

Chapter One - Manner of Bodies

Mine, in the manner of bodies, has returned decade by decade what it once claimed decade by decade---as much change from fifty to sixty, from sixty to seventy, as there was from ten to twenty, from twenty to thirty.

Growing up. Growing down.

Not complaining. Granted wishes, none would be for a return to the young adult---all those hormones wading through the brain, all that confusion.

All those mundane urgencies and mysteries, often dark, of tribe and sex and status.

The path to the future veiled.

Despite all of that, I enjoyed my youth. I have enjoyed my entire life.

Younger, year after year, without reservation, the body did what it was asked to do.

Raw vigour. Quick reflexes. Keen balance. Fast sleep.

No physical hesitation.

I prefer my person now, can bask in the discrimination it has earned and lounge in the self-discipline it has learned.

Just lately, the body craves rest.

I have saved the sedate for now. Writing.

Here I sit. At the desk. In the middle of the day. Gazing at near gum trees pruned for clear height and fire resistance, looking like they have been grazed by giraffes.

I hardly know how to proceed. I wonder if I can flatten the swell of birds or fix the smell of lemons onto a page.

A late challenge.

Chapter Two - Once upon a Time

Now that I have decided to write, how should I begin?

“Once upon a time....” Tuned to the mind of a child.
There must be advantage in fresh ears.

“In the beginning....” There was a time when time
had not started. Borrow the importance of creation?
Lure attention by alluding to the voice(s) of God (gods)?

“Love like....” Simile and Metaphor. Nuggets shinning in the dust.

“A night of full moon....” Mystery? Romance? A complicated
cure for warts?

“We approached Tethered World IV....” Science Fiction? Freedom from cultural
furniture, from time and place.

“We shared....” Utopian?

A parable to tickle the mind and define morality?

Myth? The way it was. Is. Will always be.

An epic poem? The world might be moving towards a common culture.
Perhaps the time is ripe for a new epic. Coming soon to a venue near you!

Comic book?

All of them?

Perhaps a suicide note.

A suicide note. They get read. Every time.

And, as suicide notes require no commitment to style, schools or vogues,
writing can be tailored to circumstance.

Just like life.....And death.

Chapter Three - Light on Land

End of the day. Sun setting behind the mountains to the west, bottom edge of local sunsets.

Light on the land has turned red, blush of another done day.

Cockatoos, flickering cloud of commuters, have flown over, in a mob of hundreds, from feeding grounds to the south, dropping off permanent pairs as they pass over nesting sites.

The couple that occupy a hollow red gum just north of our own roost are murmuring to one another as they settle for the night. Intimate conversation of a well established bond. A complete contrast to the shrieks that sulphur-crested cockatoos are famous for, ear-splitting warnings or announcements of position designed for distance.

The wind is up. Cadmium red stems of the yellow boxes are showing--- usually concealed beneath the grey-yellow-green leaves that are now dancing a flutter. Soft roar of white noise, surf sound of dry land.

Magpies carol, closing the day as they opened it. Kookaburras cackle to the roost.

The bats begin their bent night flights, sonar-searching for insects.

Sun seekers retreat to shelter.

Kangaroos have gravitated down the slopes, snacking at clearings on their way to serious grazing in the paddocks of the valley.

Possoms are stirring.

Time to go in.

Chapter Four - A Short History

Suicide notes are usually short and to the point. "She done me wrong."
"My life is a mess." "I didn't mean to do it." "My mother is a witch."

Please be patient.

It is impolite to rush someone's death.

I still have good days.

Writing this note is not as straightforward as it seemed before I began.

There is a residential precedent. An antecedent that you might like to know about.

Short histories are de rigueur in Australia.

The Aboriginals (longest surviving cultures in the world), black in the blazing sun, highest possible contrast, seem to have been curiously invisible, non-existent to encroaching settlers, so here all of history is contained in the last two hundred years.

Everything else is anthropology.

Alice lived here before we came. Alice was born here. More than 120 years ago. Most of European history in this country.

Despite her resolve, Alice didn't die here, but on the road between here and the district hospital. Nearly fifty years ago.

Medicos are expected to intervene in the end; people become patients.

Alice wasn't having it. At the age of 87, she escaped the ward on foot, action louder than words.

Under five feet tall, larger than life, deceased on the roadside headed for home. Alice's walking euthanasia.

Eloquence without words.

You can understand there is a certain intensity to be honoured.

Matching Alice's measured pace.

Death as commitment to control.

Be patient.

There will be a final scene.

Not walking, but death by determination to be home all the same.

Chapter Five - Nearly Deja Vu

From California, I settled in Melbourne in the mid-sixties.

While scrambling to decode the culture, so similar on the surface to America, so different beneath, I lived with a long queasy constant of almost deja vu.

Brand names, clothes, popular music, language, endless suburbs, food and social institutions were often identical to their counterparts in the States.

A "find the hidden elements in this picture" puzzle. It kept me slightly off balance for years.

Religious fanatics founded America. Australia started with convicts and keepers. Church in one land, prison in the other.

While Americans believe that God is on their side, Australians are reluctant to recognise any authority.

Americans often believe that nothing important happens outside America.

Australians are inclined to think that the important always happens somewhere else.

Australian ecosystems are ancient, fragile, subtle and unpredictable.

American ecosystems are adolescent, robust, obvious and reasonably reliable.

America has four seasons, symmetrical trees, normal four-legged placental mammals, abundant water and rich soils. Land of opportunity.

Australia has irregular subdivisions of weather, asymmetrical trees, weird hopping marsupial mammals, next to no water and soils that have been depleted for millennia. Land of endurance.

Down under contrasts continue: Australian Christmas in the heat, my summer birthday suddenly cold.

Integration wasn't easy: first absorbing this version of colonial heritage, only to discover that the English artifice lacks connection with the Antipodes.

Little wonder that ex-Europeans huddle along the coast in a few cities.

And that is just the beginning.

Chapter Six- Stirring of the Senses

Though indifferent to rites of church or state, my time is punctuated by private ritual. Ritual that takes the place of broader activity and greater strength.

An early riser, I wake slowly.

If I wanted to conquer me, I would invade before morning coffee.

The opening ceremony of a day must be a gentle stirring of the senses, a gentle passage through the blur---

A beginning bumble to the kitchen sink.

Fill the kettle. Ignite the gas. Wait for steam. Coffee into plunger. Lift kettle. Pour. Savour the aroma. A six-minute wait to brew.

Bench-top prop, watching early birds jostle in the garden bath.

Plunger. Pour. Coffee black against china white. Add milk, slow roll of convection clouds.

A sip. Sit. Consciousness blooms.

Jane'll be up any minute now. She wakes focused, full of shine.

I am almost ready.

Chapter Seven - Sets of Reasons

Every immigrant has at least two reasons.

One for leaving; another for arriving.

In Australia's population of many immigrants, requests for explanations are usually avoided.

"Where ya from?" comes up. Not often. Rarely goes farther. Many personal histories are uncomfortable, some painful.

(Not mine. Nothing heroic about endurance of savage circumstance. Nothing raw or urgent about my escape. The place I left was not obviously repressive. I was a refugee fleeing a culture even though its prejudices were not usually focused against my person.)

Between friends the picture is sometimes complete.

Between us, me, and you, a closeness arises, so I will tell you something of my motives for leaving the United States of America.

I could re-ignite the outrage, punish my heart and ruin my digestion for a couple of days.

I could list endless events and dates. Go into treatment of South America. Or Blacks. Browns. Vietnam. Casual violence. Orchestrated paranoia. Red, white and blue patriotism. Excesses. God on our side.

This example is more pleasant---still revealing, if you want it to be:

Crouching under a school desk for protection against the enemy's atomic bomb was never convincing, and has never lacked an equivalent. (I suspect that allowing a public to arm itself to the teeth causes paranoia.)

There are other ways of explaining.

Cars. Universal American preoccupation.

As on any working day, I was waiting for space in the traffic to clear so that I could cross the coast highway to the university.

Sitting in the smog.

Every day.

Finally revelation: "Life doesn't have to be like this. I'm going to Australia."

And I did.

Chapter Eight - Off to Australia then.

What did I know about my destination? Not a lot. But that little was appealing.

Australia has nine-tenths the land mass of the continental United States with a total population less than the population of Los Angeles County. It did then. I'm sure it still does.

An English speaking Western culture in the middle of Oceania and Asia.

High percentage of immigrants in the population.

Unique flora and fauna.

Communism was legal. Not that I was or ever wanted to be, a communist, but the choice was important.

My first contact with Australia was with the receptionist in the San Francisco Consulate. She was young, full of beans, and lacked the veneer of American government employees.

I requested an immigration form.

"Immigration form? You want to immigrate to Australia? From here?"

I nodded.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Whaddaya wanna go to Australia for? Nothin' happenin' there."

Contrast to the American mantra.

She shrugged and disappeared beneath the horizon of the reception counter.

Back above the counter top, "There must be one somewhere. Hang on." She bustled through a door into the interior of the Consulate.

A few minutes later, she returned with a business suited middle-aged man who said, "You want an immigration form? There is a local travel agent specialising in Aussie holidays."

"I want to immigrate."

"Right. Jen, there will be a form in the back store somewhere."

And to me, "Sorry. We deal mainly with business interests here. Few enquiries about immigration." A curious glance. "Jenny will be with you soon."

He returned to the interior.

After a quarter hour or so, Jenny bounced back.

"Found it." And presented me with the form.

"Ya can get assisted passage. Ten pounds from England. Not sure what it is from here. Wouldn't be a lot. But you have to stay for while. Four years, I think. There's the box ya can tick."

The form.

Fewer questions than I had to answer for a California driver's license.

Fewer questions than for school registration.

Maybe this was going to work out.

Chapter Nine - Dry as Snake Skins

Morning.

Sun a sullen red. Smoke in the air. Bush fires in the Malley to the north.

Bush fires in Gippsland, hundreds of kilometres away in the north-east of the state. Been burning for three weeks.

Last month, fires to the west.

Year eight of the drought. Worst since records have been kept. Not that records have been kept all that long.

Within an hour, the air will be a shimmy.

Plants are under stress. Heaths are dry as snake skins, leaves returning to dust on the stems.

High winds fan our anxiety. In addition to anything else we may be doing, we all wait and watch.

“Total fire ban in the state of Victoria. No fires shall be lit in the open, or allowed to remain alight.” The litany repeated on radio and television day after day all summer.

In town:

“Bugger of a day, Mate.”

“How ya off for water?”

“Paint’nd dry fast.”

“Hot enough for ya?”

“God-da rain sometime.”

“The nephew is off in Gippsland fire-fightin’ with the volunteers.”

“Bugger of a day.”

“Yeah, bugger of a day.”

Our local lake is nearly dry. The water reservoir is low. The irrigation storage is a flat bed of sand.

Bitumen roads soften. Tin roofs crack with expansion, boil off radiant heat inside and out.

Lizards seek shade.

Farmers haul water for stock. Whole towns haul water.

Flies are crazy for moisture, starved for the minute amount of protein dissolved in mammalian body fluids. Protein to set their eggs. Crawling into the corner of eyes, up nostrils, into mouths.

“Drive ya mad, these bloody flies.”

Gum leaves are dry. Many of the very old trees and the very young overwhelmed by stress.

The bush is fire tolerant; private property is not.

People hunker under these thick skies, reminded that they are dependent on neighbours, on weather---waiting out hot winds, enduring a vacuum of suspense.

Fires can be ferocious. And quick.

Dry as soda biscuits. Hot as motorcycle mufflers. Ash Wednesday conditions. Black Friday conditions. Worse.

We wait.

Every summer, we wait.

Chapter Ten - Leap of Fire

It has happened.

After forty years.

The bite of fire.

Months since any real rain. It's been hot, but today leapt to forty-seven degrees Celsius.

North wind.

The last few molecules of moisture evaporate into a blast from central deserts.

Cracked lips, chapped skin, shallow breathing, reckless flies---personal discomforts fail to distract from the ominous threat of fire.

Facts seem drier than the day.

It started forty-eight hours ago. A lightning strike thirty-five kilometres away. A weak wisp smouldering unnoticed in bush mulch.

The northerly. Bellows on a spark. From litter to grass. Grass to shrub. Shrub to tree.

A race before the wind.

A long thin fire. Snake of a fire. A charcoal line drawn between the Range and a point in the bush kilometres to the north-west. The front less than a kilometre wide in places, never more than five.

Too fast to develop flanks.

Sunset approaches. So does the bush fire.

Its first presence is smoke. Hours before the front arrives. Acrid. Nip in the throat.

A fire concealed. No telling through the grey curtain: what direction, how far away, how intense?

Eventually a gleaming through the smoke.

Suddenly, a visible leap of flame.

It burst through the trees and was past Jane's studio, the house, my studio, the tractor shed in minutes. Through the clearing and back into the bush.

Dark. Clouds of smoke rouged beneath by fire light.

Stands of hedge wattle, tea tree and saplings combust instantly. Fireballs spinning through the air. Cyclone roar.

Trees are standing torches.

If only bark is burning, an outline is expressed in flame.

Hollow trees become furnaces, each broken branch a chimney jetting flame.

Time outside time. The only sense of passage from the gale.

Relative quiet.

A shower of embers gliding on a gentler wind. Spot fires where settling sparks find fresh fuel.

The wind is gone. Complete calm. Smell of hot ash.

The hush broken only by trees crashing. Four or five an hour topple as trunks burn beyond support.

Retreat to the veranda.

Smoko. Sit down. Drink water. Exhausted after patrolling house and outbuildings against the reluctant retreat of fire. Four o'clock in the morning. A moment to look.

Hundreds of trees and logs burning through the hills. Looks like an oil refinery, emergency lights flickering red.

Stunned.

Fatigue imprinted with wind and flame and smoke.

Searing force of nature.

A passing energy too vast, too furious to fit into private human scale.

Intense experience already filtering, fading with time like memory of pain or sex.

Chapter Eleven - Down Under Conundrum

Education confined me to cities for 15 years.

Education and employment predicated on that education---forces for producing predictable citizens.

My education was in the visual arts.

The Western tradition. Historic tours of Euro-Mediterranean cultures for all of recorded time. Practical studio courses based on last week in New York. All you needed to know about art.

Crisp nods were extended to other cultures, if they had influenced western developments---the Impressionist's flirtation with Japanese prints, or the Cubist's 'discovery' of primitive art.

(There ought to be a separate chapter. Possibly a book. Probably a royal commission---exploring the corruption of our claims for 'discovery'.)

In our courses, we controlled colour. We mastered space and composition. We drove texture and form, pushed materials and processes.

We canonised connections of the arts to emotion and mind, revered the functions of art in society and knew that consciousness could be directed, as well as recorded, by art.

We had degrees to prove our exaggerations.

Challenge those systems of the senses?

Not likely.

On the basis of qualification, I had a good job.

Colleagues, acquaintance, position and surroundings re-enforced expertise.

Cities, centres of sophistication, citadels of art, shrines of sophistication, offered continuing proof.

My status within the cultural community confirmed it.

Reality. Corroborated daily for fifteen years.

It didn't last. It is possible to get over your education.

If you try, and are lucky.

Noise drove me from the city. Relentless sound with no identifiable source. Foreground of rattle and bang. Buzz and blur in the background.

The racket acceptable as a symptom of success, of industry, of energy.

But for me, sensory punishment.

The din was exhausting.

Time to immigrate again.

To quiet. Exchanging buildings for bush, footpaths for tracks, cars for kangaroos, grids for granite tors.

We moved to the Wimmera. The west of Victoria. Then a four hour drive from Melbourne.

To a trashed subsistence farm. The land so exhausted, so degraded that I could afford to buy it.

Rubbishy land to the local farmers. Remnant bush to us.

Well beyond the initial year in the bush, I ricocheted off the antipodean landscape, attempting to extract recognisable colour, form, or composition from the vision before me.

Impossible.

There was no green, but thousands of shades around green, exotic mixtures containing blue, grey, yellow, red.

My knowledge base was constantly contradicted.

No obvious order in anything.

No drama of sharp young edges.

The presence of the landscape based on spans of time that I could not fathom, a series of subtleties born of extremes beyond my experience. Immense strength founded on complete fragility.

A land as foreign to my European mind as private property is to Aboriginal consciousness.

It began to occur to me. My training had little application in the Australian landscape. My cultural heritage was a tissue of irrelevance, my degree a fabric of inappropriate bias.

Imposition wasn't going to work.

It takes years to get an education, the rest of a lifetime to get over one.

If you are rigorous.

Chapter Twelve - Mostly a Secret

I will tell you a secret.

You may already know, since it is not a secret of concealment--- it has been repeated continuously for millennia, often said, seldom attended to.

So still mostly a secret.

A pity since it gives everyone something to look forward to. A bright light aimed at our culturally fixed dim view of old age. Relief for our dread of brittle bones and watery eyes.

You may think that veracity is an issue here. I claim that

I am more or less ancient. One foot in the grave. Writing a suicide note.

Come on. Fighting bush fires?

Where is the limp in this language? Where are the liverish spots? No mention of hair in the ears and on the nose. Why aren't we dealing with aches and pains? Comparing my lobotomy to your multiple by-pass? My pins to your implants? Mr. X to Specialist Y?

I may return to all those things. If I have time. Especially the hair in the ears and on the nose.

Elements of ageing do begin to bend your days. Require time and attention. Attack your privacy. Assault your dignity. Embarrass your independence.

Pain can turn you inward until the universe loses extension beyond your skin. Evolution at work, I expect. A technique to dismiss the world before you leave it. I've seen such capitulation in kangaroos with injuries.

But to continue.

The secret?

You not dead until you're dead.

Bend closer. A whisper in the ear. An intense secret, like five-year-old friend to five-year-old friend.

Everyone stays the same from go to whoa. Inside, I am the same little shaver who was a child.

Eyes may blur, but the same brain produces vision. You are always in your own envelope.

The mind is the mind that established your youth. When you watch now, you look with method. You smile with familiar warmth. You weep with customary sadness.

If you have avoided the age related illnesses that scramble

consciousness, the core is the same, nine or ninety.

As ever, you deal with what needs to be dealt with. Somehow. As best you can. At every age.

Speed may decline, but progress is no less likely.

Old age may be a pain in the arse, or hip, or wrist, most likely all of them, but it does not prevent blossoms in the brain.

If you allow it, it will get you wisdom.

Chapter 13 - Yesterday's Surfaces Scattered

Morning after the fire.

Groggy at eight o'clock after late labour and little sleep.

Pulled myself out of bed prepared for bare sand, scorched rocks.

But out the front, it looks like little has happened.

In the clearing around the buildings, isolated blades are bending in the breeze. Fluffy seed heads of New Holland daisies are untouched.

Through the grass, the frenzy was too fast to consume everything.

Up the slopes, many of last night's flaming silhouettes are still standing, faded leaves above fresh black bark.

Feet heat up, walking through the bush.

Most of the landscape is black and white. Pristine as new snowfall. Ash. Charcoal. Clouds of smoke. Tonal as early photography, as classic Chinese painting.

Over the years, I have developed an aesthetic about burnt landscapes.

My reaction was once a sense of loss.

But there is cleanness about bush fires. They are the antipodean version of the renewal nature enjoys elsewhere through winter and spring.

A down under rest and re-birth cycle, flame tempered, polished by time and the sun.

Sparse accents of colour. An untouched bottle bush. An incandescent tree hollow. Embers. Red and yellow exposed fallen timber. Pink and white and green strips of bark blown free.

Inexplicable untouched patches protected by what? Islands of under-story intact, paces from granite boulders that have exfoliated in intense heat---yesterday's surfaces scattered on the ground.

Incomprehensible. Too many variables in an instant, too complex, too quick to reconstruct.

Even the ashes are complicated.

Under skeletons of hedge wattle, white powder is full of carbonised thorns.

Eucalypts, as different after demise as they were in life.

Yellow boxes reduced to fine talc.

Long-leafed boxes shrink to radial gig-saw puzzles of their fallen branches, charcoal pieces mimicking shadows of former limbs.

Dropped branches develop x-ray images of themselves, extreme temperatures baking the granite sand beneath to pink, exposed as the wood vaporised.

Ancient trees vanish, replaced by holes, smoking moulds of absent roots.

Hot spots everywhere.

Chapter 14 - Second Suicide Note?

Suicide notes are autobiographical.

This one is no exception.

Autobiography is convenient. I'm unlikely to sue myself for slander.

Research and development have been done.

Who knows? I might write *The Second Suicide Note* followed by *The Return of the Suicide Note* and *The Suicide Note Revisited*, closing the collection with *The Bedside Suicide Note*.

If I fail in the first attempt, as writers of suicide notes sometimes do.

Autobiography/egotism? Not really. Socrates' good advice to lead an examined life restricts self-love to the young (and those who have not led an examined life, of course).

What's happened has happened. That's it.

No reason left to impress, or to perform.

Living inside depreciation, startled by some rebellions of the body, exhausted by others, enveloped in my own vapours, little room left for pretence.

The hinges may grind, but old age can still be a gateway to larger freedom.

There are principles for getting ahead without dragging your body along.

It's been an adventure. No reason for that to stop.

Thank you, Mother. Thank you, Father. Thank you to all those friends, relations and colleagues who have contributed to the success of this lifetime. Just in case I lack an opportunity to mention it later.

I am relaxed.

Many conditions of old age are useful.

Nothing to fear.

The truth. The whole truth. Nothing but the truth.

It's been a long time coming.

Chapter 15 - Sound has Returned

Months now since the fire.

Deep views are available everywhere.

What was concealed is visible. Rock formations. Valley floors. Ridges. Wandering echidnas. Fox lairs.

What was impenetrable undergrowth is a stroll.

No grass seed, burr, prickle or thorn.

An eye overhead. Not all the trees that will fall have fallen yet.

The silence was arresting for a week or so. Magpies abandoned their morning chorus. Kookaburras quiet. The dawn to dusk collage of chirps, songs and shrieks was removed. Closed for renovation.

The kitchen garden was untouched. Lavender in bloom. Sage and grevillea in bloom. Rosemary. Despite the flowers, the garden remained silent in the absence of insects.

The bush fire sorted out the feral bees. For a while.

Bees gone bush are a menace.

European bees appropriate nesting hollows needed by native animals.

Super efficient, they plunder and hoard, seriously reducing supplies of nutrition for indigenous consumers of nectar and pollen.

They fail to serve, as they serve elsewhere in the world, by pollinating plants. Imported bees part petals evolved for different traffic, bypassing pollen deposits positioned over aeons for long beaks, feathery tongues.

Feral bees are hard to control, hiving high where parrots and possums like to live.

Introduced bees are an uncontrolled nuisance protected by associations with industry and sweetness and the vested interests of beekeepers.

The native bees are back. They are solitary and store their honey in

the hollow stems of grass.

Sound has returned. Begun by the bold. Large parrots. Maggies. Ravens. Every twitter now in place.

Kangaroos haven't gone anywhere. The local mob moved in shortly after sheep were removed decades ago. Each generation of females inherits the land from the last.

Animals built for travel, I have always believed that they would move on to greener pastures under difficult conditions.

Either they are more attached to their territory than I assumed, or conditions are not as difficult as they seem to be.

The re-birth has begun.

Vivid green leaves are bursting through bark everywhere.

Wallaby and kangaroo grasses are shooting from black clumps, stumps of leaves.

Sedges, reeds and lilies are launching into the light.

The violin handle heads of new bracken fronds poke through the ash.

All fresh.

And relief from waiting for a fire to come.

Chapter 16 - Before Boxed Breakfasts

When the mail delivery was minutes late, Grandma used to wonder, "What's the world coming to?"

Grandma lived to be ninety-nine; her eyes sparkled until she was ninety-eight and four-fifths.

She was in a good position to ask.

She had been around long enough to know where the world was coming from. Basic prerequisite for asking where it might be going.

Grandma was born before boxed breakfasts. She grew up without shopping, without fruit grown beyond the family orchard, without plumbing.

Life before washing machines, refrigerators, light bulbs, air travel, band-aids, zippers and store-bought everything.

Grandma referred to that earlier world in various ways. There was contrast. "When I was a girl..." Or, "Before the days of..." Or, most mysterious of all, "Long before you were born..."

She could be amazed by the present. "My word. They can put another heart into you."

Or critical. "Why do they build cars that will go faster than the law allows? Rushing around. What good did that ever do anyone?"

Outraged. "There ought to be a law against those boom box things."

Practical. "Eat as fancy as you like, somebody's still got to do the dishes."

Grandma. Just the other side of my parents. Not long ago. An instant. Less.

My parents lived through some serious change themselves. Foot-treaded dentist's drills to ultra-sonic teeth cleaners. Wooden spoked car wheels to automatic transmissions and air conditioning. Buttons to velcro. Plane geometry to chaos theory. Born before plastic.

I was born before batteries were much used, before shrink wrapping, shopping malls or franchises. Before humans had the capacity to bomb themselves to oblivion, or make the air sweat. Before children were an economic force or the old were bundled off to care. Before the deserts of Southern California were paved and swimming pooled.

Before public television.

Grandma's basic equipment was a warm stove and a fresh apron.

I cannot work without a computer.

So what is the world coming to?

Grandma lived to see man on the moon. Just.

I used to hope that I would live to see mankind stable and sustainable on the earth.

Mankind had better do it soon.

Chapter Seventeen - Sleep without Consent

No way around it.

After a day dealing with thistles, I sank into bed. No dinner. No shower.

Next morning, a miasma of the elderly. Me.

As unmistakable as the aroma of milk on an infant.

Into the bathroom. I will need to be very tired to miss another shower.

Jane didn't say anything. She must have noticed.

Another symptom.

Added to the blurred voices of conversation and the bare outline of objects against light.

A week later another session with weeds put me to sleep without consent.

That smell again in the morning.

Jane made no comment. A treasure.

But we need to talk about this. She will survive me. Probably.

Mostly days are still good.

But never completely free of sharp announcements made by worn wrists or knees lacking flexibility. Co-ordination has loosened along with skin.

Everything physical takes longer, takes more effort, sometimes takes thought. Automatic functions in the background have pressed forward. Digestion. Balance.

Time for a plan.

I'm not just going to roll over. I've still got a lot to do.

Buttons can be replaced with velcro. Laceless shoes. Walking stick.

There are no stairs here. Cupboards are between shoulder and knee.

That should do. Our home is not a facility dedicated to the wobbles. Neither of us would enjoy that. And it will be someone else's home in due course. Some newer people.

Smell of an old man.

Clear enough.

Not every measure imaginable will keep me self-sufficient for a lot longer.

Circumvented days will exchange frequency with free ones, maybe soon.

I will not use another's time to prolong my own, if I can help it.

Not fair. Not dignified.

It's been good. Why spoil it at the end?

Jane understands. I think.

I need a plan.

Chapter Eighteen - Näive by Nature

Näive by nature.

Not that I ever bought cars because of slinky dresses or firm jaw lines.

Immune to oats when they were the basis of all health. Never used an abs flattening, pectoral enhancing machine to purchase a place on the beach.

That a brand of watch would connect me to astronauts or tennis players has always seemed silly.

Sweet breath and sanitised armpits, a man's beer, life insurance--- all proclaimed necessities that I never needed.

God has neither fascinated nor frightened me.

The stars blaze along their beats without revealing how my fate might unfold.

Still, even at my age, I am naive.

Other things have sucked me in.

Ideas with as little support in reality as the fiction that the right toothpaste would woo a mate: you can be anything that you want to be; all are equal; hard work will lead to success.

All fantasy, but that hasn't tarnished the attraction.

Starvation, disenfranchised peoples, treatment of women, poverty, genocide, intelligence agencies, ignorance, bullying, propaganda, tyrants, greed, fundamentalism, plunder. It all goes on. Parts have gotten personal.

It goes on. I can't believe that it needs to.

Humans have some problems of perception, residues perhaps from our beginnings.

Contemporary Homo sapiens confuse maximum with optimum. Tribal loyalty has stretched to nations. We favour single realities, insist that some groups are more advanced than others.

Everything that can be consumed is consumed. We develop ways to consume the rest.

Prejudices are nurtured that favour our species, our race, our culture, our region, our moment.

Why does the theory of evolution have difficulty being accepted?

We still behave like apes.

Though we have been able to destroy ourselves completely for over sixty years now. And haven't.

I will continue naïve.

Chapter Nineteen - Green Profusion

More than four months since the few moments of flame rage that redrew the landscape.

The drought continues.

Re-growth slowed. Nearly stopped.

Finally rain...

Four days of soft steady rain, gentle enough to moisten the slopes without moving them.

Followed by four days of sunshine.

More soft rain.

More sunny skies.

Two weeks of alternating rain and sun.

The green profusion begins.

Four months ago, the tea-tree communities were devoured. Fine leaves, delicate stems beaded with seed capsules, thickets like lace, both open and dense---all oxidised to molecules.

The remains, cremated bumps low to the ground, lumps round as water worn.
Still black blobs. Motionless for months.

Rain. Sun.

Tea-tree shoots, bright light green clusters around black butts,
rampaging upwards. To hold new webs, new nests, to shade
new mosses.

Daphne heath and grey everlasting repeat the pattern. New stems
around black nubs.

I thought that many were dead. Hoped for some survival of seed
in the ground or delivery by bird. The stumps of shrubs withheld
any sign of life for a third of a year. I never imagined these bursts
above the burnt.

This place has been through this before.

Reserves buried beneath visibility, beneath the hot attack.

Reserves suspended until auspicious circumstances signal.

Glimpses: time beyond history, resolution beyond intelligence,
hearty appetite to be.

A privilege to watch this determination: phoenix rising, adjustment to force,
accommodation of interruption.

Beyond the brink of thought into awe.

Recent human, I won't re-shoot after cremation.

Chapter Twenty - True to Legend

The clinic.

How different from ours would a culture need to be to offer some
warmth while patients pursue medical matters?

Intimidating reception counter, protecting a nest of office machines

formidable beyond the bank's collection.

Chairs, tubular frames, deep blue practical fabric, backed up to off-white walls.

Occasional tables from the same furniture factory in the corners, pivot points for rigid rows of chairs.

On the tables, true to legend, tired magazines, brought from home, I suppose, when the medicos are done with them. Three different titles of 4 wheel drive magazines. One of the doctors must be a happy camper. Woman's Day. New Idea, stocked with ideas that weren't new when printing was invented.

Always bring a book. Always.

Bulk-buy landscape photos on the wall. The one opposite my seat is a display, horizon to horizon, of one of Australia's most invasive weeds blooming in purple majesty. No concern about the health of the landscape here.

Playpen full of bright hard toys.

We are spared muzak. The atmosphere is infectious all the same.

I have spent more time here in the last two months that I have spent here in twenty prior years.

I'm getting sick of it. No wit intended.

Today, the population is typical: young mums with younger kids, spots and fevers; broken people, outrageous fortune; and the aged, sick and tired, some, like the children, attended by responsible adults.

Full circle in one room, abstract contrast to the regimented rows of furniture.

The young mums are anxious, toddlers confined within their arms.

The broken people look impatient or drugged.

Perhaps at home the old tend gardens or scratch the dog while sipping

tea, but here they tend to be motionless.

Maybe, like me, they loathe being here and don't show it.

The old get good at conserving energy.

They know. Sitting here will not restore supple muscles or quiet joints, will not return uncensored appetites or contented stomachs, will not bring back elastic skins or silent lungs.

They know. They will be back in the foreseeable future.

Perhaps, like me, they wonder when maintenance becomes more trouble than it is worth. Are they impatient with pills and patches, solutions and schedules? Do they hate spending most of a morning in this tent of posters and printed sympathy about treating everything except old age?

Hard to know. They seem resigned. Maybe they are simply self-contained.

I have a clear view of my own old self. For me, spending time in medical mode is repugnant. Dying in it is unthinkable.

I don't want to snuff it anywhere near this place.

At home, I have a bed before windows overlooking an ancient sea bed. That is a scene that offers some useful perspective on death.

Why would anyone want to expire with stainless steel utensils and plastic curtains of containment? Smell of disinfectants. Why would you want to die on casters?

At home, the other bedroom window frames sunsets flaring behind the mountains. Years of pleasure lending symbol to the end of all my days.

Chapter Twenty-one - Raw Uninterrupted Energy

Surrounded by endless information in the bush.

Progress has required only energy, invested attention, willing focus.

And a lot of work.

Once what was here replaced what I expected to be here, the bush became an endless resource.

Feel free to extrapolate.

Substitute "world" for "bush". Try "universe". Put you "I" in place of I "I". Glance away from human processes and interests.

Withdraw, for moments, from the races for reproduction and resources.

Risk vertigo.

I am allowed to say and you are allowed to listen, because, ancient, I have no vested interests, unless you think vegetable broth can corrupt my morals somehow.

Being an alien helped. Born elsewhere. This environment never wore the disguise of normal.

Snapshot. Nine kinds of eucalypt are indigenous to our home patch. More than 500 species of that single family of trees contribute the canopy to this continent.

Eucalypts seemed messy to the eyes of immigrants, were cut down, burned, ring-barked, dismissed and replaced.

But perhaps their asymmetry helped establish a sustainable sense of balance for Aborigines, more appropriate than our right equals left.

Eucalypts trim themselves. Branches that have become expensive because of insufficient water, parasitic infection, or increasingly misplaced weight can be discarded, often on a perfectly calm day.

Trees can spring from roots beneath ruined trunks. Leaves sprout from scorched limbs. During hot days, gum leaves evaporate oil as well as water; heat hazes are aromatic.

The bark of one gum is thin smooth sheets of pink, yellow ochre,

lime green, shed annually. On another, it is annually thickened black, ridged, aggregate armour.

A triumphant species, successfully modified over and over, again and again.

Life forks from success.

Antipodean patterns are particularly clear. Fewer paths have been trodden for longer.

Much here is a matter of marsupials.

All an invitation into that exhilarating space beyond education.

Work began with questions about metabolic relationships, and fundamental forms of energy.

Beating about the bush is not always unrewarding.

Many expansions of perception are suspended between gum blossom and gum nut.

Life has been among living expressions of appetite.

Curiosity informed by nature.

How lucky is that?

Chapter Twenty-two - Annual Portraits

Tomorrow morning belongs to Ashley.

I have been taking annual portraits of her since she was a pup. A dozen years, a dozen photographs tomorrow.

At four, attached to a brown bear, she was quaint. Round and watchful. Round cheeks. Round body, Round arms and legs. Skin like well-milked coffee. Caribbean mum. Eyes blue as flame. Anglo father. Hair, black and thick and curly. Face, a full moon in a dark sky.

At nine, she was a slender child. Limber as rope. Humming with

energy. Her watchfulness aggressive, intelligent, hungry. Fastidious, hands and fingernails always clean. Nearly impossible to keep her still long enough for the concentrations of a portrait.

At fourteen she began to bud. Hints of a woman. Breasts had begun to blossom. Still unaware of femininity. Thinks she might be a professional bicycle rider. Or a gymnast. Or a circus performer high on the wires.

She spat energy like sparks from a grinder.

Now. The moment that her body receives its evolutionary imperatives of urge planted willy-nilly into sixteen years of inadequate experience.

Few survive that ignition without some scorching.

Some months ago, Ashley erupted with an angry eye, resenting the forces overwhelming her person.

She has since regained some balance. Seems serene; her alertness has deepened. Finds anthropology more fascinating than bicycles.

And yet, on top of her discipline sits the landscape of her neck and shoulders. The strokes of her collarbones alone illuminating the persistence of our species.

Ashley is striking. A degree of beauty that affects lives. Will she decide herself what that beauty means, or will she float away in warm baths of admiration?

A proper portrait. Moment of vision, record without disturbing.

I am curious. And I have a camera.

Which can be an intrusive device, but we have prevailed, Ashley and I.

So far and no farther, I think.

Tomorrow, for the first time, for the last time, chairs will be set for both of us.

Chapter Twenty-three - Notice the Obvious

Over the years, I have developed a skill.

Odd that it seems a rare skill, but much about life is odd.

I notice the obvious.

A simplistic example. The news is never new:

Some groups will be killing one another with grim determination;

Some one will murder on a personal level that makes a little more sense, is a little understandable. The big kills belong to religion, politics, economics or the occasional charismatic lunatic determined to convert social resources into personal power.

There will be a top disaster. Earthquake. Hurricane. Chemical spill. Famine. The end is nigh.

A politician will be accusing another of something that will provoke a predictable counter accusation. Both will be guilty of those accusations and much more.

There will be forecasts. Weather. Stock market. Fashion. Your very own future.

I haven't bought a newspaper in years. No point. Only the names and places change. And the forests shrink.

Despite our organic nature, we behave as though we were independent of the world.

We create air that is difficult to breathe. Food that is dangerous to eat and comfort that leaves our physiques sagging.

We applaud our spiralling numbers. We hold, above question, an adolescent conviction in our own invincibility.

We imagine that we depend only on one another.

Humans are so formed by learning that they forget to see. Acceptance

is habitual. It has advantages. It provides us with language, mathematics, agriculture, commerce and law, with shelter of all kinds.

We can survive with none of those inventions; can we survive with all of them?

A long polemic could be written about the invisible obvious.

Not by me. Among things obvious is my own time constriction.

I cannot walk without a strategy, a thought process organising my limbs, preparing for pain, planning for motion.

This level of determination used to produce works of art.

Now, I am lucky to get across the room.

Sometimes, any level of determination is inadequate. I need help to move. Someone else's time and energy invested to accomplish the insignificant.

Not going to get any better.

The bleeding obvious.

Time to pull the plug while I can still find it.

Friends become oddly coy when this subject comes up. The professionals responsible for my health refuse to include this sanity among options.

Jane agrees with the theory of euthanasia, but cannot welcome the actualities.

I will turn once more to my computer. The web.

Somewhere someone will be willing and able to supply the information that I need.

A practical person with reserves of disinterested compassion.

Someone else who can see the obvious.

Chapter Twenty-four - Lucky Failing Pets

Not as straightforward as I had hoped.

Enter “euthanasia” as a search word. You will find sites mounted by right-to-lifers, religious fundamentalists, and the odd animal protection organisation telling you how to make an easy end for a goldfish floating sideways.

Put your faith in the Lord and you will be saved. Constant advice in the face of constant pain. What a trump card---immortal salvation. After a natural god-given death, of course. Death is not a DIY project for Christians of the right.

Search “suicide”.

They have been there. Same advice. Pray, Brothers and Sisters, to realise that life is sacred, that your body is the temple of Christ.

Goldfish don't get a mention on suicide sites.

“Assisted death”.

Friend, listen to our council. We will talk you through. We will move mountains to save your immortal soul.

The pet people have re-appeared and they are sticking to their fish story. If your pet has feathers or fur rather than scales, you really should leave all this up to a vet. Lucky failing pets to have the vet.

“Painless death”. At last. The Rescuers seem to have neglected this combination of words.

An article about “Doctor Death”, a courageous medico from the Northern Territory who pushed for legal euthanasia and, briefly, succeeded.

After a short while, legal euthanasia was condemned by the conservative federal government.

Illegal again.

“Doctor Death” is being watched closely. “Doctor Death”. The press has much to answer for.

He soldiers on. Has a useful website - sort of. Very guarded.

There are clandestine conferences to teach people how to make nembutal, how to die peacefully with dignity. Suicide is not illegal. Helping someone die is. Fine line. Brave man. Few are willing to suffer public distress in order to relieve the private distress of others.

Christ, I suppose.

Chapter Twenty-five - Have my panacea.

There has been rain. There will be orchids.

Wet again today. The landscape leans away from fire.

My joints do not. Knees, ankles, elbows, wrists, shoulders, spine. Dis-bone-connected-to-dat-bone. Each connection furiously aflame.

I have my escape. An innocuous small bottle that will confuse pain, bewilder disability. My panacea.

Great source of comfort. I can be free.

Residues of curiosity. What will the world be like in another fifty years?

And if I could somehow survive to see the world in fifty years, I would want to see the thousand after that. Daydreams.

In truth, I am tired.

I would be buried here. No coffin. Slipped straight into the ground.

Give some tree a boost in this infertile soil. Plant a tree on me. Seems only reasonable that I should be allowed a final contribution to the ground that I have tended.

Can't be done. Against the rules.

So scatter my ashes here, toss me beyond consciousness of time and space.

It pleases me to dream that some molecules might seek a leaf. Others might float suspended for centuries. Some might drift through to the parent brew in the oceans.

An atom or two might join a crust of rust. How appropriate.

In any case, they will escape this tangle of nerves.

So there you have it.

A last laced cup of coffee.

Time to begin again.

Salute.