

Chapter 1: The Cut Snake Picking wildflowers, which even during my childhood was illegal, my grandmother woke a small tiger snake which coiled itself about her hand but was still too sleepy to bite her. Later someone would joke that this was her punishment and she'd reply sternly that it was on family property and she only ever took one or two. I don't think anyone ever referred to the occasion in the twenty-five years that passed until her death. But I had been there, along with my brother, my cousins, my mother, auntie and uncle. A whole family had witnessed her moment of terror, bewilderment, and relief. The snake was beheaded, its whip of a body thrown in the boot and carted back to the farm where it writhed on the ground until sunset - the headless stub clotted with dirt. Just like the old wives tale? The farm, or Wheatlands as it was called, was our escape. We went there every second weekend, spent whole holidays there. When my mother was working her way through university and making a living by teaching piano it was the farm that provided us with hand-me-down clothing. When things were emotionally hard it was the farm that offered refuge. The things that kids dreamed about doing in our suburban school could be done on the farm. So, from as far back as I can remember, the farm was an alternative reality. Even if things were bad in the country - drought, the Meckering Quake, poor seasons, it still remained a place that wasn't constrained by the laws of the city. I helped my uncle and cousins plant trees to reclaim land lost to salinity. We planted thousands, ringing the salt like the circles of Inferno, working our way through the hot snow, the frozen centre that would burn a hole straight through you. This desolation became mythological for me. It replaced the language of place that had been seemingly stripped away with the scrub. The salt was the poison. The salt was the truth behind it all and the rich green and the yellow and then burnt stubble of the crops were only an illusion. I remember the first hay baler coming onto the place. We'd seen it the year before at the York Show. There might have been balers around for years but it was the first time one came onto Wheatlands. Before that it was stooks - and I remember the Nyoongah families out in the blazing sun. And I remember someone telling me that the local Nyoongahs had been deceived into accepting a bent shotgun and a sack of flour for the district. And this was told to me by someone who'd prospered from their loss. There was guilt there: there was guilt all around. Some of the young blokes in town expressed their guilt by getting pissed and getting stuck into any Nyoongah they could find. The Nyoongahs don't want their guilt. That's what guilt does. They want land back. We can keep our guilt. My cousins ride their bikes up to the house-dam paddock and park them in an old rainwater tank that lies on its side. The school bus comes past and picks them up. I've got a few days off school. I can't remember why now. I take a twenty-two rifle and wander off up to Uncle Jack's bush. Uncle Jack is fanatical about gates - like most farmers - so I climb fences instead of taking the risk of not doing them up properly. I've always been paranoid. And a little obsessive-compulsive. I'd have to go back and check it after walking ten steps away. And then again, maybe. I rest the gun against a post. I climb over, catching my jeans on the barbed wire. The fence twitches and the gun slides to the ground. It's a single shot bolt action and there's nothing in the chamber. I heard once of a guy resting his gun and then climbing and the fence twitching and the gun falling. It was loaded and shot him dead. I shoot twenty-eight parrots. I put them in a sack I've tucked into my belt. I take them back for the pigs. The pigs eat colour. I shoot so many I run out of bullets. There's no one around to say that's enough. The barrel is about as hot as a single shot twenty-two can get. My Uncle Jack working in a nearby paddock remarks on it when I see him, walking back to the house. I shoot the galahs off my television aerial, he says. He approves. They get into the crop, he says. He is a water diviner. We believe in diviners where I come from. And we're right. I'm a vegan now. Have been for fourteen years. I like to think that every parrot I shot has a memorial in one of my poems. But we all know memorials are hollow gestures designed to appease our own guilt. I killed and killed and killed. Sometimes I would go with my cousin

Ian into the centre of the salt, into the tamarisks, and watch the finches. The guns stayed at home. My father is managing the farm of a well-known Perth tycoon. His thing is machinery - hes a mechanic by trade. A very good one. We dont see eye to eye on much. Hes into football - did his knee in playing for the East Perth Colts. He was going to the top. His sons have a responsibility. We, or at least I, dont compute. Its Mullewa, north of Geraldton. My dad shoots unwanted puppies, my brother and I get stuck in a silo, Dads new wife packs us thick lunches which we take into the scrub. The tractors have wheels twice our size. Theyre called Steigers and Panthers. We trap parrots to take back to city aviaries. Two years later our mother moves us to Geraldton - she has been transferred. We go to the same school she teaches in. Dad has gone further north so hes a long way away. He only stayed in Mullewa for a couple of years. Hes in Karratha now. Soon hell be in Carnarvon - one of the most racist towns in Australia. Geraldton is not far behind. There are fights between the blacks and whites most nights down on Front Beach. The cops beat Aborigines up in the cells. Everyone knows it. Geraldton is country and coastal town in one. The farm meets the surf, the crayfishermen meet the cockies. This also creates tensions. Fights are frequent. The explorer Gray is much spoken of. He had an interest in Aboriginal dialects and put together a dictionary when he was in Albany. My work on him - *The Benefaction 3* - is to be published twenty years later in Cambridge. Its about language and reterritorialisation. We get out into the country in minutes on our bikes. Its drier and windier than Wheatlands. And being on the coast its sandplain country. It gets so windy that around Greenough the trees are bent almost horizontal. They appear on postcards and are a local attraction. In the town its suburbs. We understand both spaces. They are fluid here. For me, its a love-hate relationship. The school encourages my writing. I retreat further and further into books. We live in the old Geraldton hospital - its a colonial mansion opposite the town prison. Mum gets it cheap through the education department. I make explosives and the results of my endeavours make the newspapers and are heard ten ks away. I go to ground. There are tunnels under the house and shadows move through the corridors. Many people died there. Some years back, visiting Anthony Lawrence who lived in Geraldton for a few years in the early nineties, I discovered that our home, the hospital, had been subsumed by a shopping centre car park. I might be twenty. Im looking after the farm for a couple of months. Im a heavy drinker now. It will last for over another decade and then stop. For good. Im drinking a beer and talking with my good friend Craig on the verandah. I read him a poem Ive written. Were going to see the world together. Ive already been to Europe and am fired up. Thing is, though, I know that it will only make me look closer at whats here. The further you move away, the closer you get. Craig takes photographs. Of the Needling Hills. Of the salt. The agony of a sky whose blue is not on a palette, defies the laws of the spectrum. He photographs parrots and the shadows of York gums. He photographs me starting the pump up at the housedam. It draws water into a tank on the dam wall which then gravity feeds to a tank down the hill near the house. Another pump drags water from this tank and onto the lawn. Which even in the middle of summer is fluorescent green. And there are roses. While all about is dead brown and yellow with mobs of sheep stretched out to collect the narrow shade. But then the drought will come and therell be no water and hope will decline with the colour of the lawn. And the locusts will come and eat everything green - even the shade cloth. My uncle is a church alderman. The parish minister is a family friend who loves poetry. The salt glows and I tell Craig about how ten years earlier a tv crew from the ABCs TDT show came out to make a programme about reclaiming saline land. Its hard not to be biblical. Thats the mythology. Mythology is about incursion. It wasnt mythology before settlement. The word is corrupt.

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