

7.2 Deterritorialisation as oppressed

Edward Said’s (1978) sociological look on nation is intrinsic to an understanding not only of this definition of deterritorialisation and its utilization in contemporary Australian outback fiction but also as an understanding of the genesis of the outback as an otherworldly and otherwise negative presence in Australian fiction since the turn of the twentieth century. The outback’s metamorphosis into an omniscient other proves to be a psychological obstacle for the protagonist to overcome, one that he invariably fails to achieve. Annette Kolodny maintains that nature can, and often does, enslave man, that man “might, indeed, win mastery over the landscape, but only at the cost of emotional and psychological separation from it…” (1975, 28).

Such an alienation of and by the land can be partly addressed through the acceptance of the city dwelling existence by Australian writers as being the foremost existence in terms of turning space into place. David Malouf states in an article about his 1985 short story collection Antipodes that “the Australian experience is about being at the edge of the known world and having to discover how to make that the centre” (Wilbanks 1991, 148). This combines back to the earlier notion by John Kinsella (2008) that the Outback is often the outside of what is known and as that is generally coming from an urban viewpoint, it is the viewpoint shared in most contemporary Australian outback fiction – viewing the Australian landscape from the suburban fringes outwards (or the coastal fringes inwards). Where these towns and cities are territorialised, having been marked by manmade buildings, events and histories, the landscape that remains ungoverned is the space to be feared. David Ireland’s A Woman of the Future (1979) has its protagonist looking at the outback as the despised and neglected heart of Australian identity: “The secret is in the emptiness. The message is the thing we have feared the thing we have avoided, that we have looked at and skirted” (Ireland 1979, 349). Furthermore, the centre is viewed as an incredibly treacherous place, where
“everyday the quiet tides of darkness roll over us from the menacing interior” (Ireland 1979, 310).

Malouf’s seminal work Johnno (1976) depicts this landscape as barren and desolate, unknowable, therefore impossible to imprint an identity on. This is what drives men to alcohol, violence and suicide. The landscape that Malouf depicts is a brutal and ultimately destructive terrain, thus proving to mirror the poverty of spirit inherent in these men of broken dreams rather than creating any personal spirit. Manning Clark concurs in 1978’s A History of Australia Volume Four when he writes that “nature in Australia is so powerful that it often sets aside all man’s attempts to assert superiority over the earth…planting a European civilisation in an uncouth land had imprinted on the minds of men a sense of their impotence and insignificance” (Clark 1978, 226). The broken will of man to territorialise the open space of the Outback leads to the broken spirit, the succumbing to the will of that harsh environment.

The subliminal tensions that exist within characters who find themselves occupying the outback reverberate and magnify in the physical environment, evident in the works of Xavier Herbert and Thea Astley that denote the impact the landscape has on the inner psyche. There is an inherent sadness in their works (especially Herbert’s 1938 epic Capricornia and Astley’s It’s Raining In Mango (1987)) that borders on despair at the failure of their protagonists to successfully plant their identity in the soil they have attempted to govern in what I would call an overt description of deterritorialisation. In fact it could be stated that the protagonists’ rescue or salvation arrives too late, which then adds credence to the inclusion of the katabatic narrative as a driving literary force. The lost opportunities that ultimately lead to these characters’ failures mirrors the futile efforts for European settlers and their Australian-born descendants to claim the land as their own, thus the history that exists is a fractured one. Their efforts are fatalistic in that, as Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins assert, the defeat of goodness seems to be affected by a macabre Deus ex machina (2007, 248). Furthermore, Bernadette Brennan (2004, 156) maintains that as a reader of Australian fiction one must be open to what that fiction may be saying about the self because ultimately what is read is not so much about others as it is meant to be a mirror onto the self. Otherness, as Julia Kristeva (1993) has theorized, is never solely without but is always already within the self, the community and the nation.

In almost all instances the landscape itself is rarely noted as chaotic from the outset. The alienness of the outback often offers initial impressions of beauty, of awe, even of intimacy. Taylor and Perkins (2007, 213) stress that the combining factors of climate, distance and sparseness of population all determine a particular physical and indeed psychic lifestyle, with
the outback landscape providing an unobtrusive setting before impacting on those people that have crept onto its scenery. It is when man attempts to lay claim over the landscape, to impose himself upon it, that it becomes chaotic, antagonistic, a negative force of will. Kolodny notes that in the course of civilizing the landscape, “man makes of it his helpless victim and inevitably betrays an earlier or hoped-for intimacy” (1975, 46). This imposition is invariably fierce in nature which means the consequences are equally as violent. However the outback’s unbreachable nature means that its chaos is unyielding, thus causing humanity to bend to its will first, or indeed to break. Territoriality is a form of oppression (Sack 1985, 35), so it stands to reason that deterritorialisation is the form of the oppressed. In *Brolga* and indeed in most contemporary outback fiction the remoteness of the landscape is responsible for the characters’ comic/tragic idiosyncrasies, elements of the inner self forced out in order for them to adapt to the harsh conditions awaiting them.

7.3 Deterritorialisation’s place in the history of the Australian Outback

It is a widely held belief that when an area has been cartographically marked or ‘mapped’, then it is governable – it exists, therefore it is humankind’s imperative to occupy it. Yet as Gerry Turcotte (1998) states, before white settlement began in 1788, before cartographers and explorers had carved their niche on the land and confirmed its existence, it had already been imagined – as a grotesque space, a land peopled by monsters. The idea of Australia in the collective minds of the European world was that of an unknown land. The idea of its existence was disputed, was even heretical for a time. “The transportation of convicts as a banishment seemed to seal the fate of the country’s inherent darkness. It was for all intents and purposes Gothic par excellence, the dungeon of the world” (Turcotte 1998, 10). Marcus Clarke (1876, 2) mirrored these sentiments in his famous preface to Adam Lindsay Gordon’s *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift* when he described the land as “a fantastic land of monstrosities…in it alone is it to be found the Grotesque, the Weird, the strange scribbling of nature learning to write”. Michael Cathcart (2009, 51) stresses that even as Australia moved beyond its penal colony status to a settled land, some fifty years on from its inception, less than 5% of Australia “had been explored. The other 95% has been aptly described as ‘a blank’, a vast and wild wilderness, immeasurably old, bereft of all appearances of either water or life – one of the last empty places in the map of the world, simply wanting to be filled in”.

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*Brolga*  
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Julian Edney sees the function of territoriality as “to provide sufficient organization, structure and predictability to be allowed to fade into a reliable background which the occupant doesn’t have to concern himself with…any functions and benefits of territoriality would be drastically reduced if it couldn’t be taken for granted” (1976, 43). The best way to take something for granted is for it to be held in one’s possession – once possessed, that item can be viewed, held and used to one’s discretion. This idea of command and conquer, leading into the imperialist age and beyond, has all added up to this – any space that is unoccupied is unknown, its potential untapped. The nature of humanity is to lay claim to any space that is deemed emptiable – that is, that has no established territories such as cities, towns, castles or villages within its vicinity (Sack 1985, 132). The quicker one created built environments that allowed them to claim governance over their environment, the easier it was for one to ‘lay their roots’ and integrate into the territory their own experience, thus becoming one with the land and changing space into place. Fernandez (1984) maintains that people make efforts to turn the spaces we enter into places with whose feeling tones they feel familiar – this allows them to participate with space, therefore gaining experience with the land. Whilst his studies rely on the examination of African tribes and their governance of the space they inhabit, a parallel could be drawn for the purposes of this argument. In his observations of the connection of the Zulu tribe and the land, Fernandez states, “In Zululand…where is one to go in that vast expanse of grass, thornbush and sky? It is the predominant sentiment of gathering up and sheltering together so as to create one familiar arena in such a windblown, sunstruck milieu. One is anxious to find a place” (1984, 32).

What has made this attempt to territorialise the outback a near impossible feat has been the lack of familiarity for European settlers with their environment. Articulating the colonial experience inasmuch as each emerges out of a condition of uncertainty, of the familiar transposed irregularly into unfamiliar space, leads to what Freud identified as the condition of the uncanny – where the homely is unhomely. This also ties back in nicely to Conrad’s (1903) _Heart of Darkness_ and Marlow’s description of his surroundings as ‘unearthly’. Yet the difficulty with Australia is that it remained sufficiently familiar that it disoriented and disempowered any who attempted to lay governance over it, thus inverting the roles of oppressor and oppressed. Australia is a continent whose interior since its Eurocentric inception in the seventeenth century had no established territories in existence from any age – it was the purest of emptiable space – a truly wild wilderness. It must be noted that this is a Eurocentric point of view – the territories and boundaries that existed between the multitudes of indigenous tribes in Australia before European settlement were not recognized then. Whilst the ability to fill this space proved relatively easy and profitable on the coastal regions and outer margins of Australia, it was a much more difficult thing to assert further elsewhere.
Boundaries were set, maps were drawn but as civilization crept further inland, it became clear that there is an inherent flaw in humanity’s belief in territoriality.

Territoriality takes place under the (predominantly Eurocentric) notion that everything is indeed governable, possessable, conquerable. The Australian outback was in no way like the environments encountered by Western civilisation before or since. The Australian rural environment is pockmarked with various attempts by European Australians to territorialize. Roads crisscross the land, fences stretch into the horizon to mark off where one man’s land ends and another begins. Windmills, cattle yards and cattle grids are all signifiers that attempts of possession and territorial defence have been laid down. Despite all this, however, is the hard fact that the vast majority of space that makes up the Australian environment remains empty. These erected boundaries are merely totems placed forth into a space in order to place governance upon it, yet no one resides there with the express purpose to harness it, to lay roots, to make it their own – to create a definable place. This physical failure to extend beyond the flimsy boundaries set up by colonial Europeans shines a glaring light on the wilderness itself. The constant effort to establish and maintain these vast emptiable spaces is a source of continuing threat to the communities that have imposed themselves within it. The Western world has not been able to imprint itself on the environment. The boundaries are smudged and indeterminate due to the remoteness, the seemingly infinite expanse of arid or semi-arid land. The Australian outback constitutes a seemingly endless expanse of space, its unique and harsh characteristics making exerting influence over it difficult, in many cases, futile.

7.4 Effectiveness of deterritorialisation in contemporary Australian outback fiction

The existence of deterritorialisation in contemporary Australian outback fiction is just one aspect in the explanation of why this phenomenon of a common narrative drive occurs. It is imperative to look at the canon of fiction and dissect sections of it from the viewpoints of the three main components of territoriality – area, boundary and control. Each element is attempted to be undertaken and yet the failure to effectively territorialise the space the hero has ventured into, is what leads the narrative into katabatic terrain.

Life in outback Australia, or indeed any remote, sparsely populated environment, has been documented as often physically challenging but also as an intellectually and culturally
isolating experience. This struggle has marred the attempts to describe the landscape within literary fiction since European settlement. The further inland settlement wandered, the Australian landscape defied the desired familiarities to the pastoral ideal, thus resisting both settlement and description. The dominating realities circa 1900 were distance and difference. The freshly cartographed Australia showed a giant expanse of land that was made up primarily of untouched, ‘ungoverned’ desert, fringed by a relatively limited fertile coast. Falkiner (1992) maintains that it is the Eurocentric realities combined with the following generations’ indoctrination to historical perspectives that has ‘marred’ the view of the Outback, thus heightening the fearsome, unknown qualities it is infused with. In Marcus Clarke’s preface for *Sea Spray and Smoke Drift*, he describes the outback as “melancholy…funereal, secret, stern,” and that settlers despair in the environment due to their “solitude in desolation” (1876, 3). Falkiner (1992) refers to the Australian landscape as wilderness, something that Judith Wright confirms in her article “Wilderness & Wasteland” (1990, 3-7) when stating that the term wilderness refers to banishment for wild animals, outcast and criminals, akin to Australia’s European beginnings as a penal colony. The term ‘wild’ as Wright uses it connotes inferiority, savageness and uncivilized behaviour. It is also true, as has been previously stated, that many of the writings and descriptions of the Australian landscape in both literary and factual pieces have been comparative to the pastoral ideal of the Europe of the Industrial age. Yet, two hundred years on this innate sense of dark, menacing alienness still vehemently exists. The conflict of historical cultural loyalties and the dilemma of the inherent exile in an alien landscape remains a consistent theme in Australian literature. Randolph Stow (1961) sees in Australia a giant symbol of the earth at all times – a microcosm of the world – and because of the bareness, the absolute simplicity, it’s a truer and broader symbol of a human environment than any other. Bruce Bennett (1985) goes further, stating that the use of landscape in Australian literature, whilst that of the dark and primitive, is also undoubtedly recognition that the land could both make men suffer yet give them visions. The landscape intrudes upon the narrative, regardless of whether it’s a conscious or unconscious act, expressing itself though a pervading sense of threat and unease.

David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*, another colonial-era novel, pre-empts the ominous nature of the outback in its opening pages,

To the north, beginning with the last fenced paddock, lay swamp country...The land to the south was also unknown. Settlement up here proceeded in frog-leaps from one little coastal place to the next. Between lay tracts of country that no white man had ever entered. It was disturbing, that: to have unknown country behind you as well as in front (1994, 8).
As the McIvor family take in Gemmy, the English lad raised by an indigenous tribe, the rest of the community struggles with this notion of belonging and an anxiety about the unknown, both in the borderless lands that surround them and in Gemmy, the one factor that threatens to destroy the carefully cultivated territorial history of their shared experience. Lachlan Beattie, who superimposes his Scottish points of experience over his Australian life, thus rendering it meaningful, is at sea when confronted with elements of the environment that do not fit this rigid mode of knowledge. In fact the entire community struggles with the intrusion of Gemmy to their territory, a fenced settlement that defines their existence and belonging in the land and keeps them separate from the unknown, meaning both the unfamiliar environment and the indigenous populations that exist as part of that climate. Gemmy is a penetration of that sanctity. In fact, it is he who journeys into the unfamiliar, and this jealousy, insecurity and mistrust ultimately turns him away, back into the wilderness – an inversion of the katabatic narrative from a Eurocentric perspective, if you will.

With all of this in mind, we can safely say that the ideal of outback life as it is in literature has shifted. The bush mythology that has built up a historical canon of heroes and battlers who overcome the odds – both stereotypes which can still be found in many aspects of Australian narratology, not only in outback literature – appears to be more of a necessary creation in order to debunk the notion that territoriality of the outback had ultimately failed; that via the creation of the legend the collective Australian psyche can overcome the oppressive nature of the environment and cease to fear it, thus governing it as they so wished to do. Yet, as further Australian-born writers added to the canon, the oppressive nature of the outback has outlived these myths. The innocent protagonist is now commonly placed as an outsider, someone not privy to the darkness that permeates the Australian wilderness. The landscape has its own life, hostile to its inhabitants. Judith Wright maintains that it forces its way into the foreground, it takes up an immense amount of time, effort, and room. Since the 1930s it can be upheld that much narrative fiction concerning the Australian outback veered away from the iconic Australian bush characters and symbols, vying to show the dark, primitive nature of the outback and its influence on those who attempted to wrest control over it.

The outback has not been destroyed, or even overly altered by Westerners’ attempts to govern it. The perseverance of the Westerner wavered as the dust and dirt turned to rock and stone; the land bears testament to its immovable presence. This is further exemplified in many contemporary Australian fictional texts. These central characters who find themselves on the edges of the outback, hoping to either coexist or triumph over the environment, can be claimed to be polluted from the outset, that they drift to the outer reaches of the outback because they have either left their own societies of their own accord or have been banished. Their journey is inexorably linear; they have little choice but to drift to the margins, to inhabit
the liminal space that the outback and its frontier towns and stations, the few pockets of civilisation that intimate the possibility of place within the limitless space that is the outback environment.

I have five varied examples with which we can see the effects that deterritorialisation has on the protagonist, the outlying characters and the overall direction that each narrative undertakes.

Douglas Kennedy’s *The Dead Heart* (1994), whilst not as easily recognizable as a hero narrative – it veers away from the normal trajectory due to the fact that the protagonist, American photojournalist Nick Hawthorne, is taken over the threshold against his will, as opposed to actively embarking on a journey with a goal in sight – the outback still remains an active catalyst to the status of the Wollanup community that he finds himself trapped with. The structure of daily life is a warped version of the civilised communities that Hawthorne believes himself to be a part of, yet its distinct alienness, its abject otherness, serves to further alienate and disorientate him. Wollanup is strategically placed within the confines of an old mining quarry, the surroundings of which are as imposing on the inhabitants of the community as they are on Hawthorne. Furthermore, although it could be argued that it is Kristeva’s (1993) grotesque that demonises Hawthorne in *The Dead Heart*, it is equally notable that it is the circumstances of the community’s failed attempts to lay claim adequately over the space of their community that has led to them adopting more intense measures, therefore their sense of place being manipulated extensively by the outback surroundings. Furthermore, Hawthorne acknowledges the abject nature of the outback before his journey effectively begins:

>A prehistoric landscape – formidable, fearful. The beginning of the world…or the end of it. A void to match my own. But now that I had seen it – now that I had been shown irrefutable visual proof of my total insignificance – I need see no more (Kennedy 1994, 33).

This observation proves to be a signpost of what is to come for Hawthorne, whilst also highlighting the notion of the outback proving to be a mirror to the darker Self. More introspection on the power of the outback at the detriment of humankind is observed when Hawthorne gets to the Western Australian town of Kununurra:

>That was the real danger of the Outback: the way its emptiness heightened your creeping self-doubt. Forget all that crap about scenic grandeur making all your insecurities appear insignificant. If anything, it amplifies every
little fear, every tendency towards self-loathing. Because this terrain informs you – *you are nothing* (Kennedy 1994, 42).

McGahan’s *The White Earth* (2004) offers another example of this, whereby the perpetration of the myth of the Outback rancher is attempted yet proves to be an ultimate failure, the wilderness and its various histories proving a ghostly barrier that John McIvor fails to traverse. Ignorance of the non-innocence of Westernised Australian history is impossible in this case, and try as he might, McIvor fails to lay his claim over the land, even when the station is in his name and his history has been rooted in maintaining the boundaries of this space in order to create an inherent place of experience, history, awareness and belonging. It is ungovernable. In the end of the novel he is broken, his experiences eaten up by the elements. His plight and eventual demise fits deterritorialisation perfectly.

Deterritorialisation is evident in a hyperreal sense for the protagonist in Cook’s *Wake In Fright* (1961). John Grant is basically an itinerant – a schoolteacher who has been sent out to Tiboonda for his first year’s teaching service. The opening paragraph to Cook’s *Wake In Fright* alludes to the fierce, antagonistic force that the outback exudes even before our protagonist has set forth on his journey. As he finishes his final day of school, he notes that the tiny town he works in is only minutely defined as a territorial outpost from the seemingly limitless expanse of the outback:

> “He walked across the school yard, past the fiction of a sapling fence that rose out of the white dust in futile protest against the possibility of straying into the playing ground… The road was distinguishable from the paddocks only by the deep tyre tracks in the dust, and the school teacher could feel his feet sinking in it as he walked” (Cook 1961, 7).

The idea of the outback as an oppressive entity is made clear from the onset – the fervent dependence by the townsfolk on rain that never comes, the constant dust that whips past, the all-pervading heat, the flies that stick to the skin – and proves to foreshadow the ominous events that are about to transpire. It is also this cloying sense of the environment bearing down on Grant that has the reader on his side, validating his want to flee to the coastal margins of Australia, making his frantic wishes explicable, and this agitation permeates the narrative. The Outback never allows Grant to escape though and as he spirals further into his own nightmare – that he will never be able to make it to Sydney, his idealized notion of civilisation – each character he encounters and situation he finds himself are directly in relation to the surrounding environment. These individuals, these situations are moulded by the outback – they have been marked by the other – they are inexorably entwined with the underworld. Grant is the outsider who is being forced to look into the mirror at the self, and
sees the abject other staring back out at him...And whilst *Wake In Fright* is unequivocally a horror story, a tale of the Outback painted in the darkest of hues, steeped in the most severe of Kristeva’s (1993) notion of the grotesque and the abject other, it is also steeped in a heady sense of realism – the outback being the final frontier, the underworld, one that is so alien, fierce, strong, corrupted and yet wondrous, alluring and tempting that it warps the human psyche. It is like the sun – amazing in its glory and wonders, yet will send one blind if looked upon directly for too long. It is a pure descent into a metaphysical hell for Grant - the burgeoning pub culture, the incessant drinking, the two-up (representative of monetary gambling), the sex scenes – all of these are attempts by Grant, and to a lesser extent the inhabitants of Bundanyabba, to escape what is essentially the inescapable; the underworld that they have at one time or another attempted to lay governance over, yet failed. Every character here represents some form of deterriorialisation. These characters are powerless to impress themselves onto the outback and find that, rather than them making impressions on the environment, it is the spatial surrounds that impress upon them. The fevered imperialistic notion of civilisation as held by Grant – his memories of university, his parents, his social life, his dreams of the girl in Sydney, all of which are painted in bright hues and underscored by their upper-class quaintness – is rendered asunder by the pure primordial force of the primitive, base elements that make up nature, as espoused by the outback wilderness.

The pivotal scene in Cook’s (1961) *Wake In Fright* whereby the reader is shown the true extent of Grant’s downfall is when he embarks on his first ever kangaroo shooting expedition. As stated by Sturgeon, the ideal of the hunter and reasons for the hunt have inherently remained primal in nature, irrespective of the upward mobility of humankind in its use of technology. However hunting here takes on a much more hedonistic, base countenance put into sharp relief via the events that bookend the hunt.

In a short story called “Litany For The Homeland”, Janette Turner Hospital asserts that she has “always drawn breath in the cracks of Queensland” (2003, 271), with many elements of her experiences growing up in Western Queensland attributing to the dark menace that underlines many of her literary works. Furthermore, she maintains that the existence “out West” provokes a heightened perception of an entrenched regional propensity for violence, something she explored explicitly in her short story “The Second Coming Of Cono-By-Chance” in her compendium *Isobars* (1990). The common emotional tropes attached to the characters are hate, anger, stupidity and cruelty, all of which manifest themselves in futile attempts to rise out of the rut that many believe their geographic location has rooted them in.

In Hospital’s *Oyster* (1996), the harshness of the outback is more overt, a physical presence that is always confronted yet never usurped. Oyster’s ‘attempts’ to recreate an Eden in Outer
Maroo are doomed to failure from the onset – the narrator that governs the prologue places the reader into the perspective of a hypothetical traveller in the outback, disoriented by the alien space, rendering them lost with no meaningful signifiers or points of spatial orientation – “the land is this with coded testaments…legible only those who can read the secretive earth” (Hospital 1996, 5-6). Even more disorientating is the quote “Time is a trickster, and so is space” (Hospital 1996, 7), alluding to the notion that the European viewpoint of what space is, and how it may be governed, does not apply here; one who attempts to ‘own’ space can no longer be certain that B will indeed follow A. Oyster’s insistence that there is no governance of the outback in such terms harkens to Homi Bhabha’s assertion that literature becomes ambivalent as it oscillates between the assumption of power and the paradoxical awareness of its absence (1994, 107). It is this constant sense of dislocation that permeates the text, never allowing the reader or the inhabitants within the story to fully understand the uncanny and unsettling nature of the outback as perceived by the Western notion of it (Dunlop 2010, 89). The outback is painted as a locus of extreme and paradoxical states, whereby its dynamic and unique nature proves impossible to obtain in the Eurocentric sense. Turner Hospital never intends to let this dislocation slip – maintaining that the landscape runs to extremes, offering years of drought then breaking with torrential rain, where “the rules all seem haywire” (Hospital 1996, 132). Regardless of the multitude of attempts to govern this alien landscape, via cartographic means and by creating physical monoliths of governance in the form of buildings, roads, windmills and homes, the outback is the abject other, it is the antithesis of Eurocentric convention (Dunlop 2010, 82). Never more poignant is it addressed as when the character Old Jess states that in the outback “there can be no illusions: whatever calibrated instruments…may say, all the tables and taxonomies and charts are flickering wishes, nothing but tapes signifying a desire to impose order on the ungovernable” (Hospital 1996, 158-59).

This mirrors Graham Huggan’s contention that “the demarcation of boundaries, allocation of points and connection of lines within an enclosed, self-sufficient unit all traces back to a point of presence whose stability cannot be guaranteed” (1990, 81). Turner Hospital is stronger in her assertion that it cannot be guaranteed ever, regardless of how aggressively the inhabitants of Outer Maroo attempt to claim the area as their own. They seek to keep Outer Maroo off the maps by means of discreet bribery, or other unsavoury means, of government surveyors (Hospital 1996, 4). Postal and telecommunications services have been sabotaged to ensure that only a select few inhabitants have the ability to communicate with the outside world. Petrol is not freely available. The borders of this community are rigidly controlled, creating a governable space by means of domination, exclusion and enclosure. Any outsider who fatefully stumbles across Outer Maroo is incorporated into its population or is dealt with in much harsher fashion.
Oyster’s cult is even more repressive than the society of Outer Maroo. The cult leader becomes increasingly deluded and paranoid until, as the new millennium approaches, he sacrifices his followers and their children – *his* children – in a David Koresh-like blazing Armageddon. The town says nothing of this – “silence is golden” (Hospital 1996, 212). Yet not even Outer Maroo can continue this dogged assertion of governance of the land. It is the internal turmoil that mirrors the harsh exterior that renders the community irrevocably lost.

The debilitating silence of the town’s complicity in the mass murder pushes the community to turn in on itself and abrogate individual responsibility, a silence that enables even those who know they are morally culpable, to do nothing. This, combined with Miss Rover’s demise, eats away at the ‘moral centre’ of the novel, Mercy Given, who was shown first by Rover and her books, and then by the grisly demise of Oyster’s Reef, that there are other worlds than the one in which she remains ensconced. Her actions prove to be the catalyst for the climactic scene which tears the community apart. It is amongst this turmoil that the outback reclaims itself, razing all man-made monuments to the ground in a blazing fire that only a handful of characters assumedly escape (Hospital 1996, 453). Rain and fire wash the slate clean.

*Oyster* is not a straightforward hero’s narrative either, as the constant changes in chronological narrative point of view time frames make it difficult to ascertain a central character. It must then be taken that there are several protagonists of this story, the most focus going to Mercy Given (young, outspoken, innocent) and Old Jess (old, wizened, embittered). Their backgrounds, motives and actions all differ. Nevertheless, the effects of the outback on these characters are evident from the first twelve pages that comprise the prologue:

> Before Oyster, when time still swam in its lazy uninterrupted way, foreigners came once in a blue moon and were either feted or shunned. They trickled in, one by one, on bullock drays or in four wheel drives or on walkabout. Or they might simply stagger out of the sun, raving or half-starved…Too many foreigners found Oyster’s Reef, that was how it began; and anyone who finds this place is lost (Hospital 1996, 8-10).

The structure of *Oyster* lends itself to a correlation with the hero’s journey as there are referential passages documenting the outsider’s entry into the other – almost every character has a back story that describes this experience. However the most interesting here is that of Mercy Given, considered the ‘outsider’ even if she has as much experience with the place of Outer Maroo as anyone else that resides there, clawing precipitously to the idea of governable space laid down by spatial knowledge and an innate awareness of the country and its link to the self. Mercy’s plight changes when, even though her existence is inherent in Outer Maroo, she realizes that her experience itself is not the whole experience. Her journey then is not into
the underworld, but to abscond from it, a journey ascertained from her relationship with Miss Rover, the local schoolteacher who herself is an outsider unwilling to let go of the world whence she has come.

We also see the effect that Outer Maroo and its wider environment have on more traditional outsiders, such as Sarah, who has come to find her stepdaughter Amy, one of many that have fallen into Oyster’s cult. She is a strong character who is perplexed and frustrated by the community’s passivity and lack of civil disobedience. However, Sarah struggles with the climate, psychologically unable to comprehend the extremes of the landscape (Hospital 1996, 118). This inner battle coalesces for Sarah to the point where she begins to hallucinate, thus threatening to overcome her initial conviction and resolve.

Overall though, the novel shows the destructive personal and communal costs bred by insularity and fear of otherness. It deals with an isolated, drought-ravaged Australian community and the changes wrought by the arrival of an outsider. The community, sustained by repression, introversion and silence, insist on sameness but is ultimately undone by difference. The overarching character in all of this is undoubtedly the outback itself and it is its unyielding nature that prevails in the end, to the subservience of the entire community.

When a character succeeds within the hero’s journey narrative, it is through being able to territorialise the Underworld. Yet in contemporary Australian outback fiction, the concept of deterritorialisation is a much more effective lens with which to study the inherent downward spiral of the self when cast into the outback, thus the creation of a katabatic narrative takes place. Furthermore, this failure to usurp the strength of the surrounding environment by demarcating boundaries and taking control of space to turn it into place, leaves the protagonist eternally adrift, forever at odds with the alienness of the Australian outback and its inhabitants, obsequious to an oppressive environment that changes them irrevocably.

7.5 Effect of deterritorialisation on Brolga

In Brolga my protagonist, Amos, is a vessel of innocence, an observer of the inner workings of the Outback town and its inhabitants but also unaware of what must be invested in order to become a part of that world. The truth of the harshness of the town and the way it mirrors the harsh beauty of the surrounding environment comes forth slowly, thus mirroring the inversion of Amos’ character from a contemplative, introverted standpoint to a much more action-oriented one.
This leads me back to the beginning and the impetus of this study – the hero’s journey. The point of the hero’s journey narrative is for the protagonist to affect, influence and ultimately control the environment they enter – the underworld – in order to gain the prize and return to civilisation triumphant. The inverse to this notion, the katabatic narrative, dictates that the territory defies the protagonist’s actions, refusing to be oppressed, thus leaving the protagonist either without the coveted prize, unable or unwilling to leave the underworld that has broken him, or leaving defeated. *The Heart of Darkness* thus is as much about the world the hero enters as it is about the hero. The characters, challenges and obstacles that the protagonist meets on his journey are all a part of that world, thus are inherently affected by it in some way – their identity and sense of self are rooted firmly in this world.

In *Brolga*, despite the fact that Amos is clearly following the katabatic narrative arc, it was essential for me to highlight each of the major characters that he meets in Brolga and show how each have in some way been defeated by their environment – the outback. I have tried to include aspects in these characters that highlight the different outcomes inherent in the katabatic narrative also. Paul is ‘the golden boy’, who in a perverse way travelled on his own Hero’s Journey to ‘the big smoke’ and returned with the community’s idea that he would become an integral member of Brolga – the hero returning triumphant. Yet he is scarred by his lack of sense of place, either in the urban climes of Brisbane or the experiential surrounds of his hometown of Brolga, and is a defeated anti-hero. Lavinia finds herself inexplicably shackled to the town, unable to return to civilisation as her circumstances have broken her will and her new identity has taken root there. She has lost her initial sense of self, thus remaining in the underworld. Others such as Stinky Pete and Jackie are a part of the underworld, yet their place within it – as professional kangaroo shooter and station hand respectively – are signposts of an earlier age, whereby they eke out their living without any sense of overall success, and succumb to drinking. Every character is holding on to a notion of the self that has been broken down, defeated – and it all ties back to the town. Brolga may be a bastion of civilisation, but its isolation from other population bases and its dying industry has allowed the surrounding environment to encroach and take back what was once its own, if not in a literal sense then in a metaphysical one.
8. CONCLUSION

When writing what is to be my first manuscript in *Brolga*, like many writers before me, I sought to inform my process via an understanding of the hero’s journey. On closer scrutiny, however, I found that this journey was an imprecise fit for what I hoped to thematically achieve in *Brolga*. Moreover I found it to be an imprecise fit for many of the contemporary novels I had read written in similar outback settings as mine.

On analysis, I found that a better fit for my ambitions with *Brolga* lay in the idea of a heroic journey from which there was no clear return from the underworld (in this case, the outback-as-underworld). I define this narrative form, informed by the writings of Rachel Falconer (2005) in particular, as a katabatic narrative. A katabatic narrative is one that has the hero entering the underworld (either willingly or through force or duress) and due to the nature of the descent realising that their dream of self is an illusion. This realisation renders them unable to effectively convert themselves to a truer, more heroic self and thus, they remain stuck in the underworld (or conversely, the underworld remains embedded in them). One notable feature that separates this from other notions of hero’s journey is that the katabatic journey does not have a return in the orthodox sense.

In outback fiction such as *Brolga*, the nature of the outback itself is central to the failure to return of the katabatic narrative. The outback, which as Kinsella (2008) notes is a perceptual and subjective rather than literal landscape, may be seen as characterized by being both unpopulated and as separate from the normal world inhabited by the perceiver. The boundaries that divide the fictive world and underworld here are the boundaries that lie between what is known and unknown; what is governable and ungovernable; and centrally – what can be claimed as place as opposed to mere space.

It must be noted that further analysis of boundaries and how they are applicable to the Australian outback and contemporary literature can be found in texts not referenced here, such as Paul Carter’s *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987), alongside works focusing on post-colonial texts by the likes of Helen Tiffin and Gillian Whitlock. These texts can further distinguish the ideas explored in the thesis in further research.

The notion of territoriality helped to inform my understanding of this latter distinction. Territoriality speaks to humans’ attempts to affect, influence or control the surrounding environment in a bid to claim sovereignty over the land – to make it an extension of themselves and their own place of experience. My argument is that it is a failure to
territorialise that leads to the characters’ failure to return within the novels under investigation in these exegeses, including my own. Therefore to understand the presence of the katabatic narrative in contemporary Australian outback fiction, I chose to define the inverse of territoriality – deterritorialisation.

Deterritorialisation as I have coined it may be seen as the engine at the heart of the failure to return that distinguishes the katabatic narrative. Here, a hero cannot return from the underworld because they cannot territorialise it. The complex thematic and symbolic resonances of the outback mean that protagonists in my novel, and the novels investigated in this exegesis, fail to make place out of space. Their dreams of self are revealed as illusory. They can neither govern the outback nor their own experience of it and, as such remain inhabiting or inhabited by the underworld.

A central theme of Brolga that I intend to further develop in later drafts is that of truth, the importance of truth, and even the possible lesser evil of believing the lie. In “Heart of Darkness and Plato’s Myth of the Cave”, Morzinski (2002, 230) asserts that Conrad, with Heart of Darkness, was showing that truth on earth will always be a series of disillusionments for those who are willing to let their perceptions of reality continue to incorporate new information. Those whose perceptions are based on belief or faith, on the other hand, are less likely to withstand the brilliant glare of shifting realities.

Amos, the protagonist of Brolga, is one instance of the latter. Others are found dotted throughout the canon of contemporary Australian outback fiction. It is my hope that the notions of katabasis and deterritorialisation help shed some light on these characters and their complex journeys.
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APPENDIX 1

The remainder of the manuscript for Brolga is presented here as a draft, non-assessable, version. It is appendicised for completeness and the reader’s interest.
Paul’s house was on the northern edge of town. Rainey Street ran off the highway from the east, passing the main roadhouse before snaking into town to continue west beyond the main street. Rainey Street itself was a well kept street, one of the few to actually have curbing and channelling. The houses were well-kept, many of the gardens lush from private bores. Brolga’s “wealthy” inhabitants. The street ended with the saleyards, the sounds of lowing cattle echoing off the walls of the houses. The railway, mainly used to cart livestock to the Roma saleyards, lay beyond the right side of the street, unofficially acting as the northern border of the town. Everything has its price.

24 Rainey Street was a rambling house, its appearance giving off an impression that it was one of the first built in Brolga, its …

Paul ushered Amos in the front door, closed the screen door behind them, then steered him to a small room to the right off the hallway. The bed was a single, the mattress thick and sagging a little in the middle, a multicoloured blanket thrown over the top, tassels brushing the carpeted floor. Other than an antique wooden table beside the bed, its surface blanketed by a white lace doily, and a wardrobe that had seen better days in the corner, the room was bare.

‘The guest room,’ Paul proclaimed. ‘Mainly the drunk room, when blokes can’t drive their way home without the probability of hitting a kangaroo. Or a guidepost.’

Amos blanched. ‘I thought everyone drank drove out here.’

Paul shrugged. ‘Most blokes do, head home to their stations after a big night at the pub. But not from here.’ Paul left it at that.

Amos dumped his possessions on the bed, the mattress sinking further with an audible groan. He followed Paul as he gave a cursory tour of the house. Paul’s room was directly opposite the hallway, a bigger room yet similarly nondescript, the differences being a double bed, an ornate chest of drawers and a large poster of Al Pacino beside the doorway. The hallway was also bare save for a duchess that Amos guessed had to be at least Depression-era, its surface lacquered to give off reflections. Figurines of the Virgin Mary and Jesus, his foot stamping down on a serpent, ordained the duchess. A cross hung from the wall directly above it. Paul moved passed it without a glance, its presence barely noticed. Another room moved off from the hallway, but its door was closed. Paul bade it as much attention as the duchess.
The hallway ended in the living room, the white paint giving way to a blue-green, the lack of natural light making the room all the more darker. Paul moved over to a tall lamp, his hand moving under the shade to switch it on with an audible click. The room emphasised the sparseness of the rest of the house; it was overflowing with knickknacks, memorabilia and nostalgia. The walls were cluttered with photographs, a montage of Goodwin family history. One glass cabinet was filled with more familial history: books, trophies, crude novelties such as paddle pop containers and plastic ashtrays constructed by little hands. Another cabinet held china crockery, dust collecting on the top plates, along with framed black and white photographs. A gramophone was set up in the corner, the mahogany base freshly lacquered, small spots of rust on the brass horn the only sign of wear and tear on the antique machine. Two plush green recliners were positioned on either side and at angles on a knitted rug in the centre of the room, facing a large flat screen television and entertainment system, the only modern addition to the room.

‘It’s my grandmother’s house,’ Paul said, as if that explained everything. Amos nodded.

‘It’s a nice house. You’re a real homemaker.’

Paul laughed, punching Amos softly on the shoulder. ‘Fuck off!’

Amos smiled. ‘No, really! I love what you’ve done with the place. The doilies on the armchairs top it all off.’

Paul grabbed Amos in a headlock, playfully giving his hair a ruffle. ‘Now listen here you young rascally, I’ll have none of this said outside this house! It’s out little secret, OK? Now let’s get drunk.’

Amos wrestled his way out of the embrace, shrugging his shoulders from the exertion. ‘On a Thursday? Don’t police officers have to work around here?’

Paul chuckled. ‘It’s Sergeant to you. And no, I don’t work. Why, you don’t want a beer?’

Amos shook his head emphatically. ‘I never say no.’

‘So I’ve heard,’ Paul replied, giving a sly wink. ‘Now, come see the piece a la resistance.’

They moved into the kitchen, a small room that barely fitted a small Formica table and three chairs, a fridge and a pantry, grabbed two stubbies and moved through another door onto a back verandah. The wooden deck was rich brown, evidence of constant oiling and upkeep. Two squatter’s chairs sat facing out over the backyard, an esky in between them, an ashtray and scattered ash on its lid, denoting its use as a makeshift table. The clothesline and a faded
garden hose snaking its way towards a small vegetable garden situated against a metal shed were the only things breaking the monotony of the lawn. The lawn itself was lush by Brolga standards, the dusk making the grass darker. The backyard was fenced off by weary Cyclone fencing; beyond laid the railway tracks, tufts of Spinifex grass and red nothingness.

Paul slumped into the closest squatter’s chair, the canvas squeaking from the exertion, his feet flung out on the wooden extensions. He motioned to the other with his stubby before taking a mouthful of beer. He swallowed loudly, a satisfying sigh punctuating the action.

‘You’re about to witness one of the wonders of the world Amos,’ Paul said, gesturing to the barren landscape beyond, the light dimming, the turquoise sky fading. ‘The sunsets out here; you’ve never seen any like em. Trust me; they are worth the admission price alone.’

Amos chuckled. ‘You mean people pay to come to Brolga?’

Paul looked at him. ‘How did you get here?’

Amos frowned. ‘By bus…’

‘So you paid to get here, didn’t you?’ He looked at Amos sternly before the ever reliable roguish grin returned. ‘I’m just kidding with you!’

Amos nodded as he opened his beer and had a drink. The liquid slid down beautifully, the taste familiar yet adored all the same.

Paul became serious again. ‘We’ll start looking for information about your parents in earnest tomorrow. I will tell you now; it may take some time. It’s not gonna be fun work for me; paper trails never are. But by next week we should have results.’

Amos stared at Paul, but he stared off at the horizon, eyes clouded in thought. He nodded absently, turned his face to the fading sky.

‘I realise that this may not be the right way to go about things, but can I ask you some questions about your parents?’

Amos, expressionless, ‘I don’t know much, but sure, go ahead.’

Paul shifted in his chair, his attention on Amos’ profile. ‘Why?’

Amos turned, apprehension etched on his face. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Why look for them now? Or in this way? Lavinia said that you’ve been real closed up about it. Just seems weird. Not like you.’
Amos’ eyes darkened. ‘Not like me? What do you mean? And what do you mean, “Lavinia said”? What have you been talking to her about?’

Paul held his hands out in surrender. ‘Hey, nothing! It’s my job to talk to everyone.’

Amos remained derisive. ‘Really?’

‘That’s what I do; I make it my business to be friends with everyone.’

‘Even Bongo?’

Paul grinned. ‘Sure, why not? He’s a lovable lug under the thick layers of asinine hostility.’

Amos softened. ‘Your heart bleeds…’

‘Ah it does. But it doesn’t matter. I merely asked her what you were up to this morning when I found out you were in town. Ant said you were a bit reluctant yesterday too. So what is it? Not knowing who your parents are is no big deal, nothing to be ashamed of.’

‘I’m not ashamed!’ Amos burst forth, then murmured, ‘I don’t know.’

‘So why look for them? Angela’s alright, there’s no rift there is there?’

Amos shook his head emphatically, his gaze avoiding Paul. ‘No! No, Angela’s fine.’

‘And Isaac?’

‘Isaac’s Isaac. He’s good.’

‘So…’

The question hung in the air between them. Finally Amos shrugged.

‘I don’t know. You want me to be truthful?’

‘Hey, you tell me what you want to tell me. The truth, or…whatever,’

Amos stared at Paul, his forehead furrowed. Suddenly he caved in, his body shrinking into the canvas of the squatter’s chair.

‘Fuck, to be honest, I feel like nothing means anything, you know? I feel like nothing. Sometimes I just feel…’ His hands flailed in front of him, through the air, futile. He shrugged. ‘Everything feels stale. Nothing.’

‘You stated that,’ Paul said, then winced, a sharp intake of breath.
Amos pushed on. ‘I just needed to *do* something! Anything! And this felt…not right, but like *something*, you know? That finding my parents, what happened to them, might give me something.’

Silence descended, broken only by the distant roar of a road train making its way down the highway.

Paul picked at lint on his trousers, his head down. ‘What do you hope to find out?’

‘I don’t know.’ Amos paused. He put his stubby down on the esky and stood up.

‘Let me show you something. Wait here.’

Amos went into the front bedroom, unzipping the side compartment of his bag, fishing out the wallet. He stood still, looking at the embossed emblem, fingerling the leather. He patted the wallet against the palm of his hand, turned and made his way back out to the verandah. He stood in front of Paul, leaning against the railing, holding the wallet out in front of him, a talisman.

‘See this?’

Paul nodded.

‘This wallet. It’s the only thing I really remember about my father. He gave this to me the day they took me away. At first…see the emblem?’

He held the wallet out for Paul. He peered at it and nodded, wanting to hold it, before Amos brought it back, holding it at his waist, staring at it, at other things.

‘I first thought that the initials were my father’s. A clue to who I was. Of course it isn’t. But I believed that for some time, trying to guess what my last name used to be. Madison? Maybury? I finally worked out it was the manufacturer’s initials.’

Amos fell silent. Paul waited for him to continue. He did.

‘I’ve never used it. The wallet. I just hold it, wonder, and put it in a drawer until the next time. Maybe…maybe it isn’t a wallet. It’s a memory. My only history. My only clue to what might have been.’

Paul leaned back into the chair, drinking slowly from his bottle. Amos moved forward and grabbed his beer, grateful to be doing something other than talk, his mouth dry.
Paul let out a sigh. ‘Do you think that doing this – finding out about your parents I mean – will give you…direction? Purpose? A foundation, maybe?’

Amos nodded, his lips pursed. ‘I suppose.’

Paul continued, ‘See, what I mean is, you said that the wallet is your only history, but that isn’t true. Your foster family – Angela, Isaac – they all mean a lot to you, and helped you be who you are. Everyone you’ve met, everything you’ve done – that’s your history too.’

‘But is it real? See, I just don’t know hey.’

Paul gestured around him in a sweeping arc. ‘You see, I grew up here, everything that is me is tied up in this place. I may be the only Goodwin left out here, but the history speaks volumes. So many things about this town are familiar – sights, sounds, smells, everything. And a place like Brolga, I know everyone and they know me, which can be comforting, you know? Everyone knows everyone, which is a given. What I’m sayin is that everyone doesn’t know everyone. Really. So when someone turns out to not be the person you thought they were, in this town, it ruins everything. You think you have them pegged down, and then…’ Paul drifted off, the sentence unfinished. He shook his head. ‘Is that what you want?’

Amos stared off over the rooftops, and then turned his attention back to Paul, his eyes set in determination.

‘I just…want to know the truth.’

Paul stared at Amos. Finally he nodded. ‘Fair enough. That’s more than fair.’

Amos sat down again, his body aching from exhaustion.

‘Well, that’s it then. My prerogative over the next few days is you, mate. I’ll send off a notice to Births, Deaths and Marriages in Longreach first thing tomorrow, get your birth certificate or an extract. I’ll ring Child Services also, see what they can give me. Don’t worry about that, I’ll fox them on the reasons for the query, no problems there. Then we’ll go through the files dating back to 1984. Mel will gripe and groan, but don’t worry about her. A stickler for regulations, but a bleeding heart.’ He leaned over and patted Amos on the arm. ‘We’ll be well on our way over the next few days, OK?’

Amos nodded, offering a weak smile. Paul grinned and pointed at the sky.

‘Now, look at that for a sight! Nothing in the whole fucking world could beat this for a view!’
The sky painted with hues of pink and purple above the red earth, unlike anything Amos had seen. He uttered a low chuckle, shaking his head.

‘I’ve been here for a few days and I’ve never seen this.’

Paul clucked his tongue. ‘Mate, where have you been?’

‘I don’t know, Paul. I don’t know.’

They sipped from their beers in silence, the sun lipping the horizon.

…
TWENTY THREE

Night fell. A small congregation of empty bottles lingered on the esky between Amos and Paul. The soft strains of Van Morrison drifted out from the lounge room. Amos pushed a lazy hand over his face, the alcohol slowing his motions.

‘Paul?’

‘Amos?’

‘So, you’re the last Goodwin in Brolga?’

‘Aye,’ Paul replied in a Scottish accent, then chuckled. ‘The last of a dying breed.’

‘Why did your family move away?’

Paul shifted in his chair. ‘Well, Mum and Dad moved down to Brissy after Connie went to Stuartholme. I was already down at boarding school then.’

‘Marist?’

‘Yeah, Year 12 then. Grandma had passed away while Connie was finishing up at Brolga State School. I came out for the funeral, and Mum and Dad pretty much packed up and moved a couple weeks later. Dad picked up a job with the Brisbane City Council and that was that.’

‘Why wait that long? They obviously wanted to leave right?’

Paul nodded. ‘Yeah. But Grandma was here, and there was no way she was leaving Brolga. It was all she knew. And Dad wasn’t going to leave her alone.’

‘Where did you live?’

Paul stood up, pointing over the rooftops down the street. ‘See that roof, three houses over? There.’

Amos nodded. ‘Cool.’

‘Yeah, I guess.’ Paul sat back down again.

‘What did your dad do, before Brisbane?’
‘What is this, twenty questions?’ Paul laughed. ‘Just kidding. Umm, he worked on Grandpa’s property for years. *Avon.* We lived out there when I was little. I don’t think he liked it much though.’

‘Hmm?’

‘When Grandpa died, he left *Avon* to Dad in the will. I remember there was a lot of arguing between Dad and my aunt and uncles, and Grandma. In the end he sold it to Richard Norville, and we moved in here. Grandma didn’t want to ‘burden’ us, so she bought this place, and we bought down the street.’

Paul stared out across the railway, a wall of darkness beyond. ‘I had some great times out there. Half a million acres. Not the biggest station around here, but big enough. A round trip of the station, checking the livestock, fences, dams and whatnot, would take near on the whole day. A lot of room to muck around, do whatever you wanted.’

Paul sucked on his bottle, the last remnants of beer trickling down his throat. He continued to look out over the distance as he talked.

‘Brolga. I don’t know. I love the place. I have so much tied up in the place, so maybe I see it through rose-tinted glasses. What do you reckon? Of Brolga, I mean?’

‘Apart from the lack of actual brolgas?’

Paul laughed. ‘Yeah, apart from that.’

Amos thought, nodded. ‘I like it. Really. Although I’d be hard pressed to explain why.’

Paul laughed, slapping his knee with the palm of his hand. ‘Exactly! I’ve tried many times to tell people about Brolga. When I was at Marist I tried to get mates to come out for the holiday break for a week. Some came, and I guess they liked it. Riding motorbikes off jumps, swimming in the dam, shit like that. But heaps others were like, “what a shithole,” you know? And I saw their point.’

He paused. ‘It’s a beautiful country. I don’t think many people would deny that.’

‘Well, I don’t know…’

Paul laughed. ‘True, OK, maybe not everyone. But there’s something about the place, you know? It’s harsh, very unforgiving to those who disrespect it. Everything out there can bite you, sting you, stab you, kick you, wash you away. Leave you for dead. You disrespect this place at your peril. But at the same time, there’s so much beauty in it all. The sunsets, the
animals…the smell! God, the smell of the earth, it’s so…ancient, or something. The barrenness of it disguises something else. Like it’s a living and breathing thing. And we’re lucky enough to be with it, experience it, live in its presence.’

Silence permeated the porch, the music struggling to break it. Amos nodded.

‘You know what I think?’

‘What?’

‘I think you’re full of shit.’

Paul started, staring at Amos. Amos held Paul’s serious expression before his face dissolved, laughter echoing.

Paul slapped him on the shoulder, joining in the mirth. ‘You’re a bastard, you know that? Here I am, pouring out my heart to you, and you fuck with me like that?’

Amos struggled to talk through barely contained laughter. ‘I think that we need more beer.’

Amos nodded emphatically. ‘That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said all night!’

He jumped out of the squatter’s chair, bumping the esky in his enthusiasm. Before either of them could act, the bottles teetered over and crashed to the verandah floor, a cacophony of glass against glass.

‘Oh, now see what you’ve made me do!’ They continued to laugh, Paul entering the kitchen, Amos’ head against the rest of his chair. The stars twinkled, their enjoyment reciprocated.
Amos woke to a rough pain in his side. His eyes opened a crack, his face twisted in irritation. Paul hovered over him, his hair dripping from a recent shower. Dressed in police uniform, he held a broom by its bristles, poking Amos with the handle, a cheeky grin on his face. In his other hand was a beer.

‘Wakey wakey princess,’ he said, waving the open bottle under Amos’ nose. Amos groaned in pain and annoyance alike, pushing the bottle away. A few drops of beer fell onto his bed sheet.

‘Oh, now you’re gonna waste my beer! Here I am, being the consummate host, offering you my last beer, and this is what I get?’

Amos pulled the pillow over his head and rolled away from Paul. ‘Piss off!’

Paul poked Amos again, laughing as Amos squirmed and threw the pillow at him, batting it away harmlessly. ‘Come on, rise and shine!’

Amos swallowed, his tongue a cotton ball in his mouth. He coughed, groaned. ‘What time is it?’

Paul continued to grin as he peered at his watch. ‘Six…thirteen.’

Amos groaned louder. ‘Six thirteen?’

‘Six thirteen?’ Paul whined. ‘What’s wrong with you? You’re missing the best part of the day! C’mon, up and at em.’

Paul walked out of the room, pausing only to pick up the pillow and toss it back at Amos. Amos lay in the bed for a few moments, his forearms over his eyes, before he dragged himself off the mattress and out into the hallway. The sound of sizzling bacon registered before the smell did. Paul hunkered over the oven, two frypans on the coils. He looked over his shoulder, motioning for Amos to look out the back door. ‘Check it out.’

Amos stumbled to the door. Bottles littered the verandah, pooled around the two squatter’s chairs. He looked back at Paul.

‘Are you serious?’
Paul grinned. ‘We killed it all right. Unless twenty thirsty roos dropped in after two this morning.’

Amos slumped into one of the chairs around the dining table, his head in his hands.

‘I’ve gotta stop doing this.’

‘You’ve just got to get conditioned, that’s all. Put the kettle on. A cup of coffee and some greasy hot food will set you up.’

Paul craned his head to look at the kitchen bench, stretching, his finger just flicking the switch on the kettle. He went back to cradling his head. Paul cracked a few eggs into the second frypan whilst flipping rashers of bacon. He tossed the eggshells in the bin by the door, walked over to the kettle and turned it off.

‘Mate, you’ve gotta fill the fucking thing up first!’

Amos groaned. ‘Bloody hell Paul! I’m not exactly firing on all cylinders here…’

Paul laughed, patting Amos on the back, sending shock waves through his skull.

‘I’m just kidding, it’s no trouble. I’m the host after all.’

The kettle whistled to a boil as Paul slid a plate of bacon and eggs on toast in front of Amos. Despite the last few nights of drinking, for once Amos was hungry, and dug into the runny eggs, the crunchy bacon.

Paul sat across from him, placing a steaming cup of coffee in front of Amos. They ate and drank in silence.

Amos leant back, a crust of toast and traces of egg yolk the last vestiges of food on his plate. He looked at Paul, glassy-eyed.

‘You know that’ll probably come up again, don’t you?’ Paul said, smiling over his coffee.

Amos closed his eyes and nodded, Paul laughing softly. He collected Amos’ plate, moved to the sink and dropped them in with a clatter.

‘Well, I’m off to work, I’ll see you later.’

Amos grimaced. ‘You serious?’
Paul smirked. ‘No, I often get up in the wee hours to put on my uniform and walk around the house.’ He patted Amos on the shoulder. ‘I’m actually late. Go back to bed. I’ll see you later. The house is yours. Pop down to the station when you feel up to it, OK?’

Amos followed Paul out to the front door.

‘I don’t need a send off you know.’

‘My room is next to the front door, Paul. I’m not speaking to you any more.’

Paul laughed loudly. ‘You do look a sight, you sorry bastard! Take it easy.’

Amos slumped back on the bed as Paul’s Landcruiser roared down the street.

After a few fitful hours of sleep, Amos had a shower and left Paul’s house, locking the front and back doors as he went. The sun was already beating down, his tongue thickening from the heat. He made his way down to the main street, his head throbbing. He reached the police station, noticing that Paul’s Landcruiser wasn’t there. Not wanting to make pleasantries with either Roary or Mel, he walked down to the end of the street, and the Brolga Historical Museum. The mural of the swagman that adorned the front of the building held his attention. The man sitting on a log underneath a Coolabah tree, his body hunched, his long white beard barely concealing his haggard face. It amazed him how even in the heat that the swagman would wear the clothes as depicted in the painting; long ill-fitting brown slacks, a vest over a long sleeved yellow shirt. His world’s possessions swaddled within a swag beside him, a tin cup at his feet. The life of a travelling vagrant.

Amos walked inside the museum. A elderly woman sat behind a counter at the left of the door, smiling benignly as he entered.

‘How are you today, love?’

‘Good thanks.’

‘Here to look through the museum, or just getting out of the heat?’

Amos smiled wanly. ‘A bit of both, actually.’

Her eyes glittered behind her large glasses, magnifying her rheumy eyes. ‘Yes, it is a hot one. Well, it’s a gold coin donation to see the museum.’

Amos’ eyebrows arched in surprise. ‘Is that all?’
She laughed. ‘Yes, that’s all! This is a non-profit business. Every cent goes towards the upkeep of Brolga’s history.’ She waved a frail hand in front of her, indicating what lay beyond. ‘We can charge more if you like.’

Amos shook his head, fished a ten dollar note out of his wallet. ‘Here. Keep the change.’

The lady’s mouth formed an O of shock. ‘Oh, I couldn’t do that! One or two dollars is more than enough!’

‘Please. Put it towards the restoration of the shack.’

The lady beamed her appreciation as she pulled a lever on the old fashioned cash register on the counter, the buttons embossed in pre-metric currency symbols. The register looked quite empty – his note the only one in the till. The lady began to count out coins for his change, but he walked off before she could hand them over.

Amos walked around the _______. 
Lavinia saw Amos as he entered the Transcontinental Hotel. He noticed her expression before she turned away to disappear into the cold room – her eyes clouded, thoughts he could not fathom. The other two men in the pub, regulars he recognised, nodded his way. He returned the favour before moving out the side door and to the kitchen. He could hear erratic banging sounds coming from the back, but could not see where it was coming from. Each bang caused Amos’ jaw to twitch.

‘Alby?’ he called out, leaning against the threshold, not wanting to enter the man’s domain.

A grunt was his reply.

‘Ah, it’s Amos. Just wanted to fix up the tab. for the room.’

Another grunt. Alby appeared from behind the stainless steel bench that sat as an island in the middle of the room, brushing off his pants, a large shifting spanner in his hand, his face marked with rivulets of sweat. He staggered forward, brushing past Amos without a word as he made his way to the bar. Amos followed him.

‘Now, the room. Four nights. That’s sixty.’

‘Three nights.’

‘What?’ Alby grunted.

‘I only stayed here three nights. I moved out yesterday morning…’

Alby stared at him, his face granite. Amos shook his head, the movement causing a brief moment of nausea. He handed over the money.

‘Sixty it is then,’ he muttered.

The money disappeared into Alby’s overalls pocket.

‘Thanks for staying at the Transcontinental Hotel,’ Alby muttered before turning around and moving back into the kitchen. The banging resumed.

Amos stood rooted to the spot, bemused at the belligerence displayed. He made to leave.

‘So you’re leaving us then.’
Amos turned, the voice swirling his already churning stomach. Lavinia stood at the cash register, one hand on the machine, the other at her hip. Her face struggled to remain expressionless.

Amos shrugged, shuffling feet an exclamation point of awkwardness. ‘I’m not leaving. I’ll be around.’

She nodded, her eyes flaring. She chewed her bottom lip, nodding again as if coming to a decision. ‘Fine. I’ll see you around then.’ She turned, her attention focused on a tray of freshly cleaned pot glasses.

Amos stared at her, confusion playing across his features. He continued to shuffle on the spot, unsure of what was going on. Finally he approached the bar.

‘Lavinia? What’s going on here?’

She turned around, her eyes dead. ‘What’s going on where?’

Amos shook his head, then pointed out to the dining area. ‘Can I talk to you, alone, for a few moments?’

She gestured around the bar at the two other patrons. ‘We are alone.’

Amos shook his head again, frustration etched on his face. He turned on his heel and walked into the dining area without waiting for her reply. He sat at a table furthest away from the bar and from the kitchen. He waited there for a couple of minutes, his foot tapping incessantly underneath the table, before Lavinia sauntered over towards him. He felt a twang of lust as she moved; her breasts pushed against her black singlet, the black jeans hugging her hips for dear life. It was quickly overcome by the look on her face: indifference.

‘What?’ she blurted as she sat across from him.

Amos ran his hands through his hair. ‘Look, I’m not sure what’s going on here! Did you not like what happened the other night?’

‘What are you talking about?’ she asked, leaning back against the chair, her eyes burning into him.

Amos rolled his eyes, a rush of breath coming out in frustration. ‘You know what I mean!’

She nodded. ‘You mean when I fucked you?’
Amos nodded, then shook his head, his brow furrowed. ‘Yes. Well, no! I mean, since we slept together…’

‘Fucked,’ Lavinia spat.

‘…Since then you’ve avoided me, and now that I move out of this fucking pub you go all pissed off! What’s going on here!’

‘I’m not pissed off.’

‘Bullshit! There was none of this…coldness before I slept with you.’

‘Fucked.’

‘Whatever, fuck! I really like you, OK? But this…you don’t act like this with Curt.’

Her face darkened. ‘What about Curt?’

‘The first night I was here. I saw…heard you and him fucking. For most of the fucking night! And you don’t go all angsty with him!’

Lavinia hit the table with the palm of her hand in anger. ‘What the fuck are you on about? Curt’s a friend. We fucked. It was good. That’s all. I like to fuck, OK? Is there anything wrong with that?’

She stared at Amos for a few moments. Amos watched her battle for control of whatever emotions were going through her mind before she stood up abruptly, the chair screaming against the linoleum flooring.

‘I don’t need this shit. I don’t need this, and I don’t need you. Now is there anything else you wanted?’

‘Lavinia…’ Amos pleaded, but she was already making her way back to the bar, refusing to look back. He ran his hand over his mouth, feeling sucker-punched. He had no idea what had happened, or why. All he knew was that if his head hurt before then, it killed like a bitch afterwards. He got up, putting both his and Lavinia’s chairs underneath the table, and made his way out of the hotel. He looked back at Lavinia as he left. She did not return his gaze.
TWENTY SIX

Amos found himself outside Tracker’s Treasures before he knew where he was.
TWENTY SEVEN

Mel looked up from the counter and beamed. ‘Hello love! What have you got there?’

Amos held up the canvas bag, shrugged. ‘Picked up a few things from Tracker’s Treasures.’

Mel waggled her pencil-drawn eyebrows. ‘Tracker, hey? What’s he got down there now?’

‘Everything.’

Mel smirked. ‘I bet he does. The way he scrounges around town with those dogs of his, he probably has half of Brolga down there.’

There was a commotion from the back of the police station. Amos peered past her at the door beyond. Mel cleared her throat, getting his attention.

‘So how have you been? I hear you have been making quite the impression!’

‘Sorry?’

‘Word gets around! There’s not much to talk about here…’

Amos shuffled his feet, the canvas bag tapping against his leg. Meg laughed.

‘Nothing bad! Just that you have made a lot of friends. Unless…you have been up to some mischief, hmmm?’

Amos’s face reddened, a reaction Mel seemed to enjoy. ‘Oh you naughty boy! Who have you sunk your fangs into?’

‘Now, now, Mel, keep the gossip to the King’s Crown tattle-tales!’ Paul walked up to the counter, re-rolling his shirt sleeve. Amos could see his knuckles were chafed. He looked back up at Paul and smiled.

‘Bloody hell Paul, just when I was getting to the juicy bit!’ Mel picked up some papers and stood up, moving towards the fax machine that sat on the rear filing cabinet.

Paul winked at Amos. ‘How you feeling, Sleeping Beauty?’

‘Pretty dusty,’ Amos laughed quietly.

Paul nodded at the bag. ‘What took you so long? What you got there?’

‘Oh, some groceries. I went down to Tracker’s…’
‘Yeah? I bet he got you some “specials”, too? Bring em round back, I’ll put em in the fridge.’

Paul opened the grey door and let Amos through. As he followed Paul down the hallway, Amos saw that the door at the end of the corridor was ajar, and could hear some muffled sounds coming from outside, presumably the drunk tank. Paul ushered him into the staffroom, then left briefly. Amos heard the door shut with a click.

Paul took the bag from Amos and walked towards the fridge, looking inside as he did so. He whistled. ‘How does he do it? This lettuce is the greenest thing I’ve seen in Brolga since…well, since time began I reckon!’ He chuckled. ‘And what’s this? Cumquats?’

‘There’s cumquat jam there too,’ Amos offered. ‘He has a little garden down the other side of his house, covered by a tarp.’

‘And a cumquat tree?’

‘I don’t know…’

‘Bet he steals em,’ Paul huffed, cramming the bag in the fridge and closing the door.

‘Probably has half of Brolga in that place of his.’

‘That’s what Mel said.’

‘Hey, don’t get me wrong, Tracker is a good bloke, keeps to himself. In fact he is a bit of a celebrity outside of here. The tour buses’ – he laughed derisively – ‘the tour buses when they come through tend to stop off there. It would be embarrassing if Tracker didn’t seem to enjoy it so much.’

Amos didn’t say anything. Paul slumped down in one of the brown leather chairs that surrounded the cluttered kitchen table. Amos sat opposite him. Paul let out a groan.

‘What a day, mate! Apparently there was a bit of a stoush down at the Trans last night – we have a couple boys sleeping it off in the tank.’ He wriggled his eyebrows. ‘One of em is your mate.’

‘Who?’

‘Bongo.’

Amos grimaced. ‘Oh.’
‘Yeah, seems that a couple boys got reeling drunk before they were to go out shootin’, and ended up shooting their mouths at each other over a game of pool. It hasn’t happened for a while – guess we were due.’

Amos shrugged and looked at his feet.

‘You wanna look at him?’

Amos looked up sharply. ‘What?’

Paul grinned. ‘You can peek in the window at him. He’s looking pretty sorry for himself, let me tell you!’

Amos stared, then shook his head. ‘I don’t…think that’s a good idea.’

Paul’s expression darkened for a moment, then he smiled again. ‘I’m just kidding, mate! He’d probably rip your face off!’

Amos smiled weakly. ‘He’d try.’

Paul slapped both hands on the arm rests of the chair, the flesh on vinyl making a gunshot sound that made Amos jump. ‘Actually, I have about a million things to do before tonight…’

Amos nodded. ‘Sure, of course, no problem! I’m feeling a bit fried anyway, I might just go home.’

Paul leaned forward, his face a mask of concern. ‘Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. You aren’t looking too peachy. You ok?’

Amos shrugged, scratching his wrist absently. ‘Yeah. Probably just hungover.’

‘Don’t I know it!’

They both stood up. Paul grabbed the bag back out of the fridge and pushed it into Amos’ chest. They walked towards the back door.

‘I’m heading out now Mel!’ Paul hollered over his shoulder. ‘Radio in if you need anything, I’ll probably won’t be back this evening!’

They walked out without waiting for a reply. The sun hit them and they both winced, scrambling hurriedly for their sunglasses.

‘Shit, I am hungover!’ Paul laughed. ‘Look, I’ve gotta run out pretty quick, but I’ll be round home in a few hours. Get a bit of sleep if you can, it’s gonna be a big night.’
‘Why’s that?’

Paul flashed Amos a devilish grin.

‘I’m taking you roo shooting.’
TWENTY EIGHT

AMOS/PAUL/ROARY/JACKIE/_______

THREE DOGS?

Banging on the screen door. Amos stirred. The room was dim, everything in shades of blue and grey. His lips parted with effort; his mouth swollen like it had been filled with cotton balls. He swallowed, grimaced, swallowed again.

The banging continued. Amos made out a voice above the clatter.

‘C’mon mate, get up! We need to get goin!’
TWENTY NINE

Amos could feel something wet wash across his face. He grunted, his eyes squeezed shut. The wet ____ swept across his cheek a second time, a third. He grunted again, tried to move but was stuck.

‘Rexy, getaway from there!’

Amos’ right eye opened and quickly snapped shut again, his face a mask of pain. He risked cracking his eyelid once more. Stinky Pete’s ____ mastiff Rex stood inches from him, panting hot breath into his face. He pulled away, his skin dragging across the black vinyl couch. It burned – he had sweated throughout the night, fusing him to the cracked surface.

Amos had righted himself and held his head in his hands, Rex hovering in front of him, by the time Stinky Pete entered the living room, a grease-stained tea towel draped over his shoulder. He shooed Rex away with the towel, the dog wimpering with his tail between his legs and the whites of his eyes showing, unsure how his curiosity and care had brought on such chastisement.

Stinky Pete laughed, more a roar in the small confines. His daughter clung to Pete’s leg, peering shyly at Amos from under her auburn bangs.

‘How’re ya feelin’, buddy?’ Pete grinned.

Amos didn’t answer, merely shaking his head and resting it against his knees, an upright foetus. Pete doubled over, expelling another roar in the process. _____ giggled from behind splayed grubby fingers.

‘It did get a little outta hand, didn it? I had to drag you just about kickin and screamin onto the couch! You really had the bottle on!’

Amos groaned into his knees. ‘What time is it?’

‘What time is it, sweetie?’

‘Breakfast time!’ she called with unabashed glee.

‘Sure is,honey! And what time do we have breakfast?’

‘Seven o’clock!’ she said assertively, her arms crossing, a mock look of consternation marking her delicate features. Pete laughed again.
‘That’s right! OK, go back into the kitchen and get your _____.’

‘Can I have the strawberry one?’

‘If we have one.’

____ turned on her heel and raced into the kitchen, closely followed by raised voices.

‘Hello, looks like ____ already has the strawberry one!’ Pete smirked. ‘And so it begins…’

‘What…happened last night?’ Amos managed to gasp out. He was met with more booming laughter.

‘Admittedly things were stepped up a bit last night, but that is what we do when us fellas get together for a shoot. Jackie can’t help himself. Usually Paul pulls us into line, but I think you led him astray. We’ll have to watch you – the way you drink, you’ll be taking ol Leo _____’s record soon enough!’

Amos roused himself back into a sitting position and peered blearily up at the hulking figure in the doorway.

‘Where is Paul?’

‘Home probably. I hope so – he sure was rat-arsed!’

‘How come I …’

‘How come you’re still here? Mate, you could barely crawl! And the angle Paul was leanin’, he had no chance in Hell in dragging your sorry arse home! No skin mate – we often have someone crashed on the couch at some stage or other. You’re lucky you didn’t have ______ jumping on you – he likes to lead in knees first…’

Pete continued to talk about his children. Amos dragged his hands over his face. Stubble scraped against skin. His dark hair stuck out at the back.

______raced in with a ______ held aloft, ______ in hot pursuit.

‘But Daddy said I could have strawberry!’

‘Dad, I had already started drinking it! She can have the vanilla one!’

He looked at Amos. He pointed, a small smile smudging his freckled face. ‘You look like Astro-Boy!’
_____ saw the opening. She snatched the popper and took off into the kitchen. _____ stared at
his now empty hand for a second, incredulous it held nothing but air, before he took off with
both hands flailing in the air. Pete frowned.

‘Shit, things are about to get a little hot in the kitchen. You want anything to eat?’

The mention of food made Amos physically gag.

‘Oh shit, mate, not on the carpet! I’m not that bad a cook! Haha, Ill grab you some water,
that’ll calm things down for ya.’

Pete turned and walked into the kitchen, calling out to _____ at top volume. The response was
equally vocal, and incredibly caustic.

Amos slumped into the couch, feeling jagged vinyl dig into his back and thighs. His hands
fidgeted in his lap. He instinctively grabbed his right wrist with his left hand. His fingers still
shook and shivered, dancing to their own tune.

‘Sorry mate, I had to grab it out of the tap…’

Amos balled his hands into fists and jammed them to his side as Pete lumbered back in, a
brown mug filled with water almost hidden in his right hand. He handed it over and Amos
snatched it with both hands. He brought the mug to his lips and downed half of the tepid
liquid in one gulp. Water trickled down his chin and onto his shirt.

Pete blanched and raised his hands to the ceiling. ‘Shit, don’t let me get in the way of a man
and his tap-water!’

Amos finished the mug and ran the back of his hand unsteadily across his mouth. He stood
up, then stood still for a moment, his eyes closed. Pete made to move forward, but amos held
his hand up, stoof still for another few moments, then handed him the mug.

‘Thnaks Pete, but I better be off.’

‘Nah, stay! _____ is just finishing up the meat for breakfast. We have a whole spread!’

As Pete mentioned it, the smell of frying grease, meat and eggs wafted out of the kitchen.
Amos held his hand to his mouth.

‘Sorry, but I’m not hungry.’

‘You sure? We have some of the meat from last night, fresh off the bone?’

‘Last night?’
‘Yeah, the roo you shot! Waste not want not!’

Amos staggered down the hallway and flung open the screen door, the force of the sun already bearing down on him. He made his way across the yellowed semblance of a lawn and moved up the street.

Pete came out on the verandah. ‘Hang on Amos, Ill make you up a doggy bag! Amos!’

_____________________

Amos staggered through the bedroom door and plunged onto the bed, the soft mattress immediately moulding to his frame. He lay stock still, waiting for the roiling ocean within him to subside. Eventually it did.

A ringing sound stirred him from his comatose state. Amos rose stiffly, walked down the hallway into the kitchen. He peered into Paul’s room. He wasn’t there. The room was a shambles, clothes and detritus thrown everywhere. The splintered remnants of the guitar lay near the door, the strings snaking their way towards him.

The white Telecom wall mounted phone, complete with _______, rang once more. Amos hesitated before picking the receiver up and holding it to his ear.

‘Hello?’ a female voice, faint. Amos waited.

‘Paul? Are you OK? You weren’t yourself last night… Paul?’

Amos opened his mouth, then closed it.

‘Paul?’ the voice pleaded. Amos still said nothing.

‘Ah, fuck you!’

Click.

Amos stared at the receiver, went to place it down, then stopped. Instead he put his fingers into the _______, dialling a number he didn’t realise was still locked away.

‘Hello, ______ residence?’

‘Angela.’
‘Amos!’ Pause. ‘You are still there?’

‘Yes…’

A sharp outtake of breath. Amos hurried on.

‘How are you?’

‘Amos…are you ok?’

Amos gripped the receiver tightly to his ear and slid down the wall, crouching on the floor. He didn’t say anything.

‘I’m – we are worried about you. Please, just come home.’

‘I can’t’, Amos sighed.

‘Why? Why can’t you just come home? Just get on the next bus and we will pick you up at Roma Street.’

‘I haven’t found anything out.’

‘And why is that?’ Angela’s voice was now infused with anger. ‘What have you been doing out there? I told you that nothing good would come of this, but did you listen? No! If God wanted this He would have…’

‘Would have what?’ Amos spat. ‘Huh? What good has God ever done, Angela? Where was He when I was a kid? Where was He when I was snatched away, never to see my own parents again? Where was He?’

‘He brought you to us.’

Amos stopped. The receiver shook. A tear broke away and trekked down his cheek.

‘Have you been taking your medication?’

Amos shook his head. ‘Don’t start.’

‘Oh Amos, that’s it! I’m coming to get you, this has gone on far too much!’

‘No!’ he shouted. ‘I’m fine! I want to do this, don’t fucking try to stop me!’

Silence. Amos bit his lip.

‘Look, Angela…’
‘No, no. That’s fine. You do what you have to.’ Pause. ‘You called me.’

‘I’ll be home soon, OK? Ill be home soon.’

‘I love you.’

Amos nodded in silence.

‘Please come home soon,’ Angela whispered, her voice shaking, before the line went dead.
Utes littered the man made hill next to the cricket clubhouse, their trays backed up to the fence line of the oval. Deckchairs, mouldy couches and beanbags adorned each tray, an esky the prerequisite accoutrement. Many of the crowd that littered the hill were in their Sunday finest, despite the heat, the sweat curling down their faces and pooling at their armpits the crosses they were willing to bear. Out in the middle fifteen men dressed in white, all bowing to the religion of the red leather ball.

Amos made his way up the steps and into the crowded clubhouse. The box air conditioners rattled on either side of the room, battling to combat the oppressive heat with so many bodies packed around them. A familiar voice rose above the hubbub, and he made his way to the packed bar where an already inebriated Marley was well ensconced.

‘Amos, how be ye!’ he shouted into Amos’s ear as he belted him on the back. Amos swayed unsteadily, buffeted by Marley’s churlish laughter.

‘You look like shit mate! I heard about last night. Sounds like a really doozy, duffed I missed it!’ He sized Amos rumpled form up and down. ‘You’ve done all right, considering.’

‘Hmm?’

‘You are standing after your first shoot!’ Marley roared. ‘Jackie told me he doused you in enough booze to knock out a water buffalo!’

Amos smiled wanly, then balked as a cold glass of beer was pushed into his hand. He started to shake his head, but Marley was having none of it.

‘Trust me, sip on this one. It’ll taste like broken glass, but it heals all wounds.’

They shuffled back towards the front of clubhouse. The front wall was all glass, allowing a good view of the oval. Just then a faint communal roar went up from the crowded men in white, dispelled by the slight shake of the umpire’s head.

‘Big innings, this one,’ Marley murmured over the foam of his beer. ‘It’s Brolga’s innings. _________ batted last Sunday and were all out for 246. Not a bad total considering that old Sid Hughes was away mustering. He’s worth at least fifty.’

The bowler strolled in, a laconic half hop, then rocketed the ball down the pitch. The wickets exploded, and this time the umpire’s discretion was not needed.
‘Shit!’ Marley spat, and most of the clubhouse concurred. The _____ players crowded around each other as the batsman made his way back to the clubhouse, swinging his bat in frustration.

‘That’s not good at all,’ Marely opined. ‘We’re still some way off their bloody total, and Mark Sturgess is the last recognised batsmen. Well, after Paul that is.’

Amos squinted out at the pitch. Sure enough, Paul hovered halfway down the pitch, staring out at the next batsman trudge out to face the onslaught.

‘How’s he doing?’

‘Paul? Not bad, considering.’

Amos looked quizzically.

‘Well shit, the stink that came off him when he arrived this morning I’m surprised he isn’t laying in a ditch somewhere! It’s not often you see ol Goody three sheets to the wind like that I can tell you!’

A few of the men around Marley murmured agreement. He leaned into Amos.

‘It all hinges on him – again. I’m gonna head over to the scorers’ desk, be back in a jiff.’

Marley moved away, leaving Amos to stare into his untouched beer.

A hand dropped on his shoulder, making Amos spin around.

‘Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you!’ Tom Lehmann asked warmly, giving Amos’ shoulder another squeeze. ‘How you holdin up?’

‘Sorry?’

‘You haven’t loosened up much thren, I see,’ Tom said, his eyes gleaming. He leaned back and looked Amos in the eye. ‘Just asking after you , to see how you are. I hear you have moved out of the Transcontinental.’

Amos swallowed, hunched his shoulders and nodded, his eyes on the tips of his shoes. ‘Yeah, moved out. At Paul’s insistence. You know Paul Goodwin?’

‘We all know Paul Goodwin round here,’ Tom smiled.

Just then another roar went up on the hill. Out in the middle the wickets were splayed and Paul was flat against the earth, his bat held forth like a horizontal Excalibur. The tension
wavered in the air as all and sundry turned to the square leg umpire. His arm remained down; a barely discernible shake of the head. The clubhouse erupted in a cheer of relief and hope.

‘Ah, speak of the devil!’ Tom chuckled. He made to move outside, ushering Amos to follow.

The clammy artificial air may not have been optimal, but it was enough to make the heat outside a physical force. Amos reeled and immediately felt the perpiration on his brow and down the middle of his back. He followed Tom down the verandah, past the tense Brolga cricketers whose innings had been cut short and whose fortunes lay with the last two men standing in the middle with the willow in their hands. Tom led them to a sliver of shade where a few people had strategically placed their deckchairs, giving waves and amiable salutations as he did so. Amos tipped his finger at a couple of people that he vaguely recognised from around town, before gratefully slumping into a proffered maroon camping chair. Tom eased himself into a blue one opposite.

‘Maria and I always come down to watch the cricket after Mass on a Sunday,’ Tom said. ‘Even when she isn’t here, I still can’t help to bring the two chairs. There’s always someone grateful for a seat in the shade.’

‘Maria…is your wife?’

Tom nodded.

‘Where is she today?’

Tom nodded to his right. Over the windswept sands of the golf course could be made out the white and grey tombstones that littered Brolga Cemetery.

Amos’ face dropped. ‘Oh Tom, sorry…’

Tom smiled. ‘Don’t be silly Amos, you weren’t to know! It has been a little while now, but I see her every day.’ Tom’s smile lingered as he turned back to the match.

Paul was on his haunches as one of his teammates raced out with a water bottle. The runner was down next to Paul, his body movements urgent. He patted him on the back before running back to the boundary, leaving Paul to impart the hasty information to his batting compatriot.

‘It’s a close game,’ Tom commented. ‘Ah, but Paul will pull us through.’

Sure enough, the first ball of the over sees Paul pulling the ball behind square leg for four, and the roar goes up once more. Amos looked around. The crowd were restless.
‘Having any luck?’

Amos turned around. Tom was watching him, his expression hidden under the shade from his fedora.

‘Sorry?’

‘With the change of scenery. I haven’t seen you for a few days.’

Amos laughed weakly. ‘It’s been OK.’

‘Just OK? Surely the bountiful treasures that Brolga offers would provide you with a more colourful response?’

Tom laughed, and Amos followed suit, the first true show of mirth that day.

‘Well, it has been colourful, for sure. I went shooting with Paul, Roary Roary, Jackie Rickson and Sti…er, Pete – umm…’

‘Don’t worry, even Fr Monaghan calls him Stinky Pete. It’s his God-given name, I’m sure!’

Tom offered a low whistle. ‘Well, that’s a motley bunch! Was it your first?’

Amos nodded curtly. ‘You could say that.’

Tom slapped his thigh. ‘They turned it on for you, didn’t they? I was going to ask after your health, but now I know!’ He continued laughing. Amos looked down at his hand, and his smile dissipated.

Tom’s attention was diverted back to the match. Amos looked at him. Tom’s “Sunday best” barely differed from the first time he had met him. He had _______.

‘You were at Mass this morning?’

‘Mmm?’ Tom dragged himself from the activity to look at Amos quizzically. ‘Oh, well yes. Every Sunday for many, many years.’

Amos looked around at the families, men with their sports coats draped across chairs, women in their long flowing dresses, children struggling with ties and ribbons. ‘Is it busy every Sunday?’

‘My word, yes! It’s the one time of the week when you are bound to see most people in town. In fact a lot of business gets done – you know that the one place you can pin most fellas down will be at St Stephen’s on a Sunday morning!’
Amos nodded. Tom shifted in his chair.

‘Why do you ask?’

Amos shrugged, noncommittal. ‘Just asking.’

Tom shrugged and went to move back to the game, but Amos rushed forward.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean look at this place!’ Amos stopped, embarrassed. ‘Sorry…’

‘Go on…’

‘Well, it’s hot, and dry, and everyone seems to think it’s a struggle out here. Yet everyone seems happy. Everyone still goes to cricket matches, to the pub, to Mass. I guess…I don’t get the appeal.’

Tom stared at Amos for a moment before rocking back in his chair, a wheezing laugh bursting forth. His hat looked ready to topple from his head, but Tom caught it just in time, straightening it whilst still laughing.

‘Son, that is a very good question indeed! Maria would have loved that one.’ He wiped his eyes with an embroidered handkerchief, which just as quickly disappeared inside his front shirt pocket.

‘Maria didn’t really get the appeal of Brolga either, son. She came out here with a singing troupe back in 1955.’ Tom’s eyes misted over, disappearing into the past. ‘I fell in love with her the moment she stood up on stage, her beautiful long hair falling down her shoulders. She had the most beautiful voice. I asked her for a dance…and that was that.’ He sighed. ‘She was from Taroom. Not exactly a bustling metropolis in itself, but she felt out of place here. But it didn’t take long. Brolga has that way with people. It sucks you in. In a good way of course. It’s the community. Everyone knows everyone, everyone has a place. It can be hard – the land isn’t exactly forgiving, my word! – but we find ways to hold it all together. To become strong. It’s hard to see from the outside looking in, I suppose – but the appeal is in the people.’

Amos looked down at his untouched beer. He smiled.

‘A bit like Hotel California.’
‘What’s that?’

‘The Eagles song? *You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave*?’

Tom looked at Amos. ‘I’m not much of a music buff…but that sounds about right.’

They both chuckled.

An almighty roar rose up from the clubhouse. Amos and Tom looked to the oval, just as the cricket ball clattered into the boundary fence. Paul had his bat raised in the air, his fellow batsman holding him in a hug. The other Brolga cricketers raced out onto the field in celebration.

‘Yep, he’s done it again,’ Tom said with a smile. ‘The golden boy.’

The end of the match saw movement all around the hill as the families started to get their things together for their trip home. Just as many moved towards the clubhouse, to whet the head of another Brolga victory.

Amos watched as Paul separated himself from the excited throng of white and started jogging towards the left side of the field. He seemed to be yelling out something. The other cricketers hollered after him, grins plastered across their faces, but he paid them no heed. Paul waved his arms. Amos craned his head to see who he was looking at, but couldn’t make anyone out from the departing hordes. He stopped and walked back to his waiting teammates.

‘What was that all about?’ Amos asked.

Tom shrugged. ‘Just another lucky fan, I guess.’ He pushed himself up slowly and collapsed his deckchair. He looked up at Amos.

‘Coming down to the Brolga? I’m sure you’ll find some more appeal down there tonight!’
The Brolga was already packed by the time Amos and Tom pushed through the doors. The PA was in overdrive, with punters screaming the words of Queen’s *We Are The Champions* in varying degrees of musical prowess. They pushed their way to the bar to see Noel already looking haggard.

‘You look like having a busy time of it!’ Tom said.

‘Tell me about it,’ Noel replied. ‘We are pretty tight on tonight. I think most orders will be for steak in a glass tonight though, so the kitchen will at least be quiet!’

Amos glanced at Noel with a questioning look. Without answering he poured two pots and placed them on the bar.

‘Two steaks in a glass, gentlemen!’

They squeezed their way around a corner table. The cricketers had arrived to jovial fanfare, a few beers sprayed over the unlikely winners. Marley muscled in on the festivities, leading the local victory chant. Amos scanned the crowd.

‘You see Paul?’

Tom peered around the pub. ‘No. He may have ducked home to have a shower. From all reports he didn’t get much sleep last night either.’

Amos looked at Tom, who put his hands in the air. ‘Word gets around fast!’ He slapped Amos on the shoulder.

Amos sat on his first beer for some time, but after his second was already regaling stories from last night’s shoot. The men goaded him into more outrageous hyperbole, the main instigator being Marley. The beers continued to flow.

A familiar figure walked past the window. Amos excused himself from the festivities and ducked outside.

‘Leo!’

Leo spun around, his ratty grey hair spinning around like a salt-and-pepper whirligig. He sauntered back towards Amos, a crude rolled cigarette stuck to his lips, his hands deep in his jeans pockets.
‘Amos! Long time no see!’

Amos laughed. ‘I only stepped out a couple days ago!’

‘Ah, you were comin’ to be a welcome fixture!’ He nodded his head to the pub as another raucous cheer went up. ‘I’m guessing another win to the mighty Brolga boys?’

‘You guessed correct.’ Amos rocked back on his heels. ‘Come on in, I’ll shout you a beer.’

Leo shook his head. ‘Sorry mate, another time.’

Amos scowled. ‘Why? Where you headed?’

Leo wagged his head. ‘The Trans?’

‘Oh, so you are going for a beer? Then come on, Ill get you one.’

Leo waved the invitation away with a flick of his hand. ‘Nah mate.’

Amos squinted. ‘What? Can’t you come in to the Brolga? Are you banned or something? You aren’t banned are you?’

‘No, I’m not fuckin’ banned!’ Leo moved closer to Amos, lowering his voice. ‘It isn’ like that kid. That’s not my crowd. I’ve drunk at the Trans since I was barely of age, and a few times more before then. It’s my place.’

Amos shook his head. ‘I don’t understand…’

‘And you don’t need to. It’s nothing major. It’s just how it is. It’s my place.’

Amos scratched his head. ‘But…can’t you change it?’

Leo shrugged. ‘Of course. But why? It’s what I’m used to. I like it. Anywhere else wouldn’t be the same.’

Amos stood there for a moment, then shrugged. He ducked back inside, drained his beer and tapped Tom on the shoulder.

‘I’m off mate.’

‘Really? But things are only getting started!’

‘I know. Sorry to leave you. I still owe you a drink.’

‘No you don’t! I’m about to leave anyway. Well, come down to the saleyards, don’t be a stranger, OK?’
Amos nodded, patted Tom on the shoulder, and made his way back out onto the footpath. Leo was a distant figure down the street.

‘Leo!’ Amos hollered. Leo turned around as Amos jogged down the street towards him.

‘What’re’ya doin?’ Leo asked as Amos reached him.

Amos grinned. ‘I ain’t got a place.’

Leo laughed and slapped Amos on the shoulder. ‘Yet you wanna make the Trans your home? You sorry bastard!’

The Transcontinental was dead in comparison to the revellers that overflowed the Brolga. Leo and Amos strolled over to the bar where Alby stood wiping beer glasses, looking indolent.

‘Two of your finest!’ Leo croaked slyly as he perched on his favoured stool. Amos sidled next to him.

Alby cocked one eyebrow, reluctantly throwing the teatowel over his shoulder and placing the newly-cleaned glasses under the tap.

‘You’re late.’

‘Whaddaya mean, late?’

‘I was expectin’ you here an hour ago! You’re the only reason I stay in business, you know!’

Leo and Amos laughed. Alby remained po-faced, yet the lines around his eyes softened as he took Leo’s crumpled note to the till.

Leo looked around the bar. ‘Roos a plenty on God’s day of rest.’ He cackled and downed his pot in one gulp. ‘Another!’

Alby shook his head with silent bemusement as he poured another drink.

‘So the Brolga boys are back in town.’ Leo looked up at Amos. ‘Lemme guess – the Golden Boy came to save the day.’
Amos’ look of amazement was Leo’s answer. ‘He’s a fuckin prodigy. With abt and ball. I can’t stand the game, but Paul Goodwin is something special. But you know what they say…’

‘No. What do they say?’

‘Big fish, little pond. He shot outta Brolga as fast as his little legs could take him to the big smoke and bright lights, but here he is, policing the riff raff and smashing no-talents out of the ground. They always come back.’

Amos shrugged uncertainly. ‘That seems a little harsh.’

‘True,’ Leo agreed. ‘He’s a good kid. And when the rest of the Goodwins lit outta town, I thought mebbe that was it for him. But no.’ Leo took another swig of his beer, the foam clinging to his beard. ‘Shame.’

Leo slapped the bar. ‘Alby ya daft prick, where is the jewel of my eye this fine evening? I love ya, but you ain’t much to look at! Amos here knows what I’m talking about!’ He nudged Amos in the ribs, ignoring Amos’ shocked expression.

Alby looked down his nose at Leo with a scowl. ‘You ain’t no oil painting yourself you old shit!’

Leo laughed. ‘Ah, touché. Pity – she livens up the place.’ He turned to Amos. ‘Doesn’t she?’

Amos shrugged, his head down. ‘I guess so.’

Leo grinned, waggling his gnarly finger at Amos. ‘You know she does.’ He rapped on the counter. ‘Another round!’

The ball dropped softly into the corner pocket. Leo thrust his fist into the air, his wispy hair falling across his face like a veil.

‘Victory is mine, young sir!’

Amos laughed and put out his hand. Leo leaned forward and took it with two strong pumps.

‘Another? I’m sure we could make it best out of seven?’
Amos looked over to their table littered with empties and shook his head. ‘Let’s call it. I should probably make my way.’

Leo leaned back, eyes wide in amazement. ‘You’re leavin me high and dry? Jus when I thought we was mates!’

Amos chuckled tiredly. ‘Yeah. Sorry about that. Next time.’ He waved to Alby, who gave no reaction either way. He wandered towards the door.

‘Wait!’ Leo ambled over to Amos, the pool cue in his hand like a staff. ‘Who are you again?’

Amos scratched his head and looked back in incredulity. ‘What?’

‘Who you say you were again?’

‘What is this? I’m Amos! Don’t tell me you have had too much to drink?’

Leo brushed the comment away angrily. ‘No, fuck ya! I mean who are you? I feel like I know ya. Are you around – from around here?’

Amos stalled, staring at Leo. Leo wavered on his makeshift cane, the pool cue seemingly the only thing holding him up.

‘No Leo, I’m not.’

Leo continued to stare at Amos, before finally shrugging and moving back to the bar. ‘Suit yerself.’

Amos scratched his head and stumbled out into the night. He could hear noise still emanating from the Brolga. Instinctively he made his way towards the pub.

As he came up _____ Street the Brolga came into view. The clientele seemed to have thinned out, yet they had spilled out into the street. A block away the music that had been blaring inside was cut short. A couple of people were making their way to their vehicles, one who appeared to be Marley being held back. Amos started to jog. A siren could be faintly heard in the distance.

Marley turned around and saw Amos. He lurched forward, clutched Amos by his forearms.

‘There’s been an accident, mate. Oh fuck me…’
Burke Street usually saw traffic only on a Sunday for the fortnightly service. This day it was overrun with vehicles parked haphazardly over the curb and on the footpath. The few shops that were open on Sundays were closed. Brolga had come to pay their respects to Paul Goodwin.

A sea of black clad figures flowed into the barren courtyard of St. Stephen’s Catholic Church. The faces of Brolga’s inhabitants were white, grim, set in various stages of mourning. Children huddled close to their parents, holding their mothers’ shuffling legs for support, feeling emotions in the air that they did not understand, yet were frightened. Younger people walked through the gates like zombies, aimlessly following the crowds, shell-shocked by the circumstances. Smattered amongst the sea of faces were the elderly, many of whom had said farewell to many of their peers and close ones in this church. Their faces were set, stern, stoic, their eyes shimmering with sadness and the realisation of their own mortality.

Amos stood on the corner of Burke and Marcy Streets, a cigarette smouldering between his lips. He watched the flow of bodies enter the church. A few women, members of the Catholic community, were hurriedly organising rows of white plastic seats on either side of the church to accommodate for the overflow of people. He looked down at his own suit, hastily bought from the only menswear store in town for an exorbitant price. Despite the lack of choice, Amos liked the suit, although its purpose dulled his appreciation of the new outfit. He wiped off a flake of ash that had dropped onto his sleeve.

‘What are you doing?’

Amos swung around, instinctively moving his weight off the ute that he had been leaning against. Tom stood on the other side of the tray, chuckling silently at his discomfort. He wore his normal tweed jacket and hat. A smile attempted to worm its way across Amos’ face, but gave up half way. Tom walked slowly around the ute and stood beside him, viewing the action on the church grounds.

‘Hell of a business, this,’ Tom murmured. He licked his lips, shook his head. Amos offered him a cigarette which he accepted graciously.

‘You know, death,’ Tom said in a cloud of blue smoke, ‘is a constant companion out here. Everything dies out here, usually without warning. But, you never get used to it.’
Amos nodded, watching as a boy received a clip under the ear from his mother for running around the church grounds. ‘Lotta people have come.’

Tom nodded. ‘Yeah. That’ll happen. Everyone loved Paul.’

‘Everyone?’

‘Just about. Doesn’t matter though. Even the ones who couldn’t care less will still be here.’

‘Why?’

‘Oh, many reasons.’

Tom flicked his cigarette onto the bitumen and crushed it. He looked over at Amos.

‘You coming in, or you going to wait out here in your expensive suit for someone to usher you in?’

…

Amos sidled into a pew three-quarters of the way up the aisle of the church next to Tom. Many people looked his way and gave nods of condolences, as if Paul was his relative, a brother even. He nodded back, keeping his eyes lowered. The church was packed; people stood along the walls underneath the 14 stations if the cross, and crowded around the three exits. Amos noticed the coffin surrounded by bouquets of flowers at the front of the church. The casket was open, indicating that the funeral director had done a remarkable job in presenting Paul. He was tempted to stare at the open casket, but resisted. The murmurings echoing around the eaves of the church began to subside, and the priest entered from the front of the church to stand behind the altar. The funeral began.

Amos did not pay attention to what was being said, only snapping back when the priest initiated a call and response prayer from the congregation. He instead cast his eyes over the pews at the mourners. In the first pew was the Goodwin family. In the past week they had arrived here from Brisbane and has resided in the (some motel), spending most days at Paul’s house going through his things and organising the arrangements for the funeral. Amos helped out where he could, but he was an outsider to such proceedings. Paul’s parents looked to him as an insider to Paul’s life leading up to the accident, yet he had only re-entered his life for six days. Mrs Goodwin did most of the organising, and was very warm and open, often
apologised for ‘invading his privacy’ when they were at Paul’s house, which made Amos feel even more out of place. Mr Goodwin was silent in his grief, barely registering conversation above a grunt or gesture. Paul’s sister Connie was different again. She looked at Amos as an intruder, and often turned away or lowered her voice in his presence. She intermittently dabbed a tissue to her carefully applied eyeliner throughout the memorial service.

Many of the other people Amos did not recognise. Some he had seen around town, but his short stay in Brolga had not led to meeting them all. Nevertheless they knew who he was, as the looks of condolences and sympathy indicated.

Paul’s cricket team sat together halfway up the aisle, the few football players who did not double up for cricket sitting behind them. The men sat up straight, their faces carved of stone. Stinky Pete was amongst them, as was Curt Whitten and Roary. Lavinia sat near the back of the church. Her heavy makeup remained unmarred by tears, her face expressionless. He couldn’t see Amber.

Mr Goodwin read Paul’s eulogy. A big man of fifty, Paul’s father’s voice was soft; belying his size and weight, and Amos found himself leaning forward to catch what was being said.

‘I never dreamt that I would be up here today, looking over my son, saying my last goodbyes, but here I am…’

The funeral was reverent and sombre; hardly a sound came from the congregation save a few sobs that escaped firmly pursed lips. Even the children sat in silence for the duration of the service. The priest came forward with a decanter of incense attached to a gold chain, with swayed rhythmically over and around the coffin. The incense wafted over the congregation. The sickly sweet odour made Amos’ eyes water, forcing him to stare down at his scuffed shoes. A cry broke from Mrs Goodwin’s lips, and she fell forward, Mr Goodwin’s ineffectual hand lying limp on her back.

The overhead speakers crackled, and the first few notes of Pachelbel’s Canon filtered through. The silence was broken, and with came an overwhelming sense of release. Two, then four, then ten parishioners began to cry, emitting small whimperings of grief. As the funeral director came forward, half the congregation were in tears and audibly sobbing. The six pallbearers – Mr Goodwin, Roary, Luke Garrett and Hamish Simms from the Brolga A Grade cricket and rugby league teams respectively, and two of Paul’s friends from Brisbane – also moved forward, and as the music built in intensity, the coffin lurched forward at head height. The crowd moved forward slightly, to feel the rush of air that the coffin left behind. Amos caught the eyes of Lavinia briefly before she surged out ahead of the procession.
The Goodwin family followed the coffin out to the waiting hearse, where the rest of the congregation was waiting, the white plastic chairs discarded and forgotten. The occupants of the church also moved out in the procession’s wake, watching reverently as it was eased into the back of the hearse, the polished mahogany shining in the shimmering sunlight.

The hearse moved slowly out of the church grounds, the congregation hurrying to their vehicles to follow suit. After a few minutes the church was empty, pamphlets for the funeral service scattered amongst the abandoned pews. The rush was so sudden that Amos could still hear the music playing as he walked towards the graveyard.

The heat emanated from the earth. His suit prickled his skin, his sleeves damp from the sweat of his brow. A few people offered Amos a lift as he walked along Burke Street, but he politely declined. No one was offended; they merely nodded in respect and continued on the crawl after the hearse.

‘Do you want some company?’

Amber jogged up to Amos and fell into step beside him.

‘Have you been following me?’ he asked.

‘I went back to the church to turn off the stereo and close up the church. You can never be too careful.’

Amos nodded. ‘I didn’t see you at the service.’

‘I helped the ladies set up the chairs outside, and by the time I was finished there was no room in the church.’

Amber wore a light grey skirt and a loose black blouse, simple black slip on shoes on her feet. The light traces of a tattoo peered out from the top of her right shoe. A fine silver locket shone around her neck.

Amos looked into Amber’s eyes and smiled. Amber returned it, a quizzical expression tinting the corners of her eyes.

‘What?’ she asked.

‘Nothing. You just look… nice.’

Her smile widened. ‘Well, under the circumstances…thank you. You scrubbed up nicely yourself.’
Amos smiled, unconsciously dusting off his sleeves with his hands. They continued to walk down the road to the graveyard, where vehicles had pulled up haphazardly along the perimeter fence. People walked amongst the rows of gravestones that unofficially marked the history of Brolga, paying no mind to the inscriptions, the flowers and trinkets at their side. Paul’s grave was situated near the rear fence of the cemetery, the golf course visible on the other side. Amos thought of the conversation that he had had with Paul there only a week ago, the day before the accident. He stared at the frayed flag signifying the 3rd hole, its movements almost imperceptible in the still shimmering light.

The crowd clustered around the hearse as the funeral director and his assistant guided the pallbearers to place the coffin on a trolley that lay abreast the grave. The pulleys groaned as the ropes holding up the trolley took the coffin’s weight. The crowd held a singular breath, letting it out again as it was realised that no travesty would take place, sending the coffin hurtling offensively into the grave. The six men stood back, their shoulders sagging, and the crowd surrounded them, took them in, their job now completed.

Amos and Amber joined the back of the crowd. There was silence unlike any Amos had heard. The only sounds came from the clouds of flies drawn to the heat and sweat created by the crowd. People fanned their faces with pamphlets or the backs of their hands. Stinky Pete’s sports jacket was coated in black bodies, dormant and lethargic from the heat and the aromas that radiate from within. The priest stepped forward, a worn leather bound Bible clasped firmly in his shaking grasp.

‘Because God has chosen to call our brother, Paul James Goodwin, from this life to himself, we commit his body to its resting place, for we are dust and unto dust we shall return. But the Lord Jesus Christ will change our mortal bodies to be like his in glory, for He is risen, the first-born from the dead. So let us commend our brother to the Lord, that the Lord may embrace him in peace and raise up his body on the last day.’

As he finished the passage, he moved forward to the front of the coffin. Unlatching the silver bolts fastening the lid, the priest lifted it up. He turned to the congregation.

‘Although this is a little unorthodox, the family has wished for the departed to be viewed here rather than in the confines of the church. Because of the heat, this must be brief. For those wanting to pay their last respects now, please do so.’

Paul’s family shuffled forward, Mrs Goodwin physically supported by her husband and daughter, her racking sobs breaking the ethereal silence. They viewed him quickly then moved away. One by one the congregation moved forward. The air was flooded with the
sound of grief. Many hands brushed the polished exterior of the coffin, the cuff of Paul’s suit sleeve, the collar of his starched shirt. Amos and Amber stayed motionless, bound to the earth under them.

A small commotion to their left caught Amos’ attention. Many bleary eyes turned to see a few men, Roary and Hamish amongst them, trying to restrain Curt, whispering to him to calm down. He cursed, violently shrugging off the men, before he surged away from the crowd towards the cemetery’s arched entrance, his face burnished with anger. Hamish and a few other men followed after him. Roary stared after them in exasperation, whispering harshly for them to return. He turned suddenly, catching Amos’ eyes as he did so. They held each others’ gaze for a few moments before Roary turned away, back to the coffin.

After a few minutes, the priest moved forward once again to close the casket. He stood back, head bowed in reverence. The congregation followed suit. As on cue, the pulleys began to click, the coffin entering the earth. It inched its way into the grave, the rope whirring. The top of the coffin disappeared. After half a minute the clicking slowed, the whirring quietening to a whisper. A soft jerk of the pulleys, then the sounds stopped.

The crowd stood motionless for some time, frozen in the heat. A few people turned to face the gate of the cemetery, and as if an indication the congregation began to disperse. Amos felt rather than saw the people brushing past him. His eyes remained fixed on the hole where the coffin had once lain. The darkness of the hole took up his centre of vision; everything outside it wavered, becoming background.

Amber tugged at his sleeve. ‘Let’s go.’

Amos shook his head, struggling to pull himself away. He looked at Amber, her eyes searching his. He looked beyond her, around him. Most of the vehicles had moved off towards the centre of town, dust trailing down the street. The Goodwins and the priest were nowhere to be seen. Only a few people remained behind. The funeral director and his assistant knelt near the grave, unhooking the pulleys and slowly unravelling the ropes.

Amos nodded to Amber. ‘You can go on ahead. I’ll…I’ll be a while.’

Amber stood silent for a moment, her fingers brushing Amos’ sleeve. Her hand fell away to her side, a faint smile touching her lips. She nodded once.

‘I’ll see you later?’

Amos nodded, watching her turn and walk slowly down the row of gravestones towards the entrance. He turned back to the grave, taking small steps towards the edge. As he reached
the grave a hand reached over and tapped him on the shoulder. A man in dusty overalls stood there, another younger man at his hip.

‘You’re not gunna be too long, are ya? It’s too fucking hot to sit out here all day,’ he said matter of factly.

‘No, not long.’

The man nodded, grunting approval as the men retired to the shade of a nearby tree.

Amos faced the grave again. He could make out the coffin lid some six feet from the lip of the hole. A few flowers had been scattered across the lid, their colours muted by the shadows. He knelt down on his hands and knees, staring down. His hands sank into the dusty earth on at the edge of the grave. His fingers curled inward, dirt gathering in the palms of his hands. He leant forward, arms outstretched, slowly opening his fists. The dirt trickled through his fingers, tapping on the lid of the coffin, dimpling the flowers’ petals.

Amos stood, wiping his hands together. He felt dizzy from the heat, and from looking down into the darkness of the grave. The dirt clung to his palms, staying in the webbing between his fingers. He rubbed his palms over his knees, brushing a clump of dirt from his trousers, when movement at the cemetery gate caught his eye. He looked up. A figure stood there, appearing to stare at him. He stared back. As he moved forward, the figure turned and moved away. Three smaller figures slunk at his heels.

‘Tracker?’ Amos called out. His voice sounded dead in the clearing, no buildings for it to reverberate off. The figure moved quicker. Amos began to jog towards the gate.

Something smashed at his feet as he reached the end of the row. He glanced down. A glass jar lay shattered there, the earth dark from spilt water. Three wilted roses were strewn over the grave where the jar had sat. He stood there, debating what to do. He looked over his shoulder at the rapidly shrinking figure, now a shimmering shadow at the end of the street. He watched it disappear around the corner.

Amos turned back to the mess he had made. He gingerly picked the roses up from the shards of glass laying them at the foot of the gravestone. He read the inscription.

Maude Grayson

1909-1987
He stood on his haunches, lightly tracing the engraving of the epitaph. The coolness of the stone eased the heat in his head. A tear skimmed the surface of his eyelid. He dabbed it away with a grimy finger, a smudge of dirt left in its wake. He looked down and carefully picked up the shards of glass, then stood and dropped the broken vase in the rubbish bin beside the gates. The sound of an engine firing brought his attention one last time to Paul’s grave. The hearse was moving away, the two workers moving forward slowly with shovels in their hands. From here the grave was indistinguishable from the others. The current lack of a headstone made it harder to pick up.

The hearse rolled around the perimeter of the cemetery, stopping as it came past Amos. The funeral director wound down his window.

‘Need a lift? We can squeeze you up the front here?’

Amos slowly shook his head.

Amos watched the hearse move away, then followed down the road.
The wake was held in the dining area of the King’s Crown Hotel. The room was filled with people, most with alcohol on their lips, reminiscing. Many of the various pubs’ barflies had taken up roost on stools in front of the main bar, whilst small pockets of friends and family occupied the tables. The Goodwins sat near the kitchen door at the far end of the room, surrounded by extended family, speaking in hushed tones. Amos started moving towards them as a hand snaked its way around his forearm.

‘How’re you doing darl?’ Melanie whispered harshly, her cherubic face glowing from sherry and vodka. Her eyes, a little unfocused, searched his for a sign of misery.

Amos gave a curt nod. ‘I’m fine thanks, Mel.’

A glimmer of disappointment touched the corners of her mouth before a smile burst forth.

‘Well, looks like you need a drink. I’ll get you one, OK?’

Amos stammered a weak decline, Mel already making her way to the bar. He ran his fingers through his hair, air escaping his lips in a heated rush.

‘I was wondering when you’d show up,’ Tom muttered amiably, placing his weathered hand on his shoulder. Amos smiled.

‘I had some thinking to do.’

Tom nodded. ‘Funerals are real good for that. Everyone’s made to think of a lot of things. Here, have a drink.’ A rum and coke was pushed into his hand before he could decline. The aftertaste of the soft drink clung to Amos’ mouth, an unpleasant feeling. Mel returned with a beer, Amos taking it graciously from her grasp and taking half the liquid down in one gulp.

Amos followed Tom and Mel to a table, grateful for the seat. Jackie and Roary were talking softly, looked up and moved aside, nodding to Amos in an effort of salutation. Amos returned the gesture. The mood required nothing more.

Flutter of conversation coursed their way through the air, the room hushed. Amos felt embarrassed for no particular reason. An awkward silence pervaded the table, everyone focusing their sight on their drinks their laps, anywhere other than each other.

Jackie broke the silence. ‘A toast, then,’ he murmured, his elbow on the table, the beer sloshing within the glass. Everyone did likewise.
'What to?' Mel returned, her eyes brimming with saltwater.

Jackie shrugged. ‘To a great man. That he rest in peace.’

Everyone nodded, murmuring agreeance. A few men near the bar who overheard Jackie did likewise, hastily draining their glasses before returning to their own world. The clatter of glass on the table punctuated another fall of silence.

‘C’mon fellas, remember Paul’s knock last year against Muttaburra?’ Jackie said. ‘117 not out, against their self-proclaimed spin whiz, that kid with the Bulls scholarship.’

Roary nodded. ‘And how ol’ Pete Moseley claimed Paul was cheating? That bastard always complained when they lost.’

‘You’d think he’d be used to it by now. They haven’t won a game since Luke Cavanaugh retired, what, ’88?’

They laughed. Tom countered, ‘Pete Moseley, now there’s a sorry sod. I don’t think there’s a thing on this world that hasn’t gone against him. He still claims that he found that dinosaur.’

‘What, that was Dougy Langdon wasn’t it?’ Mel said, the gossip drying her tears.

The beer flowed along with the stories, people drowning their sorrows in alcohol and good cheer. Amos smiled, listening to a side of Paul that he was familiar with, yet was new to him. More people came around their table, regaling each other with their own tales of Paul. Paul the Good Samaritan. Paul the prankster. Paul the kindly diplomat. Paul the great man.

Amber sidled up next to Amos as Stinky Pete rambled about a particularly vivid roo shooting experience, the content colourful and slightly gruesome, yet everyone smiling and laughing. Amos offered his beer glass to Amber’s champagne flute, a communal chink of happiness(?).

‘Hey, how are you going?’ Amber offered.

Amos smiled and nodded. ‘Yeah, good. Considering.’

Amber nodded also. ‘Yeah. It’s a bit like that, isn’t it?’

Amos laughed, his cheeks flushed from the alcohol. ‘Yeah.’ He gestured at the crowded room. ‘Many people out to pay their respects.’

‘Any excuse is a good excuse.’ She paused. ‘So, are you OK? Really?’

Amos looked across the sea of drunken revellers. He shrugged. ‘It’s hard to tell.’
Amber looked down at her drink, serious. ‘It is so wrong, you know? So wrong.’ Her hand trembled, her ring chattering against the stem of the glass.

Amos put his hand to her shoulder, a hesitant gesture. ‘I know.’

Amber looked up at him, a wan smile offered. She moved a little closer to him, her movement supposedly accidental. Amos chose not to notice.

‘How well did you know him?’ he murmured.

Amber shrugged, a laugh coming out as a snort. ‘Oh, you know! Everyone knows Paul! Oh…’ Her shoulders sagged for a moment, then she straightened. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Nothing to be sorry about.’

Amber took another gulp of champagne, the flute empty. ‘Thank you. I knew Paul. Paul, he came to the Brolga, with the cricket team. I mean, everyone knew him, it was impossible not to, y’know? He’s just so accommodating, so warm and gentle, and he was funny, y’know?’

Her gaze was unfocused, the emotion barely concealed. She teetered on her legs, again falling into Amos. He supported her.

‘Yeah, I know.’


Amos huffed. ‘Ah, it was only for a few days.’

Amber screwed up her face, a prune of annoyance. ‘You know what I mean! You were good friends.’

Amos shrugged, awkward with the subject matter. ‘I don’t know. It…really hasn’t registered yet, I guess.’

Amber nodded emphatically. ‘I know, I know! It’s so sad…’

Amos looked over Amber’s shoulder at the milling people, catching a glimpse of black hair with red streaks. He took hold of Amber’s free hand.

‘Do you need another?’

Amber’s eyes traced a line from his hand on hers to the empty champagne flute, then up to his face, her face flushed. ‘Yes, I think I’ll be needing another. Thanks.’
‘Wait right here,’ Amos said, and he made his way to the bar, wedged between Roary and Simon, one of Paul’s cricket team mates. He gestured to the bartender, ordered a champagne and a gin and tonic. The bartender arched his eyebrows, turning to make the drinks.

‘Taking things up a notch?’ Simon remarked.

Amos shrugged, his eyes flickering over to where he had spotted Lavinia, then back to Simon. ‘No better time for it.’

Simon huffed a tired laugh. ‘You’re not fuckin wrong mate! You’re not fuckin wrong.’ The conversation reached its end point, Simon returning to gazing into his rum and Coke.

Amos snatched another furtive glance over in Lavinia’s direction. She was ensconced in the corner of the room, a heated discussion taking place with Curt and another Transcontinental regular whose name escaped him. Roary nudged Amos, gesturing as the bartender brought his drinks over. He looked at him, dazed, finally handing over the money.

‘What’s on your mind?’ Roary asked, then slapped his forehead. ‘Well, you know, apart from the bleeding obvious.’

‘Nothing.’ Amos picked up the drinks. ‘I’ve gotta, you know…’ He waved the glasses in the space between them, anxious to get away.

Roary moved out of the way, an exaggerated gesture. Amos was unsure if it was because of the situation or of something else. ‘Yeah. No worries, Amos.’

Amos hesitated, nodded curtly, and moved away. Amber’s eyes lit up as he handed her the champagne.

‘Thanks,’ she gushed, her glass pausing at her lips. She looked at Amos’ filled hands.

‘You’re keen!’

He looked down at the two drinks. ‘Ah no, they’re not for me. One’s for a friend. I’ve just got to drop it off…’ He began to move away.

Amber took a step after him, then stopped. She scanned the small groups of people before catching someone’s eye, her head tilting back, eyes widening and smile switched on in an expression of sudden recognition before she moved off.

Amos sidestepped between the groups until he was standing behind Lavinia. She was talking rapidly.
‘Don’t fucking start today, OK? Today of all days, Jesus! What’s wrong with you?’

Curt placed a hand on her forearm, an effort to placate her. ‘Calm down Lavinia. Gus, she’s right y’know.’

Lavinia shrugged Curt’s hand off, her eyes flaring. ‘I don’t need you to stand in for me, Curt! I can fight my own fucking wars!’

Curt’s hands splayed in surrender. ‘OK, I was just trying to help…’

Lavinia ignored him, her focus back on Gus, her voice raised. ‘If you want to work this out, fuckin do it in your own time!’

A few people turned to stare at the group, Amos feeling their eyes searching each participant of the argument with morbid curiosity. He made to move forward as Lavinia pushed her way past the two men. Her shoulder clipped his arm, the rum and Coke he had bought for her spilling over each other. She started, then glared at him.

‘Watch where you’re fucking going!’ she vented, continuing on her way towards the back door and out of the room.

Amos stood still, his hand sticky from the spilt drink. He thought he heard a few sniggers amongst the low hubbub of conversation as onlookers turned back to their own groups. He looked down at the half empty rum glass. He looked up and caught Mr Goodwin looking at him. Their eyes locked for a moment before a comment made by Connie drew his attention away.

Amos straightened and walked out the door after Lavinia. He found her sitting on the stairs that led up to the rooms above the King’s Crown, a cigarette clamped between her red lips. She looked ahead at the dusty car park behind the hotel, her attention far away. He moved slowly, not wanting to startle her, their interaction before still firmly in his mind. His soles scraped on the cement. She turned, her eyes containing remnants of the fire he had seen earlier, before she registered him. The embers dimmed, but did not disappear.

‘Amos,’ she murmured as she looked away. ‘I suppose you’ve come to save me.’

Amos stood still, looking at Lavinia’s back. His lips trembled, fumbling for a response, then stilled.

She looked back at him again. ‘Well? What do you want?’

Amos looked down at the glass of rum. ‘I was bringing this over to you.’
She followed his gaze. ‘You’ve drunk half of it. How considerate of you.’

‘No. It was full, but we bumped into each other.’

She shook her head. ‘What…’ Recognition drifted across her face, the embers of anger dying out in her eyes. ‘Oh, that was you? I’m sorry! I was – I had my mind on other things.’

‘I noticed.’ He moved forward to the foot of the stairs. ‘I can get you another one if you like.’

She shook her head. ‘No. Thanks.’ She took the drink, a low smile creasing her lips, although not quite reaching her eyes. She patted the stair next to her. Amos sat down, their legs brushing against each other. She cradled her drink in her hands as Amos sipped his gin.

‘Fuck!’ she whispered. ‘I can’t believe…’ She shook her head. ‘It doesn’t matter. I'm sorry about before.’

‘Stop apologising. There’s probably more rum on you than me.’

Lavinia looked down, her fingers traced the sticky drops dampness that marred the front of her dress, lost again in her thoughts. Amos looked at her profile. It was strange to see her in a dress. It was simple, light material, the black offset by a red sash around her waist. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, a few strands fighting free and falling over her face. She tuck them behind her ear. She pulled her legs up, her arms wrapped around them. Her legs were porcelain against the black fabric.

‘You talking to me now?’ she murmured, her face averted.

‘I was never not talking to you.’

Lavinia nodded. ‘I guess not.’

Amos opened his mouth to speak, but Lavinia stopped him. ‘Don’t ask. Please.’

Amos nodded, turning his attention to the car park. They sat together in silence, sipping their drinks, the ice tinkling in their glasses.

Lavinia finished her drink, placing the glass on the step next to her.

‘Let’s get out of here.’
They walked along Perryview Street, near the racecourse. The sunset splashed the sky with hues of pink, orange and purple. Amos slung his jacket over his shoulder, his free hand jammed into his trouser pocket along with his tie. Lavinia held her shoes in one hand. Neither of them spoke, each enveloped in the mood of the day, their thoughts taking them away from each other, into the past, into the future.

They were abreast the horseshoe that loomed above the gateway into the racecourse grounds when Lavinia stopped. Amos walked ahead a few paces before feeling that he was alone, turning to face her. She looked over the gate, staring into some middle distance that only existed in her mind. Her pale face set in concentration, she ran her lips against each other.

Amos walked back to her side. ‘What’s up?’

She smiled, a cheeky disposition overcoming her. ‘You wanna do something naughty?’

Amos smirked. ‘Naughty?’

‘Yeah. Do you?’

Without waiting for an answer Lavinia moved to the gate. She hurled the shoes over the gate, landing with a clomp on the soft earth beyond. Threading her fingers through the cyclone fencing of the gate, she wedged her left toe into one of the spaces, hoisting herself up. It took her ten seconds to climb to the top of the fence. Amos laughed quietly, holding his hand to his eyes as she made the climb. She straddled the metal bar across the top of the gate and looked down, strands of hair floating across her face, displaying the tomboy teenager that she had once been, not so long ago.

‘C’mon!’ she urged, beckoning him to join her.

Amos laughed and moved to the gate. He scrambled his way to the top, wobbling the gate at one stage. Lavinia let out a whoop of surprise and delight, throwing her right hand in the air whilst the left anchored her, a bull ride ten feet high. Finally he reached the top, swung a leg over the bar, and faced her.

‘Don’t think we’re finished here!’ Lavinia said. They raced down the other side of the gate. Lavinia started running down the driveway, picking her shoes up as she went. Amos shook his head. He loped after her, an awkward amble, a boy playing a childhood game that he was not sure he wanted to be a part of.
She led him to the betting arena. The cement floor provided the echoes of their footsteps, Lavinia’s muffled, Amos’ thundering in comparison. The discarded bookies’ boards and chairs formed a crude circle, Lavinia moving towards the centre of it. The paraphernalia was redundant in the emptiness, implements that held no significance in the normal scheme of things. Amos was reminded of Stonehenge.

Lavinia spun around, her happiness intoxicating her. Amos felt light headed; the exertion bringing the drinks from the wake to the fore. He walked up to her. She took his hand and pulled him towards a set of stairs.

‘C’mon, follow me!’

They moved up the stairs, Amos stumbling at the first flight. Lavinia snorted as she laughed, pulling him up, urging him onwards. The landing where the radio commentators positioned themselves came into view, then they circled around to another flight of stairs, ending in a set of glass double doors which led to the members’ area.

She crept up to the doors, a burglar without shoes. She looked inside warily. Amos pondered on what she was looking for, whether she expected anyone to be inside or not. Easing her weight on the handle, she pushed forward. The door swung open.

Throwing all caution aside, Lavinia raced into the room. Amos entered in her wake, easing the door closed behind him.

‘They never lock up this place! Amazing, considering all the problems they have with security around the place. Guess people know the shit that would cause if they were caught.’

Amos didn’t ask her what she meant, or what would happen if they were caught themselves. Instead he moved to the glass wall that overlooked the racecourse. The wind blew dust devils down the track. The cricket oval sat in the middle of the track, lying dormant, another superfluous creation that served its purpose once a week three months of the year. Amos saw the ghosts of last Saturday’s match, the battle that took place there. He saw Paul there, the bright red cricket ball wedged between his index and middle fingers, his face set with purpose. The golden boy.

Lavinia’s reflection superimposed itself over his reverie. He looked into her reflection’s eyes. They were slightly unfocused from the alcohol, yet intensity burned from within. Without turning he held her gaze and spoke.

‘He was here, just a week ago. We were all here. Sitting at the bar. Telling jokes. Everyone was at his side, laughing. Crazy, huh?’
Amos saw Lavinia’s reflection move forward, her hand reaching towards his face. The coolness of his fingers startled him, yet he felt far away.

He turned to face her. Her brown eyes held something that he couldn’t grasp. Her hand lay frozen at his cheek, the tips of her fingers resting on his skin. He looked at them, then back at her.

They came together, a barely imperceptible brush of lips. His arms encircled her body, drawing her closer. She came willingly. They kissed again, this time with more force. Lavinia parted her lips, his tongue nervously flitting over hers. But that did not last long either. The emotions of the past week hit them both as they stood there, a tidal wave of darkness and light. They gave into it, and to each other.

As he kissed her, their bodies crushed together, Amos watched her. Lavinia’s eyes were closed tightly. An eyelash had come free and nestled near the bridge of her nose. He could see the pores of her skin. He brought his hands up to her face, the soft fuzz on her cheeks tickling his palms. He felt his breath escape, his heart beat rise. Her eyes remained shut.

They lay on the carpet in unison, their embrace unbreakable. Amos made to move away, to regain some composure. Lavinia’s eyes flickered open, a frown flickering across her mouth. Her lips were moist from his saliva. He wiped the sheen away with his thumb.

‘What’s wrong?’ she whispered, breathless.

He shook his head. He began to unbutton his shirt. Her hands snaked forward, fighting him for possession. They fumbled with the buttons, flighty laughter echoing at their ineptitude. Finally the shirt was discarded. Lavinia slid out of her blouse, her eyes never leaving his.

Her skin glowed against the darkness of her bra. She reached behind her to unfasten it, but Amos brought her forward, his lips on hers again.

Her arms encircled his neck, her hands running through his hair, the bra hanging uselessly between their chests. His hands coursed up and down her back, savouring the velvet touch of her skin. His eyes finally closed, needing nothing more than this.

Her hands left Amos to unbuckle his belt. Without opening his eyes Amos shimmied, Lavinia guiding his trousers down his legs. He fumbled with her underwear, bunching them together as he pulled them away.

They came together, and Amos opened his eyes again. She lay on top of him, her eyes at half mast, staring through and beyond him. They focused on him, and a smile flickered on her lips before they met his. Her breasts crushed against him as they moved against each other, Amos
staring at the ceiling, Lavinia’s hot breath against his neck. They moved into each other, slowly at first, then faster, until movement was no longer discernible. They were one, together, against the world, all in silence.

Amos felt the tension rise within him, and he made to stop. Amber pushed down harder on him.

‘Lavinia…’

She looked at him. He saw the wetness at the edges of her eyes. She shook her head, her hair flowing across his face. She silenced him with a kiss, her movement more urgent. He tightened, not wanting it to end. The heat flowed between them. Sparks lit up behind Amos’ eyelids. Everything ran together, a kaleidoscope of emotions swirling together, until the world around them collapsed, merging together, and ceased to exist.

Lavinia slumped against him, her body coated with sweat. He could feel her heart beat echoing through her chest. Her breath tickled his ear in shallow pulses. Her cheeks were wet. He looked up into her eyes. They were still closed. He brought his hand up to her head, his fingers stroking her hair.
THIRTY FIVE

Amos huddled naked at the window, staring out over the racecourse. Lavinia sat behind him, her legs around his waist. Her head rested on his shoulder, her hands absently brushing the hairs on his chest. Her pubic hair pricked the small of his back. He welcomed the sensation.

Her breath tickled his ear as she whispered. ‘I’m sorry. About last week.’

Amos looked at her reflection in the window. ‘Me too.’

‘You don’t have to be sorry. I was being an idiot. I don’t know…’

Amos sensed that she was struggling to say what was on her mind. He waited, allowing her to take her time.

‘I like you, Amos. I don’t know. I guess that I’m not used to the feeling. I don’t really understand it. I don’t really know you. But somehow I feel…different when you are around.’

Amos smiled, Lavinia smiled back. She shifted against him, awkward in her struggle to articulate her thoughts. He kissed her fingers.

A mischievous smile crossed Amos’ lips. ‘So is this just a fuck?’

Lavinia slapped him softly on the shoulder. ‘Amos! I’m trying to say something here!’

‘And doing a great job of it.’

Lavinia huffed and pinched Amos’s chest. He let out a small yelp of surprise, turning to face her. She moved onto her knees, her arms out in front of her.

‘You deserved that, OK?’

He smiled. ‘OK.’

He lunged at her, pinning her to the floor. Lavinia’s arms and legs beat against the carpet as he tickled her, deep giggles echoing throughout the room.
Amos could see the front light was on as he reached the corner of Rainey Street. The horizon was set ablaze, the sun setting amidst an explosion of bright orange tinged with pink. He smiled, Paul putting on a show even on his funeral day.

The streetlights flickered on as he reached the front porch. The door was ajar behind the screen door, light seeping out from within. He entered, letting the screen door swing closed behind him, heralding his arrival. The squeal of protesting springs as weight was released from one of the recliners, a figure standing at the end of the hallway. Amos stood still, peering at the figure, the light shining from behind, casting everything in shadow.

‘I was wondering if you’d ever show up,’ grumbled the figure before turning and ambling into the kitchen, out of sight. Without looking Amos threw his suit coat in the vicinity of his bed and made his way into the kitchen.

Mr Goodwin had his back to Amos, the refrigerator open. He turned around, producing two beers. He offered one to Amos without comment. The sound of escaping air marked the silence, bottle caps flicked into the sink.

Mr Goodwin slumped into one of the dining chairs. Amos sat opposite him. Paul’s father had aged since the wake; his eyes rheumy from fatigue and alcohol. His light blue shirt was creased, the sleeves folded up in a haphazard fashion.

‘Where have you been? I didn’t see you leave the pub.’

Amos shrugged, remaining noncommittal. ‘Around. The wake…it wasn’t really my thing.’

Mr Goodwin let out a tired laugh. ‘Wakes aren’t really anyone’s thing, mate. But I know what you mean.’ He shook his head. ‘I hoped never to come back out here. But here we are.’

They drank their beers in silence. Mr Goodwin stared off, his eyes clouded over in thought. Amos watched him over his beer, knowing that he was here for a reason.

‘I told him not to come out here,’ Mr Goodwin muttered, his eyes still focused on some middle distance that did not exist in the kitchen. ‘I told him…I said, “Boy, there’s nothing left out there. Get a job somewhere where there’s hope, a future in it.” But he didn’t listen. He never listened.’
‘Well, I don’t know about that, Mr Goodwin. He seemed to do alright.’

‘Amos, call me Alex, OK?’

‘Oh, OK. Sorry.’

Alex ignored the apology. ‘And I know you knew him some, but you don’t know this place. It isn’t hard to do well in this town. But sooner or later, it catches up to you.’

Amos ran his fingers through his hair, feeling uncomfortable, unsure of what Alex meant or where he was heading. He remained silent.

‘What were you doing?’

The question threw Amos off guard. ‘Sorry? I don’t…’

‘That night. While Paul was out there getting shot.’ He stared at Amos, his face made of stone, his jaw trembling. ‘Where were you?’

It was then that Amos realised how drunk Alex was. He looked out into the lounge room, seeing the shadows of a cluster of bottles nestled against the side of one of the recliners. A taller bottle stood in the centre of the group.

‘I was…here. And at the pub. Actually that’s where I heard about it. At the Brolga.’

‘At the Brolga,’ Alex repeated. His speech was slurring, his train of thought struggling to remain on top of his inebriety. ‘Someone should have been there for him. I should have been there. I should have…’

The trembling of Alex’s jaw spread his face quivering, his shoulders shaking. Tears fell down his cheeks, coursing their way down the lines of his face. He cried in silence, his eyes downcast, shoulders slumped, the last seven days finally coming forth.

Amos at opposite Alex, his eyes averted, chewing his bottom lip. His hand wavered in mid air between them, unsure of whether to provide comfort or to leave well alone. Finally it floated to the table, where it fiddled incessantly with the salt shaker.

Alex physically attempted to shake the grief from him, starting as he regained his composure. He looked around the house - his mother’s house, Paul’s house, and now nobody’s home. Without looking at Amos he rose from his seat, the chair screeching against the floor. He staggered out of the kitchen. Amos remained still, frozen to his chair, staring slackly into his stubby. He heard the screen door open and close.
Amos lit the cigarette and took a quick drag, leaning his head upwards and expelling smoke towards the starry sky. The inky darkness was cluttered with constellations, a busy tapestry of gaseous giants. Neither of the neighbouring houses showed any lights, giving more clarity to the vista that floated above him.

A sudden impulse to reach higher ground overwhelmed him. He looked around his backyard, peering for inspiration amongst the shadows. He was inexorably drawn back to the house itself, similar to the first day he laid eyes on it. The carport had been built along the right side of the neighbours’ cyclone fence. Clamping the cigarette between his lips, Amos grabbed the top of the fence, hooked his foot into one of the gaps and was soon hoisting himself onto the roof of the carport. The corrugated iron screeched under his weight. Afraid equally of waking his new neighbours and falling through the rook onto the concrete base of the carport, he peered down at his feet, walking along the pop rivets until he reached the side of the house. With splayed hands and feet he shimmied up the slanted roof until he came to the peak, then lay down facing the unfolding universe above him.

The night had always embraced Amos, where it seemed natural that he be alone, only his thoughts and nature as company. As a child he had often lain awake at night, the ceiling only a metre from his face, his foster brother breathing shallowly under him. Fluorescent stickers resembling the moon and stars had been plastered on the ceiling, glowing sickly green when the light was turned off. Isaac enjoyed the pretence of sleeping under the stars. Amos only pined for the real thing, sometimes sneaking out into the backyard when Angela and Michael were asleep, laying in the grass near the greenhouse at the bottom of the garden. Never had stillness felt so alive, so electric. The affinity with the night had fuelled his childhood.

Now, lying under the Brolga sky, Amos felt those feelings glide over and through him. Where the emptiness of the newly rented house filled him with loneliness and despair, the emptiness of the night exuded awe and fascination, even admiration for the freedom and beauty that it all conveyed.

He took a pull from the cigarette and let his hand fall perpendicular to him. The smoke swirled amongst the assembly of solar systems and galaxies, interacting with them, joining them in more brilliant configurations.

Brolga remained quiet. The single bark of a lonely dog echoed down the street.
The Goodwins arrived at eight in the morning, sans Alex. Paul’s mother claimed through teary sobs that he was getting some extra hours sleep for the long drive ahead, as they were leaving at lunchtime. Amos sat in the kitchen, his hands clasped around a cup of coffee, two pieces of toast going cold on the table, as Mrs Goodwin and Connie moved around the house, collecting things. Connie spent much of the time speaking in low murmurs, her arms gently supporting her mother’s frail shoulders. He felt her furtive glances whenever they came within eyesight of him, her voice dropping to a whisper until he was again out of sight.

He moved to the verandah. The day was already hot, a few flies venturing into the shade, eager for a taste of salty perspiration. Amos lay back in one of the squatter’s chairs, lazily fanning his face with his hand, keeping the flies at bay. He closed his eyes and tried to think of nothing.

It was eleven by the time the two women were ready. They came out onto the verandah. Amos sat up quickly, bowing his head demurely in an odd attempt at awkward chivalry. Despite herself, Mrs Goodwin offered a smile, shooing her hands at him to remain seated. Connie remained stonily silent.

‘I know that Paul had asked for you to stay here while you did…whatever it is that you’re doing. It doesn’t matter. We packed all that we wanted.’ She paused, looking across the backyard, a sniffle breaking free before she composed herself again.

‘We’ll sell the house. Who knows how long it will take, out here. but you’re free to stay here until we do so. Anything that you want to take with you, you can.’

Amos nodded. ‘Thanks. I don’t think I’ll be here for too much longer.’

Mrs Goodwin nodded. ‘OK then.’ The two women moved to the door. Mrs Goodwin hesitated, turned back.

‘Paul…how was he? Before…’

‘He was good. He was…Paul.’

She nodded absently, turned and moved into the house. Connie lingered at the doorway.

‘Get out of this town as soon as you can, alright?’ she muttered before she too was gone.
Amos waited until he heard their car move up the street before he went inside. The lounge room was bare, the trinkets and memorabilia gone. He walked up the hallway, peering into Paul’s room. The drawers were open, although he was not sure what had been taken. He moved in and slumped down on Paul’s bed, his head in his hands.

A creaking sound caught Amos’ attention. He stood up and stepped out into the hallway. The door that had remained closed since he had moved in was slightly ajar, dimness showing through the crack. He walked slowly up to the door, facing it, his hand lightly pushing it inward.

The first thing he noticed was the smell. The room had not been aired in a long time; dust motes swirled lazily from the draught of the hallway across the wooden floor. The room was relatively bare. Clothes lay in haphazard piles, pyres in remembrance of days gone by. Sheafs of paper littered the space between, masking the floorboards beneath. An old four poster bed hunkered in the centre of the room, veiled by a mosquito net. He ran his hand over the mesh fabric, the coarseness tickling his fingertips. The window beyond the bed head was littered with husks of dead insects. A duchess like the one in the hallway sat in the corner, a lace doily its only adornment. Nails were in the walls, squares of paint declaring the absence of the paintings or pictures that had hung there, now in the boot of the Goodwins’ car. The room was a doorway into the family’s history, a fragment of the past.

Amos moved the mosquito net aside. The bedspread had been white, but was discoloured from the dust that had settled on it from misuse. The material was old; he dared not touch it, fearing it would crumble at the touch. He turned his attention to the duchess, tracing patterns in the dust on the wooden surface. His hands lingered at the drawer handle, lacing his fingers around the metal without opening. Despite himself Amos paused, uncertain. He took a deep breath, steadied himself, and opened the first drawer.

Not much lay within. The drawer was lined with faded wallpaper, soft pink with white lines. Neatly folded garments that had not seen the light of day for years, possibly decades. He let them alone, closing the drawer silently.

The second drawer was more of the same. A small tower of embroidered handkerchiefs were nestled in the far corner of the drawer. He took the top handkerchief off the pile, staring at the blue stitching. CKG. A man’s handkerchief, most probably Paul’s grandfather. He jammed it into his pocket, closing the drawer.

The bottom drawer was slightly ajar. It was bare except for a few trinkets, silver and gold baubles that Mrs Goodwin and Connie deemed of little value or significance. He fingered
them absently: a gaudy brooch of fake opal, two tarnished plain necklaces, a simple candlestick holder. With everything else cleaned out, Amos wondered why these things had been left behind. He pulled the objects out and placed them on top of the duchess.

He closed the drawer, but it jammed an inch from closing. Amos pushed and pulled at the drawer, wood against wood, but something was stopping it from moving all the way in. He pulled the drawer out and put it next to the trinkets, kneeling down to peer into the darkness within. He reached his arm in, flailing about the back of the duchess, the back of his hand hitting something solid. His fingers blindly groped for purchase, finally drawing the object out into the light.

Amos sat in front of the duchess, his haunches aching yet forgotten. He held a book, leather bound, that had to be at least fifty years old. The leather was in three parts, stitched together carefully with thin leather strips, yet was not seamless. Possibly done by hand by the owner. It was thick, the bound pages sticking out at irregular intervals.

Amos made to open the book, a careful manoeuvre. The spine protested, the action one that had not been undertaken in some time. Amos closed it again before taking note of the contents. He stared at the leather cover, tapping absently on the spine as he thought. He stood up, closed the drawer with a quiet snap, and moved out of the room, closing the door behind him. He shuffled into the kitchen, placing the book on the table reverently, a forbidden Bible. He opened the fridge, his fingers clumsily grasping a beer. The coldness coursed down his throat, an attempt to wash away his apprehension.

The book.
Amos was halfway through a sandwich, the leather scrapbook open in front of him, when there was a faint knock at the front door. He jumped, closing the book as if reading it were a mortal sin. He looked around for somewhere to store it, settling on the cupboard underneath the sink, careful to keep it clear of the pipes in case of any dripping water, then moved down the hallway, hastily chewing a mouthful of ham and bread, brushing crumbs off on his jeans. He opened the door. Father Monaghan stood at the front step, a warm smile at the read.

‘G’day Amos. Haven’t got you at a bad time?’

He shook his head. ‘Not at all.’

‘May I come in?’

Amos stood aside as Father Monaghan walked in, closing the door quietly behind him. He realised that he only had the kitchen light on, the rest of the house in darkness. He flicked on the light switch for the hallway, then the lounge room. He gestured to one of the armchairs. The priest slumped into the chair closest to the door, grateful at taking the weight of his feet. He looked haggard, like he had been walking the streets all day. Amos stood in the middle of the room, facing him, his hands in his pockets.

‘Would you like something to drink? Water, juice…’

Father Monaghan cleared his throat, a nervous action. ‘I don’t mean to be a burden, but do you have anything stronger? It’s been one heck of a long day.’

Amos gestured at the shelf above the fake fireplace and the bottles of liquor that sat there. ‘Anything in particular?’

Father Monaghan chuckled. ‘What’s my poison, huh? Umm…Gin. Do you have any tonic?’

Amos shook his head.

‘Oh. Okay…The Glenlivet?’

Amos brought out two tumblers and ice from the kitchen, pouring a liberal dose of scotch for the priest and a smaller drink for himself. Father Monaghan gulped down half the glass in one mouthful, his eyes closed, a slight grimace setting his jaw. Amos clasped his glass in both hands, taking a small sip, savouring the harsh flavour before sending down his throat.
‘Ahhh! That’s the ticket. I’m telling you Paul, you can’t beat a good scotch!’

‘No, I guess not.’

‘Hmmm!’ Father Monaghan took another sip of scotch, then sunk into the armchair. He looked at Amos.

‘So, how’s everything been?’

Amos nodded, his mouth set in a straight line. ‘Yeah, good. Well, you know…’

Father Monaghan offered a benign smile. ‘Yes, of course. It’s been hard on the whole town, but we do the best we can.’ He patted the armrest, his eyes setting on Amos’. ‘Of course, it’s harder for some than it is for others.’

Amos nodded again, uncomfortable with the man’s stare. ‘Yeah.’

The priest leaned forward, his eyes still anchoring on Amos’. ‘I’ve been the parish priest for Brolga and the outlying district for some sixteen years, Amos. That’s a lot of ground to cover. Four townships, some sixteen thousand square kilometres of land, most of empty of course, but that makes it harder if anything. I don’t even have a secretary!’ Father Monaghan chuckled again. ‘But I love it. Always have. I am invited into every home, and I make sure that I see everyone of my parishioners at least once a year. The people of this district are close-knit, and all feel the hand of God in the everyday.

‘This is an unforgiving land that we live in, Amos. Unforgiving,’ he repeated, taking solace in another sip of scotch. ‘Even so, we have maybe five funerals out here a year in total. Every funeral is felt by the community. But…’ The priest stopped for a moment, swirling the scotch and ice around in his glass, his lined face becoming darker, strained. The man had to be sixty-five, but at that moment, his body shrinking into itself, he looked fifteen years past. Amos looked away, contemplating his own tumbler.

Father Monaghan started, his eyes harsh in their emotion. ‘But Paul. This is different, son. This is something else again. Everyone in Brolga knows everyone else, but Paul was something of a son to us. He was a young man who loved, was involved in everyone’s business. He had a good heart, but above all else, he was hope for a lot of people. And I don’t just mean the sporting teams.’ Monaghan shrugged, looking defeated, his head drifting slowly to his chest.

Amos shifted in his seat, unsure of Monaghan’s condition. ‘Are you all right, Father?’
Again the priest started, this time startling Amos. A splash of scotch landed on the rug between them. The priest sat wide eyed, bewildered, before coming to terms with himself. He laughed, a tired sound.

‘Lordy! Listen to me, Amos! I came to speak to you, and all I’ve done is speak at you! Rabble, rabble, rabble! I tell you, it’s been a long day. Many people are feeling the heavy burden of grief, and it gets to you. Sorry, son.’

Amos was quick to counter apologise and set the priest’s mind at ease. ‘Father, honestly, there’s no need to be sorry! I can’t imagine what the last couple days have been like for you.’

Father Monaghan shook his head, clearing his mind of unwanted thoughts, putting on an ill-fitting mask of happiness and delivering a script worn by overuse. ‘Bah! It’s my job, isn’t it? I am the instrument of God, and part of that is to console and alleviate the darkness that Death brings. Which brings me to you.’ The priest leaned forward, his knuckled white against the clear glass of the tumbler. ‘How is everything?’

It was Amos’ turn to stare into his scotch. ‘It’s strange, Father. I didn’t really know him all that well. I only knew him for six months about five years ago before coming here. It’s hard to realise he’s gone.’

Father Monaghan nodded, an absent yet automatic gesture. ‘I understand. Yet you spent quite a lot of time with him in his last days, yes?’

Amos nodded. The priest nodded in return, his eyes down turned, his lips quivering in thought.

‘How was he?’

Amos looked at the priest. His eyes searched his, looking for an answer before he voiced one. Amos’ brow creased.

‘He was fine. Why?’

Monaghan sat still for a moment, then smiled wanly. ‘Nothing. It’s just that…I’m concerned. I guess I wanted to make sure he left this earth…content.’ He drank the last of his scotch, the ice clicking against his teeth.

‘Another?’ Amos offered.

The priest stared at his glass for a moment, hesitant, then shook his head. ‘No, thank you. I must be going. It has been a long day.’
‘Yes,’ Amos replied.

They both stood up, Father Monaghan pushing laboriously against the armrests for support. His body sagged from the effort, his mind elsewhere. He handed Amos the glass.

‘Thank you, Amos. I’m sorry that I’ve been a little…vague tonight.’

Amos gave a nod. ‘I understand.’

Amos followed the priest to the door. Father Monaghan stood on the threshold, looking out at the waning sunlight, the night moving across the rooftops of the street. He stepped down the stairs, hesitated, turned back to face Amos.

‘I’m sorry. I rattled on. I was here to counsel…’

Amos waved a tumbler at him. ‘The scotch was good.’

The priest gave another tired chuckle. ‘There will be more of those tonight, I fear.’

The two men stood there, lost in their own thoughts.

‘I will come around again in the coming week, to see how you are faring.’

‘Thanks, Father.’

Father Monaghan walked down the pathway, again turning when he reached the gate.

‘If you ever need to talk, of Paul or of other things, my door is always open.’

The priest turned and left, waving to Mrs Hannon on the opposite side of the street as he crossed the road. He shuffled around the corner, his unaired burdens weighing heavily on his sloping shoulders.
Amos sat on the back porch in the early morning, a sodden cigarette butt stuck between his lips. Bottles lay haphazardly beside him, crowding the table, jostling beneath it. He heard the train coming along the railway lines, yet it was some minutes before it came into view. The train let out a piercing whistle, the light atop the front carriage a beacon in the dead of the night. The smell of livestock wafted over the backyard to accompany him in his lonely reverie, their bellowing calls offering no respite.

He stumbled down the stairs and walked to the fence, the train clattering past, slowing now, the carriages ushered through the night to their final destination, the corrals of the stockyard. The squeal of metal on metal, normally only heard as an undercurrent in ill-formed dreams, brought Amos’ teeth clash together.

The night was silent once more.
Amos entered the police station, the air conditioning a welcome relief from the unrelenting morning heat outside. He just made it inside the door before he was almost steamrolled by a fast moving figure. Amos sidestepped, bumping into the doorframe. The man looked back as he passed, Amos realising it was Alex Goodwin before he turned and continued on his way out into the street. Amos watched him go, scratching his head, unsure if he should follow.

A bemused laugh broke his thoughts, turning to see Roary standing at the interior door, his hand on his hip, shaking his head.

‘You alright? You almost got pile driven by ol Mr Goodwin there!’

Amos offered an awkward smile. ‘He was in a hurry, all right. Actually I thought he had already left town. Paul’s mum and sister packed up out of the house yesterday.’

Roary’s eyes widened. ‘Really? Shoot, that didn’t take long! What are they doing with all the stuff? They didn’t take everything did they?’

Amos shook his head. ‘Just valuables, stuff they wanted to hang onto. The rest they left. Like I said, they’re in a hurry to get out of here.’

Roary grunted, chewing his lower lip. Amos saw that something was on his mind, letting it pass.

Roary became serious. ‘How you going anyway? Holding up? I noticed you left the wake pretty early.’

Amos straightened, his cheeks warming. ‘You noticed?’

‘Yeah, I saw you with the two drinks, Lavinia knock one all over you, then a little later Tom mentioned he couldn’t find you. Actually I think he wanted to talk to you about something. He’ll be at the saleyards all day.’

Amos nodded, relaxed. ‘OK, I’ll do that.’

‘So? Everything was OK?’

‘Oh, yeah. I don’t know, I mean, the wake was full of strangers…I just needed some time to myself, you know?’
‘Yeah, I know mate.’ He paused, both hands on hips now, his eyes staring at a spot just in front of his shiny black boots.

‘Father Monaghan came around this morning.’

Roary nodded. ‘Yeah, he’s like that.’

‘Like what?’

Roary shrugged. ‘Visits families after a funeral. He takes care of the churchgoers, anyone he feels might need a helping hand. I reckon there’ll be a lot of house visits in the coming days. Paul…’ Roary trailed away, his eyes downcast. Amos looked away, allowing him to regain composure.

‘Anyway, it’s pretty quiet round here. Mel went home, grievances you know? Fair enough. Women tend to take these things pretty hard.’

Roary puffed his chest out after this comment, indicating that he was made of sterner stuff. Amos merely nodded.

‘Well, don’t just stand there, come in!’ Roary stepped aside as he ushered Amos through the door. The door clicked shut behind them. This time Roary led them to the staff room. Roary moved to the kitchen bench, reheating the kettle as he scraped two chipped mugs off a shelf.

‘Tea? Coffee? Milo?’

‘Ah, coffee’s fine thanks.’

Amos slumped onto a green sofa, its fabric not unlike towelling, the middle sunken from years of heavy misuse. Amos inched to the left of the sofa, gaining as much padding as he could, his arm resting on the armrest.

Roary moved over and placed a mug on the coffee table in front of Amos, sitting opposite him on a ratty brown sofa in slightly better shape. Roary sipped his tea, the tag from the tea bag fluttering against the handle. He closed his eyes and nodded in satisfaction.

‘Green tea. It really is all it’s cracked up to be.’

Amos nodded, not wanting to enter any debate on the issue. He sipped his coffee.

‘Coffee’s alright?’ Roary asked.

International Roast. No sugar. Very hot. Amos put the mug down quietly, nodding, struggling to hide his discomfort.
‘So,’ Roary muttered, leaning into the comfort of the sofa, his legs resting on the corner of the coffee table, ‘what now?’

Amos ran his tongue along the roof of his mouth, hoping he hadn’t burnt it badly. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Well, you were hunting down your parents, right? Now that Paul’s gone, what are you going to do?’

Amos shook his head, his brow creased in confusion.

‘I didn’t even know Paul lived out here, remember? So that part doesn’t change. Actually that was why I came here. To see what Paul had found out.’

Roary ran his hand through his hair. ‘Yeah. Look, we pulled out the files from 1983, 1984 and 1985. They’re in piles on the floor in Paul’s office. But… Listen, no offence, but I don’t know if we can let you look at them.’

Amos stared at Roary, eyes wide. ‘What?’

‘Look, I know this sounds bad, but these files are classified, y’know? And honestly, if you weren’t a friend of Paul’s, you’d have a hell of a time getting your paws on them. Paul’s sent away for a birth certificate extract from Longreach, hasn’t he?’

Amos nodded, still in disbelief. He went to speak but Roary cut him off with a raised hand.

‘I’m not trying to stop you finding out who your parents are, mate. But if Paul was going to stick his neck out to help you, that’s fine, cos it’s his neck. We’ll have some new guy out here in no time, and if there are files missing or unaccounted for, it’ll be my neck. And I can’t let that happen.’

‘I won’t take any of the files! I won’t even copy them!’

Roary nodded, yet his face was set in decision. ‘I know that, Amos. But honestly, if you want to see these files, you’ll have to go through the right procedure. I need this station to be tip top, and that means the rules. Talk to Child Services, go through those channels. But until then…’ He offered his hands outstretched, wrists together. ‘My hands are tied.’

Amos pursed his lips together, nodding once before rising to his feet. Roary followed suit.

‘No hard feelings?’
Amos looked at Roary, his expression of a man trying to do the right thing. He swallowed, nodded again.

‘You have to do what you have to do.’

Roary followed Amos out to the waiting room.

‘Thanks for the coffee,’ Amos said as he moved to the front door.

‘No worries. Don’t be a stranger!’ Roary broke into a goofy grin, ever the helpful public servant, doing his job.

Amos walked down the garden path onto the footpath, his hands jammed into the pockets of his jeans, containing the bitterness that welled inside him.
‘Ah Amos my boy, just the man I wanted to see!’

Tom threw his reading glasses onto the ledger in front of him on the desk and rose from his chair, pumping Amos’ outstretched hand warmly. The cheeriness in Tom’s expression faltered.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘Oh, nothing. I just went to see Roary.’

‘Ah, Sgt Roary. He’s a man lost adrift at sea at the moment.’ He waved at Amos to sit down. Tom leaned back in his desk chair, swaying idly.

‘What’s the problem then?’

‘Nothing, really. What do you mean about Roary?’

‘Oh, well, Roary is a good guy, but Paul ran the ship. With Mel of course, ever present at their shoulder, dotting the I’s, crossing the T’s. He’ll be sorely missed, that’s for sure.’

Amos nodded, his eyes down. ‘Yeah.’

‘Want a drink?’ Tom offered as he opened up a drawer of his desk, procuring a small bottle of Scotch. He swirled the amber liquid within for emphasis. Amos shook his head.

Tom nodded and dropped the bottle back in the drawer. ‘You’re right, it’s too early. I tell you what though, the first mouthful of that will be worth it by the end of this day. A lot of livestock to move today.’

‘I saw the train.’

‘Yeah? Not much came off that. Most of it was on its way up to the Isa from the Roma saleyards.’ He picked up his glasses and rolled the ledge up in his fist. He moved around from behind his desk, grabbing his hat and coat from a rack as he did so. He patted Amos on the shoulder as he moved to the door. ‘Come.’

They moved out into the sun, Amos quick to dull down the glare with his sunglasses. The sights, sounds and smells of the saleyards assailed them as they approached. Many vehicles were parked haphazardly on the gravel; utes of varying colours (mainly variants of white) and degrees of battered misuse alongside large cattle trucks, all of them empty of life. Amos
could see through the slats of the saleyards the unsettled hordes of cattle as they fidgeted in the sun under the watchful gaze of buyers and sellers alike.

‘Shouldn’t you be over there already?’

Tom laughed. ‘Son, I'm not the only person employed here, despite the name. Whilst I’m the main auctioneer, there are a few young blokes who “do my bidding.”’

Amos followed Tom up a small set of wooden stairs on to a gangway that overlooked the pens of the saleyard. As Tom strode purposefully towards the waiting crowd, Amos looked at the cattle, milling restlessly, bellowing a mournful tune, intuition allowing them to know what was to come. Most of the cattle were of lesser stuff – the faint impression of ribcages against the hides of their skin, matted hair, tails constantly swathing the air, the flies temporarily held off. The crowd was mainly made up of men, sweat stained Akubras and battered caps masking their eyes, leaning against the wooden rails, palm-sized notebooks held out, scribbling notes. They looked up as one when Tom walked out in front of them, some smiling or tipping their hats in salutation, others remaining stone-faced. Tom spoke to a few of the men briefly before turning to Amos.

‘Head down there. This’ll take a while. We should finish up after a few hours, so if you get bored I’ll see you at the Brolga?’

Amos nodded once.

‘Alright then,’ Tom said, turning back to the crowd. Amos circled back around the walkway until he came to a set of stairs a couple of pens over from the crowd. He moved towards them as Tom began his spiel.

“All right ladies and gentlemen…”

A nudge in the ribs brought Amos back. Jackie Rickson grinned at him from underneath his brown Akubra, its brim uneven from constant readjustment.

“How’s it hanging digger?” he murmured.

Amos smiled and nodded. ‘Not bad. Yourself?’

Jackie shrugged as he fished out a battered pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. ‘Same old. What’re you doin here?’

It was Amos’ turn to shrug his shoulders. ‘Nothing much better to do.’
Jackie huffed a laugh as he clamped a cigarette between his lips. ‘Yeah, I know what you mean.’ He offered the pack to Amos, which he accepted readily. Jackie lit a match, lighting the cigarette and with a snap of his wrist putting the flame out. He moved away between the pens, away from the crowd, Amos following.

‘What are you doing here?’ Amos said.

‘Drove some cattle in for ol Sawyer. You know him?’

‘I’ve heard the name.’

‘Yeah, he’s alright to work for. Knows shit all about machinery but. Lucky that I know a bit – nothing’d be running out there! He just hops in and drives the fuckers, no checking under the hood, and flat out he goes! He’s fucked a couple of engine blocks, but he doesn’t give a shit, he just goes and buys a new vehicle, flogs that to shit too. That’s the rig I brought in today.’ He pointed out at a red truck with wooden slats on its tray. Amos nodded.

‘So…’

Jackie turned to Amos. ‘You bored?’

‘Well, I was only here to talk to Tom about a thing or two…’

‘Oh yeah? What about?’

Jackie’s question was harmless, yet Amos stalled a second before answering.

‘Stuff.’ He paused. Jackie’s eyes began to dull over, his face setting in a slight frown. Amos rushed to continue. ‘About Paul. Stuff about Paul. You know, just…I don’t know. Stuff.’

Jackie’s face remained unchanged for a few moments before breaking into a wide grin, a peal of laughter echoing across the saleyards.

‘”Stuff about Paul” ey? Very well put. I thought you were a uni student or sumthin. “Stuff about Paul”!’ He shook his head. ‘Well, I could tell you stuff about Paul y’know, if that’s what you’re after.’

‘I guess I was just curious about Paul’s family.’

Jackie smiled a crooked smile, a question mark. ‘The Goodwin’s?’

Amos shrugged and nodded. ‘Well, yeah.’

‘What about em?’
‘Well they’re one of the “old” families of Brolga, right?’ Jackie nodded. ‘So, I guess I just wanted to know some about them.’

The crooked smile remained plastered on Jackie’s face as he shook his head in miscomprehension. ‘I’m not with you mate. Why do you wanna know that stuff?’

Amos nodded. ‘No you’re right. Don’t worry about it. Anyway I think I might head off.’

‘The saleyards not crazy enough for ya?’ Jackie laughed. ‘Listen, I’ll finish up here soon. Sawyer’s over there watching his cattle. It should all be over soon. Do you wanna catch up for a beer or three after then?’

‘Righto.’

‘Good, I’ll see you down at the Brolga at three?’

Amos nodded. Jackie patted him on the back.

‘Good stuff. See you then mate.’ Jackie spun on his heel and headed back to the auction, Tom’s voice carrying over still air of the pens, a voice of authority.
Jet’s *Are You Gonna Be My Girl?* blared out of the tinny speakers of the jukebox as Amos entered the almost-empty Transcontinental. Lavinia spotted him and grinned before she could bring herself under control, a mask of professionalism once more.

‘What’ll it be stranger?’

‘A schooner of heavy.’

Wide-eyed, ‘What? I’m sorry, we don’t serve that around here. that’s exclusively a Mexican drink.’

Amos arched his eyebrows.

‘A beer from south of the border. Only pots or pints.’

‘Or seven ounces,’ echoed Leo from the other end of the bar.

‘Or seven ounces,’ Lavinia admitted.

‘Not that I ever would. If you’re gonna drink, just fucken drink,’ Leo muttered.

Amos laughed. ‘Then a pot’ll be fine.’

Lavinia poured the drink, her eyes fixed on the task at hand, the shadow of a smile marking her lips. Amos gestured towards the jukebox.

‘Jet hey? That’s a bit modern.’

Lavinia offered a single laugh. ‘Yeah, well it’s off (Insert CD name here). You like Jet?’

Amos shook his head. ‘No. But it beats Chad.’

Lavinia laughed heartily, flicking her fringe from her eyes as she rested his drink in front of him. ‘No objections here!’

Leo stirred from his barstool and moved down next to Amos. ‘Now listen here young fella! I’ll have none of that talk, I don’t care what time of day it is! Chad Morgan…he’s good, alright?’

Amos laughed and nodded. ‘I’m with you, OK? But you can have too much Chad, that’s all I’m saying.’
'Alright then, seein you’re so full of the high and almighty! What do you like? C’mon, what do you like?’

Amos shrugged. ‘Lots of things.’

‘Like what?’

‘Umm…Radiohead, Gomez, Muse…’

‘Radiohead? Muse? Lavinia, you heard of any of this?’

Lavinia turned to walk out to the cold room. ‘I’m not getting into this boys. You have to fight your own wars!’

‘Pah! Those aren’t bands if I aven’t heard of em!’

‘Alright, what about The Rolling Stones?’

Leo grumbled. ‘Huh! They’re alright if you like that rock stuff. Bunch of white boys tryin to be black, you ask me!’

Leo opened up his pouch, the aroma of sweet tobacco flooding the bar.

‘Listen, Leo,’ Amos started, ‘you mentioned when I first turned up here that you knew all there is to know about Brolga. The history of the place.’

‘Mmm,’ Leo replied through a mouthful of beer, a droplet trickling down to his chin. He swallowed the beer, his hand pulled across his face, making a sound like sandpaper dragged across a plane of wood. ‘Absolutely boy. What is it that you might want to know?’

‘The Goodwins.’

‘The Goodwins? Now, why do you want to know about them?’

Amos shrugged. ‘Why not? I’m living in their house. They are part of the history of the town, aren’t they?’

Leo scratched his chest. ‘You want to know about the current Goodwins, or all of em? There’s a lot to tell.’

‘All of them.’

Leo nodded, then silence except for the music in the background. Amos stared out the door at the lengthening shadows in the main street before he spoke. ‘I need to know him. Maybe.’
‘OK then.’ Leo gestured towards a table away from the bar. ‘You buy me a drink, and we’ll begin.’

Amos smiled in spite of himself. He shook his head and turned around. Lavinia was still in the cold room, the door slightly ajar. He called out to her.

‘I’m just gonna pour Leo and I a beer, OK?’

Lavinia’s voice echoed out the gap in the door. ‘OK. Actually, could you come around to the cold room for a minute? I need a hand with something.’

Amos moved to the side of the bar, lifting up the (entry board thingy) and walking to the door. He slid the door aside slowly, metal grating on metal. He peered around inside. There was no light. Shadows merged with each other. Amos stepped inside.

‘Lavinia?’

Amos spun around at the sound of squealing hinges as the door was slammed shut. Before he could get his bearings a figure leapt out at him, cold arms around his neck, lips against lips, teeth against teeth. His body stiffened before relaxing into hers, relinquishing to the kiss before he tried to push her away lightly. Lavinia would not let go.

‘Bitch!’ he whispered harshly, a crooked smile creasing his mouth. He dabbed at his lips. ‘I think you split my lips.’

‘Really?’ Lavinia murmured against his ear. Her tongue flickered across his lips, disappeared again. ‘That better?’

Amos smiled. ‘Yeah, that fixed it.’ They kissed again, Lavinia’s hand snaking down Amos’ chest, busying itself between his legs. Amos rested his hand over hers.

‘Wait – what about Alby?’

‘What about him? Am I not enough for you?’ Lavinia laughed softly as her hand began to work again, her lips at his neck.

He stopped her again. This time she pulled away from him, staring at him in the dim light, her eyes bright. Amos fidgeted, struggled to hold her fiery gaze.

‘I don’t know! I guess…Leo…’

‘FuckLeo! I’m horny, And I wanna fuck you, alright? So let’s fuck!’
Lavinia stepped towards him again, Amos stepping out of her reach. A rush of air burst forth from Lavinia in exasperation.

‘What?’

Amos shook his head. ‘I…I don’t want to just fuck you, Lavinia, OK?’

Before Lavinia said anything in response Amos slid the cold room door open. The rush of hot air that met him made him wish for a second that he was back in there with Lavinia. The moment passed and he pushed through out into the bar. He fished out some gold coins and left them on the counter, ducking under the bar and moved towards the door.

‘Wait!’ Lavinia called. Amos looked over at Leo.

‘The money’s on the bar for your drink mate. I’ll see you later.’

‘Wait a minute!’ Leo called out, but Amos was gone.
Amber gave a tired smile as Amos shuffled up to the bar. The Brolga was quiet also. Amos said as much.

‘Compared to…?’

‘The Trans.’

‘Hmph. Thanks.’

‘What?’

‘The Trans is always empty. Or it bloody well should be. Dump that it is.’

Amber walked off, poured a beer, came back. ‘Here.’

Amos looked up at her. ‘Am I missing something here?’

Amber straightened, her frown deepening. ‘No. Two dollars.’

Amos flicked a note onto the bar. Amber snatched it off the bar mat and wandered over to the cash register, Amos watching her go, his face reddening.

‘Ah, he is here!’

Jackie slapped Amos on the back, a happy distraction. Amos forced a grin.

‘How’d it all go Jackie?’

‘Ah, up to shit. But who cares, they’re not my fucken cattle! Two beers Amber. Cheers. You up for some pool mate?’

Amos looked at Amber, her eyes averted. He nodded.

‘Good shit! Rubber, Simmo, up for pool? Double or nothing. And no cheatin this time ya fucks!’

Amos nodded a salutation to the two men, one he recognised as one of the pallbearers at Paul’s funeral. Hamish Simms. Rubber was a cockie like Jackie, in for the sales, staying over the night before moving back out to the property.

Jackie and Amos lost the first game, Jackie citing the problem as ‘not pissed enough.’ The second game was won by default, Rubber sinking the white and black balls on the one shot.
Rubber claimed that it should be play on because Jackie still had one ball on the table, which brought on some raised voices. Hamish sidled up to Amos as Jackie had Rubber in a headlock, rubbing his knuckles against his head, Rubber yelping for mercy.

‘How’s things mate?’ Hamish asked.

‘Yeah, alright. Considering.’

Hamish nodded, his curly hair bobbing against his forehead. ‘Yep. It’s a bit like that. You still up at the old Goodwin place?’

Amos nodded. He took a swig of beer, turned to Hamish. ‘Why the old Goodwin place?’

‘Huh?’

‘You know, I just assumed everyone would have called it “Paul’s house”, but it’s always “the Goodwin place”.’

Hamish shrugged. ‘I dunno. Guess that’s where the Goodwins have always lived, after they sold the property. Then they left when Paul was (age), and Paul’s grandmother lived there until she died, then Paul came back. The Goodwin place.’

Amos nodded. ‘Fair enough,’ he said faintly, his thoughts elsewhere.

‘Oy Amos, no fraternising with the enemy! We’ve got one game in the balance, and I need this kitty to get pissed tonight!’

Hamish laughed and relinquished the pool cue from Rubber, lining up the break. Ivory clacked against ivory as the balls ricocheted around the table.

…

‘Better make that two love.’

Tom sat down next to a solitary Amos. Amos dragged his fingers through his hair and looked up at Tom with bleary eyes. Amber placed the two beers in front of them. Amos pushed some coin forward from his considerable pile, Tom stayed his hand.

‘I’ll get this one.’ He handed Amber a note.
How’d we go today?’ Amber asked over her shoulder as she got Tom’s change.

‘Fair to middling. Pretty much as you’d expect.’

Amber left the change in a neat pile in front of Tom, coins in columns on top of notes. ‘Anything else?’

‘Kitchen still open?’

Amber peered up at the wall clock – 7:12pm. She nodded.

‘Good. What’s the special?’

‘Chicken Kiev.’

‘Then chicken Kiev it is.’ He looked at Amos with raised eyebrows.

‘Better make that two love,’ Amos said.

Tom laughed. Amber merely turned on her heel and disappeared out into the kitchen.

Tom raised his beer to his mouth, his lips smacking together in satisfaction. He looked at Amos with a grin.

‘Nothing beats that first mouthful, does it?’

Amos stared straight ahead, despondent. Tom’s smile faltered.

‘What’s up Amos?’

Amos shrugged, continued to stare ahead into nothing. ‘Nothing much’

‘Nothing much doesn’t sound like nothing much.’

Amos shrugged again, noncommittal, taking a mouthful of beer.

Tom straightened on his stool, looking around the bar. He waved at a table of patrons over near the far wall, then hopped off the stool and turned back to Amos.

‘C’mon. Let’s go outside.’

A light breeze had picked up, enough to cool down the sweat on the men’s skin. Tom sat at the far table, Amos following suit. They sat opposite each other in silence.

‘Listen boy, if you don’t want to be here then why don’t you head off home? Have a shower, cool down, have a rest, start afresh tomorrow?’
A cynical smile, lopsided, crossed Amos’ features. ‘And what home would this be? The Goodwin place? Cos it sure as fuck isn’t my home!’ he snorted and had another pull from his glass.

Tom stared at Amos for a few moments. Amos looked away, over the fence. The sun had gone down, the sunset washed away, yet light still remained. The darkness yet to take hold on the night, the shadows became bluish bruises, marring the streets. The dull fluorescent streetlamps fought a losing battle.

‘Is this about Paul?’ Tom asked, breaking the silence.

Amos gave another crooked smile, fishing in his pocket for cigarettes. ‘Paul? Isn’t everything?’

Tom smiled without humour. ‘Right now it pretty much is around here, yeah.’ His lips pursed, his eyes twinkled from the spotlight above the hotel door leading inside.

‘Kid, let me tell you something. Something you’re probably well aware of. Brolga is a town that is built on hard work and alcohol. Everyone drinks, and usually they drink to get drunk. And everyone has one reason to be drinking and another to be drunk. It’s the way things work in a place like this. Now you’ve been drinking, and you are drunk. So what are your reasons?’

Amos looked at Tom, comprehension evading his clouded eyes. Tom shrugged and picked up his glass.

‘I might go and sit inside, leave you to your th-

‘Everything’s fucked up, Tom. Can’t you feel it? I’ve been here a little while, and Brolga was Brolga. Since Paul though…it isn’t, y’know?’ He stared at Tom with pleading eyes.

Tom nodded slowly. ‘I guess so. But the more things change, the more they stay the same. It depends on the person. Me? Paul was a fine young man, and his death is a tragedy beyond words. But the cattle, my job, my existence – they’re all still there. So I keep plugging along.’

Tom changed tack. ‘Why are you here Amos? In Brolga I mean.’

That crooked smile again, this time a little shaky, fraying at the edges. ‘Many reasons.’

‘Are these reasons why you’ve been drinking? Are they why you’re drunk?’

‘I drink because I like to.’
‘That doesn’t answer my question.’

Amos stared at Tom before giving a barely perceptible nod of the head. Tom opened his mouth to continue but the sound of footsteps made him turn. Amber stood in the doorway, a plate balanced in each hand.

‘It might help if you let me know where you are,’ she huffed as she placed Tom’s food in front of him. She looked at Amos fleetingly before dropping his plate a centimetre above the table, the plate clattering against the table, the knife and fork toppling to the wooden surface. She offered a short “sorry” before she disappeared back into the hotel.

Tom hooked a thumb at the door where Amber had been, his eyes widened, an impish grin flickering.

‘Is that one of the reasons?’

‘She and every other bloody woman in this town.’

Tom laughed, a little more raucous than the comment warranted. Amos began to grin despite himself, before he too was laughing. Tom shook his head, picking up his cutlery and looking at the meal before him. He pointed his knife at Amos.

‘Good to hear that. Not good to be bottling it all in.’

Tom went about demolishing their meals without another word. Amos watched him eat, his own plate untouched, before the little grunts of satisfaction that Tom continued to emit made him reach for the scattered cutlery. He cut into the chicken. A jet of garlic butter spurted out onto the plate, pooling around the vegetables, creating a causeway of the zucchini, an iceberg of the mashed potato.

‘I was born here,’ Amos said, stirring the garlic butter with the tip of his knife. The stammering of Tom’s cutlery on the plate slowed, stopped.

‘Well, not here exactly, but I lived here. I don’t really remember it. But I was taken away when I was three, four. Put into a foster home. So I guess I’m looking for them, though I doubt they live here. They may not even be alive. I don’t know. But Paul was helping me, and now he can’t, he was my friend and now he’s gone, and I don’t know what else to do.

‘And Amber! I don’t even know what’s going on there! One day everything’s dandy, then today I’m in the shit! And don’t even get me started on Lavinia!’ He stopped the conversation with a shovelled mouthful of garlic chicken, his cheeks engorged, chewing with emphasis.
‘I see,’ Tom said quietly. ‘I guess they’re good reasons.’

The wry lopsided smile returned, punctuated by a rush of air expelled from his nostrils. He drank the last of his beer, the glass making a resounding crack as it came back down on the table.

Tom slowly put his knife and fork together and lay them gently at the centre of his plate, his balled up napkin atop them. He rested his weight on his elbows and looked at Amos.

‘What have you found out about your parents?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Hmm.’

‘I don’t even have a birth certificate to start with.’

‘You don’t? Then…driver’s licence? How do you go about getting registration for things like that?’

‘I have a **(Child Services reference)**. Due to the fact that I was a ward of the State.’

‘Hmm. So…why would you have been taken away from your parents?’

‘I could hazard a guess…’

‘But you don’t want to?’

Amos cast his eyes onto the table and nodded.

‘Fair enough. So what had you done before now?’

‘Paul was helping me. I was planning to look through police records of 1983 to 85, try for some sort of connection.’

‘What about Births Deaths and Marriages?’

‘Well technically I was born in Longreach. Paul sent away for any records that might correspond with my year of birth. Results hadn’t come back when…you know…’

‘Uh…huh.’ Tom scratched his scalp. ‘And you foster parents…?’
‘My foster mother, Angela…she doesn’t know.’

‘Really?’

‘She says so.’

‘Ok. And your father?’

‘No such thing,’ Amos said with vehemence. He slumped against the surface of the table, his head in his hands. ‘I don’t know what I expected! I don’t – fuck!’

Tom shook his head. ‘Son, I’ll tell you know, you’ve had a hell of a week, to put it lightly. And I don’t know about these women issues you’ve been having, but they sound like more trouble than they’re worth.’

‘You’re not wrong.’

Tom saw Amos’ head droop, threatening to break free from its resting place on the palm of his hand to come crashing on the table top. He hopped up and help him up from his seat.

‘How about we talk about this some more tomorrow, hey?’

Amos nodded his head, clumsy movements. Tom put his arm around him, but he shook it off, not unkindly.

‘I’m drunk, Tom, you can be sure of that. But I can walk out of here on my own two feet just fine.’

‘Ok son. OK. After you.’

Tom followed Amos as he staggered through the Brolga Hotel to the front door. Amber cast him a disdainful glance before returning her attention to drying a pot glass.

‘Night Amber,’ Tom called out from the front door.

Amber tried on a smile that did not fit the occasion. ‘Night Tom. Look after yourself.’

Tom tipped his hat. ‘Likewise.’

Amos stood in the gutter of the street looking towards the centre of town. He swung back in Tom’s direction, pointing crookedly up the road.

‘You see that?’

Tom peered down the street. ‘What, Amos?’
‘Isn’t that one o Tracker’s dogs?’

Tom gazed down the street, left to right. The moon hung at quarter mast, the light waning dully, shadows barely distinguishable from the objects that cast them. Finally he saw something move, skulking from behind a parked car.

‘Could be.’

Amos scratched his chest and peered at Tom. ‘Why was he at the funeral?’

‘Who?’

‘Tracker.’

‘Tracker? He wasn’t at the funeral.’

Amos’ hands moved about in frustration. ‘No! You know…the graveside. The cemetery. He was there.’

Tom slowly shook his head. ‘Maybe he was, son. Now let’s get you home.’

Amos squinted down the street. The ink black night swallowed all.
Scratching. Amos stirred, a groan scraped free from his throat. The light to his bedroom was on, the ceiling fan undulating lazily, barely stirring the thick atmosphere that permeated the heat of the house. The sheets entwined his legs, self made manacles. His mouth had grown its own fur, making him gag. The light seared his retinas, forcing his eyes shut. He cursed loudly.

The scratching came from the front door. Not scratching, but rapping. Like one knuckle brushing the doorframe. He pushed the sheets away, casting of the twisted sweaty shackles, and stumbled out of the room. He stood at the front door, his hand resting on the handle.

‘Who is it?’ he whispered.

At first there was no answer. Amos made to move away before he heard a voice.

‘Sorry?’ he said.

‘It’s me. Lavinia.’

Amos stood still, his hand still on the door handle, unmoved. He ran his other hand through his hair.

‘What do you want?’

Silence for a few moments, before, ‘I want to talk to you.’

Amos opened the door. Lavinia stood framed in the doorway for a few moments, unsure of herself, before she moved past him into the hallway, the door clicking shut behind her. She walked through the lounge room and through the door into the kitchen, knowing her way. Amos paused before following her.

Lavinia was seated at the kitchen table. Amos ambled past her, to the fridge. He opened the door, the cool refrigerated air hitting his face like an omen. He looked inside.

‘Drink?’

‘Yeah, that’d be good.’

Amos pulled out two beers, the bottles clinking together, precipitation forming on the neck as it hit the thick ait of the kitchen. He opened one, handing it to Lavinia, opening the other as
he sat across from her. They took a mouthful in silence. The beer washed over the inside of Amos’ mouth, washing away the staleness of alcohol and sleep.

‘Look, about this afternoon…’ Lavinia started.

Amos shook his head. ‘You know your way around this place?’

‘What?’

‘Well, you knew exactly where to go. I guessed you’ve been here before.’

Lavinia looked at him, nodded. Amos looked at her, arching his eyebrows. She looked down at her beer.

‘Yes.’

Amos waited.

‘I’ve been here before, OK? Paul…was…’

‘Just a fuck?’

Lavinia looked at him, guarded. ‘Hey, Paul was a good person. Yes, something like that.’

Amos gave a thin smile. Lavinia looked at him and smiled, no hint of the grin he was familiar with. Her eyes were soft, grateful. She stood up and moved around to Amos, taking his hand, pulling him out of his chair. He did not resist, the two beers left forgotten on the kitchen table.

... Sunlight filtered through the lace curtains of the room. Amos lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. Watermarks around the light fixture, although they appeared to be years old. Dead moths faded to dust in the yellowed light casing. The ceiling itself was painted white, its surface embossed spider-web cracks the enamel. The metal pedestal fan continued its rhythmic creaking as it made a futile effort to keep the heat at bay.

Lavinia cradled her head in the nook of his armpit, her hair feathered over his shoulder. Her eyelids were at half mast, a semicircle of green caught by the sunlight. Her fingers flitted up and down his arm, gooseflesh breaking out over his skin. Her soft breath tickled at his neck.
Her fingers stuttered, ceasing their rhythmic travels and began a series of figure-of-eights on his forearm. Amos stiffened. He felt her head turn to look at his arm, then look up at his face. He kept on staring at the ceiling.

‘What are these marks, Amos?’

Amos ignored her, his eyes unfocused.

‘They’re cigarette burns, aren’t they?’

Amos remained still, refusing to answer.

Lavinia raised herself up onto her elbow so that she was looking over Amos. The tips of her golden hair brushed over his chest, his nipples standing to involuntary attention. He felt her eyes boring into him, sympathy and concern burning like lasers into his turned cheek. He felt her hand caress his face, then gently guide his head to face her. He let out a sigh.

‘Yes, they are.’

She looked down at his arm again, fingertips stroking the faint scars. She remained silent, no words passing her lips, yet he knew she wanted to know.

She raised herself up further until she was seated cross legged beside him, his arm in her lap. She reached over, her soft hand enveloping his own, forcing him to sit up and face her. He kept his eyes downcast, moving around until he too was cross legged. Her constant tracing of the scars forced him to look at them. He had not noticed them for many years. He had ignored them; repressed them. Five haphazard circular scars, callused and lighter than his skin, rose up off the surface.

When he started speaking, Amos did not recognise his voice.

‘Michael…sometimes he would come home from the pub late at night. Three things could happen when he got drunk. He could disappear until early the next morning, hung over and quiet as a mouse, moping around the house all day. No one would know where he stayed the night. He could come home triumphant, hands filled with a cold chicken, a meat tray, a bag of prawns, winning betting tickets from the dogs, and he’d make us all laugh. And he could come home empty handed.’

Amos paused. Looking at the burn scars, images flicked in his mind, visions that had not been conjured up since he was a teenager. He was unsure of what he would say next.
‘Angela would meet him at the door, hold him and shower him with kisses. She never asked him how the day had gone. He could shake her, or push her aside, but he never hit her. He always got a tallie from the fridge and sat in his armchair in front of the television. Mostly he was quiet, sucking on his beer, smoking his smokers.

‘But sometimes he would wake Isaac and me up. We were never asleep of course. When Michael didn’t come home for dinner, everyone was unsure of themselves. Almost like rabbits in the headlights. Anyway he would come to our room. We’d already heard the yelling, so we pretended to sleep. He’d pull us out of our bunks. Once I hit my head on the corner of the bed frame, splitting the skin. We’d all sit in the lounge room, and Michael would tell us about ‘the real world’. Sometimes the rants would go on for hours, well into the morning. And if one of us fell asleep, he’d wake us up.’

Amos finished the last sentence, touching the scars, his fingertips brushing Lavinia’s. Amber trembled, taking his hand in hers and putting it to her lips, kissing each knuckle.

‘Oh, Amos, I’m sorry.’

Amos gave a wistful smile. ‘That was a long time ago.’

‘No one should have to put up with that. What kind of monster does these things to a child? To their own child?’

Amos met Lavinia’s angry gaze and shrugged. ‘Michael was not a monster.’

Lavinia started, defiance etched on her face. ‘Wha-? Not a monster? Amos, he put out cigarettes on you! And you couldn’t even defend yourself?’

Amos shrugged again, but continued to hold her indignant stare. ‘What he did was wrong, sure. I always knew that. But he was good to me. Real good. What more could you ask of a father?’

‘Um, that they not burn you with cigarettes?’

The wistful smile again. ‘Everyone has their own demons.’

Lavinia stared at Amos, unable to understand or comprehend his defence of his father’s actions. No tears pricked his eyes. He did not shake from grief. He remained earnest.

Tears ran down Lavinia’s cheeks as she threw her arms around Amos, showering his face with kisses. Lifting her legs, she wrapped herself around him, crushing her body against his. His lips met hers. He tasted saltwater.
Amos felt the sun on his face, already capable of burning his skin. He groaned and rolled over, his arm flopping lazily across the bed. The space beside him was empty. He looked around the room with bloodshot eyes, looking for Lavinia. He made to move off the mattress before he heard the sound of running water. The shower. Amos smiled and flopped back down on the bed.

Lavinia moved into the room, one towel wrapped around her, another turban like covering her hair. He peered up at her. They exchanged grins.

‘I took the liberty of grabbing towels out of the linen cupboard. Hope you don’t mind.’

‘You’ve already done it now.’

Lavinia looked at him, her eyes defensive. Amos smiled.

‘I’m kidding. That’s fine.’

She smiled, the shadow fleeing her eyes. She took off the towel, one leg up on the corner of the bed, drying herself. Amos stared at her, her comfort in being naked around him.

‘I thought you had gone.’

Lavinia put one leg down, raising the other. ‘Why would you think that?’

Amos shrugged. ‘Why wouldn’t I?’

Lavinia shrugged and continued to dry herself.

‘What are you doing today?’

‘Probably what I do every day. Drink.’

Lavinia grinned, then the smile wavered. ‘What of your parents?’

Thoughts of yesterday. Amos wiped his face. ‘Yeah, well. I thought I might talk to Leo. Nut out what he knows, what he can tell me. Maybe talk to Tracker.’

‘Tracker? That crazy bastard? Why?’

‘I’ve been planning to get another mango, actually.’

Lavinia stared at him before comprehension forced her to laugh. ‘Yeah, sorry about that.’
‘No worries. It wasn’t totally missed. I had other things at hand at that time.’

Lavinia laughed again, dropping the towel at her feet and unfastening the turban, drying her hair in hurried motions as she walked around to Amos’ side of the bed.

‘Well, I’ll be at the Trans, as always.’

Continuing to dry her hair with one hand, Lavinia lifted the sheet and looked down.

‘Someone is happy to see me,’ she purred, her eyes sparkling.

Amos reached up and stilled her hand, pulling the towel from her grasp and letting it fall to the floor. Lavinia’s eyebrows arched, her lips curling. A droplet of water travelled unnoticed down the nape of her neck.

…

Amos moved his head in and out of the hard stream of the shower, the water washing over him, cleansing him of thought, of emotion. His muscles relaxed, his shoulders sloping forward. He did not use any hot water; the coldness seeping inside his pores.

He did not hear the phone until he shut of the shower. The sound was alien; he had not heard the shrill sound the entire time he had stayed in the house. He hesitated before hurriedly wrapping a towel around his waist and shuffled down the hall to the kitchen. His hand stayed inches above the receiver, allowing the phone to ring another two times before he took a deep breath and answered it.

‘Hello?’ he said, his voice an apprehensive whisper.

There was silence at the other end.

‘Hello?’ he repeated with more force.

A hesitant voice echoed down the line. ‘Hello? Amos?’

Amos stalled for a few seconds before recognising the voice. ‘Angela?’

‘Did I get you at a bad time?’

Amos breathed out laughter. ‘No, no! Just rushed to the phone, that’s all.’
Angela let out a sigh. ‘Good, good.’

Amos ran his fingers through his wet hair. ‘How’d you get this number?’

‘Oh!’ Sounding surprised, almost disappointed in the question, having to explain herself. ‘I rang your mobile, but it must be switched off, so I rang your hotel, where you were staying, and I spoke to the man there…’

‘It’s fine Angela. Sorry. I just haven’t given out this number. In fact, I don’t even know what it is.’

Angela laughed, embarrassed. ‘OK.’ A pause, dead air. Then, ‘How is everything going?’

‘I haven’t found out anything, yet anyway.’

‘No, how are you going?’

Amos smiled. ‘Not bad. Coping, but OK. Actually, a lot’s happened since we last spoke.’

‘Really?’ Amos heard the smile in Angela’s voice. ‘Found a girl have we?’

Flashes – Lavinia’s breasts, Lavinia’s smile. ‘No, nothing like that.’

‘Then what? Don’t keep me in suspense!’

‘I’ve run into a guy down at the Trans – the pub I was staying at – and he said he might be able to help me.’ Amos let out a shudder of laughter. ‘Anyway he is an historian as far as Brolga goes. Probably can’t wait to chew my ear off as no one else here will listen to him!’

Angela laughed, the sound hollow, forced. ‘Sounds interesting.’

‘It is. Funny, but I…really like it out here.’ Quickly adding, ‘Not that I’m planning to live here or anything. But you know, there’s just something beautiful and mysterious about Brolga. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but…I like the place.’

‘Have you seen any yet?’

‘Hey?’

‘Brolgas, have you seen any yet? You know they’re your grandmother’s favourite bird?’

‘What, Gran Esme?’

‘Yes. You’ve seen that wood painting she has hanging over the duchess in the hallway?’

Amos scratched his head. ‘Maybe…’
‘Oh Amos! You can’t tell me you haven’t seen it!’

Amos shrugged to no one. ‘I don’t know…maybe?’

The reproach emanated down the line. Amos gritted his teeth and moved on. He needed to make it through everything before he could be dissuaded any further.

‘I’m staying out here for a little while, Mum,’ Amos murmured, the last word serving as both as a pacifier and an acknowledgement of disappointment. He looked up at the ceiling, gently biting his lower lip as Angela took in a sharp breath and spoke, sharp tones prickling his ear.

‘I knew I shouldn’t have let you go out there.’

‘No, wait, listen…’

‘It was a bad idea from the start, it always has been. I am your mother. I’m your family! They, whoever they are, didn’t want you, they did not love you! They could not love you or care for you like I have all your life!’

The tears were falling a thousand kilometres away, yet Amos felt them wet against his own cheeks. He shook his head despite his knowledge that the action went unnoticed. It was far too early in the day. He closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose as he tried to placate her.

‘Really, it has nothing to do with that! I love you with all my heart, Angela, I really do! I just… It’s hard to explain. I just feel that since arriving here, it feels right. There is something here for me, and until I find out what it is, I’m staying.’

The silence did nothing to alleviate the unwanted guilt that rose up in his throat.

‘You could do all this from here, you know! What do you hope to achieve?’

Amos didn’t answer, instead staring up at the ceiling.

‘How long will you be?’

The resignation rang from Angela’s voice, a mourning bell declaring her inherent loss. Amos covered his hand with his face, coming away clammy with sweat and tears.

‘I don’t know. A few months maybe.’

‘Months?’ An abrupt intake of breath. ‘OK.’ A pause. ‘I’m happy for you.’
The click resounded in the earpiece of the phone, harried along by the urgent beeping of the disconnected line. Amos held the phone to his ear for a few moments, his eyes unfocused. He shaped to throw the receiver, his face screwed up in anguish and frustration, before letting it fall between his legs onto the hardwood floor.
Amos’ skin prickled instantly as he left the house, the shirt sticking to his back, pulling it away and waving the fabric as a fan in a futile attempt to cool down. He walked down to the main street, cars reverse angle parked along the front of the storefronts. People’s eyes raised as he passed them, tipping their hats or offering good mornings. Amos reciprocated in the same fashion, trying to instil some emotion as he did so. He walked past the Trans, resisting the urge to enter, continuing instead to the end of the street, around the corner, and to Tracker’s shed.

The door was closed as before. Business as usual. The dogs prowled the fence from restlessness rather than any form of menace. If they remembered him from his visits he could not tell.

‘Ey! Amos! Round ere!’

Amos walked to the other side of the shed, to the ramshackle house that adjoined the shed. The condition of Tracker’s house was not dissimilar to his place of work. Of corrugated iron, the building was roughly double the size of the shed. It was raised on stubby stumps, spinifex crowding each base, giving the illusion that the house was hovering. Three windows faced out onto Strahan Way, two of them made up of eight panes of glass, four for each (window door?). most of the panes were intact, with several replaced by pieces of cardboard. One pane had a hole in it, the hole plugged up by an old ice cream container lid. The third window was made of wooden slats, and again it was not intact, with two slats missing. The edge of a curtain flickered out of one of the gaps like a lace tongue before disappearing again.

Tracker stood on the verandah that was attached to the front of the house. The house was built side on to the road, so that the porch looked out at the buildings beside it. He was wiping his hands with a dirty pink rag that had once been bright red. He waved and smiled a gappy grin, like broken piano keys. Amos waved, smiling despite himself.

‘Ey sir! How’s it today?’ Tracker called, hopping off the side of the verandah to meet Amos halfway. ‘Wan some vegies? Got sum gooduns today, yes sir!’ His hyena laugh leapt up and disappeared in the still air.

‘Uh, yeah, OK, sounds good,’ uttered Amos.

‘Hate ta dispoint ya, but am close today. No work today.’
‘But…you just said…’

The hyena laugh again. ‘Ya still new ay? Everone knows Tracker full a shit! Wait roun the front!’

Tracker hopped back onto the verandah and disappeared inside. Amos shook his head in bewilderment as he made his way to the front of Tracker’s Treasures. He waited for several minutes, watching the dogs watch him.

A scratching from behind the partitioned door brought Amos back to task. First the top section swung open, Tracker standing there visible from waist up, grinning like a horse with a surplus of feed.

‘What you wan, ey? Broccli, cabbage, colflower?’

Amos looked down at the bottom partition without a word. Tracker followed his gaze.

‘No! I get you vegies ay! I get em for ya! What you after, broccli, cabbage…’

Amos nodded, waving his hand in front of him. ‘OK, OK. You…have any tomatoes?’

Tracker wheezed his trademark laugh, bending over and slapping his thigh lightly. ‘When you learn ay? You may always be new, no matter how long you in Brolga!’

The door swung open, Tracker blending with the mottled light within, a moving wheezing shadow. Amos slunk inside the shed behind him, finding tracker muttering to himself jovially as he looked through one of his Styrofoam boxes, producing a bright red tomato.

‘How many?’

‘Half a dozen.’

Tracker looked at him blankly.

‘Uh, six’ll do thanks.’

Tracker grinned. ‘Sir is so polite ay? Six then.’ He put the tomatoes into a plastic bag. He got up and put them on the makeshift table.

‘Any else? Broccli, cabbage, colflower…’

‘Yeah, all of it. One of each.’

‘Good, good!’ Tracker enthused as he disappeared to the back of the shed once more. He rummaged around amongst more boxes under Hessian sacks.
‘So, Tracker,’ Amos started, hands jammed into his [pockets, ‘you, ah, lost any of your
dogs?’

The rustling stopped. ‘Lost my dogs?’

‘Dog. I thought I saw a dog like yours up at the Brolga last night.’

Amos watched tracker as he paused, his head still, before he continued his work. ‘No. Ain’t
lost a dog. I’d know.’

‘Yeah, I guess you would. Anyway, just thought I’d let you know.’

Tracker had put the vegetables into a cardboard box and carried them to the table, placing the
tomatoes in with them. ‘Anerthin else?’

Amos shrugged and nodded, lost in thought. Tracker moved towards the register then
stopped, shaking his head like a fly bothered him. The grin was back.

‘How was the mango ay? Juicy ay? Everone says real juicy, runs down ya chin, messy ay?
But good ay?’


‘You wan anutha?’

Amos nodded, but Tracker had already moved to the back of the shed, producing a mango
identical to the first one. He thrust it out at Amos.

‘Smell it. Jus smell it.’

Amos put his nose to the fruit, breathing in. The aroma flooded his lungs(?) , bringing on
thoughts of Brisbane and summer and running under sprinklers with Isaac. And Angela. And
Michael.

Tracker chuckled as he popped the mango into the box. ‘No one can resist Tracker’s
mangoes!’

Amos handed over the money, Tracker deftly spiriting it away to the register, handing him his
change. Amos held the coins, hot and sweaty, and did not move. Tracker continued to grin at
him.

‘Wass matta? It’s all right. What, you wan summin else? Like carrits?’

Amos paused. ‘You know Paul Goodwin?’
Tracker’s smile froze on his face, thawing to nothing. They stared at each other in silence.

‘You know him, right? Everyone does around here.’

Tracker hesitated before one, two jerky nods of the head. ‘I know him.’

‘Yeah, because I saw you at the funeral. Well not the funeral, but at the cemetery.’

Tracker said nothing for a few moments.

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘I wasn there.’

‘Yeah you were. I saw you, with some of your dogs. You saw me too.’

Tracker continued to stare at Amos, eyes wide, jittery. Amos put his hands out, palms facing Tracker.

‘Hey, Tracker, I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with being at the funeral…’

‘I wasn at the funeral.’

‘Whatever. I just wanted to know how well you knew Paul.’

Tracker shuffled his feet, a raspy sound against the dusty floor. ‘I didn know im well or nothin.’

Again silence. Amos waited.

‘Cum.’ Tracker moved around the table to the front door, standing at its side. He gestured like a doorman, his arm sweeping before him.

‘I’ll meet you at th frunt of th house. Lemme lockup.’

Amos picked up the box and moved out of the shed, the doors slammed quickly behind him. He walked around to Tracker’s verandah, sliding the box onto the wooden floor. Tracker emerged from the front door, waved at him to come forth, and disappeared. Amos pushed the box further onto the verandah into some semblance of shade before following him.

The hallway was bare, the extreme of the room that Tracker sat down in, clearing boxes off one end of a sofa to do so. The room was designed to be a moderate sized bedroom, instead
serving as a storage room of all types of knick knacks. Amos found a sturdy coffee table supported a pile of newspapers, and sat down on these.

Tracker had become uncertain of himself, his surroundings not easing his sense of anxiety. Amos fidgeted, trying to get comfortable, unsure of what tracker had to tell him, if anything.

‘Paul, he’s a good man. Good man. One of my reglar custumas. He rilly liked my cabbage. Sed it waz betta den anythin in Brisban. Yeh, good man.’

Tracker stared at a space in between and beyond the two of them, lost in thought, before he endeavoured to continue.

‘S hard for me dogs, see. I need to liv ere, but me yard isn big enuff for em… And Mister Neville, e’s a good man too, e lets me take em out, knows they’s good dogs, good…

‘Sometimes I go shootin. Roos are bad out there, yeah, bad. Sumtimes I keep em, bring em in. cut em up fer steak. Anutha bloke does th same.’

‘Stinky Pete?’

Tracker’s eyes shone with recognition and a chance to diverge from the conversation. ‘Yeah! He a funny fulla that one. I killed a lot a roos ova th years, but neva hav I stunk so bad! He don’t wash good or summin.’

Tracker’s eyes dulled, his unease returning. ‘Last week I waz out there. ‘m allowed wheneva. I tell Mister Neville ‘m there, no worry. But eh wernt there. I waited, I didn wanna make him mad. But Staz gotten restless, and I just had to!’

‘Had to what?’

‘Go out, let them out!’

‘Staz…’

‘One of me dogs. So I took em out. I wasn doin no wrong!’

Amos eased forwards, his arms across his knees. ‘It’s alright. Take your time.’

Tracker scratched his neck. ‘I…I saw what happened.

‘What happened?’ he said, almost a whisper.

‘I saw Paul get shot dead.’
‘Amos!’

Stinky Pete emerged from the shed, flecks of blood speckling his face, once-white plastic apron tied around his waist. His two children looked up from the sandbox and giggled. He looked a horror film villain with kids. John Jarrett maybe.

Pete wiped his hands hurriedly on the apron Amos hesitated before taking the plunge and shaking Pete’s hand, his big mitt enveloping his own and proceeding to pump it up and down, inadvertently ground his bones to dust in the process. Amos attempted to smile through the grimace.

‘How’s things?’ Pete offered as he turned to close the shed door. Amos caught a glimpse of a kangaroo, split open, hollowed out, its entrails on the floor beneath where it hung, a hook through its neck, before Pete’s body blocked his view. Pete pushed the lock across, rattled the door for reassurance. Two pig dogs in the pen next to the shed stirred at the sudden noise, stared up at Amos with beady eyes. Pete turned back to him.

‘Beer?’

Pete pushed through the back door of his house, washing his hands in a concrete sink in the laundry.

‘Head on through.’

Amos sidled past him into the kitchen, pulling out a chair from the table and sitting down. The kitchen was a light green in colour, the bench tops and cupboard doors a canary yellow. Amos fought the urge to squint from the garishness.

Pete lumbered in and grabbed two beers from the battered fridge, offering one to Amos. He opened his bottle and took a long gulp of beer, the bottle half empty in one mouthful. He sat down, letting out a belch that rattled the glasses drying on the kitchen bench behind him. The smell wafted over the table and assailed Amos – coppery body odour and offal. He began to breath through his mouth.

‘So?’

Amos stared at Pete. ‘Sorry?’

‘You didn’t answer my question before. How’ve you been holding up?’
'Oh.' Amos shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Pretty good I guess.’

‘Yeah mate, it’s been rough times, let me tell ya.’ Pete shook his head as he rifled through his shirt pocket, fishing out a packet of Winfield Red. He tapped one out and put it between his lips.

‘You don’t mind do ya?’ he asked and lit the cigarette without waiting for Amos’ reply. He blew the smoke over his shoulder.

‘Yeah, went shootin last night with a few of the blokes. Wasn’t the same, y’know?’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, well, Paul didn’t always come out, but y’know. It’s still there.’

Amos nodded absently, sipping beer.

‘So, what brings you round here? not that I can’t use the break, but is something up?’

Amos nodded. ‘I guess. I’ve just been thinking…’

‘Uh-oh, here we go! This sounds dangerous!’ Pete guffawed before finishing his beer in another mammoth swallow.

‘You were out there, right? The night that…it happened.’

‘It’s alright mate, you can say it! Paul was shot. By one of his mates. By accident. And yeah, I was there. Fucking terrible, worst thing I’ve ever been witness of.’

Amos looked Pete, not saying anything. Pete looked back, fidgety, rolling the beer bottle around Spin-the-Bottle style on the table.

‘I don’t want to be upsetting you…’

‘Nah mate, you’re fine! Whatever, whatever you want to know,’ Pete replied, flustered.

‘I guess I just wanted to know, how, y’know? How could it have happened? I mean you guys go out shooting all the time right?’

‘Since we were kids, Paul and me, with my older brother. Curt’s pretty much the same.’

‘So Curt was there too?’
Pete hesitated before nodding. ‘Yeah, it was me, Curt, Paul, Marley and…that was it. Luke Garret and his brother were meant to come out, but…didn’t.’ Pete’s eyes had clouded over, his mind drifting back into the past.

‘What about Jackie?’

‘Wha?’ Pete took a few moments to register, running a hand over his face, tearing himself back from his reverie.

‘Jackie Rickson. I thought he and Marley were real close, went shooting together.’

‘Yeah, well, Jackie wasn’t there.’ Pete pulled on his cigarette, a long column of ash threatening to fall to the floor.

‘So…what happened?’

Pete began to stare into that middle distance again. his eyes clouded once more, now amplified by the threat of unbidden tears, his irises swimming in unwanted memories. Amos watched him, and waited.

When Pete did talk it came forth in a pleading flurry, begging to be understood. ‘It…I don’t know how it happened! We’d come across a mob of em, I can still see the…form of em as they went across the ground. We spotted em in the moonlight, little need f

Marley popped a couple, I clipped one. I went off after the one I hit on foot, cos it wasn’t going far. I don’t know where Paul was. Then there were shots.’

‘How many?’

‘How many what?’

‘Shots.’

‘Shots? Ah, two I think. Maybe three. No, definitely two. Two shots.’

‘So…who shot him?’

‘Fuck I don’t know! I don’t wanna know. Do you think any of those blokes would want to know either?’

‘Well, who shot the shots?’

‘Does it matter?’ Pete groaned, his hand covering his eyes. he continued in this way, his voice low. ‘Marley shot at a figure, once. Curt did the same. And that was that.’
Amos looked down at his hands, fidgeting lifelessly in his lap. He took a deep breath.

‘What then?’

Pete took his hand away from his eyes in exasperation. ‘What what then? Paul fucking died, that’s what! And it was all our fucken fault!’

Pete looked away, out the window facing onto the back yard, his hand balled into a fist at his mouth, his chest rising and falling with slight shudders. Amos saw Pete’s children look up from their game, having heard their father’s raised voice, their expressions of joy muddied by the slight wind of fear. Their backs straight, waiting to hear heavy footsteps and the slamming of the screen door, like meerkats watching out for danger. Finally the boy said something to his sister, making her grin, and they returned to their sand castle.

‘I’m sorry Pete,’ Amos murmured. ‘I shouldn’t…’

‘Ah fuck off!’ Pete grumbled, a smile forced onto his face. ‘When’s a good time anyway? We’re amongst friends here aren’t we?’

Amos nodded. ‘Sure Pete. Sure.’

‘I’m the one who should be sayin sorry, almost blubbering like a bloody baby!’

‘There’s nothing to be sorry about.’

‘Yeah, well.’ Pete looked around the kitchen, like he had just seen it for the first time, looking to occupy himself, saying ‘You want another beer?’ as he pushed himself up from the chair.

Amos shook his head. ‘Look, I’ve probably outstayed my welcome anyway.’

‘Nah mate! Don’t worry about it.’

‘I should go though.’

Pete paused at the refrigerator, the door open, then closed. ‘Yeah, I should get back to work too. No rest for the wicked!’

They stepped out the back door, the glare forcing Amos to close his eyes, opening them slowly, his hand over his brow. The children looked up, furtive, before returning again to play.

‘Come around sometime when Denise is here, she’d love to meet you. We could have a barbie some time.’
‘That sounds good Pete.’

‘Iright then.’ Pete stuck out his hand, Amos taking it. They looked at each other and nodded.
Marley greeted Amos with a hearty handshake as he entered Brolga Hardware. The store was deserted, two young men behind the counter standing with the hands playing idly with pens. The aisles of the store were cluttered and close together, stock packed in boxes on the floor. As if noticing for the first time, Marley glared at one of the men, who promptly dropped their pen and began to sort through boxes of screws, the other disappearing out back.

Marley led Amos into a room behind the counter, fibro walls forming a small and cluttered office. One window looked out at the store (one of those windows that have the lines that allows you to look out but not see in?) He closed the door behind them, sitting at a battered swivel chair and motioning Amos towards another.

‘How’s things mate?’ Marley inquired.

‘Alright.’

‘Still up at the old Goodwin place?’

‘Yeah. It’s pretty empty now.’

‘Yeah, I guess it would be. You’re doin better than I would be; I’d a been out of there as soon as possible.’

‘Yeah.’

‘So what can I do you for?’ Marley said, leaning back in his chair, swivelling back and forth in a slow rhythm, his hands interlocked over his chest.

‘Not much. I would have asked you down at the Brolga rather than here, but haven’t seen you down there since…for a while.’

‘Well I’ve been pretty busy to tell’s the truth. The business and all. It’s been pretty slow over the last month actually, not good, but we have some big orders coming in, monthly accounts clearing and so forth. You seen Jackie lately?’

Amos nodded. ‘Down at the Brolga last night. In at the saleyards.’

‘He would a been shitfaced wouldn’t he?’

Amos shrugged. ‘I guess. He disappeared around six.’
‘Probably fucking that British bar chick. She acts like she’s only putting up with him, but Jackie, he…he’s a wily one. The women, they love him.’

Amber, last night. ‘Yeah, I’m not sure about that.’

‘Trust me mate, Jackie has something us blokes can only aspire to. Don’t ask me to explain it, but it’s there.’

‘No, I don’t doubt it. I meant that he wasn’t with the bar girl, not at six anyway.’

Marley nodded. ‘Fair enough. So what are you after?’

‘Actually I’d just been over to Stinky Pete’s.’

Marley sat in silence.

‘You were there…’

Marley pursed his lips together, nodded. ‘Sad, sad thing. Paul was a great man.’

Amos nodded. ‘Yeah, he was. I guess what I wanted to ask was…well, what happened? As far as you could tell. I mean, Pete said that he was away from it all.’

‘Yeah, he was. That’s the way he is though.’

‘How’s that?’

‘Well, roo shooting’s his livelihood. He takes it pretty serious. Nothing bad, one-upmanship or anything like that, but he likes to hunt alone, if you get what I mean.’

‘So he was off to the side.’

‘Maybe a k east of the rest of us.’

‘OK…’

‘Listen, why do you want to know for? Now? Why not then, when it all happened?’

Amos sat in stony silence, rigid in his seat, his hands clasped between his thighs. Finally he gave a shrug.

‘I thought knowing the basics would be enough, but…here I am.’

‘Here you are,’ Marley echoed enigmatically. He had picked up a pencil and was twirling it in one hand, spinning around his forefinger, an automatic action.
'It was dark, but not that dark. We had good moonlight to go by, so we did. So I don’t know how it happened.'

‘What did happen?’

‘Paul was in front of me, a little to my right. We had shot one or two roos in some prickly acacia bushes and were just after them. I heard a shot, and immediately swung around, thinking of dingoes. Paul wasn’t there. Then I heard another shot. Everything was real still. Then a third shot.

‘There were three shots?’

‘Yeah, three. I called out, but got no answer, so I moved slowly through the scrub. I found Curt there over Paul’s body.’

Amos took a quick breath, let it out slowly. ‘So…Curt…’

‘Shot Paul, yeah. He was on his knees, cradling him. One look at him I could tell he was gone. Pete reached us and we put through a call to Sgt. Roary and an ambulance.’ Marley wiped his hands on his slacks, his eyes downcast. ‘A bloody shame.’

‘Look, I don’t mean any disrespect,’ Amos said lightly, ‘but you don’t think that Curt would’ve…deliberately…’

‘Curt? God no! No, not at all! Look, I know the kid has a patchy history, having been down the river for two years, but he’s a good kid. Well, he means well. He ain’t no killer that’s for sure.’

‘Right. Of course. I’m just airing out my thoughts, is all.’

‘OK.’ Marley slapped his hands onto his knees, making to get out of his chair. ‘So, is that all? I gotta, you know…’

‘Oh, of course.’

Amos moved out of Marley’s office and around to the front of the counter. Marley stood near the register.

‘Well thanks,’ Amos said.

‘No problem.’

Amos turned to leave when Marley called out to him. He looked back to see Marley stretched over the counter, fishing in the bargain bin that sat at the foot of the counter.
‘Hey, you need to buy anything? Like I said, it’s been a lean month, and every man needs a hammer.’
FIfty

Amos walked into the house, throwing the hammer onto his bed as he passed, bee lining for the kitchen fridge. Grabbing a beer, he slammed the door and moved out onto the back verandah. He slumped into a squatter’s chair, drinking the beer and staring out at the nothingness that stretched to infinity beyond the back fence. Another moment of showing Amos’ deterioration…
FIFTY ONE

Amos could hear the noise of the Transcontinental before its door came into view. He stumbled towards the sound, his eyes set.

The Highwaymen’s *Silver Stallion* mingled with the raucous chatter working class drunks. He ignored them all, walking up to the bar in front of Lavinia.

‘Hey!’ she beamed. ‘What’re you doing here?’

‘Talking to you,’ he murmured.

‘Ha ha ha! You after a beer, or something else?’ A twinkle in her eye.

‘I’m not sure what I’m doing anymore.’

Lavinia’s grin turned to one of puzzlement. ‘O-K…A beer then.’

She turned away to grab a new glass.

Amos leaned against the bar, struggling to fish his cigarettes out of his pocket. He saw Curt over at the pool table, faded Jackie Howe and Stubbies, gesticulating wildly as he told some outlandish story. He surveyed the room whilst lighting the cigarette. Some he’d seen before, some he hadn’t, but all looked like regulars.

He left looking at Bongo until Lavinia returned with his beer. He turned around and caught his eye. Bongo had been staring at him, as had the men on either side of him. Amos did not break eye contact, grabbed the beer of the counter and took a sip.

‘Evening Bongo,’ he murmured, a curl to his lips.

‘Don’t fucking talk to me, cunt,’ Bongo snapped.

‘Whatever,’ Amos said, shrugging, and turned to face the bar.

Bongo stood up from his stool. ‘Don’t turn away from me, cunt!’

Amos slowly turned to face Bongo again. ‘If I can’t talk to you, then what am I supposed to do? Stare at your tits? I don’t think so.’

Bongo stepped forward, the men on either side of him getting off their stools and standing behind him. Lavinia leant over the counter, her face drawn.
‘What are you doing Amos?’

Amos ignored her, his eyes fixed on Bongo’s. Bongo looked from Lavinia to Amos and back again, his face twisted in disgust.

‘Are you fucking this piece of shit? God Almighty!’

‘Piss off Bongo! Just sit down and have your drink,’ she replied, her eyes flitting nervously back to Amos.

‘Yeah, you heard her,’ Amos murmured.

Bongo walked in front of Amos, still slouched at the bar. Now he stood up, his deadened eyes never leaving Bongo’s.

‘Looks like the cunt has a mouth,’ Bongo growled into Amos’ face, then looking around to see whether he had an audience. A few men were paying attention, but most of the bar was unaware of what was going on. ‘I wonder if he can walk the walk!’

As he uttered the last word Bongo placed his fleshy palm at the centre of Amos’ chest and pushed. Amos flew backwards, knocking one man’s beer out of his grasp as he dropped to the floor in a crumpled heap. The man turned to accost Amos but saw the situation and moved out of the way. By now a small circle had formed, Bongo hulking over the prone figure of Amos.

Amos stood up, leveraging himself off the ground, almost overbalancing before regaining his feet.

‘Look, there’s no need for this!’ Lavinia called out futilely.

Bongo nodded his agreement. ‘She’s right, fag. Just get the fuck out of my bar and the fuck out of my town, and we’ll be even.’

‘Even?’ Amos said. ‘For what?’

‘For you ruining my day.’

The bar was silent. Bongo had the audience he was after.

‘So get your faggot arse out of here before I beat it out of here!’

Alby wandered across to stand beside Lavinia. ‘Do something!’ she whispered.

Alby looked at her then back towards the two men without a word.
Bongo laughed and began to turn away. Amos’ lips moved, causing Bongo to whirl around.

‘What did you just say?’ he bellowed.

‘You heard me.’

‘No, I didn’t. What did you say?’

Amos grinned, the mirth failing to reach his eyes. ‘I said that this isn’t your town.’

Bongo spun around, a theatrical twirl, the bar his stage now. ‘You hear this bullshit?’ he called out, to no response. Even the jukebox remained silent.

Bongo turned back to Amos, standing mere inches from his face. ‘You don’t have your precious Cunstable to protect you now. I will fuck you up.’

Amos shrugged and whispered, ‘Maybe. But you’re not even a quarter of the man that he was. Shithead.’

The first punch came at Amos in slow motion, a meteor growing in size as it approached its impact zone. Amos left his hands at his sides, instead closing his eyes. He stumbled backward, feeling the hot wetness of blood trickle from one nostril. Bongo smiled thinly and drew back his fist.

Amos’ ears filled with the sounds of imploding stars and raised voices. Bongo continued to punch him, the blows hurting, bringing blood, loosening teeth, yet Amos continued to leave his hands at his side. He clawed back up off the ground to be knocked down again. Lavinia’s screams could be heard over the din, yet he could not see her. No one else stepped in.

Bongo hovered over him, replicating himself in Amos’ field of vision. Bongo’s chest rose and fell in ragged gasps, his shoulders hunched from the exertion. One of Amos’ eyes had already closed up.

‘I warned ya,’ Bongo wheezed, hands on hips. ‘I fucken warned ya…’

Amos stirred, rolled around until he could raise himself up onto his knees. He squinted up at Bongo, blood smearing his face, and gave a crooked smile.

‘Izzat the best ya got?’ he cackled before the colour drained from the world, darkness setting in.
FIFTY TWO

‘What the fuck was that all about?’

‘I don’t fucking know! But you sure as fuck didn’t help the situation did ya?’

‘What was I supposed to do?’

‘Oh, I don’t know, stop the fucking thing! Tell Bongo to sit down or his drinks would be cut off! You’ve done it before, haven’t ya?’

‘Not with Bongo I haven’t.’

‘Fat lot of use you are Alby. Fat lot of use you fucking are! Jesus, his nose’s still bleeding! Get some more ice will you? Fuck, it won’t stop bleeding...’
FIFTY THREE

Amos opened one eye, catching a glimpse of a fluorescent light before sharp knives stabbing into his brain. He groaned, feeling something move beneath his head as he did so. Hands fluttered lightly over his cheekbones, like butterflies’ wings.

‘You OK?’

Amos opened his eyes a sliver to see Lavinia peering down at him, a stone carving of worry and fear.

‘Never been better,’ Amos whispered, his voice gravely.

‘Good,’ Lavinia replied. She pinched the bridge of Amos’ nose.

Searing white heat slashed through Amos’ brain, making his jaw ache, his head splintering into pieces. He struggled to sit up, but Lavinia’s firm grasp on his shoulders was enough to subdue.

‘That was last night, you fucking prick!’ Lavinia yelled, tears welling in her eyes, her voice quavering. ‘What the fuck were you doing? What were you thinking? You could have been killed!’

Amos closed his eyes again, trying to ease the pain. ‘I know.’

‘Then why, huh? You fucking started the fight, stirring him like that, as if you wanted to die!’ The tears began to fall, Lavinia’s shoulders heaving, her hands trembling as they tried to cover up her wet cheeks.

‘Don’t cry, Lavinia.’ Amos tried to get up again. He sniffed, placing a finger at his nose, his fingertip coming away red.

‘Oh Jesus not again!’

Lavinia forced Amos down again, grabbing a warm damp rag from a bowl lying next to her and daubed at his nose, each touch both soothing and painful at the same time.

‘It took forever to stop your nose from bleeding. It’s broken, by the way.’

Amos grunted, Lavinia holding the rag to his nostril. Silence.

‘Tell me about you.’
'What?'
'Tell me something about you.'
'Umm, OK, I’ve spent the last two hours cleaning up after a fuckhead who wants to kill himself, how’s that?'
'No, c’mon…'
'What do you want? I don’t think this is the time for…for a life history!'
'Please. I know next to nothing about you.’
'I don’t know anything about you either! Obviously!' Lavinia waved her arms over Amos for emphasis.
'Please.’
Lavinia stared at the wall, her chin trembling. When she spoke, she would not look at him.
'OK. OK. You want to know about me, huh? I am the only child of a pair of fucking…alcos, who don’t, never have, given a shit about! Where if Dad wasn’t beating on Mum he was beating on me! And Mum…no fucking sympathy there! I just bring it on meself! I work in a job where I see the remnants of my parents everywhere, and I still like to get drunk. Why? Fuck, I don’t know. Cos it’s fun? Cos it’s all that I have left of Mum and Dad? And except to go to the Isa for a year, to “find myself” – what a joke! – I have never left this fucking town!’
She shook her head, laughter echoing from her twisted mouth that offered no warmth, no mirth. Her eyes strained, drying up. She sniffed loudly and wiped her eyes hard with the balls of her palms.
‘But no point whingeing about it. It’s my own fault.’
‘No it isn’t.’
Amos struggled to rise from Lavinia’s lap. She placed her palms on his shoulders again, the wetness of her tears seeping into his shirt. He did not yield. He winced as he brought himself up to Lavinia, looking her in the eye.
‘I love you.’
Lavinia stared at Amos’s earnest face, her own expression frozen, an amalgam of many emotions.
‘What?’ she finally said.

‘I love you.’

“Don’t!  Don’t even!  Not after what’s just happened…”

‘I love you.’

‘But…how?  How can you love me?  You don’t even know me, you just said so yourself!’

‘I don’t even know myself, Lavinia!  I’m not even close!  And yesterday…yeah, maybe I did want to die a little.  I talked to Pete – Stinky Pete – and Marley, about Paul, and, y’know, Paul had everything.  Friends, family, success, respect…and what does it matter, in the end?  Nothing!  So why should it matter for someone like me?  I have nothing!’

A tear coursed its way down Amos’ cheek, slipping over a small cut on his cheekbone, giving a quick stab of salty pain that he savoured, before it reached the corner of his mouth.  He blinked, forcing another tear to follow its course.

Lavinia trembled, unsure of herself, hesitant, before she eased forward and lightly kissed the corner of Amos’ mouth, the saltwater touching her lips.

‘You have me,’ she murmured.

Amos looked at her and nodded.  ‘I know.’
Amos woke disoriented, rolling around amongst the bed sheets, gauging his surroundings. He recognised Lavinia’s black jeans and Converse sneakers on the floor underneath the basin, and the night before flooded back. His head and shoulders ached, his nose throbbed. He laughed softly.

Amos had a shower, without hot water. The water hit his face like icy pellets, the feeling helping to ease the pulsating white heat behind his eyes. He did not have a towel, so walked back to Lavinia’s room naked, dripping pools of water on the wooden hallway floor.

Lavinia sat on the now made bed, sipping a cup of coffee, steam rising off the surface. She stood up as he entered, then laughed at the sight of him.

“What, so you’ve lost all sense of dignity as well as your mind?”

Amos looked down at his body, back at Lavinia, a wry smile showing. “It was cold, alright?”

“Sure!” She threw a towel at him.

He dried himself, gingerly. As he dried his hair, he pointed at a pile clothes folded neatly on the bed.

“What’s that?”

“Oh. Well, your clothes had blood on them, so…I went over to your place and got some clean ones.” She frowned, uncertain. “Hope you don’t mind?”

Amos walked over to Lavinia, hooping the towel around her neck and drawing her close.

“Thanks.”

She smiled. “No problem,” she whispered. “Just don’t do it again.”

He kissed her softly. She hesitated before giving in, putting his arms around him, holding him close, not wanting to let him go.

Amos wandered down the main street of Brolga, peering through storefront windows, until he found Curt at the King’s Crown. At first he couldn’t sight him, the few guys at the bar immersed in their own alcohol-drenched fugues. He hovered at the front door for a moment before he caught the eye of Mel. She smiled and beckoned him over.
‘How are you darl?’ she slurred.

Amos shrugged. ‘Been better, been worse.’

She suddenly noticed his appearance. She leapt from her chair, shuffling to Amos, her hands on either side of his face. ‘Shit darl, what happened? You hit by a car or something?’

One of the old men at the bar snickered. ‘Not a car he wasn’t.’ He grumbled something to his compatriot, inducing guttural laughter and derisory looks from the two men. Amos stared at the men until they cowed, turning back to their bottomless glasses.

‘I got into a bit of trouble last night. Over at the Trans.’

‘The Trans? That place is nothing but a hole! Breeds uncouthness and violence, and God knows what else! Geez, is that nose broken? You need to get that looked at!’

Amos swivelled his neck, keeping his face clear of Mel’s clutches.

‘It’s fine, honestly. Even better when I don’t think about it.’

Mel paused, her brow creased with concern, before she laughed. Amos grinned as much as the bruises would allow.

‘Wanna drink with me? Looks like you need it,’ she said, a pleading expression washing her face, pointing at his bruised face for emphasis.

Amos stammered for a reply before catching sight of Curt exit the men’s toilets. Curt made his way to the pool table and took up an abandoned pool cue, ready to line up his shot. Amos turned back to Mel.

‘Another time, thanks.’ Amos walked towards Curt, leaving Mel to return to her scotch and dry, despondent in her loneliness.

Curt hammered a ball home. Amos started clapping, slow, sardonic.

‘Nice shot Curt. I only ever see you playing pool. You must be a local Eddie Charlton by now.’

‘Yeah, I’m alright. Why, you wanna game?’

‘No, I’m right. Just need to talk to you about some things.’
Curt abruptly stood up and took a step back, turning to his mate and handing him the cue. He snatched his cigarette packet and beer up and made to push past Amos. Amos grabbed his arm.

‘Where you off to, Curt? I need to talk to you.’

‘I gotta have a durrie,’ Curt replied.

Amos nodded. ‘Yeah, me too. I’ll join you.’

Curt’s shoulders slumped but he made no reply as they moved to the back of the pub and out the back door. They stopped at a picnic table underneath the fire escape. Curt placed his beer on the table and flicked out a cigarette. He lit it, sucking smoke and nicotine into his lungs in a hurried intake of breath.

‘What, aren’t you going to offer me one?’ Amos said.

Curt balked for a moment, then offered the packet. Amos flicked one out, his eyes never leaving Curt’s. Curt looked away while Amos lit the cigarette, blowing smoke over his shoulder. They stood in silence, Curt shifting his weight from one foot to the other, then back again.

‘Bongo sure gave you a touch up, didn’t he?’ Curt uttered, punctuated with a nervous laugh from behind his cigarette.

‘Not that you tried to intervene. Did you?’ Amos continued to stare at Curt, his eyes piercing. Curt continued to shift his feet.

‘I’m not much of a fighter, man…’

Amos interrupted him. ‘How did he die, Curt?’


‘Paul. How did he die?’

‘Paul?’ The nervous flitter of laughter, Curt’s lips drawn back against his teeth, making his smile a grimace. ‘What do you mean?’

‘How. Did he die?’ Hardness lurked at the edge of Amos’ voice.

Curt fidgeted in his pocket whilst he puffed hurriedly on his cigarette. ‘He was shot, dammit! You know that! Fuck, everyone knows that! What the fuck?’
Amos flicked his cigarette away. Curt’s arms came up in feeble defence as Amos approached. He grabbed Curt’s arms and pushed him up against the wall. Curt squirmed around, a grunt of exertion exiting his lips. His cigarette fell between them to the ground, Amos crushing it underfoot.

‘Wh-what are ya doin man?’

Amos leaned into Curt, smelling stale sweat and the coppery scent of fear. His voice dropped to a whisper, the hard edge permeating each word.

‘How. Did. He. Die?’

Curt squirmed some more but did not break Amos’ grip. He finally looked at Amos.

‘He was shot! In the back. Oh fuck…’

Amos let go, Curt slumping against the wall for support. Curt whimpered. Amos paid no mind.

‘It was dark, Amos! An accident! It wasn’t supposed to happen!’

‘Take me there.’

Curt stopped, his eyes wide as saucers. ‘Wh-what?’

‘Take me to where Paul died.’

Curt stared at him, a rabbit caught in the headlights of an oncoming semi. His head rolled around, his face drenched in sweat. ‘Oh no. Come on Amos! You can’t – you can’t!’

‘Take me there!’ Amos breathed, his jaw firmly clenched, his hands shaking.

Curt whimpered again, sliding down the brick wall to sit on the ground. Amos got down on his haunches. Curt’s head lolled on his chest.

‘I can’t take you there,’ he whispered.

‘Why not?’

Curt was silent. Amos repeated the question.

‘Why not?’

Finally Curt raised his face to Amos. Two small pink spots stood out on his cheeks against the whiteness of his skin. His breath stank.
‘Because I don’t know where it is, OK? I wasn’t there! I wasn’t there…’

‘What do you mean, you weren’t there? Pete and Marley said…’

‘I mean I wasn’t there, alright? Oh fuck…’

Curt began to sob, his shoulders shaking. Amos shook his head, grabbed Curt’s chin.

‘Then take me to someone who was there.’
The ute flew down the highway, Amos huddled against the door. The cabin was littered with tools and empty Coke and beer bottles, everything coated with red dust. A tool box sat on the middle of the bench seat. Curt stared straight ahead, watching the road as he drove, the headlights washing the road in front of the ute in a dirt yellow glow. His face was lit up by the dashboard, the green light flooding the hollows of his face with shadow. He looked sickly. His mind was elsewhere, ahead of them, in the past.

It was half an hour before the ute slowed, the right indicator flickering. The headlights showed up on a bullet-riddled hulk of a vehicle, abandoned by the side of the road. An FH Holden, it had been originally blue, at least that was the only colour that could be discerned amidst the swirling clouds of rust that covered its surface. The mud guards that had protected the car’s tyres lay next to it, the tyres themselves a long forgotten memory. Words were painted crudely on the side of the passenger door in white house paint – PRESTON. A crooked arrow point off down a narrow dirt track, nothing more than two tire ruts leading into nothing.

The shock absorbers got a workout as the ute bumped its way up the track. Amos gripped tightly to the overhead handle, his knuckles white from exertion. Curt slowed to light a crumpled cigarette, the flash from the lighter showing his pallid cheeks. the sudden intake of nicotine did seemed to calm him, but his eyes remained straight ahead.

The track disappeared down a dip in the terrain. Suddenly the track was surrounded by prickly trees, their thorns scraping against the duco of the ute like nails across a blackboard. The darkness descended further upon them. On a number of occasions Amos saw the flash of red as the headlights hit the face of an animal before it shifted back into the underbrush.

The ute crested the valley, and a light could be seen in the distance. The track honed in on the light, seemingly their destination. They came across two gates, Curt charging through them without slowing. Both times Amos cowered in his seat, sure that Curt intend to do them both harm. The jarring of the metal gate against the bulbar rattled his brain, and he closed his eyes.

As they neared the source of the light, small structure lurched out of the shadows to the ute’s left. An abandoned stockyard, the haphazard poles, drums and lengths of wire did nothing to alleviate Amos’s anxiety. It looked like an ancient worshipping site, each pole in position to harness the magic that a long dead civilisation attempted to summon up, to help them predict the future. A ramshackle shed hunkered beside the stockyards, its interior hidden in shadows.
darker than the night itself. A water tank loomed from behind the shed, hoisted up high on spindly stilts, a further shadowed talisman. Amos turned his eyes away.

Curt pulled up outside the house in a skid of gravel and dust. The spotlight set up at the corner of the house illuminated the yard, the small water tanks, the (insert plant name here) in the old water tubs, the large cumquat trees that bordered the west side of the fence. Amos looked at Curt.

‘Here?’

Curt looked at him, the spotlight shining behind him, a face without eyes. ‘What the fuck do you think? I got you here, didn’t here?’

‘Are you telling me that Paul was shot here? At the homestead?’

Curt let out a grunt of derision. ‘No you fuckhead! It happened on the property!’

‘And I asked you to take me to where he died!’

‘You asked me to find someone who was there. He’s inside.’

Amos and Curt stared at each other for a few moments, heat rising in the space between them. Finally Amos opened up the passenger door and stepped out, the scrape of metal on metal accentuating the silence. Curt made no movement. Amos leaned back in the cab.

‘Well, you gonna introduce me yourself?’

‘You can find your own way up the garden path, you fuck!’

Amos smirked, the lines of his mouth hard. ‘I don’t think so. It would be rude of you, don’t you think?’

Curt opened the driver’s door, slamming it after him, the ute rocking on its wheels, the chassis giving a tiny squeal of frustration at the rough treatment. Amos left the passenger door ajar as he followed Curt up the path.

The ‘homestead’ was actually two buildings adjoined by a flight of stairs. The smaller of the two buildings was at ground level, a squat shack, the larger building looming above and beyond. A floodlight attached to the top of the screen door threw harsh light out into the barren yard, bleeding any light from the larger house, rendering it an ominous shadow suspended on stilts. Beyond the second building crouched a rough hewn shed, soft clucking emanating from within. The rest of the area could not be made out in the darkness.
Curt moved up to the front screen door and banged on the frame, causing the door to rattle, the sound loud but dead. The porch that lay beyond the door was screened in, white wooden struts at regular intervals, an attempt at holding the flying insects at bay. The screen sagged, pockmarks and dust marring its surface. The clapboard paint peeled off the walls in curling tongues.

A bang shot out over the night, breaking the silence that Amos until that time had failed to notice. The sound stirred some dogs, their crude barks coming from somewhere off in the darkness. Curt spun around, head ducked, his eyes flickering nervously at the shadows cast off by the floodlight.

‘It came from out back,’ Amos said.

Another bang, this time at the back of the front building. Amos peered through the screen door down a hallway to see an old man marching out to them.

‘What the bloody hell?’ the man yelled, laying his eyes first on Amos before they rested on Curt who stood behind him, hands in his pockets, cowed.

‘Curt?’

‘Look, sorry Mr Norville. Sorry to disturb you…’

‘Too right you disturbed me! I was about to head off to bed!’ He gestured at Amos without taking his eyes off Curt. ‘And who’s this?’

‘Well actually he’s the…’

‘I’m Amos,’ Amos interrupted, stepping forward and offering his hand. Amos let it hang in the air for a few moments before letting it fall to his side once more.

‘I…I came out here to talk to you.’

Norville looked at Amos in disgust. ‘Talk? At this time of the bloody night?’

‘I tried to tell him Mr Norville…’

‘Shut up Curt!’ Norville snapped. Curt slunk further into the shadows, cheeks burning.

‘Well,’ Norville continued, ‘talk.’

‘I was hoping that, ah, we could talk inside?’

‘Talk.’
‘OK. OK. I wanted to talk…about Paul, and the other night…’

Norville stared at him. ‘You want to talk about that now? Mate, I don’t have time for this.’

He turned to go back inside.

‘Then when will you have time?’ Amos asked.

Norville paused, his back still to Amos. ‘In the morning, after I’ve had my sleep!’

The bang of the door punctuated the floodlight being switched off. Amos and Curt stood in the dark as the sound of Norville retreating up the stairs to the other building echoed across the yard. The second door banged closed, and silence reigned once more.

‘Hope you’re fucking happy now, Amos,’ Curt spat as he spun on his heel and walked back up the path. ‘Really fucking happy.’

Amos remained still, staring up at the second building. Faint light emanated out of the left side window, a candle. The image of a shadow upstairs flickering across the glass.

Curt flung open the driver’s side door to his ute, throwing himself inside, his hands restlessly caressing the steering wheel whilst the other rammed the key into the ignition. The engine fired, roaring with the aid of an impatient foot on the accelerator.

‘Hurry up and get in the car, will ya?’

Amos turned and walked up the path, swinging the gate behind him, slipping the wire noose around the closest fence pole to hold it in place. He walked around the front of the ute, the headlights shining on him like an unwelcome spotlight. He looked at Curt, his face lit from underneath by the dashboard lights, his face a mixture of anger and apprehension. He walked to the open passenger door, about to hop in, when something caught his attention.

‘C’mon! Hurry up!’ Curt hissed.

Amos pointed into the darkness, diagonally across the dirt track from the homestead.

‘What’s over there?’

‘Nothing! Shearers’ quarters, couple of sheds, junk and shit. Fuck it, let’s go! I’m in enough shit with Mr Norville as it is!’

Amos peered into the cab of the ute at Curt. ‘Why, is he your boss?’

‘Only during shearing season, but not anymore most probably, thanks to you, fuck ya!’ He revved the engine for emphasis, the rattling chassis mirroring Curt’s discontent.
Amos looked again into the darkness, his arms draped over the open door. Finally he stood up, tapping the roof of the ute with his fist before closing the door.

‘What’re ya doing? Get in, let’s go!’

Amos leaned in the window. ‘Nah, you go on. I think I’ll stick around til morning.’

‘What? Just getting in the fucking car!’

‘See ya.’ Amos tapped the roof again and began to walk off. Curt’s roar of frustration was punctuated with spinning wheels and dust as he spun the ute around, gunning past Amos again on his way back into Brolga.

‘You’re fucking crazy!’ Curt yelled before he became shimmering red lights in the distance, muddied by eddying dust clouds thrown up in his wake. Soon the lights were gone too.

Amos wandered in the dark slowly, sliding each foot in front of the other, afraid of losing his balance, tripping over. The night sky was littered with starlight, making the shadows of the cloistered buildings he was approaching look absolute.

He reached the closest, a low set and long building. His hands fluttered over the rough wooden boards of the verandah floor, moving along it until he stumbled across the stairs. He crawled up the three stairs hands first, gaining a splinter in the process. At the top step he rose to his full height, his arm outstretched until he grasped a supporting pole. From there he eased forward until his clumsy hands found the corrugated wall, then a door. He fumbled with the cold metal doorknob until the door slipped open, and he stepped inside.

Amos let his hand run along the doorframe until it hit a circular protrusion, flicking the nib in the middle, unsure if anything would happen. A few seconds of nothing, then the staccato flicker of a long dormant fluorescent tube overhead, finally firing up and lighting the small room. Small. A battered wardrobe in one corner, bearing one full length door, another half the size, three drawers underneath. A single mattress on a rusted metal frame opposite. A faded calendar featuring a naked woman with large bouffant hair, pouring milk over her ample breasts, hung from a nail over the headrest of the bed. Rat droppings piled up in the corner behind the door, though none were fresh. Some of the pellets were green from poison, indicating the likely outcome for the unlucky depositors.

Amos walked over to the wardrobe, eased the doors open. Coat hangers and one faded pair of blue trousers hung within. He slid the drawers open; the only find one pair of red, yellow and black football socks. He closed the wardrobe. He turned around full circle, taking in the sparseness of the room, before switching off the light.
Amos sat on the verandah of the shearer’s quarters, cross-legged, his hands in his lap, waiting for Richard Norville to emerge. He could hear him shuffling around in the small shack, all clattering china and metal, popping toast and squealing kettle.

Amos peered at the adjacent sheds, the sun in his eyes. The sky a beautiful clear blue, lightening as it approached the horizon, almost white. He looked over at the house once more before getting up, hopping off the verandah and approaching the closest and newest of the sheds, effectively two walls and a roof as the other two sides remained open for easy access. The corrugated iron shone intensely, promising riches inside, but ended up being a disappointment. Apart from a relatively new but cobwebbed horse float, the shed was empty. Tyre tracks and oil stains in the dust allayed to its usage as a garage for at least one ute and two dirt bikes.

The adjoining shed was smaller, weather-beaten, threatening to collapse in on itself. Amos stepped inside cautiously, ducking his head involuntarily despite the roof being a foot above him. Within was a treasure trove for junkies of junk. Rolls of wire, pedestal fans, jerry cans, wheel rims, shearing blades, cranks, saw blades, wool hooks and many other pieces of folkloric paraphernalia littered the bench tops, forty four gallon drums or floor space. Amos picked up an opaque green bottle, its label obscured by a substantial layer of dust and grit. He moved it around, hearing the contents swish around the inside of the bottle.

‘What the fuck do you think you’re doin?’

Amos jumped, the bottle slipping from his grasp and falling end over end to the dirt floor. The impact shattered the bottle, the liquid inside seeping into the earth.

‘Fucking great!’ Norville growled as he came forward, brushing Amos aside to assess the damage. He crouched down, his fingers sweeping the shards of broken glass together into an unkempt pile. He straightened and faced Amos.

‘I need to talk to you.’ The words rushed out of Amos’ mouth, eager to get on some semblance of equal footing with Norville.

‘So you said last night. That don’t explain why’s you breaking stuff that’s not yours, now does it?’

Amos kept eye contact. ‘I’ll pay you for the damage.’
Norville eyed Amos warily, before breaking into laughter, a wheezing gas fuelled by hard labour and cigarettes.

‘OK, young fry. OK.’

Norville pushed past Amos again, out into the sun bleached morning. Amos had no option but to follow.

Without turning, Norville said, ‘You’re testing my patience. Why are you here?’

Amos opened his mouth to answer, but Norville spun around to face him. ‘How’d you get here?’

Amos balked, shrugged. ‘I never left.’

‘What?’

‘I stayed. I said I needed to talk to you.’

‘Where’d you stay?’

Amos hesitated, hooked a thumb towards the shearers’ quarters. Norville squinted, a scowl on his face, a natural expression matching the harsh lines that etched his leathery skin.

‘So you trespass? Is that what you do, huh? I should report you to the police.’

‘I want to talk about Paul. The night he died.’

The scowl deepened. ‘So, what? You some kind of…tourist or something? Here to leech off his death?’ He shook his finger, a glint entering his eyes. ‘You’re a fucking reporter aren’t you?’

‘No, I’m…’

‘Get the fuck off my property.’

‘No, listen to me, I…’

‘You heard what I said boy! And I will report you.’

Norville stood upright, all sinewy strength and rage. Amos shuffled in the dust. He balled his hands into fists.

‘Then do it.’

‘Excuse me? Are you fucking daring me? Who do you think you fucking are?’
‘I’m a friend of Paul’s. I’m staying at the…Goodwin’s place. I just want to talk…’

‘A friend, huh? Then you’d know when to leave it fucking well alone. Now get your fucking arse back into town, and I never want to see your face again!’

Norville turned away from Amos and marched back towards the homestead, dust devils biting at his heels.

Norville had reached the gate, swinging it behind him, as Amos’ cheeks grew red, his nails cutting into his palms.

‘Hey!’

Norville slowed, stopped. He turned, the frown blackened upon his brow. He said nothing, staring at the distant figure with beady eyes.

‘You hard of hearing boy? I told you…’

Amos quivered; sweat forming on his upper lip. ‘I’m not going fucking anywhere!’

Norville stared at Amos, a thin smile creeping across his lips.

‘Fine then, be my guest,’ he called, before moving into his house, the screen door clattering closed behind him, a full stop.

Amos stood there, watching the space that Norville had left behind.

…

Amos tried to sleep in the receding shade thrown off by the shearers’ quarters. Flies buzzed lazily around his face, sticking to his skin. He flicked his hand intermittently, a futile ward. The heat ate at his shoes, causing him to move closer to the wall.

The bang of the screen door of the homestead echoed off the corrugated walls. Amos looked up as Norville shuffled through the front gate, letting it swing closed behind him. He stood there, just beyond the domain of his home, squinting in Amos’ direction.

‘What’re ya think you’re doin? It’s fucking hot out.’

Norville turned and went back through the gate, back into the house, the screen door banging behind him. Amos stood up stiffly, wiped the dust from his pants, and followed him.
He paused on the threshold, his hand hovering above the handle, before easing the door open and moving onto the verandah. From the harsh sunlight he took in the clutter, a squatter’s chair surrounded by shoes of varying descriptions, all of them similar in their state of disrepair. Pot plants sat on either side of the doorway leading inside, the pots faded, the plants wilted, yellowed. Amos pulled his shoes off, placed them neatly beside the right pot plant, and walked inside.

The aromatic odour of cooking meat assailed him. The kitchen was small, a beaten table taking up most of the floor space. A large grey tongue lolled out of a large boiling saucepan on the oven. Amos took a quick breath.

‘Can’t stand the smell of tongue, ay?’ Norville shuffled around the table to the oven, stirring the boiling water with a wooden ladle. ‘You get used to it.’

Amos wiped his hand across his mouth. ‘Umm, excuse me Mr Norville…’

‘Richard!’

‘Ahh, Richard. Could I have a drink of water?’

Norville pointed at the sink opposite him, his attention remaining on his stirring. Amos picked up a chipped enamel cup off the bench and twisted the tap. Brown water spat out from the pipes. Amos ran the water for a few moments until it became clear before filling the cup, emptying it in two mouthfuls, then filling it again and doing the same.

Satisfied with the progress of his meal, Norville sat down at the table. He picked up an unlit rolled cigarette from the ashtray and planted it between his cracked lips. Amos sat opposite him, the cracked vinyl seat digging into his legs.

‘What do you want to know for?’

Amos scratched the back of his neck. ‘I…I don’t know.’

‘What? Whaddaya mean you don’t know?’

Amos, flustered, ‘Well, I guess I need to see where he died. You know, with my own eyes. To properly accept it, that he was shot.’

Norville stared at Amos, his eyes beads beneath his bushy grey eyebrows. He pulled a matchbook from the pocket of his work shirt, ripping off a match and lighting it in one fluid motion. He brought the flame to the tip of his cigarette, breathing, before extinguishing the flame in a quick flick of the wrist. All routine movements.
He removed the cigarette from his mouth and pointed at Amos with it wedged between two fingers, smoke filtering from his nostrils. ‘You know, that’s interesting. That’s…that’s interesting.’ He nodded to himself as he pulled again on the cigarette.

‘What’s interesting?’

‘Nothing, boy. OK.’

Norville slapped his other hand on the table, the sudden noise making Amos jump back. Norville pushed himself up out of his chair. He shuffled to the back door, looking over his shoulder.

‘C’mon then!’

Amos followed him out the door, through a sorry excuse of a screen door and out under the larger building. The ominous heat immediately dissipated in the shade.

A quick movement to his left made Amos spin quickly. A hammock hung between two of the stilts swung back and forth, as if recently disturbed. A mottled cat came out from under a nearby table that was buried under a myriad of plants, the purples and pinks of the plastic pots jarring with the green foliage. The cat purred loudly as it rubbed against him, making a figure of eight between his legs. Amos bent down to scratch it behind its ears, the cat craning its head back in appreciation.

‘Hurry up then! Do you want to come along or not?’

Amos stood up quickly. Splinters of pain shot through his head as he came into contact with an overhead beam. The pain from his other injuries re-emerged, bringing forth a groan.

‘Watch yer head,’ Norville muttered, a slight chuckle in his voice. Amos followed him in a hunched lope, his hand clasped to his head.

Norville’s Nissan ute sat near the rear gate. He hopped in and started the engine before Amos opened the door.

‘Get the gate,’ Norville barked.

Amos fumbled twice with the clasp before he could get the gate open. As he pushed it two black figures came rushing out from the shadows of the house, leaping onto the tray of the ute.

The ute rattled along the dirt trail, rocks and divots adding to Amos’ headache. They went through two gates over the half hour trip. No conversation passed between them. Amos
peered out at the landscape. It remained a red expanse of nothingness, the air shimmering on
the horizon.

Norville turned the ute of the track and headed towards a small Turkey’s nest, a small outcrop
of prickly acacia surrounding it like an emaciated forest. A mob of kangaroos emerged from
their resting places in the shade, lumbering shadows that shifted languidly as Norville pulled
up.

‘These fucking trees are weeds. They injure the cattle, cut em open, they get flyblown and
die. The only way to get rid of the shit is to cut it down, or burn it, or dig it right out.’

‘Is this it?’ Amos asked.

Norville stared at Amos for a few moments before opening the ute door and hopping out. The
dogs had already left the vehicle and were sniffing around the bush, their tails wagging
incessantly. Amos followed Norville through the bushes, watching the long thorns that
bristled from their branches carefully. A couple of times the brush got too thick and they had
to backtrack. One thorn caught on Amos’ shirt, tearing through it and scratching his arm.

‘How do they hunt in here? Amos asked.

Norville snorted. ‘They don’t fuckin hunt in here! The roos run in here, you’ve lost em. It’s
as simple as that.’

‘Then why were they in here then?’

Norville said nothing and kept walking through the trees.

They came out into a small clearing amongst the acacia. Norville stopped, Amos almost
running into him. He pointed.

‘Here.’ He started to walk back the way they came.

‘Hey! Where are you going?’

Norville scowled. ‘This is where you wanted to go, right? So here you are! I don’t see the
point of me stickin around, not in this place.’

‘But you’ll wait for me?’

Norville harrumphed, then disappeared amongst the bushes.
Amos turned back into the clearing. Sweat trickled down the small of his back, his shirt sticking to his skin. He moved forward, scanning the ground. There was nothing — no markings, no stained earth, no indication that anything had ever existed there.

Amos closed his eyes, slowed his breathing. His eyes strained against the forced darkness. Standing still, a gentle breeze caressing the nape of his neck. Nothing.

He opened his eyes again, faint stars dancing across the clearing. As his eyes readjusted, a glint continued to waver at the edge of the clearing. Amos walked slowly towards it, his feet unwilling. He swallowed, a vain effort to relieve his dry throat.

It was a shell casing. Amos bent down and picked it up, immediately dropping it again. The sun had made the metal blisteringly hot. He scooped some dirt over the shell, rolling back and forth in the dust, before the metal was cool enough to touch, to hold.

He rolled the shell around in the palm of his hand with his finger. It was a foreign object, an artefact. It could have been from any gun, from any hunting expedition. It could have been a spent cartridge from the other night, from months ago, maybe sitting there for years. Yet he knew exactly what it was, what it represented.

A movement amongst the brush caught Amos’ eye. A young kangaroo stood in the shade of the acacia, staring at him, his head cocked to one side, a statue except for one ear, twitching. Its eyes met his.

Amos sunk to his knees, his forehead lowered to the earth. Saltwater fell from his face, darkening the dirt. His shoulders shook, becoming more pronounced. His mouth open, Amos let out an anguished sob, his hands moving in circles amongst the dust.
Amos emerged from the acacia. Norville had a canvas water bag raised to his lips. He continued to drink, looking over the bag at Amos’ haggard figure as he approached. He lowered the bag and wiped a drop of water from his lips with his shirtsleeve.

‘Get what you were after?’

Amos did not answer, walking past him to the passenger door of the ute, climbing in. Norville shook his head, threw the water bag into the tray of the ute. He made two sharp whistles, his fingers to his lips. Within seconds the two dogs emerged from their hiding places, tongues lolling, and leapt onto the tray. Norville hopped into the ute, the closed door making the ute rock.

‘Happy now?’ he muttered as he turned the key and began to back up, his head turned to peer over his shoulder.

Amos remained silent, staring out the window, working the cartridge around the palm of his hand with his thumb.

‘Hope it was worth it. You’ve interrupted my fucking day.’

‘Sorry about that,’ Amos replied blankly.

‘So you fucking should!’

The ute rattled on, no more conversation travelling between the two men, both caught up in their own dark thoughts.

Norville pulled up outside the front of the homestead, the vehicle coming to a shuddering halt. The skittering of the dogs’ claws echoed from the tray as they jumped off, heading over towards the sheds. Norville stared straight ahead, his hands still placed on the steering wheel. Amos stared out of the windshield, both hands prone in his lap. One hand slowly uncurled, the spent cartridge cradled there.

‘What went on out there?’ Amos said, his voice barely a whisper.

Norville glanced over at him, his eyes resting on the cartridge, then turned back to the windshield and the nothingness that lay beyond. He let out a sigh.
‘I don’t know, son. But you listen to me, and you listen good. Whatever happened out there, is no good finding it out. Cos Paul is dead, and he’s never comin back. No matter how much you, or his family, or Brolga want and need him to come back. He was a mighty fine man, Paul was. But he’s gone.’

‘But that isn’t good enough!’ Amos let out, turning to face Norville, his face reddened. Norville met him with anger.

‘Damn right it’s good enough! What do you think happened? Hey? Nothing good’s what happened. And no matter what you find, no matter what you dig up, none of it’ll be better than what you’ve got now. Nothing will make it better! So don’t, OK son? Leave things well alone.’

Amos stared at Norville, who had turned to again face the windshield. His hands relaxed, the anger ebbing, and fell into his lap.

‘What do you know about that night Richard?’

Norville shook his head. ‘Nothing more than you. But I have my thoughts. And so do you.’

Norville opened up the door and stepped outside. He opened the gate to the front yard, the hinges protesting, and shuffled along the pathway.

Amos clasped his hand over the cartridge and got out of the ute.

‘And that’s it, is it? We live with it?’

Norville stopped, his back to Amos.

‘Yes.’

He walked to the front door, opened the screen door, and turned once more to face Amos.

‘Now get off my fucking property.’
The road train slowed down at the edge of town, the hydraulic brakes screaming in protest. Amos thanked the bearded trucker for the lift before climbing down out of the cab, standing by the side of the road as the truck turned south, the sun glinting off the silver spires of the exhaust pipes before it disappeared into the distance.

Dusk had fallen on Brolga. The pink hue of the sunset threw the far off saleyards into a chaotic blend of shadow and light. Amos began to head towards the main street and the Transcontinental before changing direction towards the Brolga Hotel.

Amber greeted him with a wan smile and a pot of beer before returning to her duties behind the bar. Amos took a mouthful of the liquid, his eyes closed, savouring the taste. He opened his eyes and looked around. The bar was empty save for two barflies at the other end of the room.

‘Has Marley or Jackie been in?’

Amber looked up from a notebook, the pen still moving over the paper. ‘No.’ She returned to her scribbling.

‘What about Tom?’

Amber let out an exaggerated sigh and planted the pen hard down on the counter. ‘What about him?’

‘Has he been in today?’

‘No, Tom hasn’t been in.’ She shrugged, visibly irritated, and shifted on her stool to face away from him.

Amos looked down at his pot, white foam clinging to the edge of the glass. He swirled the pot around, watching the liquid engulf the foam and swish against the glass. He got up off his stool and walked to stand in front of Amber.

‘Come outside.’

Amber looked up at him, her eyes wide in indignation. ‘What? Why?’

‘Cigarette break.’
Without waiting for her response Amos moved out the back doorway and into the beer garden, sitting at the table furthest from the door. A minute passed, Amos finishing off his beer before Amber emerged, a jug and two fresh glasses in her possession. She planted them down on the table and plonked onto the seat opposite him, a rush of air blowing from her mouth.

She looked away across the fence at the sun disappearing over the rooftops, her foot up on the chair, a cigarette and lighter miraculously appearing from the folds of her light blue shirt, and lit up, her arm resting on her upraised knee. Amos poured the beer into the glasses, nudging one in front of her. Without saying anything she pushed her cigarette packet and lighter to Amos.

‘So how’s the day been?’

Amber looked at him. ‘Fuck off! What’s going on with you?’

‘What’s going on with me? Nothing! You’re the hostile one here!’

‘Yeah, well,’ she muttered, blowing smoke over her shoulder before facing him again, her mouth a crimson crease.

‘Why are you here, Amos? Really. Why are you still here?’

‘I told you – I was looking for Marley and Jackie-‘

‘Why?’

‘Why? I just was! Does it really matter to you why?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

Amber let out a sigh of exasperation. ‘It just does, OK?’

Amos looked into his glass, his jaw clenched.

‘I want to ask them some things about Paul’s death.’

‘Yeah? Like what?’

‘Like how did he die.’

‘What? Everyone knows how he died. He was shot. Just leave it alone for God’s sake!’
Amos stood up and threw the pot of beer against the wooden fence, glass flying everywhere. Amber covered her eyes with a small shriek.

‘Paul wasn’t just shot! Fuck! What the hell is wrong with this town? Doesn’t anyone give a fuck?’

Amos stormed away from the table.

‘Wha? Wait!’

Amos spun around.

‘What, Amber? What? Ever since Paul died you’ve been fucking weird with me. Everyone has. It’s like…it’s like Paul’s this golden boy, this king of Brolga, but as soon as he’s gone everyone just clams up! Just…fuck! Doesn’t anyone want to know the truth?’

Amber opened her mouth to speak before thinking better of it. She looked down at her hands.

‘It’s not that…’

‘No? What the hell is it, cos I’m getting fucking sick of this shit!’

‘Everyone feels it Amos. Not just you. But everyone grieves differently.’

‘Grieving and burying your head in the sand are two different things Amber!’

‘Paul died, Amos! Everyone feels it, OK? And, it was shocking, and terrible, but it was an accident! A terrible, shocking accident, but an accident. How do you think the others feel, hey? Knowing that they could’ve been the ones that shot Paul? How do you think they’re coping? Knowing it was their fault that their best friend is dead?’

Amos shook his head, his face screwed up in confusion. ‘What? What are you trying to say Amber?’

‘I’m just trying to say, that, no one’s letting it go.’

‘But don’t you want to know why?’

‘You already know why dammit!’

‘Really? Then why hasn’t Roary pulled anyone in for questioning? Why hasn’t there been any sort of inquiry? Shit, it was on the fucking news! Promising young officer dies in tragedy…’

‘What do you want from me?’
‘I want the truth!’ Amos yelled.

Silence descended. Movement from behind him made Amos swing around. A shadow lurked in the doorway, moving away as Amos looked. He looked back at Amber.

‘Don’t you want to know the truth?’ he said softly, pleadingly.

Amber looked down at her hands, then drained the rest of her glass. ‘I already know the truth.’

‘And what is that?’

‘That Paul is gone. And nothing you can do will bring him back.’

Amos stared at Amber in the half light, her face drawn, tired. He started to laugh, a mirthless, exhausted laugh. He shook his head at the night sky.

‘You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.’

‘What?’ Amber asked.

‘You’re the second person to say that today.’

Amber nodded. ‘And what does that tell you?’

‘That you’re all fucked up.’

Amos shook his head again before turning on his heel and entering the hotel, leaving Amber behind.
The front light was on as Amos walked up the path of Paul’s house. The windows were black. He fumbled in his pocket for the key, letting himself in. The house was grey, light filtering down from the kitchen. He wandered up the hallway and to the kitchen.

Lavinia had her back to him, a steak sizzling on the frypan.

‘Any for me?’

Lavinia spun around, the oven hood ringing from where her head connected with it.

‘Aahh, fuck! Jesus Amos!’

Amos rushed forward, going to put his arm around her, a trickle of blood on her forehead. She pushed him away angrily.

‘Get away! Leave it!’

Amos tried again, Lavinia scowling and raising her hand. Amos backed away, hands in the air.

‘I was just trying to…’

‘It’s your fucking fault! Shit! Where do you get off scaring me like that?’

‘I’m sorry.’

Lavinia leant over the sink, dabbing water at the cut on her forehead and looking at her reflection in the window. She moved away and stared at him.

‘Where the fuck have you been?’

‘What? Where have I…’

Lavinia frowned, her features darkening further. ‘Fuck you.’

She made to push past Amos but he grabbed his arm. He swung her around, and as she attempted to pull away he saw that she was crying.

‘Oh God, sorry, I didn’t think…’

‘No you didn’t. What the hell is wrong with you, huh? After the other night, I thought…’
‘I was out at Richard Norville’s property.’

Lavinia froze, staring at him. A trickle of blood reappeared from her scalp. She wiped at it absently, smearing blood across her forehead.

‘What?’

‘I was out at Richard Norville’s. I only got back an hour ago. Look, I’m so sorry, I didn’t think…’

‘What were you doing out there?’

‘I caught up with Curt, and got him to take me out there.’

‘What were you doing out there?’

‘I wanted to see where it happened.’

‘Where it happened.’

‘Where Paul died.’

Lavinia’s blue eyes shimmered in the harsh fluorescent light. Her lips trembled before breaking into a smile.

‘Oh Amos…’

She wrapped her arms around him, squeezing him tightly, her head in the crook of his neck. He responded in kind, resting his chin on her shoulder.

‘Sorry,’ he said.

‘No!’ Lavinia pulled away, holding him at arm’s length, staring into his eyes. ‘There’s nothing to be sorry about! Well, other than disappearing on me like that…’

She stalled, her eyes unfocused, before she pulled away from him. ‘I better check on that steak.’

‘Here, I’ll do that. Why don’t you check on that cut – I think it’s bleeding again.’

Lavinia offered a weak smile before moving up the hallway. Amos turned to the frypan, flipping the steak over absently. He stared out the window, only to see a gaunt man staring back at him. He slid the window open. The image was gone.
‘Father?’

Father Monaghan looked up from his place at the front pew, a benign smile widening across his face as he placed down a stack of hymnals.

‘Amos!’

‘I haven’t seen you in a while!’

Amos walked down the aisle to meet Fr Monaghan in front of the leading pews with a warm exchange and a handshake.

Rays of light beat down from the stained-glass mural of the church’s namesake, St. Thomas, as he placed his fingers into the wounds of the resurrected Jesus. He instinctively raised his hands to his eyes.

Fr Monaghan’s smile wavered, his gaze turning to follow Amos’ discontent. He turned back to Amos, his smile restored.

‘Ah, The Incredulity of St Thomas. Caravaggio. A famous painting. Actually that window was completed by Joey Rennix over at Longreach, would you believe? Did a wonderful job of it too, I must say.’

Amos nodded, his eyes squinting. Fr Monaghan began to shuffle up the stairs towards the altar, ushering for Amos to follow him.

‘I’ve always felt St Thomas so fascinating. He has such a misunderstood standing in the eyes of the public.’ Fr Monaghan paused in front of the tabernacle behind the altar, fishing amongst the pockets of his grey trousers to produce a key. He spoke without turning to face Amos.

‘Are you religious Amos?’

The silence made Fr Monaghan turn from fidgeting with the lock, his eyes fixed on Amos’. Amos looked away, over his shoulder.

‘I’m…not sure. You could say I once was though. My mother…Angela, she is quite the devout one.’
Fr Monaghan chuckled. ‘Ah, aren’t all mothers?’ He turned back to the tabernacle without expanding on his enigmatic question. He opened the door of the tabernacle and took out the chalice that sat within, a cloth draped over the top protecting its contents. He closed the door quietly.

‘You see, St Thomas is mainly recognised for one thing. He is rumoured to have been the first Christian missionary to head into the East and into the heart of India, spreading the Good Word. He was the only witness to the Holy Assumption of the Virgin Mary. His influence stretches as far as China, and Japan, and Latin America. His writings have influenced many people. But what is the one thing that he is recognised for?’

‘Doubting Thomas,’ Amos replied.

‘Ah!’ Fr Monaghan said, waggling a finger as he smiled. ‘It is interesting that you mention it that way. He is the disciple recognised as doubting the resurrection of Christ. That says something in itself. But…’

‘What does it say?’ Amos asked, interrupting him.

‘Well it shows that first of all, most of the general public’s knowledge of the Bible comes from either the Book of Genesis…’

‘The beginning of the earth, Cain and Abel, Abraham,…’

‘That’s right. Then there is the story of Joseph, of Moses, of Jonah…’

‘All stories made popular through popular culture.’

Fr Monaghan’s smile widened, nodded eagerly. ‘Exactly! Then of course there is the New Testament.’

‘But most people can only identify the four Gospels, right?’

‘Yes, that’s true. And finally there is the eponymous “pop culture”.’ Fr Monaghan used his fingers as parentheses to highlight his point. ‘Simpson, The Brady Bunch, stand up comedy, The Da Vinci Code – our knowledge becomes second hand, through others’ eyes.’

‘So…the story of Thomas has become distorted?’

‘Well, not distorted. But it is in our own knowledge of the story and how we view it that we can make an opinion of Thomas. You see, half of the population familiar with Thomas see him as Thomas the Doubter. But the other half, the others who are more knowledgeable of the Bible and its stories, the Christian values and beliefs, see him as Thomas the Believer.’
Fr Monaghan stopped, smiling at Amos. Amos looked at him, his face blank.

“So…I’m sorry, I’m not sure what the point of this is.”

“We live in a different world, Amos. One where people view the cup as either half full or half empty. There was a time for optimism, where many people believed in the possibility of a brighter future. Nowadays, it is so much more acceptable to be pessimistic, to bemoan the state of society, the bleakness of the future. To see the glass as half-empty. So the people who before saw the story of Thomas as being a new beginning, of being shown the true way of things, has now become one of doubt, of scepticism, of derision even.”

Fr Monaghan shrugged. ‘And that is my job, you see? To make believers out of the doubters. Are you a doubter Amos?’

Amos looked down at his hands. He took a deep breath.

‘Yes. I guess I am.’

Monaghan’s forehead furrowed, large lines etched around his down turned lips. ‘And what is it you doubt? Not God, I hope?’

Amos’ eyes flitted to a point just above the priest’s left shoulder. ‘No, not that…’ He focused on Fr Monaghan’s face again. ‘I guess what I doubt…is the truth.’

‘The truth?’ Fr Monaghan sank into an old ornate wooden chair, the seat and armrests adorned with velvet suede. He gestured to another chair across the room. Amos shook his head.

‘No thanks. Um, yeah, the truth.’

‘I’m not sure I’m following. Do you mean the whole truth? The truth behind all things? There are many things in this world that we cannot be expected to understand…’

Amos shook his hands at Monaghan, his arms outstretched. ‘No, I don’t mean anything like that. Not so universal. I guess…’ He scratched his head, looking up at the ceiling.

‘I don’t know why I am here. I don’t know who I even am, for God’s sake!’ He wiped his hand over his mouth, a hiss of air coming from his nostrils. ‘But what I do know is that a friend of mine has died. And everyone wants to believe that its an accident. That’s fine. So maybe I’m the doubter here Father. But I’m not a pessimist.’

‘No?’
‘No! I want to find out the truth of what really happened out there that night. The real truth, not what is fed to me.’

‘I see.’ Fr Monaghan rose from his chair and shuffled over to a rectangular structure that was covered by a maroon sheet. He rose one corner to reveal a bar fridge, within which rested a large cask of altar wine, along with another brown bottle. He took hold of the bottle.

‘I think I may be needing this. You?’

‘It’s nine in the morning.’

Fr Monaghan frowned, thinking, before he nodded. ‘You’re right – how silly of me. Still…’ He took a glass tumbler from out behind a small statue of the Virgin Mary that sat in an alcove of his desk, pouring a liberal dose of scotch into it. He took a healthy mouthful.

‘Ah,’ he exhales, his lips paring back, his perfect white dentures showing. ‘Ballantyne.’ He sat back in his chair, has hand firmly clasped around the glass of alcohol.

‘Why do you think that the truth has been hidden from you, Amos?’

Amos fidgeted in his seat, his eyes cast down to his hands, one caressing the other. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Do you not believe what has been said about Paul’s accident?’

‘No.’

‘Do you have reason to not believe what has been said?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘OK. Is it a feeling you have, in the pit of your stomach?’

‘Um, I guess it is, but it’s more than that…’

Fr Monaghan held up his hand, silencing Amos. He closed his eyes for a few moments, nodding almost imperceptibly.

‘That is understandable, Amos. We all question ourselves throughout our lives. It is normal to feel this way. You weren’t there when Paul died. And you feel guilty.’

Amos shot up in his chair. ‘No, no, it’s not about that!’
‘You feel guilty, so you look for answers, anything to ease the pain. It’s a normal and totally acceptable feeling to have at this time. But you have to learn that it wasn’t your fault. You are not to blame.’

‘No! That isn’t what’s happening here!’

‘No?’

‘No!’ Amos began to pace the small quarters. ‘Aren’t you curious, Father? How someone could die in such a way – a police officer, no less – and no investigation is conducted? His parents, his, his family, his friends, all just let things slide? Why doesn’t anyone want to know?’

Monaghan’s voice lowered, gentle. ‘Because there is nothing to worry about. We all have to move on – grieve and mourn, yes, but move on.’

‘Bullshit!’ The explosion of the outburst forced Monaghan back into his chair, his eyes wide in shock. ‘Bullshit! Look at you!’ Amos gestured at him with an open palm. ‘You, drinking fucking whiskey at nine in the morning. Making your friendly house calls, getting free food, always with the consoling smile! You don’t care! It’s all too much hassle for you, isn’t it?’

‘No, hang on a minute, I think you are overreacting here…’

‘Fuck off I am! You speak of doubt and belief? Read the newspapers, Father. Look in the mirror. Religion is dead. And it’s because of you, closing your fucking eyes to the people who need you most!’

‘Amos, please…’

Amos stormed out of the office, the heaviness in the air failing to dissipate after he had gone. Father Monaghan brought the whisky glass to his lips. He brought his other hand to the tumbler, but the glass would not still, a drop of whiskey escaping and falling onto his white shirt, the coin-sized shadow spreading outwards, bleeding through the fabric, piercing the skin.
'Amos!'

Amos failed to react to his name being called from the other side of the street, his head down, his eyes squinting, brow furrowed. His shoulders hunched together, muscles knitting together, unwilling to relax or come apart.

‘Amos!’

The voice came again, with a deeper timbre this time. Authoritative. Amos stuttered, then stopped, glancing up and over the road. The police Land Cruiser nestled by the side of the road, Roary leaning out the open window. His face was blank.

‘Where you off to in such a hurry?’ he said, opening the door and stepping out, slamming it behind him. Amos remained rooted to the spot, refusing to move forward or away. Roary strode across the street towards him, his hand inadvertently hovering above the leather strap that holstered his firearm.

Amos nodded at this. ‘What are you going to do? Shoot me here in the street?’

Roary paused, confused. He looked down at his side, then quickly flung his hands to his side, diagonally outwards in a show of peace.

‘Shit, sorry about that! I don’t know what I…’ Roary stopped, his face setting once again.

‘Look, I think we need to talk.’

Amos’s hands formed painful fists at his side. His muscles ground against each other, against his shoulder blades.

‘Pete just called me. Said that you dropped around there a while ago.’

Amos remained where he was, a statue.

‘Look, I'm not sure where you’re going with all of this mate, but I’d appreciate it if you stopped. Right now. There is nothing but harm to be done with all of this…malarkey.’

A smirk crept across Amos’ features, his face growing darker. ‘What are you trying to say, Officer?’
Roary removed his cap from his head, letting it hover inches above his scalp before jamming it back in place. ‘Amos, you know what I’m saying.’

Amos suddenly took a step forward, peering intently into Roary’s face. ‘How many witnesses?’

Roary straightened. ‘What?’

‘How many people were out at Neville’s place that night? How many people were out hunting with Paul?’

‘How man…three.’

‘Three?’

‘Yep, three. You know that! There was Pete, Paul, Kurt, Marl…’ Roary faltered. ‘OK, four. I wasn’t counting Paul.’

‘Neville told me that there were four blokes out there that night. So did Curt. Marley.’

‘So? What the hell does that mean, Amos? Hey?’

Roary’s hand again drifted to his holster, a modern-day sheriff under pressure on high noon. Amos continued to stare at him, blinking sweat out of his eyes.

‘What did you do?’

‘What? You’ve been out in the sun too long, mate! You’re off the planet!’

Amos’ features hardened, his voice rising. ‘You were on duty that night, weren’t you? So what did you do?’

Roary shook his head, made to turn around. ‘Look, you are having issues at the moment. Just stop harassing people with your questions, OK?’

Amos leapt forward, seizing Roary by the front of the shirt, pulling him forward until their faces were only inches away from each other. The sudden movement took Roary by surprise, and he hung lifeless in Amos’ grasp as he hissed at him.

‘You fuckin did nothing, did you? You know what happened out there and you fucking did nothing! You fucking piece of shit!’

Roary, regaining his senses, leaned back and rocked forward, his forehead connecting awkwardly with Amos’ brow. Amos let go of Roary’s shirt and staggered backwards, Roary
doing the same in a weird balletic dance of symmetry, before Amos slumped to the side of the road. Roary came forward and forced Amos to the ground. As quickly as Amos’ attack had come, the strength had dissipated; Amos did not struggle as Roary forced his knees into the small of his back and roughly shackled his hands together, muttering over and over, ‘What the fuck? What were you thinking? What the fu…?’

Amos did not reply, his face half buried in the dust on the footpath.
The doors of the police station burst open with a loud bang and a almost audible pop as air conditioned air escaped from the sudden exit. Mel’s head appeared at the front window with a snap, a gasp wrenched from her mouth. She looked on in horror as Amos hurtled through the doorway, Roary right behind him, his face a mask of broiling emotion.

‘Open the door Mel!’ Roary bellowed, his face turning a higher shade of red.

‘Wha-what happened? Oh Amos…’

‘Just open the fucking door!’ Roary yelled, his voice cracking like a pubescent boy’s. Mel hurriedly got out of her chair, her face clouded with indignation and mumbling to herself. A few seconds passed until the lock clicked. Roary forced the door open by pushing Amos into it, his face jammed briefly against its cool surface. Mel let out a small shriek as the door crashed against the wall, narrowly missing her.

‘Jesus Roary, watch out!’

‘Shut the fuck up!’ Roary growled. He marched Amos to the end of the hallway where the empty cell waited. He hustled Amos through the open door to the far wall, squashing him up against it with his hip. He quickly released the handcuffs, backed out of the cell, and closed the door behind him. Amos turned around, his back to the wall. Roary threw his cap on the ground, his hair akimbo, and began pacing back and forth in front of the cell, glancing at Amos every time he pirouetted to storm in the opposite direction.

‘For fuck’s sake Amos! You’re out of you tree! That…what happened out there, that was assault! You assaulted me! What the fuck were you trying to do?’

‘I don’t know…’

‘Don’t know? You assaulted me!’

‘You headbutted me.’

‘After you…manhandled me in the middle of the bloody street!’

Amos’ lifelessness began to peel away from him, leaves falling to the ground. ‘But you stated the wrong number of people.’

‘So what, Amos? It was a fucking mistake!’
‘No it wasn’t.’ Amos pushed himself off the wall, his face firm with resolve. ‘You clearly stated that only three people were out there. Twice. Firstly the other day, and then in the street. Why would you say that?’

‘I just said, didn’t I?’ Roary spat out the words, a fleck of saliva flying from his lips, marking the linoleum floor. ‘It was a mistake, nothing more.’

As he said the last word, Roary’s body imploded, all nervous energy rushing out of him like a balloon. His face drained of colour; the adrenaline-fuelled anger washed away to show a face wracked with exhaustion. He leaned forward, his head on the bars of the cell, and looked imploringly at Amos.

‘You sorted yourself out now? You aren’t going to flip again?’

Amos remained still, giving a barely perceptible shake of his head. Roary grunted his assent. ‘How about some tea then?’

Roary moved away down the corridor without waiting for a reply. Amos stood in his place, staring at a space somewhere in front of his shoes. He stood back until he again touched the back wall, sliding down until he was on his haunches.

Mel’s scuffed footsteps heralded her arrival. She peered nervously around the corner of the wall, her frizzy hair more exaggerated, her glasses slightly askew. ‘Amos…’ she said in a gush of breath, both sympathetic and exasperated. ‘Love! What in God’s name have you done now?’

Amos looked up at her. His head lolled on his shoulders, his eyes focusing on the bare light bulb in the centre of the ceiling.

Mel huffed, a few strands of straggly hair floating on the sudden draught before falling back across her glasses. ‘I don’t know about you men! All quiet, and…brooding, and…angry! Just let it out, I say! I’m a good listener.’

‘Too right you are Mel.’ Mel spun around to look at Roary coming out of the common room with two cups of tea. ‘You listen a little too well. Can you start organising that file on Jamie Wassel’s claim for me? I need for this afternoon.’

Mel fidgeted, her face strained from containing herself. ‘But Roary, I was just…’

‘Now, please!’ Roary said with a hint of annoyance.
Mel shuffled past Roary, careful not to bump his cocked elbow as he carried the cups towards the cell. She sent one last defeated look over her shoulder before she disappeared into the front office. There was silence for a few moments before the click-clack of the typewriter started up, staccato and (unsure? Insincere? Timid?) at first, then with more conviction.

Roary shook his head, a mirthless smile thinning his lips. ‘Mel.’

Amos looked at him and wearily pushed himself back on his feet, taking the proffered cup from Roary’s extended hand. He raised it to his lips.

‘Oh, I hope you don’t mind, mate. No ordinary black tea, so I pinched some of Mel’s vanilla tea. It’s not half bad.’

Amos hesitated, then sipped the hot liquid. He pursed his lips and nodded.

‘Good, yeah?’ Roary followed suit, a much larger gulp, then the exaggerated sigh of relief. ‘It wouldn’t normally be my sort of thing, y’know? But it works.’

Roary unclipped the ring of keys from his belt and rattled it around in his hand until he found the right key. He placed it into the lock before hesitating.

‘You sure you’re right? Shit, I should have given you the hot drink afterwards.’

Amos looked at Roary’s serious expression and laughed despite himself. ‘I don’t want to hurt you. You’re right.’

Roary’s expression didn’t waver. ‘Well, can you step back a few then?’

Amos shook his head, grinning, but obliged. Roary, somewhat satisfied, turned the key and eased the door open, letting himself in. Amos though he was going to close the door behind him, locking them both in the cell, but he left it swing to the side.

Roary walked over to the makeshift bed, flopping down onto the thin mattress, the springs beneath protesting loudly. A wave of tea surged against the rim of his cup, splashing over the side and landing in his lap.

‘Ah shit!’ He dabbed frantically at the sudden dark patch appearing in his crotch. It was a comical gesture, but Amos’ smile waned, fading away. He resumed his position, sitting with his back to the wall, his eyes to the ceiling, the mug clasped with both hands in his lap.

‘What’s going on, mate? You’re going a little crazy, aren’t ya? What with the fight and all…’
Amos didn’t answer, bringing the mug to his lips and blowing briefly before sipping the tea.

Roary sighed, leaning forward to be hunched over his cup, elbows resting heavily on his knees. His shoulders sagged, tension rolling up and out of them.

‘I was here when I got the initial call.’ Roary paused to take a mouthful of tea. Amos looked up, his face blank, his eyes sharp.

Roary continued.

‘Actually I was piling up those files that Paul was setting out for you. With your search for your family? It was dead, I had nothing to do, so I was putting them all together. Shit, there musta been twenty, twenty-five files just for 1981. that’s a lot for a small town like Brolga! So anyway, I’m in the front office and the call comes in. “Someone shot at the Neville homestead.” Nothing else – not who it was, how bad it was. Just that someone had been shot.’

‘So…how did Marley know it was Paul? I thought you must have told him.’

‘Me? Shit, I didn’t tell anyone!’

‘That means that someone must have rung him…’ Amos scratched his head, his drink in his lap, forgotten. ‘So who rang it in?’

‘Neville himself. He sounded unsure of himself – I don’t think he really knew what was going on either. I knew that something was wrong straight away. I rang the ambulance, jumped in the Cruiser and hotfooted it out there.

‘Now listen Amos,’ Roary said, moving closer to the edge of the bed, focusing intently on him. ‘I did the fucking best I could. But there was nothing that could be done! I got out there, Paul was already dead! He was lying there…his head, fuck…’

Roary buried his face in his large hands, sobbing soundlessly. Amos waited for the sobbing to ease before pushing on.

‘What did you see? What did you do?’

‘Fuck, Amos!’ Roary stood up, glaring desperately at Amos, and began to pace again. ‘What’s it to you, huh? Why do you want to know?’

‘Because I want to know. Because I don’t believe that it was an accident.’
‘You don’t believe I did my job, that’s it isn’t it?’ Roary stopped pacing and stood over Amos, waving a shaky finger at him. ‘Well, you weren’t there. You didn’t have to see what I saw. And you didn’t see their faces. They were as horrified as I was! There is no way that any of those blokes could have intentionally killed Paul. No way!’

‘But isn’t it your job to find out who killed him?’

‘No!’ Roary threw his hands and his gaze to the ceiling. ‘Who wants to know? It was a terrible tragedy that those blokes all have to deal with. If none of them know who pulled the trigger, it makes it slightly easier for them to live with the fact that one of their friends is dead. And I don’t think that that is a bad thing.’

Amos pushed himself up onto his feet, Roary taking a instinctive step back towards the open cell door. ‘But, I think it is your job, Roary! You should have cordoned off the area, gotten statements, established the scene, checked the guns for the amount of bullets used throughout the night…’

‘Jesus, you don’t get it, do you?’ Roary shook his head, turning his back to Amos. ‘Are you a cop?’

Amos didn’t reply.

‘Are you a fucking copper, Amos?’ Roary yelled. Amos shook his head.

‘We are all his friends, Amos. And he’s gone now. I did everything that I had to do. I cleaned up. I rang the family. I tidied up everything here at the station. And that’s it. Paul is gone. And we will live with this tragedy in the only way we know how. By remembering what came before – who he was.’

Roary rested a hand against the wall, holding himself up. His shoulders sagged. ‘I have nothing more to say to you. Go.’

Amos stood still. ‘But…’

‘Go, Amos!’ Roary’s voice was low, spat through gritted teeth. ‘You’ve done enough. There’s nothing more to say.’

Amos moved past Roary out into the hallway. Roary remained as he was, unmoved. Amos continued to walk to the door, glancing in at Mel, seeing her head whip around to pretend that she was working. The phone receiver was firmly stuck in the crook of her neck, and she continued speaking in hushed tones. He opened the door, the only sound coming from behind
him the smash of ceramic against a wall, fragments tinkling on the cement floor. The door swung shut silently on its hydraulic hinge.
SIXTY THREE

The sun had intensified, the heat physically hitting him as he exited the police station. He squinted, holding his hands to his face as he walked down the pathway and into the street, almost running into a hunched figure who was coming towards them.

‘Sorry,’ he mumbled.

‘Ah, don’t be. I was just comin up to find you, see how you be.’

Amos looked up. Leo grinned at him.

‘Leo? Why were you coming to the police station?’

‘Cos that’s where you were, weren’t ya?’

Amos shook his head. ‘Yes, but how did you know I was there?’

‘Sonny, everyone knows you’ve been in the station. It’s Brolga! Besides, if you’re gonna have a one-up with a police officer, you may want to make sure it isn’t in the middle of the street outside a church.’

Amos grunted humourlessly. He started to push past Leo. Leo grabbed his arm firmly.

‘Whoa, where you heading off to?’

‘Home. Well, Paul’s place. A bed.’

‘No. You’re comin with me.’

The iron gates gave out a muffled scream as Leo led the way into the cemetery. The day was exactly as it had been the day of Paul’s funeral. The sky was washed white, as if the blue had bled out. The gravestones wavered in the heat. There was no sign of any life other than the two of them.

‘This town has a history. I told ya that from the start. I think maybe you should listen for a while instead of just actin.’

Leo clucked his tongue at Amos’ shocked face. ‘C’mon boy! You can’t be serious? Newbie comes in, woos the woman of my heart, personable young bloke he is too, then he starts getting his head beaten in and accostin police officers in the daytime! I don’t know about you, but to me that sounds like someone who’s head’s not on straight.’
Amos followed him along a row near the middle of the cemetery. Amos looked at the gravestones as they walked past – Marjorie Ellen Sturgess, Francis John Sturgess, Eric Matheson Cunningham, Wilhelmina Gertrude Rickson, Michael Alfred Rickson. It was not long before the Goodwin name started to appear.

‘It’s funny that the old joke of cemeteries being the dead centre of town is usually a truthful adage when it comes to places like this,’ Leo said, having stopped in front of a gravestone that had a small cherub nestled on top, its face worn expressionless over the ages. ‘Because this is where you can see the development of a town, its genesis, its heart. The men, women and children who spent weeks, months trekking across this land to finally settle here, in this treacherous landscape, to see a future spring up before them…they all reside here. They are the foundations.’

Amos stared at Leo, transfixed. The man grew in stature as he inhabited his most beloved guise, that of the Brolga historian. His breathing had become deeper, the air going through his nostrils puffing out his chest. He absently allowed the tips of his finger to traipse across the engravings of the gravestone of Alistair Malcolm Goodwin, divining knowledge from its inscriptions.

Suddenly he turned, his blue eyes in sharp focus, a clear contrast to the washed out environment. ‘The Goodwins were part of that foundation, and still are, and will always be. The name is like royalty, as it is where we all spring from. I mean, I wasn’t born here, but I’ve been anchored to this ship for thirty-one years. The very essence of Brolga is within me. And it’s the same of every person who comes to Brolga, and who resides here.’ He finished the sentence with a theatrical flourish to encompass the silent audience that surrounded him.

‘The Goodwins, the Ricksons, the Sturgesses, they all came out her in 18__ in search of ____. I don’t want to bore you, as it is bloody hot out here, so I’ll cut to the chase. They actually stopped somewhere north of here, possibly not far off from Richmond, and started to settle there. But after four or so months ____ started to occur. Young Alistair’s father, _____ Goodwin, decided to break free of the rest of the group and travel south. Why south? Maybe to hope for some degree of coolness, maybe because its where the horses led him. Had they travelled north they would’ve found the Flinders River and a hell of a lot less trouble. But he and a few others…

Amos remained blank, his lips pursed. The reverence in Leo’s eyes dulled for a moment. ‘Ah, sorry. I realise that my love of this town is somewhat different to most of the others.’
Life flickered behind Amos’ features. He rubbed vigorously at his elbow. ‘No, Leo, it’s not that, it’s that…I don’t understand any of this.’

Leo clicked his fingers. ‘Of course you don’t. Life itself is hard to understand. But I’ll tell you. Brolga is a town that is built on hardships. Mistakes. Bad decisions. That’s how it’s always been, and that’s how it will always be. Things are different, then, you see? This world don’t function like other places. We make do with what we can, and we move on.’

Amos peered at the gravestone, Leo’s callused fingertips still caressing its engraved and worn surface. Without looking up he replied, ‘So, you’re telling me to forget about this? To turn a blind eye? What if Paul was killed?’

‘By who, sonny?’ Leo answered wearily. ‘Answer me that. Why would any of the blokes out there that night want to kill him?’

Amos continued to stare at the gravestone, unwilling to catch Leo’s eye. ‘I don’t know. But how could it have happened?’

‘There’s plenty of ways it could of happened. Because that’s what an accident usually is. A whole bunch of unlikely circumstances coming together.’

‘Why does everyone want me to drop this? Why is everyone so willing to accept that Paul, Jackie, Curt and Pete were out shooting roos and somehow Paul ended up in the firing line by accident? Why is that OK?’

‘Because it’s the only explanation that works. For everyone. Don’t you see, Amos? What good will it do to find out that something else happened out there? We’re a community on the edge of nothing out here. We just lost someone who meant so much to this community in the short time he was here. He’s a part of history too. He’s a Goodwin. No one wished him harm. And to stir this all up, it will only end in ruin.’

Amos stood still, shaking his head, his jaw working overtime, short breaths bursting from his nostrils. Suddenly he kicked dust up with his shoe, spun around and stormed towards the cemetery gates.

Leo started to walk after Amos before stuttering to a halt. ‘Amos? Amos! Have you seen what this business’s doin to you?’

Leo’s voice fell. No one was left to hear him. He turned around and continued to walk amongst the graves of Brolga’s past, talking softly to himself.
Amos pushed his way into the Brolga Hotel doors, swinging open violent and nearly collecting someone as they reached for a pool cue. The loud bang echoed throughout the bar.

‘Watch where you’re fucking going, ya dumb…cunt…’

The man’s tough words withered on his lips, as Amos walked past him without a glance. He turned to his partner, raising his eyebrows in indignation, but did not deign to continue the taunts. Amos zeroed in on the bar before taking notice of who was occupying it.

‘Look, can we not, please? I really don’t want to talk it anymore.’

‘I think that it’s an issue, OK? I need to know…’

Amber had stopped looking at him, her expression of anguish sliding into something less discernable as she took stock of what was over Jackie’s shoulder. Jackie turned around, his train of thought forgotten. Amos perched up on a stool next to him.

‘Oh, don’t stop on account of me,’ Amos mumbled, making a point of rummaging in his pocket before slamming down his wallet on the counter. ‘But when you’re ready I’d like a drink.’

Jackie turned back to Amber, but she had used the opportunity to break away, moving towards the clean pot glasses. Jackie was unsure of what to do. He leaned against the bar, and then stood up straight, before leaning against the bar. He looked at Amos briefly. Amos kept staring at him. Jackie looked away.

Amber brought the beer over to Amos, froth escaping the confines of the glass and sliding down the side, over her fingers. Amos emptied his wallet onto the counter and counted out the change before taking a large mouthful. He turned back to Jackie.

‘So, what’s been happening, mate?’ Sarcasm edged the comment like a finely honed sword.

‘Yeah, not much. I’ve gotta go actually.’ Jackie looked over at Amber imploringly, but she continued to ignore his gaze. Jackie fidgeted before turning and making for the door. Amos spun around on his stool to watch him go.

‘Jackie?’ he called out. Jackie’s hand stayed inches from the door. ‘You around town for a while?’
'Nah mate, sorry,’ Jackie replied before he disappeared into the afternoon heat.

Amos watched the space Jackie had left behind, his eyes focusing on something that was not there, before he turned back to his beer, polishing it off in another large mouthful. Amber brought a replacement over. As she went to pick the coins from Amos’ pile to equate for the beer, Amos placed his hand over hers. The movement was quick but without malice. Nevertheless, Amber flinched, although she did not try to move away.

‘What was up before? Are you OK?’

The softness in Amos’ voice perturbed Amber. She visibly bristled. ‘What? Of course I’m OK! I should be asking you the same question.’

She pulled away from Amos and moved towards the cash register.

‘Why?’

‘Why? Because of the way you stormed in here, almost knocking Billy through the bloody front door! I can almost see the steam coming out of your ears!’

Amos’ shoulders dropped, his head focused on the new beer cradled in his hands. ‘Sorry about that.’

‘Yeah, well, I’m not sure what’s going on with you, but I don’t like it, and I won’t tolerate it! Any sign of you causing shit like you did over at the Trans a few nights ago and you’ll be out on your arse, alright?’

Amber’s voice was stern, yet belying a softness. She did not want to do that to Amos, but she did want if she had to. Amos nodded.

Amos drank in silence while Amber served people at the other end of the bar. He stared again at the old paraphernalia that hung from the ceiling and walls. Leo’s history lesson ran parallel with these rusted implements, altogether denoting a life so far removed from modern civilisation. The trappings as displayed by the electronic register, jukebox and televisions were mere shadows of an existence that seemed out of place in this landscape – accoutrements that led the inhabitants to falsely believe that they were changing, or indeed capable of change. Amos sighed and had another drink of beer, the darkness that had permeated his being all day slowly subsiding. Amber, intuiting the change in temperature, moved slowly to stand in front of him.

Amos tried a smile, which wavered unconvincingly. ‘I’m…sorry. About before.’
‘Don’t worry about it,’ Amber said quietly, a cautious response. She glanced over his shoulder, her expression making Amos follow her gaze. The two men playing pool were standing side by side at a table, leaning into each other and whispering whilst they looked Amos’ way. They stopped talking, one of them making a show of measuring up his next shot.

‘They’re talking about you, Amos,’ Amber murmured. ‘Everyone is. You’ve been acting a little crazy lately.’

‘Everyone’s been talking about me? I’m flattered.’ Amos’ joke fell flat. Amber ignored it.

‘I don’t know you too well, but something has to be said. You can’t keep beating yourself up like this! You’re becoming…self-destructive.’

Amos’ head bowed as he again began to cradle his drink, rocking the glass around on the bar in a circular motion. The noise of the glass on the wood increased as the rhythmic action became faster. Amber reached over and stayed his hand; a little beer again overflowing and splashing onto her hand. She again ignored it.

Amos looked up at Amber, tears threatening to break free. “I don’t know what’s going on, Amber. Everything is fucked. Nothing makes sense. I came here with nothing – at least I thought I did – and now… I have nothing left! I don’t understand anything.’ His voice quavered. He quickly broke away from Amber’s touch, gulping down some beer, dribbling some down his chin and onto his shirt. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, taking a deep breath. Amber stood with her hands at her chest, fidgeting, unsure of what to do.

‘What was your problem with Paul?’ Amos asked, a quiet tone, trying to take the focus off himself. He looked down at his glass, waiting for an answer. When none came, he looked up. Amber had moved away, disappearing into the cold room. Amber watched the door, drank his beer, ignoring the furtive glances and murmurs coming from other quarters of the pub.

When Amber did re-emerge, her hands full balancing a carton of beer, Amos had finished his drink and put his wallet back in his pocket. He stood up as she approached the bar.

‘You read my mind!’ Amos joked, his smile turning to confusion as she placed the carton in front of him, looking at him expectantly.

‘What? Is this for me?’

‘Thirty dollars, please. You should go home.’

‘Well, I was, but now that I’m being forced out…’
‘Don’t start any shit.’ Amber sounded tired, but resilient. The softness of earlier was fading away.

‘What have I done now? I just asked about Paul.’

‘There’s nothing to say. I have nothing against Paul, God bless his soul. Now go.’

‘But…’

‘Just go, Amos!’

He picked up the carton and shuffled away from the bar, Amber’s exhausted, baleful eyes tracking his movements until he has gone. She leant against the bar and sighed, her head in her hands.
Amos heard the knock on the door. He craned his head, listening for the sound again, before returning to his reverie. He sat in the kitchen, the fluorescent light bleaching the kitchen of colour. A small cluster of beer bottles congregated on the table. Paul’s guitar lay across Amos’ lap, his fingers flitting occasionally across the metal strings, a barely perceptible tune being created.

The knock became more insistent, forcing Amos to come back to reality. He propped the guitar up against the table and lumbered up to the hallway.

‘Amos, I’m out here!’ a small voice echoed from behind him. Amos, confused, turned around and returned to the kitchen, seeing Amber’s silhouette at the screen door.

Amos picked up his wallet from the kitchen bench, dropped it, picked it up again. ‘I’m sure I have enough for the carton here…’

‘Shit, this isn’t a good idea,’ she muttered. Her footsteps echoed as she left the back verandah. Amos opened the screen door and hurried out after her, catching up to her in the driveway.

‘Wait!’

Amber turned around to face him. ‘Look, I’m sorry to disturb you…’

‘Why did you come around?’

Amber paused, looking down the driveway to the street, and her escape. She sighed.

‘I wanted to talk. But you’re drunk.’

‘So?’

‘So, I want to talk about serious things. Personal.’

Amos ran his hand over his face, eager to wipe the alcohol from his system. ‘OK. Let’s talk. I’m fine. We’ll sit out the back, hey?’

They sat down in the squatting’s chairs, both of them refusing to relax, sitting on the edge, poised to get up and leave. Amos stared intently at Amber; Amber looking out over the nothingness beyond. She took another deep breath.
‘Paul…meant a lot to me. He meant a lot to just about everyone around here, but what he meant to me was something else. Intimate.’ Amber stopped and gave off an abrupt, humourless laugh, as if the last comment was something that had been in her mouth for some time and had finally decided to come loose at the most unexpected of moments. She looked at a point somewhere between them, digesting her words, her thoughts, meticulously putting them into order.

‘I never meant to stay here longer than a month. Two, maybe. You know, experience the famous Australian Outback in all its ugly beauty.’ Again, that thoughtful, incredulous laugh. ‘Two fucking years! Jesus.’

Amos focused on where she was looking, some invisible point between them where they could exist without meeting each other’s eyes.

‘I was backpacking with two other girls. We stopped off to do some bar work, raise some money, then move on to Mt Isa. We were making our way to Darwin – I wanted to see Kakadu, with all the dangerous animals, you know?’ Amber’s eyes sparkled briefly in the dim light at the memory.

‘Then I met Paul. I just sort of…gravitated to him, you know?’

Amos nodded without a sound, a small, wistful smile playing across his lips.

‘He came into the Brolga a fair bit, you know, chatting to Jackie and Tom and the locals, sweet talking the other girls, but I could tell his presence was for me only. The looks he gave me…’

Amos looked up at Amber’s face. She was no longer beside him, but experiencing the moments again. He quickly looked away.

‘He offered to take us around, to see the sights. His days off were spent taking us to waterholes and properties, showing us kangaroos and emus. The girls loved him, wouldn’t stop talking about him. How much they wanted to fuck him. They didn’t notice the looks he saved for me.’

Amber paused, her hands twisting in her lap.

‘Nothing happened, really. When it came time to leave, though, I didn’t want to. I liked it here – working at the Brolga, the locals, the whole rough earthiness of it all. That’s what I told myself and the girls anyway. But I knew. And he did too.’
She paused again. Amos chanced another look at her, afraid to break the spell that had been cast over her. She had almost forgotten that he was sitting beside her, telling him her story. Tears brimmed in her eyes.

‘They protested all the way, but in the end they moved on, and I stayed. Not long after, Paul asked me to dinner at his hou…well, here.’ The laugh, forcing one unbidden tear to escape down her cheek. ‘He cooked up this quiche, with fetta and semi-dried tomatoes, I could tell he had put a lot of effort into it. He had even made dessert! Tiramisu, no less! He had wine, and candles…’ She smiled. ‘It was perfect.’

The smile – radiant, full of happiness – faltered, withered, disappeared.

‘We were together for a few months. It was wonderful. Then I started to feel ill. I went to the doctor, and he told me what I feared.’

Another tear joined the first, following its path towards her chin. She wiped it away absentmindedly, hurriedly, eager to finish while she still could.

‘I told Gus that I needed some time off, and I caught the bus to Longreach. I didn’t tell Paul. I couldn’t. I mean, I felt I didn’t have to. I was young – I still am young! I wasn’t ready!’ Saying these things to herself, a well trodden argument.

‘But it’s Brolga, isn’t it? As soon as I got back, Paul was full of questions. Why was I in Longreach? Why didn’t I tell him? He thought I had left him. That’s when I realised how serious he was. That we were. And so I told him.’

Amber could hold back no longer, a sob tearing from her chest, the sound unbidden, unwanted, yet a welcome release. She broke down, her head in her hands, her body convulsing with pain, anguish, and grief. Amos, the alcoholic fugue lifting, hesitated, unsure of what was required. He remained still, staring out over the inky darkness, honing in on it, embracing it, just as Amber embraced her sorrow.

Amber sniffed heavily, the spell breaking. Amos turned back to her. She wiped her face frantically with the back of her hands, wiping the wetness away on the sides of her dress.

‘That was it then. He didn’t want to talk about it. We broke it off. But the most hurtful thing was, he stopped looking at me that way. And I resented him for it. He was the golden boy of Brolga! He seemed to move on. He belonged here. I didn’t, and I no longer wanted to stay, but I couldn’t leave! I was the one who hurt, but I was broke. I had no where to go. And now…’ Her voice quivered as another wave of grief came forth. ‘I want him back. He isn’t supposed to be gone!’
She buried her head in her hands again, the sobs coming back in a surge. This time Amos left this chair and crouched beside her, wrapping her up in his arms. She folded within them, her hands scrabbling at his shirt, his shoulders, and holding him close, the tears falling on his collar and neck. He placed his face in the crook of her neck, and closed his eyes.
Amos woke with a start. Light greeted his eyes, a tepid brightness. He was disoriented; his neck and back ached. He rubbed his eyes and peered around him. The darkness was quickly moving from the sky, the grey light brightening as day made its presence felt. The open land beyond the fence, the backyard, all images that eased his mind.

He got out of the squatter’s chair and stretched, feeling more than hearing the popping of his vertebrae. He looked around the verandah, finding his mobile phone abandoned beside the chair. He checked the time. 6.22.

He moved into the house. He picked up the bottles off the table, the kitchen bench, out of the sink, and dropped them lightly into the wheelie bin outside, wincing when a bottle chinked loudly. He moved back inside, cleaned down the bench, and put on the kettle.

He found Amber on his bed, fast asleep. Her breathing was heavy, as if last night had allowed her escape from a terrible burden. She had not even made it past the covers. He moved quickly so as not to disturb her, grabbing some clothes and a towel. He paused at the doorway, watching Amber in peaceful slumber, before he closed the doorway silently behind him.

The water ran over him in rivulets of pleasure; he sighed as the cool water seeped into his skin, relaxing his muscles, cooling his soul. He rested his forehead against the tiles, allowing the water to run over his head and down his body, a natural cranial massage that chased all thoughts from his brain.

The dull remnants of the beer consumed the day before still echoed in Amos’ skull as he exited the shower. He dried his hair, lightly, trying not to disturb the monsters that lay within.

Wiping the condensation from the mirror, Amos stared at himself, front on, profile, reverse profile, front on. Stubble had broken out along the ridge of his jaw, linked up to his sideburns, held ransom on his cheekbones, invaded his upper lip. He ran his hand over it, allowing the prickles scrape against his palm. His eyes were rheumy, somewhat flat. His forehead bore lines that had been less prominent some weeks before. He let the water run from the tap, the plug pushed firmly into place. The lathered shaving cream covered his face, the creamy substance pushing through the gaps between his fingers. He ran his hands through the stream of water until it was hot to the touch, turning the tap off, drying his hands quickly, then ran the razor over the contours of his face in slow methodical strokes.
He was almost finished when the blade got caught on a fold of skin near his Adam’s apple. A spot of blood appeared immediately, marking luridly his newly shaven face. He stared at it as it grew in size, became a bead, broke away and dripped down towards the hairs at the crest of his chest. He dabbed at it with his fingers, damming the flow, looking around for paper. He grabbed some sheets off the toilet roll and pressed against the cut, his neck strained upward. The sight of the blood threatened to unsettle him. He rubbed his temple in anticipation.

One hand holding the paper to his neck, Amos opened up the medicine cabinet, his face sliding from view to display rows of medical paraphernalia in its stead. He searched amongst the bottles, lotions and tubes for anything that resembled aspirin. His flittering fingers were careless, knocking over a few bottles in the rummaging. One of the bottles – plastic, white, fell on its side, rolling to the edge where it balanced precariously before it escaped his futile clutches, hitting the edge of the basin and clattering to the floor.

Amos crouched down, the tissue still held to his throat, and cradled the bottle in the palm of his other hand. His fingers fidgeted, moving the bottle until the label faced upward. He stared at the black computer-typed words for some time, as if examining hieroglyphics or something of its ilk, his brow furrowed in confusion. He twisted the top of the bottle, the tissue forgotten, hanging from the skin, fused there momentarily until gravity worked against it, and floated to the floor. He looked inside. Five tablets rattled within, clamouring for attention, consumption.

He read the label again before he hurriedly stuck the lid back on, forcing it over the threads without screwing it on, the cap locking into place with a loud click. He quickly threw on his clothes, and left the bathroom.

He poured himself a coffee, polished it off, had another. He rolled the bottle back and forth on the table’s surface, the pills rattling against their plastic cage. He traced the words with his fingertips, as if they were Braille and would take on a different meaning. He cooked up some toast, smeared with Vegemite, washing it down with a third coffee.

He scribbled a quick note on some scrap paper and laid it next to Amber’s head. She hadn’t moved, her breathing maintaining a steady rhythm. He again eased the door closed and left the house. The bottle had made the small shrink in stature; its walls conspiring to suffocate him, to keep his discovery forever. He needed out.

The sun resumed its relentless attack on Brolga. Amos’ wet hair dried, then becoming wet again from a fine sheen of sweat. He walked past the police station – it looked deserted, even with Roary’s Cruiser parked around the back. He moved up past the shops of the main street,
the King’s Crown, the Transcontinental. He paused here, stepping out from under the awning to stare at the upper floor, the dimmed windows, Lavinia. No movement registered. He continued to the edge of town, turned the corner, and made his way to Strahan Way.

Tracker’s place was closed; his dogs roaming the perimeter, looking over at the adjacent house, waiting to be fed. A couple of them noticed Amos’ presence and made their way over to them, sniffing curiously through the gaps in the fence, their wet noses pushing forward. Amos held his hands outward, fingers splayed. They soon got the message, joining their brethren in their breakfast vigil.

Amos wandered around to the front of Tracker’s house. The front door was open; the sounds smells of cooking meats wafted from within. Amos hovered at the doorway, looking about him, over the dead expanse of land that extended past Tracker’s property, before entering the house.

Despite the early morning light shining through the open windows, the hallway remained dim. The paint on the walls, a dull light green, muted all other objects in the hallway. The rug that lay in the hallway, a red imitation Persian, languished in the low light, its colours fading into insignificance. As Amos passed a room to his left, he noticed the unused bedroom for what it was: a storage room for an unlived life. Dolls and teddy bears infiltrated the surface of a sagging double bed. Boxes and other paraphernalia heaped together in haphazard columns, a fortress long forgotten. Despite the gaiety of the painted faces and knitted smile, the happiness inherent in such gifts remained unfulfilled.

The bang of a screen door made Amos’ head snap around. He moved past the other doorways, unwilling to see what lay within, and entered the kitchen. It was empty, yet Amos could hear the happy whines of the dogs. He moved over to the kitchen sink and peered out the louvres, watching Tracker as he threw the dogs freshly cooked sausages. The dogs’ tails whipped the air in a frenzied show of affection and gratitude. Although the ritual was a daily one, tracker’s face was creased in a wide grin as he spoke softly to them, scratching them under their snouts and ears.

After he had fed them Tracker moved back to the house. Amos backtrackered, standing just outside in the hallway. The screen door clattered against its frame, soon followed by the sound of rushing water. Amos tentatively moved forward, and looked through the doorway, knocking on the wall as he did so.

Tracker looked over his shoulder from the kitchen sink, continuing to scrub the frypan. There was no noticeable sign of intrusion other than the slight widening of the eyes and a tensed
grip on the handle of the frypan. His posture relaxed considerably when he realised who it was.

‘Ah, Amos!’ he proclaimed, grabbing a tea towel and throwing it over his shoulder in a sign of hostship (not a word – what am I thinking of here?) (I realise that I am not getting the voice of Tracker right in this segment – I’m trying to “splurge”, and get all thoughts out on the page. I intend to correct where necessary in the following draft – this is all about getting ideas out of my overcrowded brain for the moment!!)

‘How long you bin standin there, ay? No matter! Sit, sit!’

Tracker made a show of pulling out the chair for Amos, proffering his hand in an arc across the table in an effort to show his (again, mind blank – I’m thinking host, so something along those lines?) Amos took the offered chair, the cracked vinyl covering cutting into his legs. He wriggled around until he was comfortable.

‘I be cookin sumthin up.’

Amos showered Tracker in his protestations. ‘Oh, thanks Tracker, but I’m right thanks.’

Tracker’s smile faltered, darkening with confusion. ‘Why? No, you must eat, it’s no good no eatin.’

‘Look, honestly, I don’t need any breakfast, I had a piece of toast –’

The look on Tracker’s face stalled Amos’ words on his lips, remaining unformed.

‘Toast is not enuff! You cum in my house, you must eat, OK?’ His eyes wide, eyebrows raised, he nodded his assent until Amos reciprocated. The smile returned, and he turned towards the screen door. ‘I bein two minets, k?’

True to his word, two minutes later Tracker re-emerged, his arms laden with fresh food from the meat safe. He laid the bundle of treasures on the kitchen bench and quickly began to split them up, slicing up vegetables at a fantastic rate, cracking eggs with one hand. All was done in silence – Tracker performed each task with reverence, in respect of the meal. He helped Tracker clear away the papers that obscured the table’s surface.

Amos breathed slowly as a mountain of prepared food was placed in the centre of the table. Tracker served him up the scrambled eggs, cooked mushroom, tomato and onion, with bacon on the side. The vibrant colours of the egg and tomato screamed out against the dimness of the kitchen, making the meal more delectable. Tracker did not sit and serve himself until Amos had tasted the food and given a hearty assent. The meal was eaten in silence, Tracker
looking over his fork at Amos to ensure his pleasure with the meal before treating himself to a mouthful.

Amos put his knife and fork neatly at the side of the plate, finished. He leaned back and looked at Tracker, who quickly mopped up the last of the egg yoke and shovelled it into his mouth, giving him a greasy grin.

‘No bad, ay? All natural, only way to go.’

‘What did you actually see out at Neville’s property that night?’

The question caught Tracker off guard; he shifted in his chair, the smile frozen awkwardly across his lips.

‘Wot do ya mean? I tol you, tha otha night, ay? Member?’

Amos nodded, impassive. ‘I know, Tracker, that you told me who you saw. But not what. And why.’

‘Why? Huh?’

‘Why you were out at Neville’s. I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t have been too keen to have you and your dogs roaming his property.’

Tracker looked down, hurt. ‘No, but…’

‘But what?’

‘I know what I saw, Amos! I saw him fall.’

‘You actually saw Paul die?’

‘I saw him fall.’

Amos moved to the edge of his chair, his hand caressing the bulge in his pocket. ‘What exactly did you see? From the beginning.’

Tracker’s brow furrowed. ‘I tol you orready Amos! I don no wot…’

‘Can you just go over it all again, just this once? I want it straight in my head too.’

Tracker looked at Amos then nodded. He stopped mid-nod, his face clouded. ‘You arnt gunna tell ol Neville bout this ar ya? I needs to go out there an he don’t like it much.’

Amos shook his head. ‘This is just for me.’
Tracker nodded again. ‘I take the dogs out there sum times, for a run, sometimes hunt. Hares n such. They’n stir up the roos at times, but is jus fun, ay? They jump up on the tray an off we go! But Neville, he doesn like it. Doesn like me, mores like it! Cort me a coupla times, said I wuz trespassin. Says he’ll report me. But he lets any ol bastard with a gun on the place!

‘But I’ve worked it out, ay! Is always the same blokes go out there roo shootin. I jus see if there headin out; if not, I’m!’

‘Why Neville’s?’

‘Huh?’

‘Why Neville’s? If you knew he wasn’t happy for you to be out there, why risk getting caught? There are plenty of other big properties for your dogs to roam around on.’

Tracker nodded. ‘Yes. But I know Neville’s. Knowed it all my life. Jus cos he tell me his ideas doan mean they’re right. He doan own that land. No one does.’

Amos nodded. ‘OK. Then what happened that night? If you watched Paul and them…’

‘But it wassun Paul’s turn.’

‘What? I don’t…’

‘They have a pattern ay! Stinky Pete went out everen night jus about. He never en minded me bein out there. Same as a few other blokes. But the others… Paul only went out on Tuesdays, same as Jackie and em. Others head out other nights, Mondays, Thursdays. An I track em. They go m shootin in a pattern. M dogs are good n quiet, waiting for distance between them n us before they go exploring.’

‘But not this night.’

Tracker shook his head. ‘Nuh, not that n night. Was up’n near the waterhole on the Red Bend n I heard the engines n saw them lights. I told the dogs to hushen up, and made me way down in the scrub.’

‘Red Bend?’

‘Yeah, Red Bend. Red Bend, where en the earth sweeps round in a bend. You ken see it in daytime – like a red wave in the dirt.’

‘So you were on the Red Bend at the waterhole – the turkey’s nest?’
‘Yeah ay. My dogs became shadows. I did the same.’

‘So…the utes came up to the scrub – the prickly trees, yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Where were the roos?’

‘Lying. Settin. In the scrub.’

‘What about your dogs? Why didn’t they chase the roos off?’

‘Don’t know. Prolly would if they had a chance, but they didn. They knowed trouble was comin.’

Tracker paused, his head bowed, his hands fidgeting, clamouring at each other, the light pads of his fingers rasping over the skin. ‘I heard the moving of the roos, the slamming of doors, voices.’

Tracker nodded. ‘N it was dark ay. The moon hid away. Then the moon came out, and I saw im.’

‘Paul?’

‘Yeah. But I couldn see im proply cos the moon was still hidin. I saw his shape. There was a voice, but quiet. Then a flash, the gunshot. And he fell.’

Tracker’s hands stilled, but his head remained bowed. Amos teetered on the edge of the seat, a bead of sweat coursing its way languidly down the middle of his back.

‘What else?’

‘That’s it ay. Cept, I saw another shape. Walkin slow, slumpin at the other shape. And he cried out for help. I ran away. The dogs were en huddling on the tray, waitin. They knew. They always do.’

‘It was the station bloke who en cried out ay.’

Amos leaned back in the chair, the cracked vinyl forgotten. ‘Jackie Rickson.’

Tracker nodded. ‘Jackie, it was, ay.’
Stinky Pete hosed off the tray of his ute, the water mixing with blood, entrails and effluent in a muddy red confluence, a foaming waterfall that soaked into the dry earth below. Amos waited at the end of the driveway, squinting into the sun, until Pete spotted him. The customary lopsided grin wavered and floated away as recognition sank in. He ducked his head down, his massive hand fumbling with the tap at the corner of the house, the hose spewing forth a small stream of water before being shut off.

‘Amos.’

‘Pete. I need to talk to you.’

‘Yeah, well, I think you’ve done enough talking for a while. Come back later, we’ll have a few beers and a steak…’

‘I know it was Jackie.’

Any semblance of joviality slipped from Pete’s frame. He leant against the ute, 

‘You don’t know that, Amos.’

‘Tracker told me.’

Pete’s eyes widened. ‘What?’

‘Tracker was there, Pete. Out by Red Bend. He saw Jackie holding Paul after he got shot.’

Pete swore under his breath. He stood up and started walking away, towards the shed.

‘Where are you going?’ Amos called.

‘Where do you think?’ Pete whispered urgently. ‘Do you wanna do this in front of the neighbours? My bloody kids?’ Without waiting for an answer he swung the double doors open and disappeared in the darkness.

Amos walked in. a couple of kangaroo carcasses hung from the hooks in the far corner of the shed, but otherwise it remained empty. Pete closed the doors after him, turned around slowly, his eyes guarded under his cap.

‘You’ve got it all wrong, mate.’

‘Tracker saw…’
‘He didn’t see shit!’ Pete hissed. Amos stopped. Pete breathed slowly.

‘When did Tracker tell you this?’

‘Just now.’

‘Just now.’ Pete scratched his chin. ‘Why didn’t you go see Jackie then?’

‘What?’

‘You don’t believe Tracker do you? Why come to me if you did?’

‘Because I knew you would tell me the truth.’

‘Me?’

‘C’mon Ptet, I can tell it’s eating you up like it is me!’

Pete stuck a quivering finger at Amos. ‘We are nothin alike, mate! I know when enough is enough! I know when to let things be! You and me aren’t nothin alike!’

Pete looked away. ‘Do you know what it’s like to be called Stinky Pete? Ha ha, funny stuff. Maybe with your mates. But when everyone in bloody Brolga starts to call you that, and the kids at school tell your children that’s their dad’s name, it’s rough. But I had to laugh it off. Because no one meant nothin by it, and soon enough, that’s all it was – a name.’

He looked back at Amos, his eyes swimming. ‘Don’t think this is hard for me, Amos? This is the fucking worst. Paul was my best friend. And I –’ Pete gulped ‘– I couldn’t do a fucking thing.’

Amos said nothing as Pete swept the cap off his head and hastily wiped his face with it. His cheeks shining, he glared back at Amos.

‘But if you want to know the truth, go ask Jackie yer fucken self. Now if you don’t mind, I’d like you to get out of here and never come back.’
SIXTY EIGHT

The Transcontinental was empty, Lavinia standing dejected against the bar. She saw Amos come in and with a scowl turned her back, her hands idly playing across some pot glasses in a futile attempt at looking preoccupied. Amos took a deep breath and approached the bar.

‘We’re closed,’ Lavinia said to him, her back still turned.

‘It’s eight o’clock.’

‘I said we’re closed!’ Her voice became reedy, betraying her efforts to keep her emotions from him. She continued to face away from him, but her fingers had become idle, her shoulders hunched.

‘Lavinia…’

She spun around, a deep crease set on her forehead, hands on hips, her blue eyes blazing.

‘Why are you here, huh? To stir up some more shit? Fuck off!’

Amos heard shuffling footsteps from upstairs. He took another deep breath and leaned over the bar, his voice lowered.

‘I’m not here to cause any trouble, honestly. I…’

Lavinia snorted in derision. ‘Bullshit! Ever since you arrived in this fucking town things have fucked up. Why would things change now?’

Amos raised his hands, palms forward. ‘I don’t know why there is so much hostility here! I’m sorry for whatever it is I’ve done, honestly. And I’m not here to cause trouble.’

‘Not here to cause…’ Lavinia’s incredulous expression darkened considerably. ‘What the fuck’s this I hear about you causing shit with Roary, huh? He’s a fucking police officer, in case you’ve forgot! What are you trying to achieve? Do you want to get locked up? Killed?’

He shrugged in exasperation, exhausted. ‘Look, I’m sorry, OK? I’m flying a white flag here!’

Her scowl remained, but her eyes softened. ‘Then why are you here?’

Amos sat at one of the bar stools, a deflated and tired action. ‘To see you. To make things easier. I don’t know.’
Slowly she dropped her hands. ‘Beer?’ she said, her voice softer.

Amos nodded. She poured the beer, a rushed movement causing foam to overflow the lip of the glass. She placed the beer in front of him, the foam sliding down the glass onto the bar mat. Amos put his hand around the beer without bringing it to his lips. Lavinia poured one for herself.

‘Look, about what I said the other day, about Paul…’

Lavinia put up her hand, the other at her brow. ‘Stop, OK? Just stop. You can’t unsay what you said. You meant it then, I meant what I said then, let’s leave it at that.’ With that she took a slug of her beer, half the glass empty. Amos followed suit.

‘Ahh, this is all fucked up, y’know? All of this.’ Lavinia gestured around the pub, trying to encompass the last few weeks in one flourish. ‘I need to get out of here.’

‘You can check out any time you like, right?’ Amos gave a crooked smile. Despite her defences, Lavinia returned it.

‘Yeah. The goddamned fucking Eagles.’

Amos laughed, looked into his glass, then finished the beer. He fished around in his pocket for his wallet. Lavinia leaned over and stayed his hand.

‘It’s on the house.’

Her hand lingered on his arm for a moment, then moved up to trace the bruise on his cheekbone, their eyes locked on each other. The moment passed.

‘Thanks.’

Amos pushed off the stool, the absence of Lavinia’s touch burning his skin. ‘Get out of here, OK? Get to the coast. Get anywhere. Just get away from here.’

Lavinia smirked. ‘It’s that easy, huh?’

Amos looked off across the room. ‘Not always. But the right thing to do is never easy.’ He shot her a tired smile. ‘Trust me on that.’

He walked over to the jukebox, hitting the buttons until he reached the Smiths. He dropped some coins in the slot and hit play.

The first strains of *This Charming Man* drifted out of the tinny speakers as he walked to the door. He turned and left, Lavinia watching him go. He hovered at the threshold.
‘See you round.’

‘See you round.’

Amos made to walk out. Lavinia leaned against the bar and called out.

‘Look after yourself, OK?’

Amos gave a little smile before he walked out, leaving Lavinia to the ghosts of the bar and her swirling thoughts.
Amos could see Paul’s house before he noticed anything different. Lost in his own thoughts, it took a while before he noticed the next doo neighbours’ dog was barking. He stopped and looked around. Every dog up and down the street appeared to be barking. People were appearing at their windows or on their front lawns. A couple started pointing back over the houses towards the centre of town. Amos looked. The orange hue of light that lit the sky meant one thing.

Amos raced back the way he came, noticing a few cars racing past him. As he got to _____ Street, he saw that the fire wasn’t consuming any of the shopfronts or pubs that littered the main street. The light was coming from beyond – from Jamieson Lane.

Amos came to the end of the street to see the lane was already crowded with onlookers. Tracker’s house was up in flames, the flotsam and jetsam that made up the ramshackle existence of its owner inadvertently helping to fuel the fire. The heat was palpable. Volunteer firefighters were pumping the crank on their portable water hoses, but the fire was so intense that they couldn’t get near enough to the house to be remotely effective. Others were hosing down the nearby storage sheds to prevent any further damage. But most pointed, and stared, and whispered.

Amos pushed past a few slack-jawed onlookers towards a commotion closer to Tracker’s Treasures. He couldn’t hear any yelping from the whippets, and feared the worst, yet he was drawn to the small mob around the flashing blue and red lights of Roary’s police Landcruiser. Marley had Roary by the shirt, whilst others tried to pull him away.

“What do you think you’re fucking doing, Roary ya cunt!” Marley screamed. ‘He’s your fucking mate, ya dog cunt!’

Roary struggled, his hand fidgeting just above the hefty Maglite that hung from his belt. Before anything could happen, the men had wrested control of Marley’s arms and had him pushed up against the far fence. Roary’s face was twisted with anguish and anger.

“I’m doing my job goddammit! I can’t let this happen, and you know it!”

Marley was still fighting against the men restraining him. ‘He’s your fucking mate!’

Roary swung around at the fire, its voracious flames now masking the house entirely. ‘I know! And my mate just did that!’
Amos stared into the flickeringly-lit area beside Tracker’s Treasures. There was nothing but chains and bowls scattered against the corrugated wall – no dogs.

Roary took one last look at the fire before heading towards the driver’s side of the Landcruiser. Amos reached forward and grabbed his arm. He flung his arm away and spun around, his hand again grappling for the Maglite.

‘Fuck Amos, what are you doing here?’

‘Is Tracker OK?’

‘What?’ Roary seemed confused.

‘Tracker! Is he OK?’

Roary stood there for a moment in silence, then shook his head. ‘We don’t know. No one has seen him, so he could be in there.’ He nodded helplessly at the flames. ‘We won’t know for hours yet.’

Roary hopped into the Landcruiser without another word, slamming the car into action. By the fire’s light Amos made out Jackie Rickson’s stricken face as the vehicle pulled out of Jamieson Lane and out of sight.
SEVENTY

Amos walked up the driveway to the police station. The Landcruiser was parked haphazardly beside the drunk tank. He walked up to the back door. It was locked. He could hear Roary’s voice.

‘…fucking stupid! What were you thinking? What were you fucking thinking?’

Amos couldn’t hear Jackie’s response. Something clattered against a wall.

Amos started to bang on the door. There was silence on the other side. He beat on the door with his fist, a rhythmic drumming.

The door unlocked and swung open. Roary stood there, eyes wild.

‘Jesus Christ!’

Amos tried to force his way past Roary. Roary grabbed him by the arms and heaved him backwards, sending him sprawling in the dirt. He came down the stairs and stood over him, his fists by his side, rigid.

‘Fuck off! Just fuck off out of here!’

Roary turned to go back into the building. Amos scrambled to his feet and grasped Roary’s trousers. Roary tried to shake him loose.

‘Jesus, what are you doing?’

‘Let me speak to him!’ Amos pleaded, a tear coming down his cheek. ‘Please, let me talk to him!’

With a final push Roary freed himself from Amos’ grasp. Amos was left on all fours, staring up at him in anguish.

‘You’ve got to let me talk to him! I need to know!’

‘Know what? Huh? Don’t you think you’ve done enough!’

Amos made another lunge at Roary’s leg, but this time the police officer stepped out of the way. Amos’ head slumped, red dirt sticking to his face. Roary panted, leaned against the doorway.
'This is all your fault, you know that?’ he hissed. ‘If you’d left it well alone, everything would have been fine. You fucking couldn’t help yourself!’

‘I couldn’t!’ Amos pleaded. ‘Paul deserved better, you know that better than anyone!’

‘Roary? Amos?’

Mel had come up the drive, her hair askew. She looked at Roary slumped against the building wall, Amos sprawled on the ground.

‘What’s going on?’

‘Just go home, Mel, nothing to see here, I’ll deal with this.’

Mel stepped forward. ‘What have you done?’

‘Just go home!’ Roary yelled, stopping Mel in her tracks. ‘I’ll deal with this, I said! Just go home and I’ll speak to you in the morning!’

Mel froze, her expression a mixture of shock and bewilderment, before her eyes went hard. She spun on her heel and stormed back the way she came.

Roary stepped forward and grabbed Amos by the shirt, half-dragging him to the open door.

‘Get inside!’ he growled and pushed Amos inside before he slammed the door shut and leaned against it, staring at the ceiling.

‘God knows what she’s going to be telling people about that little scene. Amos, you really know how to fuck things up, don’t you?’

‘Amos?’ a broken voice echoed from up the darkened hallway. The light was on in Paul’s office.

Amos and Roary both looked in that direction. Amos dragged himself off the floor.

‘Don’t you fucking dare mate, I’m fucking warning you.’

Amos glanced at him before walking towards Paul’s office. Roary stormed after him.

Amos stepped into the room. Jackie was hunched over on the seat infront of the desk, looking up from his splayed hands that lay in his lap. He continued to sob.

‘Oh Jesus, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry…’

The stench of whisky flowed off him. Amos lunged at him.
‘Why did you kill him? Why?’

Jackie’s eyes flared, animalistic, and shoved Amos away. Roary grabbed him and shoved him up against the wall.

‘You’ve gone too far, mate!’

‘Me?’ Amos said, wild eyed. ‘I didn’t kill anyone!’

‘I thought he wasn’t home!’ Jackie spat, saliva flying. ‘His dogs weren;t in the yard. It was just a warning!’

‘ Shut up!’ Roary barked. ‘You don’t owe him fucking nothing!’

Amos tried to shrug out of Roary’s grip but to no avail.

‘I know about Paul! I know you killed him!’

Jackie started, looked up at Amos. Roary reared back and punched Amos in the stomach. Amos crumpled to the floor with a sigh. Roary staggered back, bumping into the desk.

‘I said shut yer fucking mouth!’ he whispered.

Jackie looked back at Roary. ‘But Pete said that he saw me! He didn’t…’ He shook his head wildly. ‘I didn’t kill Paul, fuck’s sake! Why would I kill him? He was my mate!’

‘Just shut up…’ Roary muttered, his eyes closed, his shoulders hunched.

‘Tracker said he heard the gun shot up at Red Bend and then saw you holding him. Why else would you do what you did!’

‘It was meant to be a warning!’ Jackie hiccupped, holding back another sob. ‘I’m sorry it…I was drunk…’

‘What?’

‘A warning!’ Jackie blurted. ‘To keep his mouth shut, to push him out of town! No one was supposed to know that he shot himself!’

A strangled sound came out of Jackie’s mouth. Roary sagged into the desk chair.

‘Fuck.’

Amos stared at the both of them. Silence permeated the room.

‘But…you were hunting…’
'We weren’t hunting,’ Jackie murmured. ‘No one was there except for me and Paul.’

‘But what about Curt? Pete?’

‘That was his idea,’ Jackie shifted his head in Roary’s direction.

‘Jackie!’ Roary warned half-heartedly. The fire of only moments ago had bled out of him.

‘Pete usually shoots on Sundays, but he was with his kids. No one knew he was home, so…’

‘What about Curt? Why him?’

‘Because he’s a little shit,’ Roary spat.

‘Shut the fuck up!’ Jackie fired back. They stared at each other, before Roary retreated back into himself once more.

‘Paul and Roary had touched him up the night before, over some drugs stuff.’

‘He was dealing marijuana at the Trans,’ Roary murmured.

‘We convinced him to copping to being out there and pulling the trigger so he didn’t get another stint.’

Amos mulled this over. ‘So…’

‘After he left Pete’s place the Saturday night, leaving you there, he apparently went round to the Brolga. To see Amber.’

‘You don’t have to do this…’ Roary said, his voice barely discernible.

‘They had words. What about I’m not sure, but she turned him back. I know that much because of Noel.’

‘Noel knew too?’

‘No! He heard a commotion and came out of his room, reckons he didn’t see anyone but found Amber crying.’

‘The abortion…’

‘What?’ Jackie and Roary asked almost simultaneously.

‘Amber told me the other night. She had an abortion not too long ago. It was his, and she didn’t tell him.’
They both sat in silence, stewing. ‘Fuck,’ Roary muttered.

‘He turned up on Sunday wrecked, like fucking shattered. But I was pretty hung too, so I didn’t notice. Then after the match he saw her, but she took off and wouldn’t have a bar of him. So he jumped in his car and lit off out of there.

‘I didn’t like how he looked. He was…wild. Out of control. Not like Paul at all. So I tore off after him.’

A sound from above them stopped Jackie. A tap. Then another. Soon there was a constant stream of tapping on the corrugated iron roof. Roary laughed, a hollow, mirthless sound.

‘No fucking way.’

The rain opened up, a deafening roar. Jackie wasn’t to be deterred. He raised his voice and spoke quickly, a purge.

‘He headed straight for Norville’s, and I had no fucking idea what was up. He didn’t have his lights on, so it couldn’t have been an emergency… He had to of seen my lights as we turned off the highway, but he kept on drivin and swervin. He didn’t stop until he got to Red Bend. I thought he might have been lookin for something, but he never slowed. I saw him go to the back of the cruiser, and I…I just knew.’

Jackie began to weep again. ‘He just stood there. Tall and upright, like he was standing to attention. I called out to him, and he said nothin. Didn’t even look my way.’

Amos slid down the wall to lie on the carpet, doubled over. A peal of thunder cracked overhead, and the lights dimmed before coming back on again.

Banging. The three of them looked up, rabbits in headlights. It was coming from the front door. The beating was growing in intensity.

Roary stood up. ‘You’ve gotta get out of here.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Jackie mumbled into his chest.

Roary looked over at him then marched to Amos. ‘Get up.’

Amos struggled to his feet. All life had gone out of his limbs. He stumbled like a new-born foal. Roary pushed him out of the office and down the hallway.

‘I’m sorry!’ Jackie hollered after them.

They got to the back door. Roary turned to Amos.
‘Get out, go home. No one else can see you, or right? Fix up whatever you need to do, then get. And never come back.’

He opneded the door, shoved Amos out, and closed it again. Amos was left in the rain, immediately soaked through.
SEVENTY ONE

Amos stirred. He could hear the swoosh of a passing car as its tyres moved along wet asphalt. He opened his eyes. The room was swathed in shadows.

There was a knock at the door. Amos groaned and sat up. The sheets were damp. He looked down. He still had his clothes on from the night before, dank from the rain. He shivered, holding a hand to his temple.

He opened the door. Tom stood there, his hat held with both hands to his chest, pensive. Tom painted on a smile.

‘Morning Amos!’ he said cheerily.

Amos peered past him towards the sky. Cloud covered the expanse, an almost forgotten sight.

‘What time is it?’ His voice croaky from sleep and alcohol.

‘I know, it’s early.’ Tom hesitated. ‘Is it OK to come inside for a moment?’

Amos nodded, and stood aside as Tom moved in, closing the door behind them.

The kitchen was in disarray. Tom surveyed the beer bottles, unwashed plates and silverware.

‘Mate…’ he murmured. Amos quickly made to clear away some of the mess off the kitchen table, knocking over a bottle in the process. It rattled, rolling towards the edge of the table. Tom leant forward and righted it before it could make any further damage.

‘How about we move out to the back?

Amos scratched his head and shrugged. ‘OK. It’s not much better.’

They moved to the back porch. Tom gently lowered himself into Paul’s deckchair with a sigh. Amos slumped into the one opposite. They both looked out over the unkempt lawn to the fence, the railway, the barrenness beyond. A glimmer of sunlight skirted a tear in the clouds, yet other than offering a sliver of light, it was held at bay.

‘There’s more coming. Earlier than normal.’

Amos nodded, continuing to look out into the nothingness.

Tom cleared his throat. ‘I spoke to _____ last night.’

Amos tucked his chin to his chest, nodded slightly.
‘Messy business.’

‘Mmm.’

‘The fire didn’t spread much further from the house. The rain made sure of that. Lucky too, it was a real rager.’

Amos said nothing.

‘Jackie,’ Tom whispered a mirthless laugh. ‘He’s a passionate bloke. Really looks out for his mates.’

‘Right.’

‘Well and truly went over the line this time though. I’m not sure there is much that anyone can do to…’

‘Why are you here?’ Amos interrupted, still looking anywhere other than at Tom. Tom sighed.

‘Before all the hullaballoo, _____ Goodwin called me. They’re coming out in the next couple days to settle things. The house.’

Tom paused. The weight of the unspoken hovered between them. He shifted in his chair to face Amos.

‘Look at me, son.’

Amos looked down at his idle hands, then glanced up at Tom.

‘Things aren’t real pleasant around here, that goes without saying. There has been a lot of grief. The town is hurtin, real bad.’

He paused again. Amos refused to say anything. Tom sighed again.

‘It might be best if you head on home. Forget about this place.’

Amos’ eyes widened a touch. ‘Forget about Paul?’

Tom shook his head, disappointed. ‘You know that isn’t what I mean! No one is going to be able to do that, or ask you to either.’

Amos nodded, picked at the canvas on the arm of the chair.
‘This isn’t the first rough patch I have seen here in Brolga,’ Tom said quietly. ‘Probably won’t be the last. Death has a way of affecting everyone here, regardless of who or what has passed on.’

He looked down at his gnarled hands gripping his hat in his lap. ‘Some time ago, there was a fella that lived down the way on _______ Street. Young bloke, early thirties I think. Did a bit of work out at the yards when needed. Mostly shearing though. There was still a lot of work for a shearer even then. He used to bang around a lot with Leo, drinking and fighting down at the King’s Cross. Usual stuff, you know.

‘He had a young wife and boy. She had worked at _____’s Habedashery when they first came to town, but after the boy was born she stayed at home. I can’t say I know if she had any friends before she had her boy, but not many people went round there after. Certainly no one claimed to after.’

Tom paused. ‘After what?’ Amos asked.

‘We all knew he beat her. There was often a racket coming out of that house. But he was an honest worker, and besides, that business had carried on here and there over the years around here. You just let them sort things out. It was theirs to sort out.

‘One night there was a hell of a commotion. The young fella was out on the street, yelling blue murder. All the dogs started up, half the town could hear him raving on. It was a particularly sticky year that one, so even in the middle of the night just standin raised a sweat. A couple people came over to calm him down, and he was having none of it. Eventually the police arrived. Ole Sgt. Mick Twoomey. Good fella. Retired not long after, moved to Tewantin. Died a couple years back. He had a way about him, he could talk anybody down. He had the young fella sitting on the front steps, his head in his hands.

‘I spoke to Mick before he left. He said he found her sprawled on the bathroom floor. She had bruised on her, some old, some new. He had come home fuelled up and they had it on, and knocked her one that sent her into the basin, hitting her head. He told me that he had seen much more horrific things in his time – heck, the amount of cuts and amputations that would spring up during shearing season isn’t pretty, let alone the car accidents we get from time to time – but there was a way that her body lay crumpled on that floor that really stuck with him. He turned around and there was the boy, in flannel pajamas even in that heat, hair stuck to his forehead, staring at his dead mother. He said it was the worst thing in the world.’

‘What happened?’ Amos whispered.
‘Well, they took him into Longreach where he got done for manslaughter. From all reports he was a shell of a man. Went away for five years, I think. Never heard from again.’

‘The boy?’ Amos’ voice a whisper.

‘He was taken away. Neither of them had family, as far as anyone knew at least.’ Tom murmured, leaning forward slightly, ‘There is no denying that it was a terrible thing to have happened. The thing is, in that house that poor little boy had no hope. And now…’ The thought was left to dangle in the air.

‘The house went on the market, but other than a couple of families who came out here for this or that, it’s never really been lived in. ‘Why don’t they just knock it down? The house?’

Tom looked at him with rheumy eyes. ‘Maybe there was a time when that might have happened. No one thinks it’s haunted or anything daft like that. There are enough ghosts out here without making up ones. No, it just got so no one ever looked at the house. It just sits there, and now no one even pays any mind to it. It just…doesn’t exist.’

Tom sagged in his seat, looking down at his hat once more, before gently placing it on his head.

‘Why did you tell me that just now?’ Amos said.

Tom sat on the edge of the deckchair, made to stand, then paused and looked at Amos.

‘I’m sorry that things panned out the way they have, Amos. We all are. But whatever it is that you’re chasing, it’s not out here. You’re either of the land around here, or you’re not. And those that aren’t, well they either stay or they go.’ He nodded. ‘It’s time to head home.’

They stood as one, facing each other. Tom stuck out his hand, and Amos reciprocated.

‘It was a pleasure kid,’ Tom said. He offered a resigned smile before he dropped Amos’ hand and shuffled to the stairs that lead to the driveway. Without turning around he offered a wave before he walked around the corner of the house and disappeared.

Amos stepped back inside. He patted down his pockets, pulling out a papier maiche rectangle that resembled the envelope Roary had passed him the night before. He took it into the kitchen and stood over the stove. He turned on one of the hobs, waiting for the _______ to tick over before it sparked and a blue flame sprung up. He held the letter above the flame, feeling the heat rising up to kiss his fingers. He ran the letter back and forth across the wave of heat for a few seconds, his hand shaking, before he dipped a corner into the flame. It took a few seconds for the flames to take purchase, then it caught. Amos watched as the flame
crackled, fighting the dampness to eat up the letter. He let it dangle before his eyes until the flames reached his fingertips before he dropped it into the sink. With the letter still smouldering, he walked over to the telephone, picked up the receiver and dialled a number.

‘I’m coming home.’
Amos walked into the Trans, slinging his bags after him. The usual array of barflies held their positions at the bar, their own version of communal pews. A smattering of conversation took place at the far end, Bongo holding his usual centre stage. The jukebox lay dormant in the corner.

The men looked up as Amos dropped his bags at his feet and leaned on the bar. The conversation died away. Bongo looked over, leaned back to take in the cluster of bags that now milled at Amos’ feet. He sported the last remnants of a black eye, suiting his battered features. He smirked, although his customary aggression seemed momentarily curbed.

‘You off somewhere?’ he rumbled.

Amos looked down at the bar and nodded, refusing to make eye contact. Bongo turned back to his disciples.

‘About fuckin time.’

The whine of the hinges of the bathroom squalled, and Leo emerged. As he walked around the bar, he saw Amos and his face lit up. Ignoring the others, he came and leant on the bar next to Amos.

‘Amos! Coming to drink with the heathens?’

Amos gave a small smile. ‘One last drink.’ He toed the bags on the floor. ‘For the road.’

Leo glanced down, and his face fell. ‘Shit, that’s no good!’ He rifled through his top pocket, fishing out tobacco and rolling papers. ‘I thought you might have been a fixture. Lavinia, darl, a couple beers – for the road.’

Lavinia came through the kitchen door and stopped, the prepared smile dropping from her face. She quickly painted another on and moved to the taps.

‘For you Leo, anything.’

Leo chuckled. ‘Ah, you’re my sweetheart.’ He nudged Amos. ‘What would I do without her?’

Amos smirked and looked down at the ratty bar mat.

Lavinia brought two beers over and placed them down. ‘Specially made!’
She glanced at Amos before moving away, behind the taps.

‘Ah, thanks love,’ Leo said. He picked up one of the glasses and placed it in front of Amos.
‘Cheers.’

‘Cheers,’ Amos murmured and brought the glass to his lips.

Bongo peered over, jutting his chin towards Amos for Lavinia’s benefit, his eyes dark. ‘He’s leavin. Aren’t ya?’

Leo sighed. ‘Fucking give it a rest, will ya?’

Bongo’s eyes widened in mock apology. ‘I was just sayin?’

Lavinia looked at Amos, feigning disinterest. ‘Leaving?’

Amos gave a small nod. ‘Yeah.’

Lavinia nodded and looked quickly down, busyng herself with a dish cloth. ‘Fair enough.’
She walked quickly back out to the kitchen.

Leo sighed. ‘She likes you.’

Amos coughed, a dirisive laugh. ‘I’m not sure about that.’

Leo tut-tutted as he finished rolling a cigarette. ‘You’re tellin me that you’re dumber than you look?’ He sighed again, placed the drooping cigarette to his lips. ‘Kids.’

Amos turned to Leo. ‘I spoke to Tom yesterday.’

Leo raised his bushy eyebrows as he lit the cigarette and inhaled. ‘Yeah? What did that ol wily bastard have to say for himself?’

‘He told me about the house on ______ Street.’

Leo looked at Amos through a haze of exhaled smoke. ‘Did he now?’ he said slowly.

‘Yeah.’ Amos paused. ‘I just wanted to say…sorry. About all that.’

‘Hey?’

‘Just…you know…’ Amos fidgeted, swirled the beer in his glass.

Leo harrumphed. ‘That was a long time ago, son. A long, long time ago. Haven’t thought about it in years.’ He took a drink from his glass – half the beer disappeared.
‘Do you know what happened?’

‘To him?’ Leo burped quietly. ‘Nah. Prolly a good thing too.’

Amos nodded and sipped his beer. Leo unched over the bar for a moment.

‘Hell of a thing last night.’

Amos nodded.

‘Have you been down the saleyards?’

Amos shook his head.

‘Flooded. Haven’t seen that amount of water jus lyin around in years!’ Leo cackled tiredly, pulling on the cigarette.

Amos tried to smile. ‘Maybe I’ll see some brolgas in Brolga before I go.’

Leo looked at him. ‘There haven’t been any of them here for years. Brolga’ll be washed away before they come back.’

‘Yeah, guess so,’ Amos murmured. He put the beer down. ‘Ill be back in a minute.’

Amos moved around the bar and through the kitchen door. It was a dingy area of neglected steel surfaces and fat-flecked fryers. Lavinia leaned against a counter, smoking. She looked up, then blew a jet of smoke into the air, staring at him with down turned eyes.

‘So.’

Amos jammed his hands in his pockets and stepped through the doorway.

‘I was always going to be leaving…’

Lavinia dragged her hand through the air, a sharp gesture that stopped him in his tracks.

‘Don’t, OK? Just…don’t.’

Amos nodded and looked down, rocking on his heels. He took another step forward.

‘Did you find what you were looking for?’

Amos looked at Lavinia. Her face struggled to stay impassive. She looked away and took another drag before looking back at him.

Amos shrugged. ‘I’m not really sure what I was expecting to find. Maybe I wasn’t really looking for anything.’
He looked back down at his feet.

‘Pretty fucked.’

Amos looked at Lavinia, her arm crooked, the cigarette smoke wafting in front of her. Her other hand lay anchored on the corner of the stainless steel bench. She suddenly laughed, a bark that echoed in the small space.

‘Brolga knows how to really put on a show!’

‘I just wanted to say thank you.’ Amos paused. ‘For everything. And… it isn’t easy.’

‘What isn’t?’

‘Leaving. Here. Anything. None of it is easy.’ He pulled his hands out of his pocket, placed a folded scrap of paper on the bench and slid it between them. ‘But if you do – leave – let me know.’

Amos paused before he turned and walked out of the kitchen. Leo sat at a stool, his beer empty. Amos picked up his half-full glass and placed it in front of him, along with a small pile of coins.

‘Here you are Leo. Thanks for everything.’

Leo looked up at Amos. ‘Hey now, don’t be doin that? I didn do anything!’

Leo went to give the change back, but Amos stayed his hand. ‘If you see Curt, buy him a beer, say it was from me. Make sure you buy yourself one first.’

He bent over and picked up his bags, walked towards the door. Leo called out after him.

‘See you round?’

Amos turned and smiled. ‘See you round.’
SEVENTY THREE

Amos stepped up onto the bus. The _____ air hit him like a sledgehammer – the rain had not abated the oppressive air of heat. He shuffled down the aisle and took a seat. He heard the hydraulic hiss of the door as the driver revved the engines.

He looked down at the footpath outside the Transcontinental. A shadow leant in the doorway, a flash of red. He smiled, hesitantly offered a wave. The shadow hovered for a moment before moving back inside.

The bus rumbled down the main street and turned left, towards Jonnop’s Roadhouse. The statue of the two brolgas with their necks entwined now lay marooned, isolated by a moat of brown dusty water. Two boys rode through the puddles on the BMXs. The front lawns, the weatherboard shacks, hadn’t changed despite the torrential downpour. In fact, much of the rain had already dissipated, and other than the few _____ of water that clung desperately to divots in the roughly paved road and the angry, pregnant clouds that hung low to the horizon in the west, it was as if it hadn’t rained at all.

The bus turned right, the true exit. Amos craned his neck back to look at Jonnop’s Roadhouse. The _____ tree stood forlornly at the edge of Brolga, the outpost that looked out on the endless expanse of red dirt. He stared beyond and could make out the smudge of the hut, an abandoned relic of a history that no one cared for, ancient nor modern. A shadow of movement caught his eye and brought his attention back to the _____ . Some dogs slunk in the shade of the tree, circling a crouched figure. He half sat up to try to get a better look, but the bus passed by, and the building blocked out the _____.

Amos sat back down. He put his forehead against the glass. A solitary fork of lightning snuck down to earth in the far south west. He closed his eyes and wept.