

Dust Cycle

*And I hear the clang of their leader crying.
To a lagging mate in the rearward flying...*

W*hen the world changed, people*

were different. Towns closed, cities were boarded up, communities abandoned, their governments collapsed. They seemed to have no qualms that were obvious to you or me about walking away from what they called a useless pile of rubbish, and never looking back.

Mother Nature? Hah! Who knows how many hearts she could rip out? She never got tired of it. Who knows where on Earth you would find your heart again? People on the road called her the Mother Catastrophe of flood, fire, drought and blizzard. These were the four seasons which she threw around the world whenever she liked.

In every neck of the woods people walked in the imagination of doomsayers and talked the language of extinction.

They talked about surviving a continuous dust storm under the old rain shadow, or they talked about living out the best part of their lives with floods lapping around their bellies; or they talked about tsunamis and dealing with nuclear fallout on their shores and fields forever. Elsewhere on the planet, people didn't talk much at all while crawling through blizzards to save themselves from being buried alive in snow. You could bet your life on it – they hardly talked while all around the world governments fell as

quickly as they rose in one extinction event after another. You be the judge. Believe it or not.

Ignis Fatuus = Foolish Fire. That's you Oblivion! You're just like that old Rip Van Winkle fella of the fairytale time. They were always calling out to him: 'Wake up coma man.' That man who slept like a log, more than an old dog, and kept on sleeping for so many years that when he woke up and went home, his house was gone – just scrub there, and nobody knew who he was anymore. He was empty – like a mystery man. Nobody remembered him. He could have been anyone. They kept poking him in his bony ribs wanting to know, 'Who do you reckon you are?', what his name was, and why he kept saying that his house had disappeared and all that. It is very hard to lose a house. Why would anyone want to do that? So bloody good job. Serves him right. You should always know where to find your home.

'It was here! It was here!' That was what the Rip Van Winkle man kept saying. He was just like you for making up stories like that, Oblivion. Nobody liked him either.

Some say that there was an accident before the drought. A little girl was lost. She had fallen into the deep underground bowel of a giant eucalyptus tree. In a silent world, the girl slept for a very long time among the tree's huge woven roots. Everyone had forgotten that she even existed – although, apparently, that did not take long.

Locked in the world of sleep, only the little girl's fingers were constantly moving, in slow swirls like music. She was writing stanzas in ancient symbols wherever she could touch – on the palms of her hands, and all over the tree root's dust-covered surfaces. Whatever she was writing, dredged from the soup of primordial memory in these ancient lands, it was either the oldest language coming to birth again instinctively, or through some strange coincidence, the

fingers of the unconscious child forming words that resembled the twittering of bird song speaking about the daylight: but the little girl could not understand the old ghost language of warbling and chortling remembered by the ancient river gum.

Her fingers traced the movements of the ghost language to write about the dead trees scattered through the swamp, where *dikili* ghost gums old as the hills once grew next to a deepwater lake fed by an old spring-spirit relative, until they had all slowly died. This happened during the massive sand storms that cursed the place after the arrival of the strangers from the sea. Their voices were heard arching across the heavy waves in the middle of the night. All their shouting ended up on ribbons of salt mist that went idling from the sea along an ancient breezeway – travelling with sand flies and tumbling bats through kilometres of inlet, along a serpentine track, dumped where it could dig into the resting place of the old story that lived inside the ancestral people of the lake.

The beetles blanketing the lake shook the night in a millisecond that shattered its surface, like precious old Venetian glass crashing onto a pavement. The roar of those harsh-sounding voices from the sea startled the ghosts which rose from beneath the lake's water – from hearing those men calling out – *half past midnight, half past two*, echoing from inside several brackets of reeds.

Sleepy children from the little dwellings around the lake heard voices speaking from large leafy fields of waterlilies. They felt words chasing after them, surrounding their feet like rope trying to pull them back as they ran away. Anyone daring to look back into the lake's echoes heard voices like dogs barking out of the mouths of fish skimming across the surface as they chased after the hordes of mosquitoes – *around four o'clock*.

Those echoes of voices which originated far out at sea were coming from the Armed Forces men involved in a large-scale

sweep-up of the ocean's salty junk, floating about, bobbing and buoyant across the horizon.

The men from the Army were taunting these haunts of ghosts and outlaws to surrender themselves by dawn because they shouted: *Grab your liberation! Freedom! Called ghosts, you what?* It was a tragic demand to abandoned steel, planks of timber, brass lanterns and fittings, whose ghost sailors were unable to respond to military voices. But surprisingly, the empty wreckage obeyed. Vessel after vessel crawling out from behind the waves gleamed with the light of the stars dancing with the moonlight.

A parade of tugs towing the collected ruins churned across the breakers and headed towards land, and while the voices giving orders rose and fell, the flotilla began motoring through the deepwater channel towards the vast lake where the caretakers lived – the Aboriginal people who were responsible for this land. Whatever the men from the Army had been saying to each other on that night of bringing the junk to the lake was quickly forgotten, since around here, the words of strangers meant nothing.

Up to that point in time, the people of the lake had felt secluded in their isolation, even invisible to the outside world. They were more interested in singing in praise to the ancient spirits for the seasons lived alongside eels, fresh-water mussels, turtles and other aquatic life. Now they were truly startled by voices that resembled angry animals fighting over a few scraps of food.

It was freakish, yet they were frightened for no reason except instinct, from having their invisibility exposed by a simple little thing – lit up in the night as though it was the middle of the day by the beams from the Army's high-powered search lights swivelling on the tug boats – eyeballing along the shoreline for witnesses.

Their instinct for invisibility caused the entire population to slink away from its homes and slip into the bush, but in this inglorious fleeing for safety, something more sensational was

noticed by one of these so-called *nouveau-journalists* of the event.

Somebody had eye-witnessed the lake bubbling from tug boats mix-mastering the water with their propellers, whisking it like a spritzer and putrefying all the dead ancient things rising to the surface, spraying it around like the smell of eternity. No wonder the local people, the traditional owners and all that, were too frightened to go back to the lake anymore. They had heard stories – bad stories about what happened to anyone who went back there.

Oblivia's fingers kept on writing the swirl language over the dust that fell on what the tree had witnessed in its lifetime, and the history of the stories that continued to be told by the locals about the years of fighting like a bunch of battle-axes – for umpteen friggen decades, without success, to get back what was theirs in the first place, and of years later again before these old families quit their tourism of other peoples' lands by saying they had had enough of wandering around homelessly for years worse than a pack of overseas gypsies, and returned to their rightful place of belonging, their ancestral domain.

Then, to top it off, they had no sooner set foot on the place, when they were told that Australians now recognised the law of Native Title after two plus centuries of illegal occupation, but unfortunately, on the day that they had left their land, their Native Title had been lost irredeemably and disappeared from the face of the planet.

The first thing they saw on their arrival at the lake that no longer belonged to them was the audacity of the floating junk. Even the tugboats had been left there to rot unfettered and untethered. Undeterred, the traditional owners ignored the view, and acted as though the lake was still the same tranquil place that it had always been from time *immemorial*, before the day that their people had been frightened away.

They took up their lives with the eyesore view of rust amongst

the lilies, and very soon, everyone felt as though they had never left. But, it was strange what a view can do to how people think. The rotting junk clung to its secrets and in turn, the local people who did not really know what they were staring at or why the junk was staring back at them, also became secretive.

They wished and dreamed for this emotional eyesore to be removed and gone from their lands forever. It was foreign history sinking there that could not be allowed to rot into the sacredness of the ground. Their conscience flatly refused to have junk buried among the ancestral spirits.

These were really stubborn people sticking to the earth of the ancestors, even though they knew well enough that the contaminated lake caused bellyaches, having to eye each cup of tainted water they drank from the lake, but drinking it anyway.

There was not much choice about pure and pristine anymore. It was no good thinking about contaminated water leading to deformity in their culture for an eternity.

These people were hardened to the legendary stuff of fortune and ill fortune. They saw many children being born without any evidence of contamination. All children in living memory of the lake people's history, and regardless of the Army intervening in their parenthood, were deeply loved by their families, until this girl came along who was so different to any child ever born in their world, it made everyone think about why Oblivia had been born at all after this dumb girl was dragged out of the eucalyptus tree by old Bella Donna after years – a decade of being missing – and who disowned her people by acting as though she had by-passed human history, by being directly descended from their ancestral tree. Time would tell if this was true or false. Who was anyone to judge anything?

The junk on the lake was used as regular target practice for bombs falling from the warplanes that appeared unpredictably,

flying low across the water from time to time throughout the year. Surprised at first, the local owners soon realised that their homeland was really a secret locality for Defence Force scheduled training manoeuvres. What a blast was that? Things getting blown up, up and down, in the isolated northern part of the nation.

Only heaven knows, there were millions of people throughout the world who either offered pigs as sacrifices to their Gods, or flowers, or the first grain of the new season's crop. There were even others who offered their own people to the Gods. Now the day had come when modern man had become the new face of God, and simply sacrificed the whole Earth. The swamp locals were not experiencing any terrific friendship with this new God. It was hell to pay to be living the warfare of modernity like dogs fighting over the lineage of progress against their own quiet whorls of time. Well! That just about summed up the lake people, sitting for all times in one place.

These were anti-halcyon times for the lake people, where the same old festering drains and degraded lands were struck hard and fast by a string of bad luck, which all in all, amounts to the same thing happening with the surprise of being struck once, or twice, or a hundred more times as though it were a chosen place.

Sand storms continued pouring over the lake and turned it into a swamp. The sand flew about in this freak weather until it banked up into a mountain with a pointy peak reaching into the sky. The mountain blocked the channel leading from the sea to the swamp.

Then an elder, a healer for the country arrived to examine the devastation, which he called, *a total ugly bitch of an annihilation*. He turned up like a bogeyman. A *kadawala*. *Dadarrba-barri nyulu jalwa-kudulu*. He claimed that he was feeling pain in his heavy heart. Turns up from nowhere like an aeroplane. *Bala-kanyi nyulu*.

He just flies where he wants to. This old *wululuku* was an Aboriginal man with an Asian heritage, the kind of person all sorts of people liked to call a half caste, yellow fella, or *mixed blood urban* Aboriginal. Half caste. Thinking! Thinking! Mixture. Mixed up. Not straight this or that. Extract! Lost purity. Not purely trustworthy. Exactly! No matter! He liked to call people a lot of names too, but he called himself the Harbour Master. He favoured calling himself by his own *worldly acquired* bona fides: a bony man with sun-darkened brown skin and sunglasses, a slack shaver with stubbly growth on his face – someone who resembled Mick Jagger. Someone with special healing powers who travelled anywhere he was needed, just by thinking himself into a sick person's mind. His was *wanami*, like fuel, and *wakubaji* – goes like anything. He started to live like a *persona non grata* sitting up there like a motionless exile on the sand mountain's summit. Japanese type. Something *sage-guru-expert* turnout. He became simple, like a snail-eating dune hermit. Somebody short on detail about what else he was going to feed himself with, and no tap water either to boot. Still, only kings live above everyone else, watching everybody else like this. So, maybe, he was a bit of a king too.

Oblivia remembered thinking that dust had a way of displacing destiny the first time she saw a swan. A red ghost was rolling in the sky when a lone, grey-black swan suddenly appeared at lunchtime over the riparian rook of this northern world. General swamp people sitting around as slack as you please, were shovelling freshly sautéed fish fillets into their mouths when they heard the strange song of the swan. The whole place went silent. Nobody said a word. Everyone stopped eating. Half-raised forks froze mid-stream above the dinner plates. The dinner went cold while everyone stared at the first swan ever seen on this country. Only their thoughts wild with noise were asking why this strange bird stilted the heat of the

day with song where there was no song for swans. The locals asked the storming almighty red dust spirit relation, *What's that bro?*

In all of this vast quietness where the summer sun was warming the dust spirit's mind, the swan looked like a paragon of anxious premonitions, rather than the arrival of a miracle for saving the world. Seeing the huge bird flying through the common dusty day like this, disturbed whatever peace of mind the stick-like Oblivia possessed. Everyone watched a swan's feather float down from the sky and land on her head. Oblivia's skin instantly turned to a darker shade of red-brown. What about her frizzy hair then? Well! There was no change in that. It was always sprayed out in fright. *Ngirriki!* Messy! Always looking like tossed winter straw that needed rope to tie it down. She was *psychological. Warraku.* Mad. Even madder than ever. That was the most noticeable change. She did what was expected. She nose-dived like a pitchfork into the unbearable, through broiling dust vats, to countless flashbacks of what was over-the-top and dangerous. Everything in her mind became mucked up. This is the kind of harm the accumulated experience of an exile will do to you, to anyone who believes that they had slept away half their life in the bowel of a eucalyptus tree. Well! Utopian dreaming was either too much or too little, but at least she recognised that the swan was an exile too.

Suddenly, the swan dropped down from the sky, flew low over the swamp, almost touching the water, just slow enough to have a closer look at the girl. The sight of the swan's cold eye staring straight into hers, made the girl feel exposed, hunted and found, while all those who had suddenly stopped eating fish, watched this big black thing look straight at the only person that nobody had ever bothered having a close look at. Her breathing went AWOL while her mind stitched row after row of fretting to strangle her breath: *What are they thinking about me now? What did the swan have to single me out for and not anyone else standing around? What kind of*

premonition is this? Heart-thump thinking was really tricky for her. She feasted on a plague of *outsidedness*. It was always better never to have to think about what other people thought of her.

It was through this narrow prism of viewing something strange and unfamiliar, that the girl decided the swan wasn't an ordinary swan and had not been waylaid from its determined path. She knew as a fact that the swan had been banished from wherever it should be singing its stories and was searching for its soul in her.

The black swan continued travelling low, then flew upwards with its long neck stretched taut, as though it was being pulled away by invisible strings as fine as a spider's web held in its beak. She saw a troupe of frost-face monkeys holding the strings at the other end of the world. They were riding on a herd of reindeer crushing through ice particles in those faraway skies. Those taut strands of string twanged the chords of swan music called the *Hansdhwani* that the old gypsy woman Bella Donna would play on her swan-bone flute while you could watch the blood flowing to the pulse of the music through the old white lady's translucent skin. It was the swan raga the girl heard now coming down from the sky, the music of migratory travelling cycles, of unravelling and intensifying, of flying over the highest snow-capped mountains, along the rivers of Gods and Goddesses, crossing seas with spanned wings pulsing to the rhythm of relaxed heartbeats.

This was when the girl realised that she could hear the winnowing wings from other swans coming from far away. Their murmurings to one another were like angels whispering from the heavens. She wondered where they were coming from as they entered her dreams in this country, this first time she saw a swan. She could not have known anything of how long it had taken the huge black birds to make the migratory flight from so far away, to where they had no storyline for taking them back.

The swans had become gypsies, searching the deserts for vast

sheets of storm water soaking the centuries-old dried lakes when their own habitats had dried from prolonged drought. They had become nomads, migratory like the white swans of the northern world, with their established seasonal routes taking them back and forth, but unlike them, the black swans were following the rainwaters of cyclones deeper and deeper into the continent.

Bevies of swans crossed the man-made catchments and cubby dams on pastoral lands, and flew down to the tailing dams of mines, and the sewerage ponds of inland towns, where story after story was laid in the earth again before the dust rose, and on they went, forging into territory that had been previously unknown to these southern birds except perhaps, for their ancestors of long ago, when great flocks might have travelled their law stories over the land through many parts of the continent. The local people thought, *They must have become the old gypsy woman's swans!*

So it was really true. The old *badibadi* woman had always said she could call swans, but it was a white swan she wanted most of all, not these black ones. Bella Donna and the girl that she had adopted after years of searching for her and pulling her out of a hollow in the trunk of a tree, lived together on one of the old rusty hulks stuck out there in the middle of the swamp where the black swan was flying. The girl remembered how the old woman was always talking about how she owed her life to a swan. Telling Olivia about how much she missed seeing the swans from her world. It was a foreigner's *Dreaming* she had.

She came beginning of dust time, some of the old dust-covered people claimed, remembering the drought and the turtles that had lived there for thousands of years crawling away into the bush to die. They had studied her bones that could be clearly seen under her thin translucent skin. This they claimed was caused from eating too much fish from her life at sea, and said that Bella

Donna was a very good example of how other people were always fiddling around with their laws. These were people old enough to still remember things about the rest of the world, whereas most of the younger generations with a gutful of their own wars to fight were not interested in thinking any further afield than to the boundary of the swamp. All of these big law people thought tribal people across the world would be doing the same, and much like themselves, could also tell you about the consequences of breaking the laws of nature by trespassing on other people's land. They were very big on the law stories about the natural world.

The girl was full of the old woman's stories about swans before she had seen one, and even if words did not pass through her lips, she would imitate Bella Donna's old European accent in her mind: *I have seen swans all my life. I have watched them in many different countries myself. Some of them have big wings like the Trumpeter Swan of North America, and when the dust smudges the fresh breath of these guardian angels, they navigate through the never-ending dust storms by correcting their bearings and flying higher in the sky, from where they glide like Whistling Swans whistling softly to each other, then beating their wings harder they fly away. I know because I am the storyteller of the swans.*

Where I came from, whole herds of deer were left standing like statues of yellow ice while blizzards stormed. Mute Swans sheltered in ice-covered reeds. The rich people were flying off in armadas of planes like packs of migratory birds. The poverty people like myself had to walk herdlike, cursed from one border to another through foreign lands and seas.

You know girl? I owe the fact that I am alive today to a swan. But anyhow, my story of luck is only a part of the concinnity of dead stories tossed by the sides of roads and gathering dust. In time, the mutterings of millions will be heard in the dirt...I am only telling you my story about swans.

Could an ancient hand be responsible for this? The parched paper country looking as though the continent's weather systems had

been rolled like an ancient scroll from its top and bottom ends, and *ping*, sprung shut over the Tropic of Capricorn. The weather then flipped sides, swapping southern weather with that of the north, and this unique event of unrolling the climate upside down, left the entire continent covered in dust. When the weather patterns began levelling out after some years, both ends of the country looked as though normal weather was being generated from the previously dry centre of Australia. With the heart of the country locked into a tempestuous affair, hot and sticky, what was once the south's cool temperate climate mixed with the north's tropical humidity until the whole country was shrouded in days of dust – *Jundurr! Jundurr!* – or, all the time in heavy cyclonic rain.

Its journey took the black swan over the place where hungry *warrki* dingos, foxes and *dara kurrijbi buju* wild dogs had dug out shelters away from the dust, and lay in over-crowded burrows in the soil; and in the grasses, up in the rooftops, in the forests of dead trees, all the fine and fancy birds that had once lived in stories of marsh country, migrating swallows and plains-dancing brolgas, were busy shelving the passing years into a lacy webbed labyrinth of mud-caked stickling nests brimmed by knick-knacks, and waves of flimsy old plastic threads dancing the wind's crazy dance with their faded partners of silvery-white lolly cellophane, that crowded the shores of the overused swamp.

Up you too, Oblivia snarls under her breath after being reminded of the people she suspected were keeping an eye on her, after they saw the swan looking at her.

The swan had swung into shock-locked wings when human voices interrupted its nostalgia, but still it kept flying over the dust-covered landscape. This child! The swan could not take its eyes away from the little girl far down on the red earth. The music

broke as if the strings had been broken, and the swan fell earthwards through the air for several moments. Maybe, it was in those moments of falling, that the big bird placed itself within the stories of this country, before it restored the rhythm of its flapping wings, and continued on its flight.

Oblivia gave the swan no greater thought after it had disappeared, other than to think that it was heading in the right direction – towards water, to reach the sea, the place that she knew existed from stories she had heard of what was beyond the northern horizon. She thinks people are talking about her and glares unkindly towards the multitude of residential shacks jammed cheek to jowl like a sleeping snake ringing the swamp: a multi-coloured spectacle in the bright glare of sunlight, of over-crowding and over-use, confusion in love, happiness, sorrow and rage, in this slice of humanity living the life of the overcome. All about, birds squabbled noisily, chasing one another over the rooftops for space in air thick with the high cost of living for a view of a dead lake.

These people keep looking at me, the girl mouths the words – *read my lips*, centimetres from Bella Donna's face. No sound comes out of her mouth since she had decided not to speak, that it was not worth speaking. She would rather be silent since the last word she had spoken when scared out of her wits, the day when her tongue had screeched to a halt with dust flying everywhere, and was left screaming *Ahhhhhh!* throughout the bushland, when she fell down the hollow of the tree.

Bella Donna felt invaded by Oblivia's hot breath striking her face. In an instant, her sense of privacy diminishes into the spoils of war flattened over the barren field of herself, even though she recognises the girl's clumsy attempts to communicate with her. That the girl has never recovered from being raped. But feeling and knowing are two different things: she retaliates all the same,

and like any other long-standing conflict around the world, one act of violation becomes a story of another. *Remember who it was who rescued you with her bare hands. Did you see anyone else digging you out of that tree? Out there in the heat? Sun pouring down on my head in the middle of the day? Did you hear anyone else calling out for someone to come and help me to pull you out before you died out there? No! There was nobody else coming along and helping an old woman. Nobody else spent years looking for you. It was only me who was walking and walking in the bush and calling you girlie – you remember that. Even your own parents had forgotten who you were. Dead! They thought you were dead. It was only me who looked for you.*

Try as she might to rectify the problem of the speechless child, Bella Donna knew that the girl would only manage to make certain sounds that did not even closely resemble vowels. It seemed as though the child's last spoken word had been left orbiting unfinished, astray, irredeemable and forsaken. The only sounds she heard emanating from the girl's mouth were of such low frequency that the old woman strained to distinguish what usually fell within the range of bushland humming, such as leaves caught up in gusts of wind, or the rustling of the *wiyarr* spinifex grasses in the surrounding landscape as the wind flew over them, or sometimes the flattened whine of distant bird song, or a raging bush-fire crackling and hissing from *jujuu jungku bayungu*, a long way off, which the old woman heard coming out of Oblivia's angry mouth.

The girl did not actually care whether the old gypsy lady from the land of floribunda roses was listening or not, nor did she care that the old woman kept saying she was in charge of caring for her until she was covered with dirt in her grave, and even from the grave itself, she would still rise to cook, and wash and what not, because she was a saint who took on responsibilities like this. *I told you these people keep looking at me.*

What for girl? My sweet Lord, they only see what they want to see. They are blind, not stupid. They see, but they are blind, the old voice did not feel like answering the girl – never understanding the speechlessness, making it up as she talked.

Oblivia! The startled old woman, believing she understood whatever the girl was saying or thinking, having cracked the code of the language of windstorms or wind gusts, spoke in a pitched tone of voice that implied she held a high status in this poor community. She had given the girl a fancy name and everything. Oblivia, short for Oblivion Ethyl(ene), was her unconsciously inspired, synonymously paralleling sentiment for a girl perhaps best suited dead, instead of returning like a bad smell from the grave. She continued with pride in hearing herself saying the name again, *Oblivia! You have become a very cynical person for someone of your age.*

The old woman was trying to make good use of her burden, whose aim in life was to get the girl to act normal: behave and sit up straight at the table and use a knife and fork properly, learn table manners, talk nicely, walk as a butterfly flies, dress like a normal person, learn something marvellous on a daily basis, and show some resilience. Over and over, Oblivia sings in her head: *Nah! Sporadically all the time. Be full of useful facilities. And, this: Treat people decent.*

It seemed as though Oblivia had learnt nothing in years of living with the old woman except how to stay bent and rake thin, but not even she could prevent the force of nature. She could not go around in a perpetual state of warring with the obvious, by forever imagining herself to be like a piece of rotten fruit peel curled up inside the tree. Bones straightened out. She grew taller, and her skin darkened from the nondescript amber honey of a tree's heartwood, to radiant antique gold – darkened, like a tarnished red-yellow ochre pit blazing in the sun after rain.

In this world of the swamp, people had good ears for picking up every word that went skimming across the surface of the water, and vice versa, from the old lady's hull and back. You could almost reach out and grab each word with your hand. They were listening to what was considered to be some general crap coming out of the old lady's kitchen. The girl copycats those nicely spoken words, but prefers the tempo of the local dialect, to interpret like a local, and with her tongue tapping around behind closed lips, echoes soundlessly the homilies of her home life: *Toughen up. Get out there. Make a difference. Don't be like the rest of the people around here. And have a good day.*

The old lady's speech was considered quite charming but inspired nothing in the local Indigenous people's summation, where it was generally thought to be, *Very good English for sure, and would go far for the language betterment of Australia, but not here.* Naturally! Out on the swamp where life was lived on the breeze, her tongue was considered to be too soft, like a cat's purr. It could not adapt to the common old rough way in the normal state of affairs, *cross-cultural-naturally*, where all English language was spoken for political use only. Whatever was decent about English speech in the way she spoke it, was better for chatting a long way away, in its homeland. Maybe, while taking a leisurely walk with ladies and gentlemen through the environs of a finely constructed English garden, with those whose day delighted in the sight of every fresh rose, or were surprised by a squirrel scampering across the path with a plump autumn acorn in its teeth.

Swamp people were not ignorant of white people who, after all, had not turned up yesterday. Having lived it all, they claimed to have at least ten, or possibly more generations of knowledge, packed up tight in their mentality about white people doing good for them. Seasonal crop farmers, harvesters of potatoes, cabbages, fields of beans, yellow pears, wheat for whisky, wine grapes, dairy

cattle or pigs, truffles and olives, death feuds, imprisonment, domination, the differences between rich and poor, slaves, war and terror – whatever celebrated their faraway ancestral districts. Still! Why worry about the old woman's voice going – *Blah! Blah!* Or jumping – *Ting! Thang! Thing! Ting! Thang! What!* – it was only the needle of her compass spinning back to the north from any radius of her wanderings of the Earth. Opera! It was only opera. This was how the local population living packed up and down in the great distance around the swamp described her kind of talk.

The old woman spoke loudly to the girl while feeding flocks of black swans gathering around the hull. She was fed up. She had always gotten on well with people everywhere in her life before being rudely treated by a child. *Not just from this swamp. Yes, she said, I have used my opportunities for influencing people across the world. You must use the voice.* The girl thought that she should be silent if words were just a geographical device to be transplanted anywhere on earth. Then if that was possible: *Was it possible for her voice to be heard by imaginary people too?*

Wanymarri white woman was from one of those nationalities on Earth lost to climate change wars. The new gypsies of the world, but swamp people said that as far as they were concerned, even though she was a white lady, they were luckier than her. They had a home. Yes, that was true enough. Black people like themselves had somewhere, whereas everywhere else, probably millions of white people were drifting among the other countless stateless millions of sea gypsies looking for somewhere to live.

Bella Donna of the Champions claimed that she was the descendent of a listener of Hoffmeister's Quartet in F. This music was cherished throughout the whole world she boasted: *But not here.* That was true enough! The swamp people had never heard of such music. She said on the other hand, whilst living happily enough among

the Aborigines of Australia now, she was from many other countries equally and felt *not really here and not really there*. When you had travelled so far and wide in a lifetime as she had, of course you would be heard anywhere on Earth if you had left your tongue everywhere. She had often told the girl that all of humanity's past and present had locations stored in her head. *That was what the head was for – storing knowledge about the world that you might want to use one day.*

Right! As if!

As all stories begin with once upon a time, so the old woman always began her story, while looking into the levitating crystal balls she juggled, as though all stories that ever existed originated from these objects. Anything was possible when her snowy hair seemed charged with electricity and flew about wildly in the wind. All about her tall lean frame, the faded red hibiscus flowers of her old dress billowed as if caught in a cyclone. Her hundred-year-old face creased into a hundred more wrinkles. White lines of fog filled the fractured lines in one ball. Red dust swarmed inside the other.

With eyes the colour of the oceans, she continued staring absentmindedly, perhaps from habits formed on journeys over listless seas, but the scary thing was this gave the impression that she was releasing the words she spoke from inside the mesmerising glass, struck golden by the sun. So transfixing was the power of these objects, it did not occur to anyone that she might be fiddling with their minds, cursing them perhaps with overseas magic. Her trick made people stare straight into each spinning ball as it hung in midair like a miracle, the pivot reached before each slow ascension, while haphazardly heaping into their brains whatever they liked to remember about her story.

For all anyone in the swamp knew, she might have been Aine, the sun goddess of Ireland. An old woman, mortified from having

been dredged out of her lake in haste, and then, having to suffer the indignities of being dragged around the world in stinking boats. The swamp had become the place for reincarnation for all sorts living around the place. For sure, she was grand enough, enticing people, tricking their dreams, and juggling things around the edges of their minds. A goddess who had dragged herself out of the ocean then become an ordinary old woman.

Her country of origin, Bella Donna had claimed, was where people of the modern world once lived happily by doing more or less nothing, other than looking after themselves from one day to the next to fuel the stories of their life, but they were *finished now*. Always she returned to the memory of a single white swan feather resting on the spider web outside a window of her childhood home next to a forest where deer lived. She would recite a line from a poet from Hungary, *Snow, fog, fingerprints sprouting swans' feathers on the windowpanes...It was just a childhood memory*, she always snapped abruptly on reaching this point of her story, as if her most treasured melancholy thought was not fit enough for *this* place.

She claimed that one day, some devil, not a person, but a freak of nature, went to war on her people. *Old woman what kind of freak was that?* Well! Swamp people wanted to know. Had a right to know. She looked startled, as though she had been asked to describe the inexplicable, of what happened to people affected by the climate changing in wild weather storms, or the culmination of years of droughts, high temperature and winds in some countries, or in others, the freezing depths of prolonged winters. *Peace*, she said, it was called peace by the governments that called on their people to fight land wars. She had seen its kind rampaging across the gentle lands of her country, destroying everything in its path, and leaving those who survived with a terrible story to tell.

Listen to what I say: cities, towns, homes, land, as well as animals and crops, were flattened and could be no more. It was bad

weather that made fanatics like this. Her voice thrilled as though her tongue was on fire while she listed her foes: *Dictators! Bandits! People bashers!* She could spend all day listing the world's villains who had destroyed her people's land. Those willing to push the world into an unstoppable catastrophic slide of destruction and hatred with nuclear fallout, she shouted, as though swamp people were deaf to the sound of the outside world. *Everybody looking twice at his neighbour's property. One land-grabbing country fighting another land-grabbing country, and on it went with any people excess to requirement killed, or they left on their own accord by throwing themselves into the ocean.* Her voice fell into lady-like pretty-garden reminiscences now, quavering with the memory of a lifetime enmeshed with sea waves in a volatile shifting world that was irreconcilably changed. *With their country completely destroyed and radioactive, who could return? Which millennium, this one or next? What would her people be then?* Her words were caustic and frightening, but beguiling too in the minds of the overwhelmed swamp people trying to imagine this ghost country where nobody goes.

Then, without country, imagine that? Imagining! Can't imagine. For country never leaves its people. This was what the swamp people claimed while seeing some sort of country in her, and dragging it out of her by listening, like scavenging rubbish out of a bin, rubbish lying everywhere – hard to imagine where it all came from. She asked them to think about the people of her nation as they joined a trail of misery forged by those who were walking before them.

What about them? These people owned nothing but the clothes they wore and whatever could be carried away on their backs, handy things like: *television, computers, mobile phones?* Whoosh! Splat! Bang! They were the sounds you heard all day long when technology was being thrown over the side of mountains in the search for food and water. The story of her people, she claimed, was like the chapters in a nightmarish book. What would come

next? The people of the swamp knew about stories. Stories had value. Could buy trust. Could buy lots of things. Even silence. This story was new cash among people full of suspicion of one another.

Helter skelter, running away, fleeing people became refugees marching onwards just like deer would through winter steppes to nowhere. Hunger was constant. Waves of vermin, rats disguised as men, drove the moving chains of humanity into traps. The killing of people was without reason, fruitless and endless. This was Bella Donna's life when her people were being forced off their land. Eventually, beyond breaking point, there in the mountains under some spirit-charged rowan trees that were thousands of years old, they reached another summit of hopelessness. Bewildered, and staring down from above the clouds clinging to the sides of the mountains, they tried to locate holes in the scrim of mist to the fells, to see if the face of so much inhumanity was resting somewhere among the rivers and forests with smoke pluming from camp fires, but eventually, even those who had survived to this point resigned themselves to a fate of total annihilation.

So be it! Miserably, but almost bizarrely joyous too for such a final realisation that they were at the gates of their Maker, Bella Donna said those who were standing on the mountaintop ready to die, now turned their fragile gaze upwards to Heaven. If there was a bigger picture than the landscape, they were acknowledging the existence of a much mightier hand inflicting this enormous punishment on their depravity, even though they had once felt that their lives were normal enough. Then, as they knelt on the frozen ground to pray silently for the end to come quickly, something very unusual happened.

They heard God approaching in the fog. Music, so sweet as though nature was singing, it was just like hearing *Spiegel im Spiegel*

played lightly on a cello. A single white swan flew by: its wings beating with music. *The bell-beat of wings above our heads*, the old lady whispered, a line that an Irish bard had once crafted with ink on paper to sweeten the world. They saw a Mute Swan, one of the biggest of the eight known types of swans in the world. It circled above, and then flew down and landed amongst them. It whispered a greeting of good day and good fortune. Its hot breath formed a little cloud in the cold air.

Listen closely: *Our thoughts were not brave. Should this fat bird, the only one seen for days, appearing like an angel in response to our final prayers to Heaven, be eaten? Should angels ever be eaten, even one, by so many hungry people?*

The swan had dirty feathers, ingrained with the ash spread through blackened snow on the burnt plains of low lands where it had walked under the clouds. It did not stay long. Swanlike, it ran heavily, carrying away the past, present and future on its webbed feet, slapping along the sodden, mossy, alpine swamp until it was treading water then air in its wake.

But unlike a wild creature, the swan returned. It flew in swooping circles around the people gathered on the mountain, forcing them to get up off the cold ground they had been kneeling on, and move. The freezing temperature, already sourer than a hoar wind, threatened to turn them into statues of ice. Several thousand people began walking in circles through biting wind and rain, their spirits lifting in the talk circulating about a swan that had once landed at the feet of a saint. The sinking into the well of memory about swans on that day was remarkable. Back! Back! And even further back, remembering how this very creature was descended from a Knight Swan, which of course convinced them of their own relationships to the swan's *descendency*. Someone yelled to the swan flying above – *Lohengrin*. A chorus, remembering Wagner's opera, replied – *The knight Lohengrin arrived in a boat drawn by a*

swan. History! Swan history! Quicker! Quicker! Remembering this, and remembering that; and there it was, the swans loved and hated through the ages in stories laid bare by this huddling melee of the doomed trying to find warmth on frozen moss. They grabbed a trillion swans in their imagination, dragged them back from the suppressed backwoods of the mind. *So! God help us*, Bella Donna said, they all sang – *live and let live*, until the throng sang for their life to keep warm, then decided to head back down the mountain.

They followed the swan quickly, breathlessly, and down they went, becoming strong again simply from believing there was goodness left in the world. From remembering God and words, and lines of poetry, *Upon the brimming water among the stones, are nine and fifty swans*. The old woman looked as though she was back on the mountain that day years before, reciting lines they sang, quicker and more quickly, as their feet hit the stony path, *And scatter wheeling in great broken rings, upon their clamorous wings*.

Through the swan, they had put their faith back in life as routinely as though they had been watching a favourite weekly television program. They knew without reason that the swan would always be there on the land, would always return, and always be remembered. They were like their ancestors of the Dark Ages who once followed swans up and down imaginary paths with the single-mindedness of saving themselves – from what? *A similar misfortune?* The swan flew above the gushing bluish-white torrents coursing down the mountains. *We followed the idea of living*, she said, believing that this swan was a guide that had reached out from our past.

The swan flew on and on while every man, woman and child followed, tumbling in their own stream down rocky slopes and slippery moss to take up their flight, until finally before nightfall, the big white bird flew over the coastline through wild winds out to a grey sea, guiding Bella Donna's people to safety from wars.

Severely deluded into believing that they could be saved from whatever calamity chased them, the people went clambering after the swan even though the winds butting against their faces tried to push them back from the sea. But in the terror of having nowhere else to go, somehow the miracle of the white swan continued urging them onwards. They stumbled through the darkness, and they ran along a river covered with solid ice until they reached the shore. They ran straight on into the freezing water, towards the abandoned, unseaworthy fishing boats still bobbing in the bay.

They set sail; following the swan's own long migratory flight out of the country, heading towards the moon squatting on the horizon. Bella Donna lamented to the swamp people, the swan disappearing across the sea was like the myth of Icarus whose wings fell off for not heeding the warning of his father. But, people running away do not always remember precisely what was in any old text locked away in the library. Instead! *Let's sail*. She sighed, and nodding her head, looked as though she was back on that same rough sea crashing on to the foreshore and revisiting the scrambling scene of their chaotic departure. She claimed it was an angel with swan wings pushing them out to sea that night; hands of the angel holding the masthead, covering the sails that should have been torn apart in the wind.

Gladdened to be nestling under moonlight and safely afloat, Bella Donna of the Champions said, *We wanted to relinquish our lands, their memories and stories, and after a little reflection and the buoyancy from being so far out on the water, we said we wanted to be exonerated from history*. Soon, indeed on the morning of the following day and every day afterwards as they headed further out across the ocean, only the inconsequentiality of the day before lingered in the memory of their new identity as boat people. They believed they had become mythical oarsmen with gilded paddles rowing sedately to beating drums, in time to the rolling wave of a chanter

waving outstretched batons, with long white horse hair flying in sea wind. It was as though they were on a flying swan the size of a ship flying smoothly over the tops of waves. *We imagined ourselves sailing on the magnificently crafted Subanahongsa swan barge. Our swan's feathers shining like gold and precious jewels in the sunlight, and the pearl that hung from its neck, the size of a huge ball, shining in the moonlight.* And so she claimed: *We called ourselves the people who could call swans.*

Aunty Bella Donna of the Champions travelled the seas as wretchedly as any other among the banished people of the world, but as luck would have it, she came to live out her last days among the poorest people in a rich land. A hidden place. Another Eden. A place where hunger and death were commonplace to its elders, the landowners who knew that they were a social-science experiment with a very big cemetery. A small place where sometimes things got so bad when the swamp's little gang of brain-damaged, toxic-fume-sniffing addicted kids ruled, that parents asked only for one moment of peace. Where any silence was considered heaven-sent. People were gambling the cards and playing like ghosts. They were gambling about the Messiah. Made bets to see who was the luckiest. Well! Song sung true! Messiahs come and go, usually in the form of academic researchers, or a few chosen blacks and one-hit wonders pretending to speak for Aboriginal people and sucking-dry government money bureaucrats. They were the only Messiahs sent with answers. You got to practise what you preach. Pray God, waste not.

It was unimaginably miserable to be languishing at sea, moving from one ghost ship to another as the last living soul of the armadas, when finally, by simply saying enough was enough, this old woman invaded Australia. She saw the Australian beach lined with pandanus, smelt bush fires, caught the dust in the breeze laden with the aroma of over-ripe mangoes, *gidgee kadawala* woodlands and

bloodwood *corymbia capricornia*, and she would listen no more to the law of breaking waves slapping against the shores of a forbidden land. She gathered up into a bag her old swan flute, a pile of books about swans, and those crystal balls. Then she walked straight across the Australian coastline and headed into the bush.

Anyone there? she called.

A bullfrog sitting in the *janja*, the mud, a lone tiny creature guarding the closed-gap entrance to the security fence of government transparency erected by the Army around the entire swamp answered, *baji* – maybe. It was happy enough to grant her asylum when she asked for a look.

She turned up on an Indigenous doorstep, and the children called out: A Viking! A Viking! An old, raggedy Viking!

All covered with dirt, grass and sticks, she looked as though she had forgotten how to walk or comb her hair and had swum through the scrub. Two laws, one in the head, the other worthless on paper in the swamp, said she was an invader. But! What could you do? Poor Bella Donna of the Champions! The sight of her made you cry. She was like a big angel, who called herself the patroness of World Rejection. She wasn't some renegade redneck from Cammoweal or Canberra. This was the place for rejection: there was no hotter topic in the mind than rejection in this swamp, so to prove that they were not assimilated into the Australian way of life, the ancient laws of good manners about welcoming strangers were bestowed – Here! Stay! Have a go! We don't mind.

The old woman was terrified that she would be taken back down to the beach and thrown into the sea, and struggled to explain her lengthy and extraordinary ordeal. The crystal balls, her swan books and swan-bone flute in a canvas bag were all that she possessed, and these she tried to bargain for her life by pushing them into the hands of the elders. No one would touch them. Everyone backed away, fearing contamination from what were

plainly the sacred objects that locked in her story. In quick gulps, she mentioned secrets – an important message about how she had been saved to tell the tale.

She was quizzed by the old people with the ancient wisdom. They asked if her secrets were in their national interest, by which they only implied their own big swamp of a nation, not the shebangs of anybody else's business. Well! Those hearts almost jumped straight from their chests from seeing so much horror in her eyes as she levitated the crystal balls, which created another illusion altogether, as though her world had once been like these balls, momentarily able to float in space.

All of this kind of thing happening out of the blue like that was not the message from a Messiah that the Government in Canberra had told the swamp people to expect, but still, none could deny that she had been a sort of answer to prayers, even though she looked more like the local soil covering the roots of trees. She answered their inquiry by saying that her stories were of the utmost interest to the world. Well! they thought, why not. Our nation was small. Our boundaries not very large. It was very nice land. A bit flat. A bit hot. What they liked best, the kinsmen told her, was that they had nothing to do with the rest of Australia. They thought that they might like to have a bit of a holiday from some ancient responsibilities, and told her: So stay. Have the floor old one. Tell stories.

The maddest person on Earth told her stories of exile endlessly, but who listened? The swamp people were not interested in being conquered by other peoples' stories. Aunty Bella Donna of the Champions knew times when no one listened to the inconsequential stories she sung to herself: when hungry people feed themselves fat on voices droning from the radio, and repeat what they hear, they are like canaries. The girl replaced any dream of a big audience.

But Olivia stared into space, not listening. It was just music. Wave after wave of it rippling through the swamp. The score of a long concerto in gibberish and old principles cemented in language that ears had never heard before in that swamp.

First off! There was fright. Hell's people were naturally jumping around with Bella Donna's prolonged talking in this silent place of worship. She liked talking about surviving, intervention, closing the gap, moving forward as the way to become re-empowered, learning 'lifestyle', of aesthetically pleasing houses and gardens. This confused the swamp. They thought she was really a local-bred redneck after all. The old people asked her: *Weren't you supposed to be some kind of a holy orator who remembered each epoch-making episode and emotional upheaval of the Planet's nomadic boat people?* Heads spun with all the fires and violins endured in oceans as barren as a desert when she got back to the facts. She told it all: Feast and famine. Flutes of bewilderment. Drowning cellos. The voices of lovers. Crying births. Storms screaming. Wailing loss, abandonment, silence. Rejection. Bombing. Prayers. Theft. Beseeking. War. Puzzlement. Starvation. Staring at death. Organs from all over the world were playing in the swamp now. Thieving pirates. Robbers. Bandits. Murderers. And, somehow, more survival until: Glory of migrating swan birds filling the skies.

Her poetry was about the grind. A treadmill recalling unlaurelled bravery. Notes for those dead at sea. Men, women and children captured forever in the ghost nets of zero geography. She floated on the calm of swamp brine like the halcyon bird that sung the myths of wind and waves for the polyglotic nations of the sea. The uncharted floating countries of condemned humanity. Twenty-first-century cast-outs ploughing the wilderness of oceans. But that was long ago she said. When the years passed and the floating worlds of refugees had grown white-haired, become weak

and old of heart from waiting for any welcoming country on earth that was either big or small enough to let them in, all but one of those tens of thousands of obsolete people, the rejected of the world, had died.

The swamp people said her stories were lies. The sovereign facts lying on their table said that there was nothing worth hearing about from anywhere else on earth that was like her stories. Their sun hissed down and crackled on tin roofs. They did not need more heroes. Their own healer of country was already sitting up on top of the sand mountain trying to figure out what to do with it. And they knew what it meant to be sweltering in the heat, and dirt poor. Politely, they asked the *wambu wanyamari* sick white lady to speak elsewhere about the snow, frost and chill. They had never seen any of that. *Go tell China! Africa! Bundaberg! Istanbul! Don't come here with stories sounding like some kind of doomsaying prophet. We need our own practical measures to safeguard our culture. It is after all factual that terribly, terribly dry stories that flip, flop seven times in one hour straight are dangerous to the health of the mind.* No worries. What if times were blind and tight? *We were dead in the water in a dirty world,* she claimed while wiggling her fingers at the locals. Forget the raving. Forget the ranting. *We will not give away our rich provenance to the rest of the world, just to be like madamba – joined together like friends, no way,* the local broadcasters replied in song sung blue, and weeping like a willow.

Lesson over and another begins. *Oblivia! You must always remember eyes and ears are everywhere.* The old woman still spoke from a mind that lived elsewhere, with her speech that ran off to thoughts of hearing twinkling bells like the sound of a swan flying away. Oblivia listened to Bella Donna from a corner of the kitchen in the hull where she usually sat on the floor, without saying a word,

imagining no one could see her. The old lady was retelling for the millionth time, the story of spending years in a row-boat far out in the sea with only a ghost swan sitting beside her for company, while passing old houses and dead trees stuck out from the water. *I called out to see if anyone was there, she said, but only seagulls answered – laughing. Yes! Fancy that! Laughing at me. And kicking rats around the water for fun.*

Every now and then, every day in fact, the Harbour Master would come down from the sand mountain and row across the swamp, passing the rotting hulls, all the swans now living on the swamp that he called the wildlife, and anything else – decaying plastic, unwanted clothes, rotting vegetable matter or slime that bobbed, *wanami* diesel slick – on his way to visit the old woman who was looking after the girl he called The Human Rat. The stupid thing that got under his skin, who he was convinced was too lazy to speak, and was always sitting on the floor like a dog in the corner where she thought nobody could see her. Why did a thing like this land on her feet? Big question. This very thing made him wild enough to want to kill her because he thought she should be sitting up on a chair properly, if she was lucky enough to have one. He knew plenty of people who wished they had a chair to sit on. Why he even thought of himself, and he did not own a chair. If the white lady sat on a chair then the girl ought to be made to sit on a chair too, instead of acting like a white woman's black dog by sitting around on the floor, and the old woman beaming, *Oh! That's Oblivia for you.* These visits usually caused his mind to spew a bag of dead peace doves as soon as his eyes caught sight of Oblivia, and the more he saw her, and dwelled on all of her not-talking pretentiousness, and watched the old white lady struggling to teach the thing to talk, he was convinced that he had the girl pegged. *Git up off the floor and show some backbone like the rest of our people,* he

snapped quick smart out of the corner of his mouth whenever he had the opportunity, behind Bella Donna's back, and added for good measure, *you make me sick*. Usually Oblivia ignored him, or else she shot him one of her several nasty expressions – eyes down, eyes blaring, screwed up or blanked face looking blacker than black, or more generally she spat on the floor between them, and with a bit of spit dividing their mutual disgust of one another, quite frankly, that's where the matter rested.

But Oblivia watched the Harbour Master who she thought ought to be doing something more about the sand mountain – unblocking the swamp for instance – he was taking long enough, and he should be more involved in fixing and healing like a real healer, instead of swooning about like some stupid cringing dog after Bella Donna. He splattered his soul that was fat with complaints all over the kitchen table for the old woman to see what the world had come to, of how difficult it was to heal anything these days in a place controlled by the Army like the swamp was. He was not superman was he? How could he take the love of Aboriginal children the Army men had stolen from parents and return it to them? And moreso, he thought that instead of Bella Donna wasting her time on the useless girl, she should be consoling him and giving him some excellent full-bodied strength platitudes about how everything would work itself out for the best in the end.

The Harbour Master could not help himself, even though he sincerely believed Bella Donna was really a spy working for the Army and telling them lies about the swamp people. Why did he believe this? He told himself it was because he believed that he could spot a spy from a mile off, and he had. He could spot spies anywhere, and they were everywhere, even ones as small as an ant racing about and minding other people's business, or somebody obviously white and conspicuous like Bella Donna, although she just about knocked his socks off.

Like! Like! Oblivia overheard his whispering, and her guts had groaned and moaned while her stomach muscles tried to shove a jumble of dog vomit words up her windpipe, although always in the nick of time, any of those screaming words that made it up to her mouth, crashed like rocks landing on enamel at the back of her clenched teeth. So, by remaining silent, saying nothing and stewing with hate and spitefulness in her guts, she reminded herself with a shiver down her spine that she would rather be dead, than waste her breath speaking to an idiot.

The Harbour Master was oblivious to that tongueless thing Oblivia's attempts to communicate through a piece of spit and continued on with what he had come for – his total intoxication with the blissful Bella Donna who he claimed was on par with a saint, even if she was a spy and a traitor of the Aboriginal people. She was too much in his heart, so he kept telling himself, *Don't chase her away. Balyanga Jakajba. She's staying here. Jungku nyulu nanyi.* She became his soul mate. She made his heart beat faster. Why ignore somebody who could wind his motor up? He was intrigued with Bella Donna's mission to kill off any strength and sign of leadership in the Aboriginal world by running straight to the Army with tales of Black insurgents, Black uprisings, Black takeovers etcetera around the swamp to keep his people in control, under the thumb and weak, but at the same time, needing with every ounce of her being to nurture a sickly, damaged and most obvious to everyone else, crazy, *warraku* Aboriginal child who would never be cured no matter how much the old white lady tried to change the girl's attitude by showering her with compassion, do-gooding, saviouring and so forth. A complete useless waste of time. But, he thought, what was the use of him being a fanbelt spinning around, that was always intervening and arguing with Bella Donna about her spying for the Army against any sign of Aboriginal strength, while mothering Aboriginal weakness, if that was the whole idea

of racism. No! the Harbour Master reasoned. Who on earth was he to think that he could intervene in a white lady's prerogative to think the thoughts of racial fanaticism? A plain man like himself only had simple thoughts on offer. He was not the anti-racist God almighty, and he almost drooled down both sides of his mouth while listening to each of her nicely spoken well-rounded vowels as she gave a total list of her acts of compassion as though it was her penance for having sinned, for having survived the horrendous boat journey of her life. Whatever she spoke of, he believed that he could easily have listened to her talking all day long, if he did not have to be constantly busy minding the sand.

The Harbour Master was missing his monkey friend who lived in an overseas country and who he claimed was a genius of world politics. He was always sorry about leaving the monkey eating grapevines, or where wolves hide out in forests of chestnut, or conifers, or larch trees that he claimed were like Bella Donna's rowan trees, a thousand years old. He missed not being on the scenery of world politics and speaking the monkey's language, and often complained, *I should be looking after all of my responsibilities instead of being caught up here having to guard the sand.*

But the joy of his pre-dawn *gloriosus* rowing, was to glide among the dumped military ships and vessels that had once been used by commandos, militants, militia, pirates, people sellers, cults, refugees and what have you: everything dumped there by the Army and a very good place for a spy to hide.

This particular huge dark hull where he climbed up the rusty steel steps to come on board was the home of the old woman and the girl. He was their only visitor because he and the old woman had comparable memories of times when the countries in the world were different and, once he got Oblivia stirred up enough to spit on the floor, he got on with the job of reminiscing with Bella Donna about the world's geographies and analysing the old maps they

carried around in their heads. Some countries they remembered had even disappeared. They enjoyed a lamenting conversation of, *Oh! How I wonder what happened to that country! No. Did that little country disappear? Nobody lives there anymore. It just does not exist. You really mean that old place no longer exists, it can't be true but I guess it must have disappeared by sea rising, or wars. Had to happen.* Talk like that. Lead-poison brains kind of talk. Conversations that meant nothing to overwhelmed swamp people who had always been told to forget the past by anyone thinking that they were born conquerors. They already knew what it was like to lose Country. Still, it did not pay to fret about the world when you were imprisoned. They were already the overcrowded kind of people living in the world's most unknown detention camp right in Australia that still liked to call itself a first world country. The traditional owners of the land locked up forever. Key thrown away. They were sick to death of those two going on about what it was like having – *Been there! And, Been there too.* And, *You should have been there before the whole place turned to nothing.*

I wonder why you never see a white swan landing on the swamp? The old woman was always asking the famous Harbour Master this question, ignoring many large flocks of black swans that now already lived on the swamp, and he in turn was always singing and talking about the Rolling Stones songs that his genius of a pet monkey once sang. Yes, for sure, he missed the monkey he called Rigoletto. Sorry he had abandoned it after the monkey kept making a nuisance of itself by predicting colossal wars that started to frighten the life out of everyone. Sorry he thought the monkey was mad. *How does this swan look in your dreams?* He seemed to have been waiting for the swan to arrive too. No! She had never seen it in her dreams. These two had travelled to so many places in the world, surely, one of them had seen it somewhere, from viewing the land in a boat of banishment.

They looked for her lost white swan down in the chasms of gullies and valleys wrinkling the world, tramped through mill ponds, listened to the Mute Swans ringing the food bell in a Somerset moat, gone along the flaggy shore of County Clare and searched among the Liffey Swans dipping for weed. It was like a giant séance for gathering the thoughts of at least half a million swans from Europe to Central Asia.

Bella Donna talked of having walked the stoney shores among the Iceland Whooper Swans of Lake Myvatn to Reykjavik, of having skated along-side swans taking off on a frozen lake surrounded by icicle trees in Sweden, of having lived among migrating swans rushing to fly from snow on the mountains in Russia. She spoke to the *oo-hakucho* wintering in Japan's Akkesi-Ko, descendents of the great Kugui flocks that came from the olden times of the *Nihonshoki* in the eighth century and now sleeping on ice in the mist of Lake Kussharo. She had slid across the ice on Estonia's Matsalu Bay among sleeping Bewick Swans, still like statues, escaping wolves on their long migration. In her imagination, she had flown among the thousands of black-beaked Whistling Swans lifting into the Alaskan skies and in flight to the Samish Flats of the State of Washington, and far off, she had heard the bugling of the royal swans owned for centuries by monarchs, gliding along the Thames. Did she look around China for her swan? She had sat silently in a small boat under a Chinese moon where the Shao Hao people's winter angels live among kelp swishing in the sea of Yandun Jiao Bay. Long were the distances travelled, and all lonely! And all of them slow from too much hope in the heart, expectation, and the yearning to return.

The two old people's stories fly on through storming specks of ice, where the air had frozen into crystals that danced around the swan as it struggled to fly over the peaks of Himalayan mountains. They searched every abandoned, broken-down and flattened nest

in the Eastern Kingdom on the Mongolian Nurs, and then hiked, wet and wretched across grassy plains, while a migratory procession of white Whooper Swans flew over Hulun Nur, to Cheng Shanwei's Swan Lake. On lonely roads the old woman ransacked the nesting material of sweet swans running away from her over the ice on Dalinor Lake.

The old man and woman daydreamed themselves into every swan image on earth, and off they went again. *There they go – la, la, la*, the wild girl Oblivia whinged under her breath, excluded from entering their world of knowledge. So fair enough to travel in talk, about what it was like being among a pandemonium of snakes while wading barefoot and broke into old desert ponds covered with tumbleweed, to find a black-beak Whistling Swan with its head curled under its wing asleep, frozen to death. In the end it was always the same. No swan. Not the one she was expecting. Flat broke from renting hire cars, driving them until they become rust buckets. Finally! Their journey ended at the river where a poet carried a black-necked swan in his arms that was too weak to breathe. *Yes, ode indeed, lost swan*. Then the old woman and the Harbour Master each crawled back into their own separate, quiet dry caves dug somewhere deep in their minds. A silent place where each had their own swan blessed with flowers and fruit carved into granite grey brains.

He has the best intuition, the old woman said. Bella Donna was often full of her own gloating and fandangoing about geography and reminded the girl that she and the Harbour Master were very much alike. They were peas in the same pod. Exactly similar! Both had fled countries. Identical. He had always known the time to go too, uncanny, just like swans. *Which goes to show that Aboriginal people who put their minds to it, can track anywhere*. She could not praise him enough. She even continued rejoicing about the Harbour Master

in her sleep, high praising the likes of him for his natural intuition about migratory routes, immigrating cycles and so on. It was for these reasons she had found a friend to talk to out here in a swamp that was in the middle of nowhere. *This is why he is very famous. He's the full packet, you betcha.* And all that...

Well! Nothing much comes marching in on thin air, even though the old woman was relentless in her belief that somewhere over the vast oceans lying between her and the old world, the grandest white bird of all laboured in flight to reach her. But what did its continued absence mean? She could not understand it. Or why she was being denied her only wish. The only legacy she had left. Had she lost the ability to call her dead country's swan? Bella Donna offered the only possible explanation: *Because it was dead too.* The Harbour Master had to agree: *Died on its way. Fallen from the sky.*

Like a proper English-speaking child, the voiceless Oblivia learnt to sit straight-backed at the dinner table and chew fish, while contemplating the adult world talking themselves silly with their stories. In her mind she mused, *Brain rust rent-a-car mouths. Car dead. Brain dead. Aren't there enough black swans here, all nesting in rusted car bodies dumped amongst the reeds? And together they go: Toot! Toot!*

It took her no trouble to imagine the bird falling from the sky. She could see its body floating in any stretch of ocean that lay beyond the horizon – even though she had never seen the sea herself. She skipped a heartbeat. Any thought of distance did that. Her heart almost stopped beating every time she had to listen to their talk about travelling overseas to see swans. She was more comfortable with closer geography, with what lay in front of the horizon, as far as the top of the sand mountain, and into the ocean of the Harbour Master's stomach. She smiled at the gargoyle with a small white down feather sticking out from the corner of his mouth.

Bella Donna's world of exhausted journeying continued to shrink until it became so small, there was only space left for her one lost white swan. It loomed ever larger in her mind, until finally, her mind contained nothing else but the swan. She would not believe it was dead. How could anything so special, that was celebrated by hemispheric legends on both sides of the equator, be dead? She gifted the swan with eternal life. She quoted Hans Christian Andersen. Hadn't he written about a swan sitting on a nest of fledglings that perpetually flew off to populate the world with poetry inspired by their own beauty? Now her swan was the Denmark swan, and she wanted to know why it had not come to the swamp to create poetry. *Well! Why not?* How could a resurrecting swan, with the strongest pair of wings for flying half way around the world, be lost? Perhaps it was always shot dead on arrival? Fallen in sediment. Its poetry condemned. Evading its final splash down in front of her eyes.

Oblivia thought about the invisible swan whose stories occupied every centimetre of their hull. Was it real? Sure! Acts of *descendency* were important ideas in the swamp; and even, whether it was right to think about stories of birds like a white swan in the swamp.

One day Bella Donna's old storytelling voice told the girl: *A black swan flies slowly across the country, holding a small slither of bone in its beak.* But then she hesitated, perhaps realising she was deviating from the white swan she had been longing for. Her voice stalled, tapered off into whispers that even the girl, now the perfect mimic of the old woman, could not understand. It was as though the old woman had become so old, she was unable to continue either to dither or to go thither in a fantastical story that began not at the beginning, nor at the end, but centrally, in ether. *What was it? Ah?* Was she unable to comprehend progress? Did she now doubt the

white swan's ability to navigate its journey? Or perhaps, she just told stories the way swans fly.

Obediently, Oblivia listened. She had become more interested than ever in the old woman's stories, even though she thought old Aunty was just facing another storm, and this made it difficult for her to speak. Where was it this time? She wondered if it had always been like this for old *wanymarri* white woman Aunty. All beginnings, wherever begun, lost? Perhaps even, that the old woman was neither life, dreams, or stories. Just air. The girl looked away and whispered into the steel wall of the hull: *She was nothing*. It might have been so! *Fat plague of loss*. The girl accused the old woman of being a victim by telling the wall, *You dream like a refugee – of never being able to return. Being lost all the time. That's all you think about. Think about that*. The girl had turned examiner of other people's consciences. But what would you expect? She knew old Bella Donna like her own thumb, knew exactly what it was like to be unable to realise one single idea without falling over a multitude of anxieties. In numerous conversations with the wall, she explained the crux of the matter – *The old woman was a victim of her own mathematics*. She had become lost in senseless tangles. An eternity of trying to calculate the exact weight of a swan travelling from so far away through such a long period of time. How long would it take to reach its destination? *There are endless, infinite possibilities, you know*. When she thought more kindly, the girl softened her image of the old woman flying around in *etherland*. *Might be as good a place as any to be with her swan*.

You could see that the old woman had become a little bit *day-dreamy*, but she often tried to impress on the girl one single thing of importance: *A love story can be about swans, but the swan looks more like death with a bone in its beak. It could be a human bone, or a bone from another swan. Its mate, maybe*.

The old lady's fearful whisperings like this at night lulled the

swamp people in their cradles, cocooning them like machinery rattling away, like swarming bees, and sea gulls squalling for hours on end in the distance, or else remembering hawks piercing the hot air with their cries all day long. But it was different for birds. The seagulls and hawks flew around the swamp, absorbed in their own business of surviving in a peaceful and orderly manner. The birds disregarded the monologue of northern hemisphere *outsidedness* humming like the engine of a boat, trying to move their relevance to their native country further away in the fog.

When the girl whispered, the old woman interpreted – guessed what she wanted to know – and spoke for her, *why can't I see that swan with the bone if you can see it?* Something dropped into the water. Plop! Was this a fact that had slipped from her hypothetical love stories? The girl thought that she could hear ghost music. A string of musical notes gob-smacked in bubbles broke through the surface of the swamp. Even the old woman noticed the music, but she continued on her merry way with her story, regardless: *I have become an expert on music made from old bones, and I say it could be from swan bones, or bones of drowned people, or of drought-stricken cattle, imitating the scores of Mozart's fingers racing across the ivory.*

The greatest love story this country has ever known began somewhere around here, the old lady said while sniffing back at the bubbling water, speaking only to herself, or to somewhere way past the girl, that could have been the Harbour Master listening from the top of his hill.

A large flock of black swans whispering to each other in their rusted car-body bedrooms all over the swamp whistle, glide and bump over the waves driven along by the sudden arrival of gusty winds, while the old woman sings more: *I got to roll you over, roll over, rolling bones.*

Far into the night, the swamp music continued telling the old woman's love story through the girl's dreams where, in

the underwater shadows, she looked like a cygnet transformed into two people entwining and unwinding back and forth in the bubbling swamp, in waves scattered by a relic dropped from the beak of the black swan imagined by the old woman.

Black swans kept arriving from nowhere, more and more of them, from the first one that had arrived unexpectedly and spoiled the swamp people's dinner.

After black swans came to the swamp something else happened... A soft yellow beam of light fell over the polluted swamp at night. It was the torchlight of armed men flying in the skies like Marvin Gaye's ghost looking about the place, to see what was going on. *Yes! Well! You tell me what was going on?* The Army men sent by the Government in Canberra to save babies from their parents said that they were guarding the sleep of little children now.

The swamp bristled.

This was the history of the swamp ever since the wave of conservative thinking began spreading like wildfire across the twenty-first century, when among the mix of political theories and arguments about how to preserve and care for the world's environment and people, the Army was being used in this country to intervene and control the will, mind and soul of the Aboriginal people. The military intervention was seen as such an overwhelming success in controlling the Aboriginal world it blinded awareness of the practical failures to make anyone's life better in the swamp. This 'closed ear' dictatorial practice was extended over the decades to suit all shades of grey-coloured politics far-away in Canberra, and by tweaking it ever so little this way and that, the intervention of the Army never ended for the swamp people, and for other Aboriginal people like themselves who were sent to detention camps like the swamp to

live in until the end of their lives. The internment excluded the swamp people from the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the control proliferated until there was full traction over what these people believed and permeance over their ability to win back their souls and even to define what it meant to be human, without somebody else making that decision for them.

Now the swamp people's voices were talking in the girl's dreams, telling her: *Your tree did not exist.* Screamed: *TELL HER. No strong tree like that ever existed here.* The girl panicked, would wake up in fright from not remembering anymore about how she came to be asleep in the tree. She started to believe what other people believed: *She was telling lies.*

The light quickly travels across water, twice over buildings, through the football oval, and along streets, then swirling around, the Army men on the boundaries go through the exit gates, before turning around, locking the gates, and the lights march off again.

The girl watched the other children. They play a game of pretending they are from another life – from the *space age*, living on Mars or some other planet, and run to be saved by the passing light.

When the old woman was not watching, Oblivia studied the running rays of light reflected on the surface of the swamp, unsettling a black swan that lifted, tail splashing, into garnishes of serendipity. There were bones rattling like loose change when the torchlight hit flocks of white cockatoos, causing them to screech from the rooftops where they sat roosting – *Sweet Lord*. A light ran again across the water saying, say again: *What's going on?*

Humpies! Hundreds sprung up all along the banks of the swamp like nobody's business now. Well! The dominant voices around the country and western bloc of the country's politics had not balked

for a second about Aborigines when saying, 'Why not?' This was what happens when you put the Army in charge of the swamp, long after it had become one of those Australian Government growth communities for corralling Aboriginal peoples into compounds. These were past times for kicking Aboriginal people around the head with more and more interventionist policies that were charmingly called, *Closing the Gap*. But, so what? The very sight of the place was vilified up and down the country for being like dogs in the pound begging for food.

Well! So what if it was just another moment in a repetitious black and white history repeated one more time for Aboriginal people from wherever about the place, after having their lives classified and reassigned yet again? Anybody's politics was a winner these days, so long as they were not blackfellas caring about their culture. So it was nothing for Australians to get excited about when Aboriginal people started being divided into lots and graded on whether anything could be done for them. Upper scale – if they could actually be educated. Lower scale – just needed some *dying pillow* place to die. Many Indigenous populations began to be separated regardless of family or regional ties. In growth centres like the swamp, thousands of Aboriginal people became common freight as they were consigned by the busload, then more conveniently, by the truckload. The swamp now renamed Swan Lake was nothing special. It was the same as dozens of fenced and locked Aboriginal detention centres.

Only starving skin-and-bone people with hollow-eye children who refused to speak came off those trucks and Army buses. Their clothes were stiffened with dried sweat and dirt from the journey. These strangers looked here and there initially, as though trying to avoid the heavy spirit of bad luck swooping down to sit on their backs. They got spite eyes from the local people. A little dull blue butterfly flew through one of the buses to have a look around and

sat down on a young boy's head. He would commit suicide this poor little *juka*. Everyone knew. More boys and girls would die like this.

The swamp people, the big time protesters, rocked to their foundations from three centuries of dealing with injustices already, will probably feel the same way in two centuries more – who's speculating on the likely projection of this tragedy? Now they were yelling and screaming, *Weren't we supposed to be the traditional owners?* Doesn't that count for anything? Serious! Well! They were right about that. So! *Alright*. An Army general put in charge from the Government said they were the traditional owners of a convenient dumping ground for unwanted people now.

What were unwanted people? Well! They were little people who can't fight a big thing like the Army in charge of all the Aboriginal children – little pets owned by the Mothers of Government who claimed to love them more than their own 'inhumane' families. *Disgraceful business?* So inter-racially intolerant Australia was still the same old, same old. Aunty Bella Donna, now old as the hills, said that she felt like a thief, even a kidnapper, and she went around the place like a mad woman trying to mop up any insinuating words she thought were generating from out of thin air – *I told you myself, that I found her...in a tree*. If she had saved the girl or not – what did it matter? The girl could answer anyone herself about what it was like to be saved if she thought about pillaging a few words from somewhere in her mind to speak. She could have said that she did not know who she was. Or that she was so damaged that she could not speak. She was under a spell. But she felt nothing about pain or joy, night or day. She thought no life was worth saving if it was no longer your own.

I think that girl caused all of this Army business coming here. Holy smoke why had the swamp people forgotten? The Army had come a long time ago. But this swamp was plaguing for revenge and

pumped itself with so many compelling ideas of fear they were now far beyond the capacity to clean the floor off with a mop.

You should have left her where she was.

The cuckoos and cockatoos heard every single thing and, it might be, their nervous flinching and tapping of beaks on wood were imitating insecurities in the hearts of the children.

The light that came from the sky at night was relentless. It was the Army swinging around the searchlights. Where was the joy in this? Ungovernable thoughts unfurled into the atmosphere from the heads of people hiding beneath folded wings that might have belonged to the black swans that had died in the swamp. Yes, those grand old birds flying high into the greatness of life without paying a dollar for the flight could just be angels.

The swamp's murky water was littered with floating feathers, and it looked as though black angels had flown around in dreams of feeling something good about one another. *Well! Not around here when you were nobody, you don't feel like an angel*, Bella Donna said as though she read thoughts, but she was just passing traffic – generalising about what was going on in the girl's brain. She had no idea of how the girl saw those wasted grey-black feathers.

Ah! All these feathers were just sweet decoration. Feathers floating on fading dreams, obscuring the address that was difficult enough to remember for transporting the girl back to the tree, where in her mind the route she chased while sinking away into slithers of thoughts slipped silently in and out of the old threads woven through the forest of mangled tree roots. When she runs in these dreams, her footsteps crush the delicate crisscrossing patterns of the worn stories, that reached deep into sacred text, the first text, in saying, *We are who we are*. Fancy words, scrolling back and forth in the girl's mind, float like the feathers that stop her escaping back to the tree.

Rubbish stockings, tied with yellow clay-stained stockings – too many of these human nests encasing the swamp. The sand bank that had grown to mountainous heights still separated the brackish water from the sea, while a fast-growing population of Aboriginal people from far away places was settling, living the detention lifestyle right around the swamp.

The truck people kept on arriving. They were more like arriving cattle being segregated and locked up in ‘growth centres’, now called National Aboriginal Relocation Policy by some mind-dead politicians clap-trapping that they were dealing with rats. Suppose hard come, and easy go, for the traditional land of the swamp was snatched again. The real owners hidden in the throng could not count the number of times their land had been ripped from under their feet.

In this oasis of abandonment, home for thousands forcibly removed from other ‘more visible’ parts of Australia by the Government, the swamp became a well-known compound for legally interning *whoever* needed to be secluded far away behind a high, razor-edged fence from the decent people of mainstream civilization.

It was just a contemporary painting – a pastoral scene, the old lady surmised in the early days, while her eyes swung along the ever-increasingly crowded shoreline.

It's really insanity here, she told the Harbour Master about the people living all about the place. *It's not like it used to be, honest*, he replied, the magic lost from his voice. He was forgetting to sing his Mick Jagger songs. The girl sunk deeper into her thoughts: *So! What did I care? What about my story? Me! Different dollar please!*

Now while Bella Donna was carrying on like this, the population would peer out each day from package crates, donated cubbies from foreign aid, and rubbish that sprung up in the overcrowded slum now running around the entire shoreline. *What unimaginably*

difficult poverty-stricken circumstances, Bella Donna cried, wiping up her tears with a bit of newspaper. She consoled herself with poetry, reciting lines like John Shaw Neilson's *I waded out to a swan's nest at night and heard them sing...*

The Harbour Master stayed on top of his mountain, too frightened to leave. He was just sitting like everyone else, and listening to all kinds of fruitless, high volume *megaphoning* protest from the minority landowners trying to reach inside the closed ears of the Army men protecting the swamp. *What do we want? We want you white bastards outta here.* Waste of breath. Their mantra was five or six words more or less which meant the same thing: *Nobody asked us for permission, moron.* Every day, hours were put aside for protesting. It was like listening to a continuous earthquake of hate from a stadium built out of the swamp itself.

Can you tell me why those Aboriginal people had to be relocated here for – from across the country, Aunty? The girl sometimes imagines herself speaking politely, in a pretty voice, while mouthing off her soundless words.

God knows it was only a swamp, of what a storm gives, or easily takes away.

A low-pressure weather system was unpredictable and nobody knew whether it would bring more dry storms or blue skies sulking through another year. Still, a flood of mythical proportions would be required to drive the sand back into the sea. The ceremonies sang on and on for majestic ancestral spirits to turn up out of the blue, to stir up the atmospheric pressure with their breath, to turn the skies black with themselves, to create such a deluge to unplug the swamp, to take the sand mountain back to the sea. But more was said than done. The ancestral sand spirits flew like a desert storm and backed themselves even further up against the mountain. Silt gathering in the swamp lapped against the dwellings of the increasing population and crept further inwards as the

swamp decreased in size. This was the new story written in scrolls of intricate lacework formed by the salt crystals that the drought left behind.

The swamp's natural sounds of protest were often mixed with lamenting ceremonies. Haunting chants rose and fell on the water like a beating drum, and sounds of clap sticks oriented thoughts, while the droning didgeridoos blended all sounds into the surreal experience of a background listening, which had become normal listening. Listen! That's what music sounds like! The woman once explained to the girl that the music of epic stories normally sounded like this.

This is the world itself, disassembling its thoughts.

It was just the new ceremony of swamp dreaming, the girl thought, for what she called, Nowhere Special. She thought it suited the wind-swept surroundings of the dead swamp, where children played with sovereign minds, just by standing out in the wind to fill their cups with dust given to them by their ancestors.

Dust covered the roads and nobody knew where they were anymore, and the old woman claimed that even the bitumen highways were disappearing. Soon, no one would have any idea about how to reach this part of the world.

If you leave here, you know what is going to happen don't you? People are going to stop and stare at you the very instant they see the colour of your skin, and they will say: She is one of those wild Aboriginals from up North, a terrorist; they will say you are one of those faces kept in the Federal Government's *Book of Suspects*.

Bella Donna said that even though she had never seen this book for herself, she had heard that it had the Australian Government's embossed crest on the cover, and was kept at the Post Office where anyone could study it. What was a post office? The girl had listened.

This was the place where they kept faces plucked from the World Wide Web by Army intelligence looking at computers all day long, searching for brown- and black-coloured criminals, un-assimilables, illegal immigrants, terrorists – all the undesirables; those kind of people.

Never ever leave the swamp, she said, adding that her own skin did not matter, but the girl was the colour of a terrorist, and terrorism was against the law.

Bella Donna's home was camouflaged in the middle of the flotilla of junk littering what she called the vision splendid. The hull jutted out of the swamp like a war monument saluting in grey-coloured steel. This joyless, rusting hull with a long war record of stalking oceans looked like a traitor imprisoned away from the sea, but it was not alone in this polluting junkyard choked up with so-called 'lost' Army property. Its neighbours were the remains of all the *muwada* – cargo boats, trawlers, tugboats, fighter boats and rickety old fishing boats. These phantom vessels were either falling apart at the seams from decades of bobbing themselves into oblivion, or had become dilapidating wrecks.

While the hull was slowly sinking its huge belly in the yellow mud, the old foreign woman chopped carrots in the galley. She sang her premonitions as she chopped. *The hull was burying itself at its own funeral.* It was a kind of simple theory, as far as theories went. All kinds of conspiracies poured out of her old lips to the sound of the knife clipping the wood, chopping vegetables for another stew. *Was this going to be the unrecorded record of the world's longest suicide attempt?* The longest pause! You could feel the slide, slipping and dipping further into the mud, by a few millimetres a day.

The bounty the old white aunty business brought from overseas was about reading the signs of the unsaid and speaking about what

was not obvious. Well! Why not listen? The resident Queen of the manufacturing and boat-building industry did reigning well. She knew what you needed to feel in your bones about nautical living, boat steel and planks of wood. Even her bones could feel how the hull was reorienting itself towards the fanfare of East Coast cities. She asked any passing spirit bystander she noticed hanging around her kitchen, *How else was the hull going to capture the glory from which it had been robbed?*

Sounds were destroying the memory of the girl who only wanted to be living in her tree again. She felt as though she was locked inside a suitcase that the old woman dragged along and pussy-footed about on noisy gravel. It was the *walk of life*, old Aunty claimed. How it felt to be living inside the steel of a battling war hero robbed of the hullabaloo, feeding off the fanfare of pomp and ceremony, had it not been dishonoured. Sabotaged by traitorous telltale words, *Welcome Boat People*, which protesters had once sprawled in white paint across its side.

These words, decrypted many times by the old woman, had almost faded away from years of sitting in the swamp, just like the memory of most of those protesters of good causes, once they scrubbed up and rejoined their conservative Australian upbringings. The old woman said that she had often heard the hull moaning, crying out as though it had lost heart in the idea of achieving perfection through one last salute. Let there be Death! The girl walked around with the hull's colossal lament impaled in her heart. *What could I do?* She demanded. There was nothing she could do about glory.

So! Bad luck and so forth, Aunty said, because anyone could dream like fish on the other side of the sand mountain, where shifting winds were funnelling the outgoing tide back to the sea.

The swamp people were really frightened of the flotilla. Some would not even look at the decaying boats. Some claimed that they could not see any dumped boats out there on their pristine swamp. *Ya only see what you want to see and that's that.* They did not go around looking for things outside of the *sanctum* of traditional knowledge. They said old scrap boats were dumped in the Congo, in real swamps, among the boa constrictors. Well! You learn a lot of things like that from looking at too many of those old movies.

Nor did it take much from a separatist-thinking swamp person to believe that Bella Donna was a real ghost even before she was dead, or that girl *whatsherface* too – for turning up years after she was supposed to be dead. Rah! Rah! Everything was vapour. There were plenty of people around who said that they would rather be dead than sniffing old fat hissing from a frypan where ghosts were frying up their fish. Exactly right! *Whitefella ghosts, seasonal plagues of grey rat ghosts, other vermin ghosts like swarming cockroaches, march flies and infestations of hornet nests.*

So floating junk, if seen in the light of having too many foreigners circulating in one's own spiritual world, could always be ignored for what it was – other people's useless business. Of course it was infuriating for all of the witnesses of the swamp world to see so much waste not being put to some proper use. After all, anyone could see that foreign ghosts were not particularly harmful if you got past the innocuous cunning way that they could steal a whole country, kill your people, and still not pay all those centuries' worth of rent. It was just that all those men, women and children in the detention camp living cheek to jowl in broken-down shacks, crates and cardboard boxes had no affinity with dead strangers. Cramp was better. So much preferable to being haunted when you did not feel like being frightened by other people's ghosts.

Only the old woman had decided to be radical by taking up a grandiose lifestyle on one of the flotilla's rust buckets, and in

the end, when she had claimed responsibility for the girl, she had taken her out there on the water to live. She said that the hull was part of the Australian way of life. She was helping to make Australia a great country. *I am not a separatist from Australia*, she claimed.

The detention camp was now a settled population of traditional owners from kingdoms near and far, and swamped with a big philosophy about the meaning of home. Why do they do it? *They could also seek asylum and permanent Australian residency by living on navy junk*, the old woman claimed, referring to her hull as a solid piece of Australia that was immune to traditional land ownership laws. She liked being part of mass Australia and owning her own home. It gave her a sense of authority when it suited her. *You think that they would want to grab the chance to become fully Australian. A chance to live like everyone else.*

It was easy, and eerie, to see bleeding-heart, rust-staining yellow water. It gave you the shivers. If you looked closely at the flotilla for long enough you saw people at war. Saw military parades. Dead men marching up and down on the decks, and in your sleep you dreamt of people screaming and running for their lives from the explosions. The girl did not say much about that, or the ghosts screaming in her sleep about the wars they had never left.

The rotten and broken-down vessels were a jarring sight, but the old queen marvelled over the slicks of pollution – the strange panorama of toxic waste swimming on the surface of the water. The water gleamed with blue and purple oxidising colours, and if you were to look long enough at the sun hitting the swamp from 1400 to 1600 hours in the winter months, this polluted glare became even more dazzling – where the water was broken into trails of rainbows made by the movement of swimming swans.

Swamp people regarded this particular sight as something

evil, created by devils, easy, easy now, and in this respect the swans coming to the swamp with no story for themselves generated a lot of talk. They were suspected of being contaminated with radioactivity leaking from some of the hulls. Of course it was mentioned, considered, even nurtured by the swamp-dwellers' constituency, now permanently submerged and half-drowning in open wounds, by asking forlornly any question that would not be answered such as, *Was this the silent killer then, the Army's final weapon of mass destruction?*

No more! It was easier for the swamp people to shift unanswered questions to somebody else – *Here! Chuck it over to him*, passing the buck, and end up blaming the old Harbour Master for the pollution. They complained of not seeing him remove one speck of sand, and that the situation had gotten worse, and whinged, *He was supposed to be a healer for the country. That's what he came here for when he could have just arrived in a dream and blasted the mountain like that, like an email, and finished the job off like we asked him to do. Just get rid of the sand mountain, that's all we wanted, and he could have done that from anywhere, instead of ending up coming here personally. We can't look after him forever. Well! Pronto. We are waiting...and he should finish the job off straight away, not taking years to do something.*

The sand mountain that the Harbour Master lived on seemed to be growing even further towards the sky, while its shadow now rested over the swamp for a good part of the day. Anyone would have thought that the Harbour Master was actually shovelling the sand up to the sky himself. The shadow spread uncertainty as to where it would all end, as much as being a feast to be devoured by the swamp's full-time philosophers, soothsayers and fortune-tellers emerging at the crack of dawn from their homes of cardboard and similar stuff – like worms crawling out of a hole, to look way up the mountain where they could see for themselves how it had grown a couple of centimetres higher during the night.

All the great holy and wise people of the swamp would come and stand around on the shoreline looking across the water towards the hull, and while deep in whispered conversation with each other, you could tell by their sour facial expressions that they were not happy at all about what was happening to their land. The girl thought that they were accusing the old woman of upsetting the Harbour Master and jumping in with the status quo. It was during this time that Oblivia began to understand that nobody noticed her on the hull. It was obvious that the locals acted as though she never existed, was too unimaginable, unable to be recognised and named.

Traitors! Bella Donna's voice rang like a big tower bell over the water to any assembly on the foreshore looking her way whom she accused of not being patriots to the Australian flag. She had good communication skills for throngs. The whole riled swamp now ate each other's venom for breakfast. They yelled at her: *Yea! That's your story. Patriotism! Ha! We'll show you what bloody patriotism means.* A blaze of colour of Aboriginal flags unfurled in the wind, some intact, some tattered, or just bits of faded material, even paper coloured black, yellow or red, were hoisted up on sticks of makeshift flagpoles in her face.

Boat person! Loser! Terrorist!

As the worldwide know-all of everything, the old woman claimed that most of the rotting boats dotting the lake had belonged to an army of textbook terrorists who invaded other countries. She had once chopped carrots for terrorists and claimed: *I am recognised in all the seas of the world.* She waved her stick at the sea-wrecks bobbing up and down or stuck in mud, noting with sage-like authority which of the old boats had carried people she knew, which had run from wars in far away countries and which had fled over dangerous seas trying to reach this unwelcoming land. She knew millions of people, shouting it around, *I knew all those people*

who didn't even make it. Those left behind to suffer the hand of fate. Those millions of refugees out there somewhere who were still dreaming of coming to your paradise, she yelled.

Water levels went up and down, and during the winter months many wrecks were left squatting in the mud.

What became of their owners? The girl mouthed this question as many times as Bella Donna spoke the words for her, hoping to coach Oblivia to ask more about her sea journeys.

The earth buries the dead. Lovers to Lovers. Dust to Dust. Their families hate all of us, Bella Donna said, giving the same answer every time.

Far off behind the dwellings on the other side of the swamp, on the top of the sand dune mountain that blocked the channel between the swamp and the sea, now that the Army had taken over the Harbour Mastering responsibilities, the old Harbour Master had become even more reclusive. His mind felt strange. Useless. He felt unable to control what was happening any more. He hardly ever scrambled down the sand ghost, or longed for the pleasure of brushing past the swans guarding the hulls in the middle of the night, and those old sailor spirits crying down in the mud, while rowing the stagnant waters to visit Bella Donna of the Champions.

His worries grew proportionally with the sand mountain steadily reaching towards its zenith, knowing undeniably it would eventually be vanquished by its own weight. He fretted about this final collapse. What would he do? This was the reason that he could hardly risk leaving the mountain, yet he had to see the old woman to tell her of his dreams.

He frequently dreamt that he would leave the swamp by clinging to a ghost flying like a huge Zeppelin of sand through the atmosphere, as the drought moved somewhere else. Culture was

such a formidable thing to him now. He did not know how to hold on to such a thing anymore. This idea of the sand taking him away from his country was his constant concern – the thing he had to tell her – to be calmed. Only she knew how to look at him straight in the eye and tell him he was wrong, and when she smiled, it was as though she had looked through music – a pleasing melody, that had come out of his mouth.

Whatever she heard reflected through the filter of foreign musical manuscripts nestled in her brain of tonally lifeless melodies, he could have been playing a shakuhachi in Japan, or whistling like an Asian songster, or seducing the world through a bamboo flute. How would she hear him? She was still attached to the libraries and archives left behind in the western part of the world. It was as though she had never left.

Sorry! Really sorry! About the sand! We will both go together, he warned, turning away, and with a further thousand apologies, forced his rowboat through the league of hungry swans packed around the hull. Until finally, he ran back up the mountain to wait, too anxious of missing the moment when the ghost would decide to collapse and be gone with the wind.

The girl felt the anticipation of change creeping towards the swamp. She already saw the old man as streamers of sand blowing their own *espressivo andante* of an exodus-song for homeland.

Him sand – every grain is sacred. The Harbour Master was desperate to inform others to be prepared to leave on the big journey, calling on the locals, even the alienated and stigmatised truck people from the cities, and whoever went up to the top of the mountain to ask him why he lived his lonely life, separate and unsociable and isolated in this outstation from the swamp's growth town.

Well! It was truly something strange to do, the old woman even thought that, although she was also living apart from the rest of the

community. But unlike the Harbour Master who everyone seemed to care about, nobody came over to the hull and asked her what her responsibility was.

You should leave and the sand might follow you instead, she had suggested, and he laughed.

She told him that people were wishing on a falling star for bulldozers to come and destroy the sand mountain.

They say it was foreign people thinking in a pristine environment that was making this trouble etcetera! The sand got no mind himself. Nothing to do with it.

The Harbour Master was insulted to be called a foreign person who did not know his own culture. He stomped around on the mountain. Sand rolled through the air, teasing the whole swamp before flying off somewhere. He could not get the insult out of his head.

Old Aunty ignored it all. At times like this, she just played Hoffmeister type of music on her swan-bone flute to the swans.

Pythons and lizards, the fattest catfish from the swamp, bats and marsupials, were thrown like flower petals up the sand mountain as offerings. All of it landed with a thud. Taipan snakes shimmering about, danced amongst dead catfish with bodies coiled and heads raised off the ground.

Don't expect me to drive it away, the defunct Harbour Master called down to the gathered people below who thought he, an old man, just an old *malbu*, could have so much power in his body that he could snarl like some unidentifiable animal throwing poisonous snakes around in the sand and move a mountain away with his bare hands. But! He said his sand was welcome to stay regardless of all the inconveniences. *It will go away when it wants.* Well! Anyone could be a genius about drought saying something like that.

Bella Donna was sulking because the Harbour Master had

become too tied up in matters that did not concern her and preoccupied with arguing with the community now doubting his powers as a healing man for their country. These days she even tended to ignore Oblivia, and the girl felt neglected, a bit miffed, and renewed her vow never to speak again. Who was she kidding? The truth of the matter was that Oblivia had long forgotten how to speak, and did not know she could speak, and had no confidence to speak. She was glad that the Harbour Master had stopped coming to the hull. She was happy to hear him arguing with everyone thinking he was a fake, because he probably was as far as she was concerned. The reason she thought so was because she knew the Harbour Master only had a big mouth and that was not going to move the sand mountain. No. The Harbour Master was not even a big-shot character from one of the old woman's many treasured books. And certainly, Bella Donna had not incorporated him in the long self-edifying narratives about her journey to this, the concluding triumphant chapter of her life.

It particularly annoyed Oblivia that Bella Donna remained fascinated by her ugly-face ghost-man the Harbour Master and that the old woman had stopped telling her stories. In particular, one obscure and favourite story about a little *juka* who was called God's Gift. The old woman claimed she had seen the boy many times. She was always looking out for him and wondering when she would see him again. His home was the world itself because he was a special gift from God. She had heard about this boy people had been waiting for to care for their deer on the other side of the planet. His aura was seen standing among rays of sunlight shining through a dark misty forest next to snow-capped mountains where God lived. Or, she told of people having seen a vision of the boy living in the swamps throughout the world where swans lived, and also where God lived. She told stories of how the boy was thought to live in the houses of ancient cities where fig trees grew out of

cracks in the walls and from the rooftops and, only rarely, could you get past the troupe of monkeys who were guarding him, to see him more closely. It seemed as though she had seen this boy all over the world, or wherever you found God.

The old woman often saw him visiting family along the swamp. He was always visiting she claimed. *Oh! You should meet him one day. He is a proper good boy. A boy the whole world would love.* The girl scanned all the shack houses around the shore of the swamp hoping to locate the ones where monkeys lived and where fig trees grew from the rooftops, among the din of ghetto blasters and loud television.

The old woman claimed that she had just seen him running around the swamp with his pet monkeys and even with a fox in his arms. God was here. *Did you see him too?* She thought anyone would have noticed somebody like that – a gift from God. Bella Donna would sigh and resign herself to failure, knowing that telling stories to the child was pure waste. The little girl had no imagination: *Never sees a thing.*

Look out! Taipan snakes dancing all over the ground.

It was impossible for Aunty Bella Donna of the Champions to conduct herself like normal people, like those who did not call out for all manner of things to be brought to them – calling to the skies to bring her swans. In that *la la* voice of hers, she snorted about the swamp's negativity, *Why be like other people calling all these trillions and zillions of flies to come here, dragonflies, sandflies, march flies, blowflies to swim in their tea cup?*

Believe it or not, everyone thought that the old white lady was one of those people who had invented climate change and that she really had brought the swans to the North to live on the swamp. The old black swans had heard her voice running along streams of dust floating in the breezes, that dropped in and out of

the skies, and back and forth along telegraph wires, and through kilometres of pipelines, and on bitumen roads of state highways, until reaching the droughts in the South, where great colonies of swans normally lived. A flock of swans deranged by drought, then another, and another, laboured the distance, flew the same path to the swamp when it stopped raining, no *janja* for what seemed for ever, when the wetlands dried up. No one cared for the swans coming to the swamp's detention camp. Nobody knew what it meant. The very presence of those swans living with Aunt Bella Donna of the Champions on a swamp that belonged to a few broilgas, linked them very firmly with what they called, *some other kind of madness*.

In yellow froth and feather waters covered by films of dust, the swans led mottled brown and grey cygnets to the old lady whenever she appeared on her raft. They whistled soft music while gliding alongside their swan caller's floating platform. Her raft, constructed of Melaleuca paperbark trunks, was tied together with randomly found wire and rope, and that it floated at all was thanks to a little bit of starlight for luck. She looked awkward – juggernauting long poles that moved the platform. It was like looking at a brightly dressed, long-legged water bird walking through the muddy water. All along the foreshore, the swamp dwellers watched through the permanent haze of insects at what was happening to their lot. The old loved weeping spring was now the stagnant water among sad old lilies and long wriggling serpents.

Those black swans would glide from all corners of the swamp to the old woman. They moved through the water with their long straight necks held high and their fine black-feathered heads slightly cocked to one side to listen to her stories about the world she had known. Drops of water would fall from their red beaks, with the signature white bar above the nostril, while they listened

to her. Continuously quavering, their beaks dipped slightly into the surface of the water, testing the level, sensing the evaporating moisture running away into the atmosphere. Suddenly, a swan would orate the reply by arching its neck towards the sky and trumpeting a long, mournful call. Soon all that could be heard for kilometres around were swan bugles heralded skywards in prayers for rain.

In those days of graceful gliding swans, swirling around in loops in settled softness, there was often a serene calmness that ran throughout the swamp. The swans stayed all seasons, even until the swamp almost dried up when the old loved spring did not flow. Sometimes, the whole mass would suddenly disappear in the middle of the night and the swamp would seem empty and silent – as though they had never been there – then unexpectedly, they returned, homing to the old woman. Perhaps it was her stories. Or, she really could call swans.

Among the miracles of over-crowding, conjuring more, praying for more – more swans arrived instead of rain on the swamp. Though they were previously unknown in this environment, the swamp people thought that the swans had returned to a home of ancient times, by following stories for country that had been always known to them. Swans had Law too. But now, the trouble was, nobody in the North remembered the stories in the oldest Law scriptures of these big wetland birds.

The southern swans kept descending in never-ending ribbons from the sky, and some said it was because they had noticed their kinsfolk below, detained and locked up. Their migrating journeys to follow their people across the continent had already taken many months. The swans were gathering into flocks of thousands, crowded in the swamp in black clouds that the old woman poled her raft through as she fed them.

Throngs of people gathered on the shoreline to throw nets, to catch one or two fingerling fish – and watch Bella Donna. It gave them something to talk about. They laughed. It was fun to watch the floating contraption with pole sticks moving abruptly through the choppy waters where the swans swam idly up and down in the turbulence. But seriously, no one had ever hoped or prayed for swans to come into their lives. Why would they? Swan eggs. Cygnets. Good things. But not for eating in this place! These were Law birds with no custodians in their rightful place. No one was that far down on their luck.

And to see the swans swimming about was considered a bit of luck for softening the look of the polluted mess of the place, staring at persistent drought, or having an accidental bomb fall in your face on a regular basis from the Army, or your spiritual ancestors dug up by miners and turning spiteful on you, or Army surveillances protecting your little children as though they were the parents who loved them. Everything had its impact. And bugger it all, apart from the things that were supposed to happen to close the gap of disadvantage in all of those makeshift dwelling places, a swan lake had emerged in the chaos. So that was one good story for local folk to say: *Wasn't that lucky?*

Yet what was the real lexicon about swans in this swamp? The swamp people, tight-lipped though they were about the presence of swans, really feared any ancient business that was not easily translatable in the local environment. There was total agreement on that. Old wise folk were talking strongly about it too, saying: *We do have our own local birds. Can't you see them everywhere if you bothered to look? All kinds.* Of course they had. Currawongs abounded. Noisy miners ran through the place. Thousands of brolgas were standing around, *tall and proud*, and living happily with the swamp people for aeons thank you very much. The grey-feathered cranes with long stick-legs were the emblematic bird of the local environs.

Brolga! *Kudalku!* Brolga! A bird of a big dreaming; a bird with a bare red-skinned head sitting on top of a long skinny neck joining a large body covered in grey feathers.

These birds crowded the lake too. They were the guardian angels roosting on every rooftop of the shanty shacks to watch over families – all of their kinfolk living inside. These homeland brolgas casually walked into any house without fear, gently prancing off the ground with spread wings, and stealing food they plucked straight from the kitchen table in a casual leap. No one cared less about what brolgas did as creatures that belonged there, with every right to have a bit of food – and who would harm a brolga anyway?

The girl fed the swans. She ran through the water with the fledging cygnets. She started to believe that by helping them to survive on the polluted swamp, she might learn how to escape as freely as they had been able to take flight. She wanted to fly. Dreams of stick wings attached to her arms that possibly grew feathers filled her mind with flights to escape. A great space in her mind played with words – *disappearance*, and *invisible*. She never thought that escaping a life of living with Bella Donna of the Champions was impossible. She was often flying like a swan. She watched the old woman obsessively, and decided to learn how to talk to swans too. Yes, she would be fluent in swan talk. She could feel the miracle of leaving every time swans lifted themselves off the water, the lightness of being airborne, in watching them fly until they disappeared through the dusty haze, and leaving her to dream about all of those invisible places she had heard the old woman talking about, that lay outside the swamp.

She watched the swans growing fatter and heavier, each a little battleship, that could still run in a rush across the water to take off, and fly back in to grab food thrown into the air. They swarmed in packs of hundreds for the food that the old woman

threw at them. Other people's food! Piles of it in plastic bags and buckets, dumped like daily offerings to spirits on her floating platform. Old Bella Donna even had the audacity to swan around, humpy to humpy, counselling the greedy, and then collecting all the food scraps that anyone could have eaten themselves. She took everything: a pile of finely chopped yellowing cabbage, egg shells, old bread, wilting lettuce leaves, potato peels, fish bones, orange skins, a shrivelled apple core. She poured the lot onto the water and watched the frenzy of swans and brolgas devour every piece of scrap in moments. Then the swans drifted off, and resumed an endless activity of sifting waters stuffed with algal blooms, scum on the surface, and slime-covered waterweeds.

As time passed, the swamp people grew skinnier than any normal person sweating it out in the Tropics, while the swans became fatter on their food. The old woman, ancient now, did not have a guilty thought in her head. She prowled about on moonless nights to steal food right from the arms of children. Little things sound asleep from the exhaustion of clinging to their own special watermelon, from watermelon day, army fruit, good fruit given to them to treasure by the protecting armed forces. Such hot summer nights. Very easy being dead to the world. Deaf to the feral cat jumping out of the way when the door creaked, the breeze tinkling chime bells, or a thousand things moving, banging and clapping, while the ghostly old woman with thieving household brolgas walked straight in to snatch food right out of their little fingers.

The girl followed the old woman wading amongst the swans floating on their fat bellies, their red beaks preening themselves right next to their old benefactor's bright floral-patterned dress billowing in the water. Silently, the girl was a shadow that listened to the stories and secrets whispered into swan ears, and whatever she remembered, it was mostly poetry for swans.

Swamp people said the swans were frightening them. They

accused the swans of looking right into their souls and stealing the traditional culture. Bella Donna said she did not know why a swan would want to look into somebody's empty soul. Just an insult a minute. She had already looked inside their souls herself and said that she had found nothing there. *Just thin bits of weak weeds lying on the bottom of your guts trying to stay alive.* Perhaps swamp people had empty souls, but they did have pride. They jumped around a lot and told her, *Enough's enough now, don't you go talking like that.* Anyway, she retaliated: *What could there possibly be for a swan to see except these little bits of weeds lying on a tin plate in a tiny pile at the bottom of your soul?*

Guess there was no answer for that.

But red-ringed, black-eye swans dipping their beaks like fortune-tellers swilling and swirling old tea dregs around while swimming by the girl could create beautiful thoughts, staring straight into her eyes. The girl in turn thought she might read their fortunes in the language nature had written in the blackish-grey-tipped curled tail feathers scalloped across their backs. It was how swans read each other when choosing a mate. She was determined to solve the mystery of why they had left the most beautiful lakes in the country – a vision created in her head by the old woman's stories of other places. Her existence revolved around learning the route they took, how they had crossed the interior country, the old woman's geography of featureless sand dunes stretching to kingdom come, just to reach a North country polluted swamp. *It was the love stories,* the old woman chuckled to herself. She was amused at the girl's addiction to bolt holes. In the muddy waters the old woman went on feeding squads of cygnets volumes of a tangled, twisted love story about the Gods only knew what, which they soaked up like pieces of wet bread.

All children wanted were answers to universal questions about how people should live, and strangely, the girl thought she would find these answers by tossing herself in the old woman's madness of singing to swans. Just as she believed there was a secret route back to the tree – she believed there had to be a secret route that had brought the swans up to the top of the country. The mysteries were running away from her. Her mind too tied up in a jungle of tracks to run. Another way. Hidden passages. Places to hide. Always running. She had to become Auntie Bella Donna of the Champions who knew how to call swans, and time became desperate. But Oblivia remained out of kilter with the old lady's shadow, never quite fitting the cast of the sun, while the old woman sung her stories slowly, moving more and more slowly those days.

This story that began across the ocean, in a far-away land of a country which had already lost its name. In this place people were often telling common stories about themselves as they looked out at the awfulness of their land. The stories were never about history, or science, or technology. They talked about a useless landscape that grew nothing and which most of them could not see anyhow because of their blindness. These people spent ages comparing better times before who can tell what happened, except saying: We were already late when the God of the world said Git.

Ice-covered lakes dried up where the swans once lived. Beautiful creatures of snow-white feathers with yellow beaks had flown half-dead, half-way around the globe to reach extraordinary destinations in faraway lands.

Here, dead clumps of grasses by the sea billowed until whisked from the earth and into highways of dry wind crossing the continent that went round the world and back again. Trees stopped measuring the season and died slowly in ground bone dry several metres deep. Finches had been the first to swarm into jerking clouds hightailing it out of their hemisphere. In winter or

summer, only the old-fashion homely birds scratched the ground for moisture from long ago.

You could see the white eyes of the old fishermen watching the flowing rivers in their memories, listening to them go on and on, it was like listening to the poetry of a canary's song dancing in those minds to sweeten the drought...

Draw breath, Auntie. Frequently the girl would interrupt her by laying her hand on the old woman's arm. Life was short. The old woman spoke faster, and was short of breath. The girl was greedy to know exactly what the old woman had to say and nodded repeatedly at her, asking Bella Donna the questions about what makes the world go around. Oblivia needed explanations quickly, not blind fishermen. How do you fly solo? Which way should you run to escape this world? Where do the swans go? No one else knew how to tell her how to shuffle the cards, so what harm was there in believing a mad person? The old woman finally leant forward and whispered into the girl's ear that the best journey she had taken in all of her travels in the world was with a swan in a sampan. The girl convinced herself that only the mad people in the world would tell you the truth when madness was the truth, when the truth itself was mad. Then the old woman began a new love story, *All rivers flow to the sea*, and its breath finished when Auntie Bella Donna of the Champions of the earth, who might have been an angel, died.