MAPPING THE PADDOCKS

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Chester Eagle

TROJAN

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To Alice, Norman and Travers Eagle

The sun shines down on New South Wales. A boy crosses a road. Two paddocks await him, and a dam. Its clay banks are bare. One of the paddocks is full of wheat stubble, the other has been ploughed and left fallow. Brown and broken, it submits to weather. The boy has a plan for it, to do with the sheep that have been pushed across the road for a few days. Wanting green grass when there is none, they search the paddock for hours before returning to the dam. The earth is hard where they pass through the gate. In the immemorial pattern of sheep, they follow each other in lines, the leader's nose bent to earlier paths. The boy has noticed that, like railways radiating from a colonial metropolis, they push out hopefully, more widely spaced as the distance from water increases, and never quite reaching the western or northern fences. There is no grass, and the sheep, discovering this, have to return eventually to drink, and to content themselves with the golden stubble of December's harvest.

It is January. Summer is at its height. The heat is exhilarating to those who are used to it. The boy has decided to map the lines traced by the sheep. He thinks there is some important pattern to be discovered. The farm is his father's, his mother's, and his. He knows it, yet it is still to be known. He obtains a book, asks the dimensions of the paddock, and prepares an outline. He crosses the road to plot the paths. He does this twice, there is still much to do.

He has a friend to stay for the weekend, he tells his friend, one blazing morning, that they must continue the work. The friend agrees. They map, marking with pencil on paper an approximation of what the sheep do in the paddock and what humans do in New South Wales. The friend, despite the protection afforded by a sun helmet, cries enough. It's too hot, he's bored, he wants to go home. Like the sheep, he needs a drink.

The boy is peeved, but gives in. They drink. Once home, there is no way the friend can be persuaded out again. The project is ended.

The project is begun. I am the boy. The summer of New South Wales is the furnace from which I sprang. The blazing light, which I exulted in, was also something I needed to escape. Spending hours in blinds-drawn rooms, I pored over books, a longstanding favourite being a squat grey publication - Report of the Season 1930 - published by the Victorian Cricket Association, which gave full scoreboards of Sheffield Shield matches and Bradman's first English tour. It was studded with famous names - Woodfull, Ponsford, Oldfield, Kippax, Ironmonger, Tate, and the incomparable Bradman. 334. 309. 254. 452 not out. Father said Bradman had once been bowled first ball and the Melbourne Cricket Ground had been stunned. He had also batted all day, and when he was dismissed the following morning, the English press had declared in relief HE'S OUT!

When I read these scores he'd been out for four years because there was a war on. The hateful Nazis were opposed by Great Britain and her allies. Test cricket was in abeyance, to return only if we won. What would the Germans do to cricket? Ban it? Shoot all cricketers? The Japanese would be worse, Father said. Despite Teutonic arrogance, the Germans were Europeans, while the Japanese were yellow and beyond prediction. After they bombed Darwin, Father dug an air raid shelter under the double row of pepper trees sheltering our house on the western side — the side where afternoon sun, cool changes, and dust storms came from. The shelter was tiny, but my imagination increased it. Alone and with friends I spent hours below ground, tending slush lamps, rigging up curtains to suppress any glimmer, deciphering code messages from distant battlefields, getting messages to spies and otherwise maintaining the nerve centre of a world at war.

I asked Father if I would see Bradman bat. He said it depended on how long the war lasted. If we didn't beat the Huns and the Japs pretty soon he'd be too old to play again. He'd been invalided out of the army, and it might take a while for cricket to get started after the war. The good news was that it was England's turn to tour Australia, so if the great man did play another season, it would be in our country; Father said he'd take me to see him. He was already on our mantelpiece – a square photo, rounded at the corners, with a stylish, printed autograph. And he could, in a rudimentary way, be seen in action in tiny booklets of photos which you flicked with your thumb so that the pictures replaced each other in rapid succession, showing a jerky but at least a moving image of Bradman executing the cover drive and, his specialty, the late cut.

Another approximation of reality was described to me by Father. Once the cable connections had been made with England, it was possible to send telegrammatic messages encoding the action of an over (six balls, in England) at Lords, the Oval, Old Trafford, Leeds or Manchester. Australian commentators, with a judicious admixture of pen tapped on table, or coconut shell, reconstructed the play for local listeners as if it were happening before their eyes. Father admired this illusion. We were very far away, but we were as good as the Poms. Bradman proved it.

When he was a boy, he'd thrown cricket balls at a single stump to improve his fielding. If his throw missed, he had further to chase. I did the same on a dusty plot beyond the kitchen fence. My wicket was a kerosene tin stacked on another kerosene tin. I rarely succeeded in hitting it, and wondered what made Bradman different. The ball was hard to find in the stubble on the other side of my pitch from the pepper trees, the dunny, and the pile of trunks and fence posts which was our woodheap. This was where chooks had their heads chopped off, and it regularly reminded Father to tell me of swaggies who, after offering to cut a pile of firewood, took their money and departed before the cheated housewife discovered that the carefully stacked pile of logs was hollow.

That was their illusion. Ours, after years of depression, was that the postwar world could be bright. This was an item of faith. On a cold September morning, Mother dressed me by the fire. 'We're at war with Germany,' she said; I knew the news was momentous but rode to school as on any other day, aware that though everything was familiar, some change had begun, too big for me to understand.

Years passed. An aerodrome was built in the next town. Troop trains thundered north. Newspapers showed arrows pressing bulges in the front lines of Egypt, Russia, France. American soldiers threw coins to admiring children in the streets of my dusty town. Irrigation came, and electricity. We got a fridge. My brother neared eighteen, and wanted to be a tail gunner; one afternoon, five years from the morning when she'd told me about the war, Mother came home from Finley, put the shopping basket in the kitchen and leaned her head on the refrigerator which gave us ice cream, now, in summer. She was crying. I stared. 'Travers wants to be a tail gunner,' she said, 'and I've just heard what happens to them. Tail gunners are killed more often than anyone else in the plane. They're such a mess they can't even get them out of the seat!'

I didn't want my brother killed, but to think about that required a different sort of imagination from the games I played in the dugout. My mother's distress was much more immediate. The war was a limitless horror.

Time passed. The Germans were defeated. The papers ran articles on the fitness of Bradman and the likelihood of his return. The Japs remained to be defeated. The Americans were pounding them with fleets of bombers, but they hadn't given in.

Then, when I was twelve, came the news. An atom bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. No surrender had been received, but the Americans were waiting.

A city had been destroyed. I'd been to Melbourne, I knew what a city was, and a city had been destroyed. I walked to the window of our dining room and stared down the avenue of pepper trees. The enormity of what had been done was beyond all words. Despite my fantasies of spies and destruction, I knew it was too much. War, made respectable by popular songs and newspaper articles, had gone too far. The tide needed to be reversed. I cannot remember my parents' reaction, nor neighbours' comments when they called, only the realization that the world had been taken past the point where it could get back. The war, which would soon end, would be leaving us high and dry above the waters that had produced Hammond, Larwood, Voce, Maurice Leyland, Eddie Paynter, Stan McCabe, Archie Jackson, Clarrie Grimmett and Victor Richardson. They were as dead as ... no, the days that had produced them were as dead ... as the dead of Hiroshima.

And a couple of days later we were able to say, as dead as the dead of Nagasaki.

Peace. Generals signed treaties with ceremonial pens. An Australian services team began to do battle with the Poms. The world was trying to resume. There were more articles about Bradman's health. He was fit, he was unfit. His back. His age. His form. Could he repeat in his late thirties the deeds of his youth? Could a champion whose zenith had been the double summer, English and Australian, of nineteen-thirty, shine in the summer of forty-six forty-seven?

He played, and Father took me to Melbourne. He'd made 187 in Brisbane, though the English writers said he was out at 21. The Englishmen lost by an innings. 234 in Sydney. The great man was more sedate than he'd been prewar, the papers said, but he was still the master. I awaited his magic. When a small man in an Australian blazer entered the arena with another figure in Marylebone Cricket Club colours (Father told me that prewar English amateurs used a different gate from the professionals), I found Hammond, light on his feet despite his weight, more noticeable than the Don. After crowd speculation as to who had won the toss, the Australian openers appeared. For the first time I heard the hush attending the first ball of a test. It was almost an hour before Bradman came to the wicket. He was padded, now, gloved, carrying a bat, and wearing the baggy green cap which was more natural, for me, than the stiff, jockey cap of England. To my surprise, Father, along with thousands of others, stood to clap. I had never dreamed that my shrewd, disbelieving Father was capable of hero worship, and I realized that someone he passionately believed in was making his way to the centre. Bradman walked more slowly as he approached the pitch. He took block, straightened, tugged his cap, acknowledged the applause, then bent over his bat. Bradman was where he belonged.

Did he let the first ball go, or prod a single? I retain few images of him from that game, despite the years of buildup. He merges into my experience of test cricket, the Melbourne Cricket Ground, and the suit- or blazer-clad country men who'd booked the Victoria Coffee Palace for the duration of the test. Two years later Father took me to a test against India, and I saw Bradman, after batting easily to reach fifty, suddenly stricken; at the completion of a single, he clutched his back. Fibrositis! The papers had been full of it. It was some time before he could continue. His partner came up, opposing players hovered, then, cutting into the universal concern came a hoarse, rugged voice. 'Too old!' Row after row of spectators turned to identify the Jeremiah, calling on him to be quiet. With the coarse confidence of the working class, the judgement was repeated. 'Too old!' Father had told me, walking the paddocks, of days when the Melbourne outer had roared like a football crowd for Bradman thrashing the bowlers. That was the Bradman I wanted to see, or rather, wanted to have seen. My Bradman was clutching his back, was forced, after a few more scoring strokes, to retire, and was dogged, in those last minutes, by the sort of voice, calling across the field, that must have bayed for him as he smashed his drives into the pickets. 'Too old!'

Never! And yet it was true. What Bradman had done was complete. He had only to make his hundredth hundred, and retire. He had perfected his time, expressed it, and had been created by it. He was its necessary summation.

That time began before I was born, when my parents were having their first child, were running a store, and were purchasing, in the moment before the Depression broke, the farm where my earliest memories live. That time becomes my time when I consult those moments when I lie on Mother's knee on the back seat of a celluloid-windowed Chrysler, stationary beneath a redgum while someone opens a gate, or when, a year older, I stare down our avenue of pepper trees at a mysterious cloud of dust from which materializes a V8 with headlamps like eyes and tail lamp like a snail's stalk. The black and white number plate says NSW 174413, and the man stepping out of the machine which has come to rest by the wood heap is Father, who likes to quote Henry Ford: 'You can have any colour you like, so long as it's black!' That time is past because the car he shows Mother is the brown of mid tan Nugget. Father has bought it cheaply from a friend who no longer needs it, and it is only replaced when another war - the Korean - has stimulated our wool-based economy.

Mother drove timidly, and by rule. She applied the gear sequence first/second/top regardless of road conditions, even if it meant dropping the car into third gear while turning through an intersection at five miles an hour. 'I know what I'm doing!' was her answer to criticism, and she did: she kept to the left, stopped at corners, raked the horizon for trains when crossing railway lines and never stepped away from the car without double checking the steering lock, a tiny pedal of chrome on the steering column. 'Oh-double-eff OFF!' Mother would say. 'Oh-double-eff OFF!' Only then could the keys go in her bag and, with the dispensation of certainty, could she begin her shopping.

The town was distant from our farm by 'three miles as the crow flies, and you might as well say four by road' as Father put it. The three mile post leaned near our front gate and the extra distance was added by what we termed 'the avenue', a double line of pepper trees planted by the selector who'd separated our 640 acre block from Tuppal Station. The trees, of weeping habit and horny bark, had an air of wistful stoicism somehow fitting the earlier generation whose response to the landscape was visible in the paddocks further west, where forests of ringbarked trees stood between paddocks cleared for grazing, in which the destruction wrought by white settlers was no longer visible.

It was a family of these settlers who'd shaped our house, a four-roomed block with subsidiary buildings behind and to the side. Approaching from the north, one saw the familiar visage of two eyes and a nose, shaded by a corrugated iron hat. The verandah covered ant-infested dirt until the fifties, when Father, using the skills acquired in building irrigation stops, concreted the verandah floor. The front section, three bedrooms and a rarely entered lounge, had a central hallway and a fireplace in each room. Symmetry ended at the back door, where a covered walk led away to the kitchen and dining room where we mostly lived. Our wash house, as we called it, a mudbrick cell filled with bikes, milk separator, and papers from Father's store, was behind the kitchen and took a further step to the west. Our dunny - known as the lavatory, though no hint of washing facilities attended it - was displaced in the same way, so that, driving towards the house, one saw it as a facade with a diagonal extension down a line of perspective to an umbrageous, peppercorn-ridden endpoint attended by spiders and flanked by mounds of earth where Father had buried excrement from our pan.

In the fifties, we demolished the freestanding cooking/eating area, gave ourselves a flush toilet, harboured the V8 in a garage, and wrapped a new kitchen, sunroom and bathroom around the block which had stood apart for one and a half lifetimes.

Was Mother happy with her setting? Though she must often have gone into the paddocks, I have no memories of her there. I can hear her saying that she wanted to pull out the oleanders between the house and the pepper trees to make way for a tennis court. Father, without objecting, left the initiative to her, and since what she really wanted was his overtly shown approval, nothing was done. Mother played tennis at the Wells' house in Finley, where there was a bitumen tennis court, overlooked by a referee's chair. Mr Wells senior was Finley's leading cricket umpire and its undertaker. His black wooden hearse, with niches for the stems of plumes, was once offered to Father as security for credit given at his store. Though the debt was never paid, the hearse remained an operation of the Wells family until an engine-driven rival pushed it to the back of the shed. That was an occupation Father had no wish to inherit.

Tennis was also played at church halls and schools sprinkling the Murray-Murrumbidgee plain, the nearest to our farm being Blighty and Retreat, two tiny settlements opened up for soldiers after 1918. Motorists heading for Deniliquin on Saturdays could glimpse brown legs beneath white pleated skirts, brown faces beneath white shades, and white sandshoes scampering over bitumen. High wire fences enclosed the courts, with the players' cars nosing under trees. Tennis, whether played socially on Saturdays, or in organized tournaments, was more intimate than cricket, where fieldsmen stood in paddock-sized tracts of grass. It was this sociability Mother craved and only occasionally enjoyed at our farm, where visitors arrived one family at a time. Father appeared not to miss it, or perhaps he drew what he needed from the conversations men had against the verandah poles of pubs, above the radiators of cars, or over the scorebook at cricket. At the Finley showground, scorers sat on a backless bench within touching distance of the fence, a steel cable circling the ground in loops, or in an iron shed high off the ground in which, in their seasons, judges judged trotting, timekeepers managed football, and cricketers translated the play into numbers and dots pencilled in a rectangular, green-lined book. A double V, turned side on, marked the end of a player's innings. The nature of his demise was registered in two rectangles:

stpd. Harrison	b. Wells
c. Thorton	b. Morris
l.b.w.	Malone

The progress of an over was recorded in fingernail sized boxes, thus:

• • 1 •
2 • 1 •

with a maiden over shown as:

• • • •
• • • •

The umpires being at times inattentive, it was not uncommon for a cry to go from the centre to the shed, 'How many balls to go?' or for players to roar 'What's the score?' Apart from these shouts, appeals to the umpire, and occasional hoarse-throated barracking, the major sounds of Saturday afternoons were the squealing of galahs, the warbling of magpies, and the warm purr of six or eight cylinder engines as cars drifted to the cable for a brief inspection before going home. I was often bored on these afternoons, and looked forward to the relief of wives or mothers lighting a fire, or in later years boiling an electric urn in one of the showground sheds so that afternoon tea could be served in the glass cups which were all that wartime austerity allowed.

Though Mother must have done these duties, I have no memories of her watching cricket except when the Finley team, of which Father was captain, was in the final. Her statement was in the dining room, where two of Mother's pictures balanced Bradman above the fire. One was a crinolined, parasol-carrying woman whose mauve garments glittered in a sea of jet; her blush-coloured face had black dots signifying eyes, nostrils, mouth. This picture, Mother explained, was created entirely from 'silver paper' - the wrappings of chocolates. It was one of the few things in our house classifiable as 'artistic'. The second picture, also to the right of the mantelpiece, depicted a scene unimaginable in New South Wales, a misty European light playing on two figures contemplating a purple lake. One reclined on a bench long enough for two; the other stood. Both were slender and clad in Wedgewood-Grecian robes. Their stillness disturbed me. The picture was like a dream image, and I kept returning to see if they'd moved, or if their dialogue could be caught, but all I discovered, returning to these kitschy figures with flesh the colour of mildew, was my own face reflected in the strip of mirror built into our mantel. It was a face I never knew, nor did I like it. Though people said I resembled Father, I couldn't connect what I saw with the red-faced man who walked in from harvesting with a straw hat and hanky knotted round his neck, let alone the man I saw in the wedding photos which moved around the bedrooms according to Mother's moods.

To believe in that father, that mother, was to believe that my parents existed before I was born, and this was hard, despite the evidence of wedding gifts, furniture they'd bought for marriage, and stories about my older brother riding in the cart with Tatie Malone the butcher, or presenting the Bank of New South Wales with a cheque signed John D. Rockefeller by Father, for one million pounds (the teller gave him sixpence). Though I often went into the building which had been our store, I couldn't imagine Father behind the counter. I couldn't even imagine what it would be like to live in town.

Farm kids were different from town kids, a little more withdrawn into their silences. Solitude, and learning how to handle it, was the unique factor of living down a lane branching from one of the roads, dusty in summer and boggy in winter, which began with a signpost at the end of Murray Street — Deniliquin 37; Jerilderie 22; Tocumwal (Toke to the locals) 13. The exit for Berrigan (also 13) was a right turn at the war memorial, with a bend at the railway crossing. Kids from Toke and Berrigan came to the upper levels of Finley school, bringing with them an indefinable feeling of their towns. Lanes, mostly stock routes, entered Finley's back streets but took their atmosphere no further than the saleyards. Dust filmed everything. Milk jugs had to be covered. People edged gardens with bottles, or bricks thrust in at forty-five degrees. The Melbourne papers arrived at 4.10 if the Melbourne train and the diesel from Narrandera met punctually at the border. A hoot from the diesel, returning from the Murray, meant an early release for the farm kids clustered at the newsagent's.

Winds crossing the plain could make riding hard for cyclists; it was therefore better to live on the eastern side of town because if the wind changed during the day, as it commonly did, you got a tail wind both ways. Our farm was to the west; thus I was pleased when Mr Murdoch or Mr English, my teachers, brought a message. 'Your mother rang. You're to meet her at the Post Office at half past three.' This meant waiting with Mother, if she could be bothered, until the grid which meant the end of sorting had been lowered, then packing my bike in the boot of the Ford. The Post Office was more lonely than the newsagent's because the papers always came eventually, while there was no certainty that the letters one longed for would ever come. There was a feeling of abundance in opening Box 64 to find it stuffed full of letters, and of shame if, reaching clumsily for this treasure, I pushed a letter back and had to go to the counter to reclaim it. The deepest loneliness came on the afternoons when the sorting was late, the sky cold, and there was nothing to show for my waiting. Negotiating the last bend out of town I felt I was looking at infinity, and my moods were made worse when the drivers of trucks and utilities who could have put my bike in the back of their vehicles failed to stop. How I envied the kids who had horses, enduring beasts that didn't mind headwinds!

Our farm, like Peter Wells' hearse, was powered by horses until tractors came. They had guileless names like Ben, Jack, Topsy, Captain, Prince, Darky, Star and Bill. Ben, however, was named after Ben Whittaker, a channelling contractor of whom Father said 'He'd pinch anything, he'd pinch the eye out of a needle.' Jack was Jack Close, a tightfisted manufacturer of farming machinery, proprietor of a foundry and of an inefficient store with endless aisles of dusty display counters patrolled by a lonely girl. Whom the other horses represented, Father never said.

The teams pulled machinery – that was their function, and their place in Father's affection. Standing on the driving board of his combine, or seated on his McKay harvester, Father, normally so prosaic, sang:

> The last time I saw Paris,
> Her heart was young and gay;
> I heard the laughter of her heart
> In every street cafe!

When I asked him his favourite songs, he named 'Twas on the Isle of Capri that I Found her' and 'One Night of Love'. What these songs meant to him, I have no idea. Naming them now brings back the smell of his hanky, pulled from a worn out suit coat as I stand next to him on the driving board of a combine, putting seed in the Riverina earth.

It was during the war that planes first flew regularly above our farm. The rare and distant mysteries of the high wing and biplane era were replaced by camouflaged Beaufighters and clumsy, aggressively flown Wirraways from Deniliquin. The Mulwala canal, which ran beside our farm, was a landmark for pilots, and horse teams were a tempting diversion. There was always the chance that Father's harmonious, hardworking days would be interrupted by a young pilot bringing his plane down for a mock attack – mock, that is, for the airman; farmers trying to control their horses thought otherwise. Father's tactic, when he became aware of pursuit, was to lower the plough to its full depth in the earth, making it heavier to pull, after which it was a matter of hoping that the reins, swingles and chains could take the strain. The pilots were a new breed of men in our area, and they were unsteady; Finley schoolchildren became used to the sight of trucks carrying burnt-out planes back to base. When word reached our playground that one had come down near the town, bikes were pedalled furiously until the guarded but pilotless machines were swarming with kids staring at things we'd seen in magazines – joysticks, altimeters, ailerons ... Planes brought magic to our earth. A pilot was supposed to have flown a Lancaster under Sydney Harbour Bridge, but this feat, we knew, was less difficult than the local trick, whereby pilots felt impelled to take their planes between telephone wires crossing the Canal and the surface of the water, an opening just possible for a plane. What of those who caught the wire? Their funerals, which weren't managed by Peter Wells, were never discussed. They were seen as larrikins. Australian aviation, to use a term relished by the *Argus* Weekend Magazine, had once been in less foolhardy hands, those of the legendary Smithy, Scott, Ulm and Taylor.

Father spoke of these men with respect. Captain Moll, completing his Centenary Flight in 1934, found darkness overtaking him before his DC2 could find a landing place. His distress call was picked up by Albury radio station, which summoned motorists to the showground, their headlights showing a path for the airman. Other pioneer planes had been lost, or disappeared in cloud. Only a wheel of Smithy's Southern Cloud had been found. Listening to Father, I wanted these disappearances explained ... yet the mystery was attractive too. Father's most awesome story was about Smithy's engineer crawling on the wing of the Southern Cross to repair an engine, a thousand feet above the Pacific. I imagined a glittering ocean, storm clouds, and a hundred mile an hour slipstream tearing at a clinging figure. It made me nervous to go up the windmill, or to climb the last few steps of the ladder to look in the tank, a task I undertook when father said 'Get up and check that float level, would you? I reckon there should be more water than that.' Up I went to see how much water there was for our garden, our sheep when they were yarded, and for the horses to drink at our trough. Other kids climbed trees for birds' eggs, which they brought to school or dropped wantonly on the ground. But I was scared of heights, so that Smithy and his peers, mastering the air though machinery, were glittering figures for me as they were for Father.

Mother was more interested in virtue. She cooked for Red Cross cake stalls, she bought jars of jam sealed with cellophane. When Kevin Baker overturned a stolen car on the Tocumwal road, Mother said he might have been lucky to die because he'd been in trouble before, and if he'd survived he'd have been sent to a reformatory and would have lived a life in and out of jail.

Kevin's father was a shearer who lived in a fibrocement house near the school. I rode past it several days in succession, trying to imagine the atmosphere, and the pain, within the brittle walls. My only awareness of Kevin's mother was through a green kerosene tin on the verandah which held a geranium. If Kevin's was a Peter Wells funeral, it didn't go down Murray Street, where people closed shops for the dead. Kevin's continuity in my mind came when Mother drove me to dental appointments in Tocumwal. Each time we took the bend where Kevin met his downfall I thought of his face, and wondered what expression it had worn in the last seconds of life. The only picture I could conjure was of a younger, short-trousered Kevin standing in the queue for a drink from the corrugated iron tank at the end of our school. The drab, swampy ground through which the three chain road was passing gave back no image except itself. It was a bleak place to die, yet Mother drove through the belts of casuarina as if rejecting their ingrained sadness; work, merit and charity were her revision of the Corinthian ideals.

Her principles were made clear very early, when I stole a packet of chewing gum from Dick Coulter, a farm labourer who worked for us occasionally. Though I can't have been more than four at the time, I was made to pay; the price was a penny, which Mother provided, and tears, which came from her son. He, I, had entered the tent in the big shed where Dick, after eating tea with us, would retire to smoke hand-rolled cigarettes by the light of a hurricane lantern. Dick slept in a singlet; if he wore trousers, I never saw them, since when Father went to give him instructions for the next morning, Dick's nether half was always blanket-covered. His tent smelt of tobacco, was roughly swept to reveal bare earth, and held his mystery. Exploring the shed one day, I discovered his suitcase. Closed, it too held mystery. Opening it, I found nothing but a packet of chewing gum.

I stole the packet, unwrapped four tablets of Wrigley's P.K., and put them in my mouth. I was still chewing when Mother called my brother and I for a bath. My brother asked me what I was chewing. Foolishly, as I saw at once, I told him. 'Mum,' he called, 'he's got some chewy, he pinched it from Dick Coulter's tent.' Mother came to the bath, asking if this was true. I couldn't deny it.

Mother said that when Mr Coulter came for tea, I'd have to confess what I'd done, and I'd have to pay the value of what I'd stolen. She judged this to be a penny. It was still daylight when Dick passed under the corrugated iron walkway joining the two sections of our house and opened the wire door outside which Tim our kelpie sat whining when the wireless played music at night. At the sight of him I burst into tears. Dick, smelling of soap, asked what was wrong. Mother held me up. Her son had stolen. He was sorry. He was Mother's version of me; I was crying my eyes out. Father, I think, was somewhere in the background. My brother had been kept decently out of the way. Mother explained that her son wanted to make recompense; she thought a penny would cover the value of what I'd taken. What the admission cost her, I didn't know then and don't know now. Dick rose to the occasion, saying it didn't matter, it was nothing, it was okay. I cried. Mother pressed a penny in her son's hands. He passed it to Mr Coulter, who knew what he had to do. He took it. I was put down, the transaction complete. Mother's son had entered the moral world.

Mother's son has never left it, and needs now to explore it as he once needed to explore his father's earth. He, and I must call him this, since the boy we are looking at is not the same child who set out to map the sheep tracks, had a mind more widely, more receptively open, yet more burdened by a sense of duty. This means he was like his mother, even though this meant accepting others' pain. When Mother heard of young women widowed, children orphaned, or limbs severed in an accident, she gasped as if the pain had been transferred straight to her. Peeling potatoes or shelling peas, she would listen to news brought home by Father, and I would see her, so capable and reassuring, stricken by another's pain. Affected by her distress but wishing to be distanced from it, I would wonder why she let herself be upset. Fate hit other people. Our farm was secure.

But sometimes the pain of life broke in. When Tim the kelpie grew old, Father tried to train a young dog to replace him. The puppy grew into a nuisance that harassed sheep at night. He had to go. Father took out the shotgun, put in a cartridge, and led the dog to the fence between our house and the channel taking water to the back paddocks, no longer waterless in drought. The dog looked expectantly at Father as he, having chained it to the fence, turned to aim between the eyes. The dog held his tail upright, ready to obey a command. Father leaned into his shot in the classic position of my lead soldiers, weight on the front foot. If I say that he fired, I mean that I heard a sound which always frightened me, saw a wisp of smoke, and saw the dog go down. I disappeared. Father dragged the dog away to bury it.

Tim grew older, blind, mangy, and slathered at the mouth. His second replacement was little better than the first. Tim got to the stage where he didn't want to get up. One day Father put a collar on him, saying that he was going to take Tim up the paddock. I got out of the way. When I went to the house, the gun was gone. I looked towards the western paddocks where Father had disappeared. They were brightly lit, despite an overcast sky. It was cold. When the gun was back in the wardrobe, I wondered where Tim was buried, but never asked. I understood a distinction between the two shootings - one merciful, the other an expression of justice, or necessity, and why one had happened near the house, and the other out of sight. Father had hated to shoot Tim.

Death was an occupation on our farm. Animals were raised to be killed. Sheep were castrated, cattle branded. Father slit the throats of lambs when we wanted meat. Trucks backed against a ramp to take our stock to market; it appalled me to see how closely they were penned when the steel gates closed behind them. The animals on the lower deck were not only jammed in a prison reminding me of the Black Hole of Calcutta, which we'd learned about at school, but also suffered the indignity of piss and shit from the upper deck trickling on their heads. Even the floor of a stock truck made me sick. I determined never to be a farmer. Father put his hand inside ewes when they couldn't give birth; watching him, I knew I couldn't do it. Farm workers made jokes as they dropped lambs to the ground, bleeding where their balls had been, bleeding at the severed tail. Father or one of the workmen, heavy booted, would kick the tails into a heap and when the job was finished say 'How many'd we do?' and the tails would be counted. No one counted the testicles splattered on aprons, railings, or the surrounding earth.

It was not for me.

I followed Mother when she walked out of the kitchen banging a saucepan with a spoon, calling 'Chook chook' or 'Puss puss'; I did it too, but felt a treacherous accession of power; would I make them wait? Favour these by scraping in their direction, leaving those to scramble on the outer? Would I watch fondly as the kittens lapped their milk, or make them wriggle in my hands, feeling my power? There was a dangerous ambivalence in nature, and in my conjunction with it: our flocks of sheep, however statuesque when disposed across dambanks or drowsing in the shade of trees, had to be crutched, or dagged, which meant that they were held between the knees while shears removed the shit attached to their wool; if they'd been scouring, the green paste was impossible to remove without smearing it on oneself. Contented, moreover, as they might be, they would breed and die as we determined; the docility of a well-run farm disguised a brutality I found obscene.

Father gave me a lamb. I fed it milk which it drew from a rubber teat attached to a tomato sauce bottle. When Lamby (he had no other name) sucked vigorously, I was pleased. If he was messy and got milk on my clothes, I was angry. It could be said that I loved him; he followed me, and when for some reason he had to be yarded with the other sheep, I liked him for being whiter and cleaner. If I called, he would leave the others, expecting his bottle. On the day he went in the stock truck I helped Father yard the sheep, called Lamby to the fence, considered him, then returned to the house, where I draped myself over the sofa to read a comic. Mother, speaking quietly from the kitchen, said 'Are you upset because Lamby's going to market?' I said no, and it was reasonably truthful; Father expected to get thirty shillings a head, and Lamby's money would be mine. I have no idea what I did with it.

Mother rarely visited the yards, and never watched the operations on which our livelihood depended. If she was pleased that I was to get a five shilling stamp album from Mr Ibbotson's newsagency for sewing forty wheat bags, she left it as a matter between Father and me; it was I, not Mother, who took tea and cake to the men.

I found the wheatfields deeply satisfying, however hot; the absolutism of sun met its match in the ratcheted, cogged, spiralling machines, the men who squatted on wheatbags to smoke roll your owns, and in the Federation, Rahnee and Farrer strains that gave us an income, Rahnee darker and Farrer lighter than the other crop, planted now, then, only by those who were old-fashioned or short of seedwheat. Those heads, stretching to the barrier between themselves and infinity, a five strand post per chain fence! That sunlight, streaming on a boy trudging paddockwards, basket in hand, with a billy of tea and greaseproof-wrapped slabs of cake!

Father had a marvellous certainty with wheatbags. When the header stopped at the bagstack, crammed with grain, Father would rush on it with a jute bag, Indian as Rahnee, hook it on three spikes, and open the filling gate; then, with knees, hands and back he would dump it twice or thrice before lifting it to the end of the stack, ready to be sewn, with twenty deft strokes, to within a finger of completion. Into the remaining hole he rammed the filler, a metal pipe designed to drive grain into the slackest corners of the bag; withdrawing the filler after a series of thrusts, he would loop the bag's second ear with his remaining twine, ready for the truck. Paddy Treacey was his favourite carrier. 'He's hard to get and a bit slow,' Father would say, 'but he's reliable. If he says he'll turn up at a certain time, you can bet on it, he'll be there!'

Unreliable buggers were anathema to Father, who rarely swore, though he was capable, in rage, of giving fractious horses a kick in the guts. Of a morning, he would lay out the chains of a team on the ground behind the shed, then yoke the horses one by one. Their collars were slung in order on a beam — Ben, Jack, Topsy, Captain, Prince, Darky, Star, Bill and the rest. Father came in for the collars in turn and settled them on the horses he was hooking to the team, receiving, normally, their cooperation. Sometimes they pissed, and the flood of urine, so much more than I could produce, was wondrous. I would watch from the door in amazement as a pool formed around four, twelve, twenty hooves, then flowed in my direction. I was equally amazed that Father took no notice; only a horse refusing to lift its foot off a chain could enrage him. Mostly he patted them, and rubbed their noses, deciding whether the more nervous should have blinkers, or whether, looking thin, they needed extra grain in their bag at the end of the day.

Father controlled them by calling Whoa back, Gee up, or Gee orff. He started them by clicking his tongue. His reins went to the left and right hand leaders in a team of eight. If twelve were needed for heavy ground, the system of harnesses and swingles was more complicated and I never knew how he got it right. The horses plodded stolidly in their web of chains and leather, farting occasionally; I felt it as an injustice that their shitting was done on the march whereas we squatted privately in our dunny of maroon-painted iron, reading the names in last year's phone book which Mother had cut into squares. The Bulletin and the Weekly Times were other sources of paper. I thought my city cousins affected for needing toilet rolls. They also left taps running while they talked, something unthinkable to my parents, who measured water by the basin, by inches in the bath, by - even - the mug in which Father shaved. Water was a treasure collected from our roof; Father showed me how roofing nails had a collar beneath their heads, and how they were driven into the up-curve of the iron, not the trough, a mistake made by people who paid for it by having buckets and basins all over their floors when it rained! We had two spots in the hall where water got in; when it rained, Mother brought washtubs and put them where I liked to lie on the hottest nights, when our straight-through hall provided the only movement of air. If a dust storm threatened, Mother closed the house, putting long sausages of fabric stuffed with sand against the cracks between door and step, but dust always got in, coming down the chimneys, through the ventilators … Mother liked to quote Dorothea McKellar:

> The love of field and coppice,
> Of green and shaded lanes,
> Of ordered woods and gardens
> Is running in your veins;
> Strong love of grey-blue distance,
> Brown streams and soft, dim skies –
> I know but cannot share it,
> My love is otherwise.

There was less than full conviction in the way she expressed the poet's affirmation of Australia. Mother, like Father, rejected the word 'Home', but when, in later years, she travelled overseas, she made England her first call, and this despite Father's use of the word 'Pom' as a term of contempt, and the scorn he felt for the English resorting to bodyline to contain Australia's batsmen, foremost of whom was the Don.

When Father described short-pitched bowling aimed at the batsman, and the cluster of fieldsmen ready for catches, it seemed impossible for anyone to stay in against Larwood, Voce, and the rest. But father said this was only because these bowlers were able to carry out their plan; Tom Wells, Finley's fastest bowler, also tried bodyline, but, having induced Father to set a legtrap field, he bowled on the off, the batsmen scoring freely. 'I had to make him go back to a normal field,' Father said. 'He wasn't good enough for what he was trying to do.'

This wariness of people's personal rhetoric was one of Father's most persistent traits; believing in no one, he expected never to be let down. Only Bradman satisfied; despite occasional ducks and single figure scores, he made a century every third time he went to the wicket, and this was so improbably good as to be good enough. He at least could be believed in. The run-getting strokes of his major innings, as diagrammed by Australia's scorer, showed an even spread of lines radiating to all points of the oval, from fine leg to sightscreen, and back to the finest cuts between slip and wicketkeeper. These star diagrams were even more convincing proof of his mastery than his average, a statistic which might have concealed faults. Father added that he was quick between wickets, a wonderful fieldsman, and a shrewd tactician. Bowlers despaired because he had no flaw. No one in my world was that good, nor, I saw, when I thumbed through the 1930 V.C.A. Report, was there anyone in Bradman's world to match him. No name appeared more frequently in the records than Bradman, D. G. (Donald George, Father told me), the initials associating in my mind with the halo of letters around the King's head on coins - GEORGIUS V (or VI) D. G. BRITT OMN REX F. D. IND. IMP.

Deo Gratias! By the grace of God! I grew interested in second names. How did I get my own? Why was Mother's Myra? How did Father get stuck with Percy?

Mother, custodian of family lore, said that when Father had been born, Grandma and Grandpa had agreed on Norman for their son but couldn't think of a second name. Grandpa had opened the phone book at the listing for the tiny village where the family had settled, and stuck a pin in the page, his child receiving the name thus impaled. It was many years before I suspected that this story owed its origins not to fact (What village had a phone book in 1897?) but to Father's family, cautious, patient people, wishing to release in themselves a cheerful willingness to take a chance. Mother didn't like taking chances and Father laughed at her. I sided with Father. Nothing could go wrong when you were six, ten, twelve!

I expected luck to stay on our side. Father rode down the avenue on Ginger, our hack; I watched him ride off, confident in his cardigan, felt hat and battered suit coat, and was surprised when he walked into the kitchen minutes later, dusty, and giving off a feeling of having been humbled. Ginger had tripped and fallen; thrashing to regain his feet, he could have rolled on Father, but had gone the other way. Another night, having washed for dinner, Father announced that he might have been killed that afternoon. He'd stopped the team to straighten a twisted chain, and a young horse had started in fright, causing the others to move. Father had fallen in front of the tines. 'Fortunately,' he said, 'I'd put new reins on the leaders a few days ago, and they held.' In my mind I examined the combine, wondering which parts would have dug into Father, and what would have happened to someone dragged across the earth. Would the bolting team have stopped at a fence, or veered through the paddock till its terror ran out? It was the loneliness of Father's crisis that frightened me; the incident had begun and ended with no one in sight. I wondered that he hadn't come back to the house to tell us, the narrow escape surely excusing him from any more work that day. Would other farmers have gone on with their work? Would Norman Taylor? Keith Dawe? Bert Morris? Norman Crosby? Dick Killeen? Johnny Hamilton, if he'd been bright enough to work his farm instead of leasing it to others? Joe Marantelli? George Pinchen?

I thought they would. It was the sort of thing they mentioned to each other, leaning on gate-posts or the rails of stockyards, more able, in male company, to admit fear by making light of it than they could be with their wives. Or that was the understanding I drew from my parents, Mother so defenceless against entering imaginatively into disaster, and Father so stoical in accepting odds. Father backed a racehorse three or four times a year. Mother stored threepences and sixpences for the Christmas pudding. Presents she received which seemed too self-indulgent were put aside for someone else; the cache for this defence against being caught out by poverty was the bottom drawer of her dressing-table where she stored powders and powder puffs, doilys and scented soaps against the obligation to give. I felt nervous of this drawer and never opened it, though oddly enough I was prepared to open something which would seem to have been far more terrifying.

In the wardrobe where Father kept the gun I discovered a small book printed in black and red (for emphasis), which set out the terms on which humans were damned or saved. This book contained the most damaging statements I had encountered. I feared it, yet when Mother was shopping and Father working, I studied it. Unless, it said, you believed that God had sent His Son into the world to save sinners, you were damned. To Hell. Furthermore, it read, unless you were prepared to believe that God had sent his only SON (red type) to be crucified for the salvation, not only of sinners in general but particularly and especially for YOU (more red) then, it announced triumphantly, you too were DAMNED.

TO HELL.

I couldn't believe it. God hadn't sent Jesus to be crucified for me, sitting on my swing beneath the grapevines, nor could I, considering the matter calmly on the dried mud-bank of the channel running past our house, believe, as the book wished me to, that I was going to spend ETERNITY

IN HELL because I didn't think the crucifixion had been staged for my particular benefit. Though the book terrified me, I thought the God it talked about must have a peculiar sense of proportion if he wanted to damn me.

I wasn't that important.

I wondered what Mother made of these threats, and why, since she never voiced such ideas to me, she had them in the wardrobe, but I was never able to ask. It wasn't that I was scared of her answer, it was because I was scared to reveal my fears; Mother's anguish, if it entered me, would be too much to cope with. I preferred to fight fear alone.

I never told anyone my dreams.

One of them drew on the illustrations in an encyclopedia of world animals that sat on our bookshelf. I was wandering in a jungle populated by lions and dinosaurs. Their roars were all about me. Terrified, but somehow collected, I found my way to a secret spot where there was a trapdoor, and beneath it a tunnel. The tunnel led to the other side of a river the animals couldn't cross. When I pushed up the trapdoor on the safe side of the river, I was in cleared land, and the roars of the carnivores lurching around their jungle didn't threaten me. If I crept out of my double bed to the window, I saw moonlight streaming down on our farm, and heard only cows and sheep. I was safe.

In another of my dreams, I was pursued. Running without daring to look back, I could tell that my pursuer was neither gaining nor losing ground. The climax of my dream came when I ran into the yard surrounding our house, wriggled my limbs energetically and flew with breathtaking ease to the roof of our kitchen/dining room. Perched like a finial above the window through which I looked on the day I heard of Hiroshima, I looked down in certainty that the pursuer had gone away because he/it couldn't fly. I was safe.

In a third dream, I flew endlessly above a black ocean crowded with glistening crocodiles, also from the animal book. They snapped and snarled a few feet below me, but out of reach. I was safe.

In another, I was in the air raid shelter Father had dug beneath the pepper trees. Hearing Germans tumbling down the steps, I whipped aside my curtain to reach a secret door leading into another tunnel. This tunnel also had a secret door and behind it another tunnel, which had its secret doors and further tunnels. X-ray vision allowed me to know how many doors and tunnels behind me were the Germans with their revolvers. They never caught me because no matter how many of my secret doors they uncovered, there was another, and another. I was safe.

In the most frightening of my dreams, I was in an enormous covered space. A polished floor stretched to an horizon where it met a roof without visible means of support. I stood anxiously in this space, watching two objects like cannonballs in the remote distance. These shining balls moved towards me in a mysterious geometry, advancing, then standing still. With each step they halved the distance between them. Making no visible movement, they seemed to dissolve and reform. As they came closer, my tension increased. Eventually I stood on one. The moves continued, the second ball halving its distance from me at each step. I had a feeling that if they touched, the result would be calamitous. I woke up, always, when the two balls were a hairsbreadth apart. I was not safe at all in my double bed, in my farmhouse, in my mother's and my father's care.

I never told anyone my dreams. Mother never told me hers, nor Father his. I knew it was our ambition to be out of debt, even modestly prosperous, but did my parents want anything impossible, or were they content?

For me, they were content, because on summer nights they spread rugs on one of the two squares of lawn in front of the house and I lay between them, staring at the Milky Way, the

Saucepan and the Southern Cross. My parents' knowledge of the stars was soon exhausted, and we played 'I spy', nominating a room and a letter:

'I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with J. In the kitchen.'

'Jug.'

'No.'

'Jam.'

'No.'

'Am I getting hot?'

'Not very.'

'Jelly?'

'No. Bit closer.'

'I can't think of anything else.'

'Do you give up?'

'No, just a minute ... all right, I give up.'

'Junket!'

'Oh, I never thought of that!'

When I fell asleep, Mother or Father carried me to bed. Sometimes I stayed awake until we all went in, trailing rugs and cushions on the couch grass which was too thick for our mower. Lacking the strength to push the machine through its spongy surface, I mowed the weeds in the sandy path between front door and garden gate; there was some pleasure in seeing them fall. I used also to attack the huge trees at the front of the house with an iron hook, leaving stigmata which the trees tried to heal with gum; it was supposed to be edible but neither my friends nor I could do more than lick it briefly before spitting it out. The blackfellows never had food like Mother's! On cold nights I wondered how they'd lived, unprotected from frost and rain; there were no caves in the Riverina, no natural shelter. I wondered too about the animals; how could they survive when Mother, Father, my brother and I were huddled by the fire? Sometimes, when we argued about who was getting the most warmth, Father mentioned Norman Taylor, youngest in a large family, and always squeezed out of the fireside circle. Norman took some shotgun cartridges, filled them with sand and replaced the cardboard wad. Waiting till his family were settled one night, he threw the cartridges in the flames, making the Taylors scatter and giving him the chance to grab a seat. Or so the story went.

My parents were at their most characteristic with fires. Father walked in with an armful of dried bits from the woodheap, split from forty-year-old fence posts, or fallen redgum, tossed them across the hobs, stuffed a few pages of The *Argus* underneath, applied a match, and walked away. His fires always caught. Mother knelt by the opening every morning, shoveled out ashes, then, with a bucket of kalsomine, whitened the blackened opening. One of our four fireplaces had a brick coloured plaster for which Mother used another application, but in either case she obliterated, every morning, last night's coat of black. To me, this was flying in the face of nature, since the next fire would blacken the fireplace again, but Mother refused to be what I thought was rational. It was what she'd been brought up to do, and if 'other people' - Mother's euphemism for anyone with whom she was in conflict -didn't agree, they'd just have to accept that she was going to maintain her standards.

She did it in defiance of her men. She spread butter knives at every meal. She despaired of tomato sauce. She suffered, by courtesy of Father and his sons, the A.B.C. news blaring over meals. Our dining table was open to whatever swept across it. Mother must often have felt powerless, but there is only one scene which fixes this for me. We'd had lunch in the old dining room, before the fifties improvements. I remember tension, but not its cause. Lunch finished. Father went back to the paddocks. My brother was at school. I, being less than six, was at home for the altercation. I went into the paddocks and came back to find Mother at the kitchen table, head down. She was crying.

I understood her tears, but not the cause of them. I watched, then withdrew. I was not the sort of child to ask 'Why are you crying?' nor would I have wanted to know the answer. I had seen what I was not intended to see, and it undercut what I wanted my parents to be – a secure, harmonious protection.

I remembered Mother's tears four years later when there was another dispute at table. Rationing had been introduced. Clothes, petrol, butter and sugar were obtainable only on the production of coupons, though there were black market avenues which my parents despised. The careful measuring imposed by rationing was something which accorded with Mother's nature; she set the table with four sugar bowls so that those who restrained themselves might have a little extra late in the week, while those who were spendthrift would go without. I liked the idea; it reminded me of the seven lean years following the years of fullness in Joseph's Egypt, and it was a challenge: I found I was a hoarder. Father said it was silly, and the sugar had to go back to a common bowl. He was damned if he was going to have his sugar and butter parcelled separately. I see this now as simple patriarchy, and also a difference in temperament; Mother would, and Father wouldn't, accept a restriction for the opportunity it gave to practise virtue.

Father thought clergymen were unmanly; when Mr McNaughtin called late one morning and was invited to stay for lunch, Father, sensing that Mother would ask him to say grace, nudged her under the table and started eating. They joked about this for years so I must suspect that for some reason Mother didn't mind the cleric not getting his chance to say grace. Mother's respect for clergymen didn't allow their virtue to show itself too plainly as poverty: Edna Morris, whose home was visited by Canon White on his pastoral journeys between Finley and Deniliquin, shared with Mother her despair about the badly executed patches and the bagginess of the Canon's trousers. 'I do wish he'd look after himself,' she would say, and Mother would agree; no matter how poor you were, an effort should be visible.

On the other hand, Mother felt that efforts had to be made for the poor. The Far West Children's Health Scheme, the Red Cross and other charities took up much of her time. Father was scornful. 'If those women got jobs,' he used to say, 'and put the money they earned into these charities they work for, they'd make ten times as much as they do with these pokey little stalls and card afternoons,' Father always grinned at me as he ended these pronouncements with a not very questioning 'Eh?' He knew he had me on his side. What jobs the women should take, and what would be said about their neglect of their families, was not discussed.

Women worked in the appropriate parts of Sammons Edwardes department store, at the school, the hospital, the florist's and behind the counters of their husband's stores; their own commercial enterprises were limited to haberdashery, clothes, and the tiny lending library of Rhoda Lewis, a spinster whose books, people complained, weren't changed often enough. How she was to do this, and live, on an income composed of threepences, was another matter not discussed.

That there were taboos at every turn I realized when, at four or five, I entered the bar of the Tuppal. 'Whose kid's that?' I heard, and 'What's he doin' here?' before Father led me out. Mother sat in the car when she'd finished shopping, and waited for Father. Father sat in the car when he'd done his business, saying 'By God, those women can talk.' When I was ten I showed Father something I'd found in a Reader's Digest – a quiz champion had been asked how he gained so much knowledge. 'I make it my practice,' had been his reply, 'to read a book whenever we're going out and my wife says she'll be ready in just a minute.' Father thought this made sense. Mother said that when we were going somewhere, there were things to be got ready which he left to her, so of course she couldn't be sitting in the car the minute he brought it round the front, while Father advised his son, 'If you're going to get married, you're going to get used to waiting.' In the brown

Ford with the registration sticker at the bottom left of the windscreen, and a dusty track between the pepper trees stretching ahead, marriage seemed unthinkable: I was only eight, five, ten, only six, twelve, seven, two.

I was a child. I expected each stage of my upbringing to happen within a secure society that knew where it was going and who its citizens were. I expected the liberty of observing them, bound as they must be, in their places, while I decided who I was, and where I might, in the universe of destinations, be headed. It was the right, I thought, of every child, even the kids who, banging upturned washtubs, followed mounted troops down Murray Street in a World War Two recruiting drive. These Lindsayesque urchins, trailing behind entrants in the decorated bicycle competition, were the lineal descendants of the frustrated youth who'd allowed themselves to be turned into marble buglers, granite obelisks, and other sombre remembrances of sacrifice, and the foolishness of Great Britain.

Living on a farm, I never saw Anzac Day services. On Empire Days I attended school for speeches, flag raising and the singing of 'Oh Valiant Hearts' and Kipling's Recessional Hymn before we were allowed our holiday. I asked Father why he hadn't gone to the First World War. He said his mother had determined that two boys in uniform - his elder brothers - were enough. Describing how pro-military activists had handed out white feathers to young men they saw as cowardly, he spoke equably; it seemed not to have happened to him. Mother said wars were foolish and the world would be better off without them, but she had no interest in policies; nations, in Mother's thinking, needed to obey the same rules as individuals. If this was impractical, the alternative - the news from Hitler's war, and Tojo's - made no more sense. I had a picture in my mind, which must have derived from a newsreel, of a naval turret suffering a direct hit. I imagined naked sailors sweating in tropic heat as they stuffed shells in their gun the moment before a Jap shell blew them to pieces, shearing their turret and scorching their flesh. It was unthinkable.

Yet I thought about it. I got a set of cardboard ships, Japanese and American, which I pressed from their sheet, folded to provide a base, and disposed about the floor of the lounge. With marbles rolled or flung across the room I torpedoed them, or shelled them, drowning hundreds of sailors at the corner of the sofa or beneath the fire set of tongs, pan, brush and poker. Though I admitted no bias, the Allies always won, coming from behind to sink six or seven Japs while enemy fire went wide. 'Taking evasive action' was the phrase I picked up from the papers. At other times I transferred these battles to a huge -I thought — heap of sand near our windmill. This island I peopled with lead soldiers and defended by lead guns, most of them, after the battering they received, having barrels like elephants' trunks. I raided the woodheap for boards to represent the Japanese navy and the shed for machinery parts to act as shells, the most vicious of them being sharply pointed tines from the hayrake. Standing on the island, I flung these pieces of metal at the boards, then, standing offshore like Gulliver, I flung them back, picking off Allied soldiers I cherished individually because a box cost two and six for six and that sort of money didn't come easily. The papers said we were spending a million a day on the war effort; Mother explained that this meant a thousand times a thousand pounds, but confused me when she explained that a billion was a million million in some countries and a thousand million in others.

I had no idea what another country might be like. The English were supposed to be most like ourselves, which was why we were fighting for them. I felt some stirring at the patriotic song,

> There'll always be an England,
> And England shall be free,
> If England means as much to you,
> As England means to me.

but was no less moved by 'God Bless America' and 'The Marines' Hymn'. What the Germans and the Japanese sang I had no idea until the Allies adopted 'Lili Marlene'. Of Germany's other musical tradition I knew nothing except the facts about composers' lives which Miss Allen, who taught grades one and two, made us copy in our books. 'How do you spell it, Miss?' we asked, confronted by Bach (bark?), Handel and Schu(shoe?)-mann. We dutifully listed the components of Mozart's output – forty-one symphonies, twenty-seven piano concertos and the rest – never believing that a kid of seven could compose, let alone play an early version of the piano before some Grand Duke at the age of five. It was all a bit much, and when Miss Allen played us a 78 of Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture, turning over in the middle, I couldn't see what the fuss was about. Nothing emanating from the wind-up gramophone made me think of fairies; indeed, since we knew fairies didn't exist, it wasn't clear why famous people wrote such tripe.

The most popular numbers in our School of Arts concerts were given by the Nigger Minstrels. It seems that we had a taste for the exotic, because Tom Wells, clad in Arab headgear and singing excerpts from *The Desert Song*, made me feel that I knew as much about the French Foreign Legion as Father did from his reading of *Beau Geste*. The only people recognized by the town as foreign, yet accepted, were the Heterelezis family, safely anchored in the Wattle Cafe. My brother went there because Johnny, who was the same age, and Nick, a year ahead of me, gave him double helpings of lavishly topped sundaes. Sometimes I joined my brother and his friends, feeling there was something odd about a place where the sons could disburse their parents' profits. Everything should be paid for! Nick Heterelezis was held to have a beautiful voice, but the more remarkable aspect of his performances at the variety concerts which drew the district to the town on Saturday nights was that he had the confidence to sing before the town. The very thought of singing solo was, for me, embarrassing. I felt Nick deserved his ovations, but was always relieved when he was replaced by items where adults, and preferably groups of adults, held the stage.

My way of filling the tedious minutes of interval, when adults were chatting noisily in the foyer, and some kids were exploring the edge of the streetlight and the empty block beside the hall, was to study the curtain which was lowered to hide the stage. It was painted with advertisements for local businesses, some of them defunct, but the centrepiece was a lakeside scene obviously meant to display nature at its most beautiful. Hair smarmed and cardigan buttoned, I studied this scene and discovered that it bore the caption LAKE COMO. I discussed this with Mother, who thought the lake was in northern Italy. Our atlas confirmed her opinion, but how and why this Lombardian feature came to be represented in Finley, we never knew.

Unanswered questions presented themselves at every turn. Entering Murray Street in the early years of the Ford, we found ourselves looking at the Murray Hut, a decrepit structure which must have been an outpost of the long divided Tuppal or Coree stations; it was said that Ned Kelly had slept in it the night before (or after) his gang's raid on Jerilderie. This was always qualified by 'supposed to have slept' or 'That's what they reckon, anyhow,' adding mystery while offering no verifiable source. Similarly, the *Finley Mail*, a handset weekly, printed lexicons of aboriginal words, or notes from early settlers explaining how places had got their names; how anyone could know that Corowa meant 'rocky river' and Barooga 'my home', while Numurkah meant 'war shield' was beyond me; I pictured blacks using sticks to make squiggles in the sand while an educated white, probably a clergyman, took notes. The trouble was, there were so many words for 'meeting place of the waters', and the pioneers' stories conflicted; these glossaries left me frustrated. Why couldn't someone get it right?

Jack Cosstick at the Mail didn't claim to do more than print what people gave him, and our teachers came from elsewhere so they had no special knowledge; there didn't seem to be anyone who knew how our district came into being. Father said our farm had been owned by a Mr Erskine, about whom he knew little; Mr Erskine became, like God, a prime cause. Thus it was Mr

Erskine who was responsible for the pepper trees, and the thatched roof stable that leaned for years until it fell one night, crushing the horse troughs but not the horses because Father, distrusting the building, never left them inside at night. Father said the building's downfall had been inevitable, but I wondered why the swallows' nests and the musty smell couldn't have been saved – not that this stopped me from enjoying the fire when Father cleaned up.

Mr Erskine was responsible, I guessed, for the old blacksmith's shop with its circular pit of ashes and its mighty bellows, which Father never used, preferring, if he needed something welded, to go to Wimpy Halligan in Finley, whose ashpit was fanned by a handle-operated device which Wimpy let you turn if he knew you from having fixed a puncture on your bike. I loved the sparks in Wimpy's gloomy shed, and would have liked the fire in our blacksmith's shop rekindled, but Father neglected the building, dumping machinery behind it and letting boards fall off until it was only a frame. Two down against Mr Erskine!

I also undid Mr Erskine's work when I picked off the smooth black coating he'd applied to our mudbrick wash house; I envied my brother being given the job of pushing over another mudbrick shed prior to the creation of a new henhouse. The Erskine creation we didn't destroy was the front section of our house, but even then there was something missing because Father said the house had been built from bricks made on the property, but where the kiln had been and the clay had come from, he didn't know. His ignorance disturbed me because I felt one ought to be able to refer to a clearly established origin.

How had I come into being? I'd been born in Bendigo because Mother had returned to her mother for the birth; Father said women often did that. Before the birth? There were only romantic stories which I felt must be nonsense if applied to my hardworking parents. At the age of eight or nine I would sit by the fire (my brother away at school) musing aloud: 'Oh Alice, it's a moonlight night, let's go for a walk!' 'Oh Norman, I love you, hold my hand!' My parents found these performances amusing; they liked being jointly teased and I liked teasing them, but what the realities of their courting had been, they didn't say and I never asked. Father bought Truth occasionally; Mother told me it was for grownups, thus I read it when no one was around, taking care to put it back where I'd found it. When I read about rape cases I had a sense of men with swollen penises doing something to women more cruel than the things we did to animals; I was also puzzled by the violent language used by judges in divorce cases, where one or more of the parties involved were castigated as having 'barnyard morals' or being 'worse than animals'.

This puzzled me. What were the judges getting at? I saw rams lock horns occasionally, dogs fight, and chooks victimize one of their number, but by and large animals managed their affairs quite well; there was some self-hatred in the human species which I couldn't understand.

Then it entered me. I was sitting in a cane chair by the fire studying a picture of a naked woman in *Truth* when Mother came into the room. Addressing me by my Christian name and my family name, she said, 'What are you doing looking at a woman with no clothes on?' I put the paper down. Next day I cut out the picture, fascinated, now, in a different way. It said something I needed to know but wouldn't be told. I had therefore to have it where I could refer to it. I took it beneath the pepper trees and buried it in a patch of much turned over soil. Days later, when I came back, it was lying on the surface. A reasonable explanation would have been that the chooks, which were always scratching in that spot, had turned it up, but I looked furtively at the house; had I been followed?

I wasn't sure. I took the picture to an old harvester which Father had abandoned behind the blacksmith's shop, a partially gutted machine in which I flew missions over Germany, and hid it hastily. When I came back, it was on the floor of my cockpit. Who'd done it this time? The wind? Birds scratching for grain? Someone? I crumpled it into a tight ball and threw it away, hoping to rid myself of the feeling of being pursued.

Recalling now my feelings as I studied the picture before Mother came in, I discover a deep absorption (I had never seen a naked adult) and a further, stronger, feeling of enjoyment. I liked what I was looking at. My interest was something to which I could give myself with a warm completeness comparable to the feeling I had had when, younger, I fell asleep in my mother's or my father's arms. Once, going to sleep with my head on Father's chest as he sat by the fire, a perception came to me – that my sense of total security was something that I wouldn't have forever; older people didn't seem to have it, thus my time in the charmed circle wouldn't last forever. Now, with the picture of the woman flung away, a taboo had entered me and something had been destroyed; my sexuality was in the hands of adults unless I kept it secret.

It was too important to let anyone else control; I felt deeply curious. There was a picture on the Tarzan's Grip tube which fascinated me. A naked Tarzan sat astride a lion, controlling the beast's jaws with his hands. His penis was hidden. Wondering what it would be like to be in such a violent conflict, I took myself to the front lounge when there was no one about, took off my clothes and wrestled a velvet cushion, imagining that unless I quelled it, it would kill me. I enjoyed the savagery of the game, noticing that my small penis grew erect; this added a marvellous dimension of pleasure, but I didn't repeat the game. It was the knowledge that was more important; I'd found out a little of what it was about.

For the rest, I remained in ignorance, and there were other experiences as compelling as sexual ones. On hot days, as I stood in the shed, toes deep in chaff, I saw stirrings above the bare spot where Father hooked the horses to the machinery; before my eyes whirlwinds generated themselves, lifting dust, feathers and powdered dung in spirals which petered out as mysteriously as they had begun, or dashed to the gate as if wanting to follow our horses to the paddock. Bigger whirlies, born in grander spaces than the forecourt of our shed, swept on us from the west, setting our wheat in turmoil and thrashing the canopies of trees. I imagined the heavy trunks wondering if their roots would hold as their arms were pulled skywards! A frequent path for these winds was from the southwest comer of our farm, past the gum trees I hacked with my iron hook, and into the paddocks near Norman Taylor's; the farm took minutes to settle when one of these visitations had passed.

Dust storms were more ominous than whirlwinds (Father said the snow on New Zealand's mountains had been found to be stained by Mallee soil) and fire was worst of all. That it could kill, I knew from reports of the Black Friday fires, a day I spent sprawled in the hall with cushions and comics, fretting against the heat. That it could destroy I knew from watching a house owned by the Koschel family burn one night before an audience of hundreds, the men saying 'There's nothing you can do, once it's caught on,' and the women 'It'd be silly for anyone to risk their lives.' Flames from the Koschel house rose as high as the water tower, making our faces lurid. The fire brigade contented itself by spraying neighbouring houses. I wondered if Miss Lewis's curtains were getting wet. For weeks afterwards I saw the remains of the house every time I went from school to the Post Office, the aftermath of a fire so dreary beside the excitement of flames lashing in the night.

My parents were careful of fire, but nothing on a plain could be isolated. A column of smoke always set Father estimating the distance and checking the wind direction. 'That'll be the other side of Maxwell's lane,' he would say. 'It'll be Russell burning off.'

I relied on Father to know these things, and Mother did too; fire was one of the things against which she was unable to provide any security. Lightning was another. When storms rumbled around our house, Mother was concerned to know whether they would bring sheet lightning, which was harmless, forked lightning, or chain lightning, a species I was never able to identify. Forked lightning was dangerous, devastating trees and sometimes felling players on sports fields. There was some suggestion that the best precaution against lightning, as with goannas that might take you for a tree, was to lie down, thus lowering, as it were, the visibility of the target. Mother's most puzzling reaction to lightning was to move about the house covering mirrors. I was never able to get from her why she did this. I am inclined to think that she believed the lightning might enter the house via its reflection, thus becoming able, perhaps, to destroy people and things inside. I don't remember Father commenting on the practice, which he would certainly have thought irrational; perhaps it fitted in his widely defined area of women's foibles. He said you didn't want to be carrying a crowbar when there was lightning around because you were making yourself a conductor, but for the rest, he seemed not to fear it, and his absence of fear provided security. I recall an afternoon when a storm broke while Father was out working. Thunder rumbled around the house and rain crashed on the roof. Mother hung rugs on the mirrors. Returning to the dining room, she drew me to the table, and we sat on it. I preferred to stay by the fire, and asked why we had to sit in the middle of the room. Mother explained that if the storm blew the chimney over, we wouldn't be close to it, thus we mightn't get hurt. I could see through this quite easily – if bricks were tumbling we'd be safer under the table or in the furthest corner – but couldn't understand why the centre of the room was the safest place for Mother.

When Father kicked off his gumboots and shed his oilskin at the spot by the door where Tim liked to sit, the danger was over. We got off the table.

Another time, in summer, Father went to cricket in Jerilderie. Early in a sullen afternoon, I noticed a column of smoke in the west. The day was still, but our strongest winds came from the west, and if a wind got up, we could be burned out. I called Mother. She had none of Father's skill in reading horizons. We watched the smoke, debating whether or not the fire was getting bigger. We decided that it was. Mother rang Maxwells. No one answered. I felt exposed. We walked to the woodheap to get a better view. The column of smoke was higher. It was not hard to imagine a fire seething in someone's stubble with the peculiar crackling sound of dry grass burning, and an acrid smell which didn't reach Mother and I as we stood looking through the line of pepper trees which shaded the stockyards and cowshed. I felt my chest tighten. Mother said she'd ring Jerilderie. We went back to the house.

The telephone was mounted on the passage wall. Standing at the back door, at the spot where, soon after I was born, Mother had had her white Tuscan china teaset, with its green rims and green-tipped handles, knocked from her hands and broken by a door whipped by a gust of wind, leaving only two cups and two saucers as survivors, I watched Mother, heavy hearted and anxious as myself, turn the handle of the phone. Finley exchange gave her Jerilderie exchange, who said there was no phone at the ground. They offered to put her onto one of the hotels, where someone might know something. While she waited for this to happen, I went for another look. The fire hadn't got any bigger. I went back with the news. Mother kept making phone calls. I kept studying the fire. The sky grew more ominous, the column less distinct. I wasn't sure what this meant. Mother spent ages turning the handle of the phone or holding conversations which produced no information. Eventually we heard a vehicle on the back road. This was something of an event at any time; Mother and I went to the fence over which she threw scraps for the chooks and over which, in the reverse direction, horses leaned to munch the tops of our carrots, the only provocation which, to my knowledge, ever caused Mother to say bloody and bugger. The engine we'd heard was that of a cutaway Chevrolet, altered to allow its chassis to support, in somewhat sagging fashion, a corrugated iron watertank and a hand operated pump. The Finley fire brigade! Two or three men clung to the tank, and another sat beside the driver. 'At least we know there's someone fighting it,' Mother said, trying to reassure me. I was far from convinced. We passed the afternoon making phone calls, waiting for Father. The fire appeared to be neither soothed nor maddened by the brigade's arrival. Nor did our tension decrease, but I felt, as the afternoon wore on, a numbness, a feeling of inevitability about whatever happened. This was perhaps my deepest, my most prolonged, blooding in rural ways. By the time Father came home, we'd discovered that the fire was out. The danger was over but I was now aware, as Mother had always been, that there were certain agents of fate over which we had no control.

There were other times when my security was in doubt. Father went to hospital for a hernia operation. I assumed he would recover; he recovered. He was called to a medical inspection in the School of Arts to assess the fitness of district males for military service. I couldn't believe that a forty-five-year-old farmer would be called up - and he wasn't. Father said that the men in the hall had to take off their clothes for the doctor; I was puzzled, and even more, offended that some power could strip people of their dignity. Adults wore clothes at all times. It was only kids who were told by their parents 'You don't have to be embarrassed, just change your pants quickly, no one's going to look!'

I was nervous about operating tables. When I visited Father in hospital, the air was heavy with an unpleasant smell. Father said it was chloroform being given to someone having an operation; I could hear a man groaning in fear. Father said proudly, and said it for years, that he'd heard himself say, as he went under, 'If a man loses his sense of humour, he might as well be dead.' This was a statement characteristic of Father, but he had no control over the doctors when he was asleep and even less, it seemed, over military manpower boards, who sent men north on trains that stopped in Finley, khaki figures leaning out windows, accepting chocolates, sandwiches, bottles of beer ... They were extraordinarily cheerful men, excited by what was happening to them. I couldn't accommodate their broad smiles with what I read in the papers about Japanese pillboxes raking beaches with machinegun fire, about troopships torpedoed in the night, about prisoners beheaded or used for bayonet practice. I didn't want Father in any of that. If someone had to die to save Australia, it mustn't be my dad.

Mother's view of the war was characteristically apolitical. 'We just want this war to end,' she would say. 'We just want peace.' To me it was obvious that this couldn't happen unless the Japs and Germans were defeated, but Mother refused to be swept up in the war effort; madness had descended on the world like a plague and she wanted it to pass. Newspapers reported what judges said to Australia's rare pacifists: 'What would you do if a Jap (German) tried to rape your wife (daughter)?' The answer was self evident to the people I heard discussing it. When it came to the crunch, even the weediest pacifist would fight. Pacifists were gutless wonders who wanted others to do their fighting for them. Jail was too good for them. They should be made to fight, and if they died, there'd be one less coward in the world! It was all very simple. I wondered why I wasn't sure.

Yet there was a war on, and I responded as intended to pictorial strips showing how brave Australians had won medals. One of them had been a man from a nearby town whose glory, I thought, reflected on the whole Riverina. The papers also printed recognition charts of the planes of all nations; thus I felt that should a Messerschmitt or Zero swoop down on our farm from the blinding light of the sun I would be quick to recognize it and get my family in the shelter — unless Father was, as usual, ploughing; unless Mother decided that her place was beside the stove! I also knew about the war because at school we paid in money to buy war savings certificates, the teacher calling us one by one to the table. When our contributions reached sixteen shillings, we received a certificate which could be cashed at any time at the Post Office - but if we kept them the full seven years, we'd get a pound! My sixpences bought seven of these; some kids had dozens. I was competitive, and felt envious of kids who played British Bulldog better, ran faster, had better clothes, or got sums right when I got them wrong. But I knew I was luckier than most because I could memorize 'Say not the struggle naught availeth', and when my brother, on holiday from Kerang High School, flung his French book in a chest because he hated it, I sought it out with something of the furtive interest that had taken me to Mother's fire and brimstone book. If there is a moment of magic in my life it is when I discovered that there were other words for familiar things. *L'élève*, pupil. *La règle*, ruler. *Le pupitre*, desk. *Ou est la plume de l'élève? Elle est sur le pupitre*!

And my brother didn't like it! He didn't want to be a farmer, either, he wanted to be an airman, paining Mother, who hadn't boarded her son to get an education unavailable in her town so he could rush to an early death. Since I wasn't going to be a farmer either, I wondered who would run the farm when Father grew old, and assumed he'd move about on a stick, directing workmen. I couldn't imagine him without his farm, yet he, when he was tired, said he'd have no trouble retiring, he didn't want to work till he died. Mother said this was nonsense, he wouldn't know what to do with himself; she was tilting at his lack of interests outside the farm and cricket. 'Don't you be so sure,' Father would say, and Mother would look at the unused butter knives and I would wonder what, exactly, there was between them that couldn't be worked out.

I assumed, studying other couples I came into contact with, that my parents' relationship was F.A.Q., a Wheat Board term often used by Father; it meant Fair Average Quality. There were people who were closer than my parents, like Bert and Edna Morris, who were always rubbing each other's hands, and others, like the Pinchens, who were my introduction to lives in disarray. I was fascinated by the Pinchens and never refused when Father, harnessing the hack in the jinker, said he was going to their farm. Mrs Pinchen was the most morose person I knew. 'Don't you ever be a farmer,' she would say, taking my hand in hers. I would say, respecting Father's presence, that I wasn't sure, and she would rub my white palms as if she saw in them an innocence about to be destroyed. George Pinchen, if he was home, would greet Father, leaning on the side of our cart in a fair imitation of normality, but if he was elsewhere when we arrived, Mrs Pinchen would emerge, and a dialogue like this would ensue:

Father (cheerily) Where's the boss?
Mrs P. (grimly) In Deniliquin, of course.
Father What's he doing there?
Mrs P. (with sour satisfaction) The bank manager, of course. He's the boss of this place.
Father (trying to recover) Well, where's George, then?
Mrs P. Down the paddock, the no-good loafing bastard.

It was said that Mrs Pinchen had run away from home to marry, and had lived to regret it. She swore, she wore ragged clothes, and she did nothing with her hair. She sounded as if she wanted to lace her husband's meals with arsenic, yet she stayed on the farm, letting the house fall into ruin. Father said she had a son who was clever, but looked a sadsack, with sleeves and trousers too short for his frame. No one knew where he was, but opinion had it that anyone would want to get away from the house he'd been brought up in. Mrs Pinchen took me inside one day while Father and George did something in the paddock. She sat me at a filthy table and gave me a cup of tea. I felt her kindness though I was afraid of what might happen. She lifted a ship model from the shelf above the fireplace and set it before me. It had cannons, sails, a poop, flags and dainty rails ... it's not possible to go on with this description because I don't believe I saw it accurately at the time – I saw what I wanted to see, the sailing ship of romance. 'My son made this,' Mrs Pinchen said, not bothering to ask if I liked it. I fondled the ship in the sunlight streaming in the window, while Mrs Pinchen put biscuits before me on a plate. Later she took me on a tour of the house. Windows were open, and piles of chookshit on the frames showed that they hadn't been closed for years. The dust storms that Mother fought to keep out had left drifts of sand in the unmade, sheetless bed, and dunes on the carpetless floor. Walls were cracked, cupboard doors open, ceiling boards hanging loose. Chooks flapped in and out of the bedroom, perching on the bed ends as of right. These too were encrusted with shit. Mother's struggles seemed positively heroic beside Mrs Pinchen's refusal of effort. She neither commented nor apologized as she led me through the rooms. I described the house to Mother on my return, and she, seeing that the pain had entered me this time, was tactful. 'She's very unhappy,' Mother said. 'She hasn't had much of a life.'

This puzzled me. No one wanted to be one of those people describable as having not had much of a life, but how did it happen? Why did some get it better than others? Why were the failures so fascinating? The Pinchens further kindled my interest when they sold their farm to the Broockmanns, a lanky Dutch family with long blonde hair (the women), and highpitched voices (the men). The Broockmanns were extremely hardworking, and I knew, though I never entered the house after they bought it, that Mrs Pinchen's negativism would have been swiftly overcome. I wondered if they knew what George Pinchen had told Father, and Father told me – that years before, George had buried money in a biscuit tin, 'against a rainy day', as he put it, but that when he'd come to leave the farm, he couldn't, though he dug in every place he thought likely, find the treasure. Assuming that the tin wasn't a fantasy, which was certainly a possibility, it must still be there. How I wanted to enter the Broockmanns' yard by night with a spade and lantern, like Pegleg Pete and Mickey Mouse in my comics, and uncover the buried wealth. Would the notes be mildewed, or wrapped in an oilskin packet? How long would a biscuit tin last in the earth?

About the time the Pinchens left, my fascination with magic and treasure led me to take a biscuit tin from the stack in the wash house and place in it the nucleus of a treasure. I remember a coin or two, a badge, a newspaper clipping ... and then memory runs out. I carried the tin to the dam enclosure in the back paddock where casuarinas and black box trees created an atmosphere of remoteness and resistance to enduring hardship. I selected a forked tree with a hollow in it, and hid the tin. Thereafter, fighting against my curiosity, I would force myself to stay away as long as I could, but sometimes, with dinner over but the sun not yet set, I would visit my cache, hoping, if not quite expecting, that some force would have visited in my absence to put new things in the tin. Alas, the contents were always the same. I added a few more trinkets to encourage the powers ... but to no avail. How I longed, staring at the infinite west through the fork of my tree, for something more amazing than the world I knew to give evidence of itself. Opening the tin to find nothing new was like waking from a dream in which I held money in my hand and believed, for a few seconds while I clutched my sheet, that it would be there when I was fully awake. Alas, again, this wealth never made the transition to reality. I did tell Mother about my money dreams and she was sensibly sympathetic: 'You've got to work hard if you want to get money,' she said. 'It doesn't grow on trees.' With my friends I laughed at the idea of a money tree, coins and notes dangling from its limbs like lemons. We agreed that if we were nurserymen we wouldn't sell such a tree, but would keep it to ourselves, which brought up the question of security. Everyone would want to raid it, perhaps even chop it down. We were inclined to think a money tree might be more trouble than it was worth ... but it was a fantasy that pleased.

Living on a farm meant that I experienced such shared pleasures only intermittently. Being alone seemed more natural to me than knowing the rules of games. I was only envious of the folklore available to town kids when I encountered Spin The Bottle, in which boys and girls had to kiss. I found this delightful and wondered why it was obligatory to groan when the bottle pointed to you, and why, if it came to that, the game wasn't played everywhere, all the time. What I didn't realize was that in a way, it was; I was aware that the rubber things in the vacant block opposite the school where the burnt house had stood, were not balloons, as some kids said, but their full import escaped me. They were part of that sexual mystery you could only get into when you were older. I would hear people say 'Georgie Malone's going round with Betty McGowan' and I would sense that George and Betty, driven by something I couldn't understand, were becoming part of the adult formula. Parenthood was natural, certainly – I needed Mother and Father – but childhood was so much more natural that I couldn't see why anyone would give up one for the other. This would be most apparent to me when I'd finish my peaches and cream and ask if there was any more. Mother, saying no, would add 'But you can have some of mine,' or 'Finish this, I don't feel like the rest.' I always took it, felt grateful, yet wondered how anyone could put someone else ahead of themselves. It wasn't natural, so what made people do it? Being adult was a peculiar business.

Adults, for instance, worked, and this was a very mixed bag. Digger Harley, legs slung over the side of his cart, making deliveries round the town in his rubber tyred, horsedrawn vehicle, was the picture of a happy man, jigging his nag with a flick of the rein and forever initiating cheery conversations as he pulled in and out of calls. Parcels went over his shoulder or under his arms as if they were feathers. His son Allan said he might take over his dad's work when he grew up. But there were others who seemed little more than slaves.

When the town's wheat silos filled up – that is to say, when there was no longer any capacity for loose grain storage – the harvest was bagged and stacked. Paddy Treacey and the other carriers took their loads to the northern end of town where, on an open sandy patch, and on a platform of redgum logs, a bagstack was built. There were photos of such stacks in the darkly panelled offices of New Zealand Loan, Dalgety's, and Goldsborough Mort, along with champion rams and beribboned bulls. The stacks in these photos, printed in sepia or grey, had a timeless air, even though the captions detailed the precise number of bags, the year, the place. Our town, I was pleased to see, figured prominently; an N.Z.L. agent told Father, who repeated it promptly to me, that the Finley wheatstack for nineteen-something was the biggest wheatstack ever built in the world! In later years, aware of Canada and America, I questioned this. A world record for our little collection of buildings on a plain? Father would say, with reassuring confidence, 'Well, they say, and it's supposed to be correct, that the record stack, in nineteen ...' and I would believe it a little longer, marvelling at the photo when I followed him into N.Z.L.

Watching the stacks being built was another matter. In blazing sunlight, baretopped young men, their skins browner than beer, accepted one hundred and eighty pound wheatbags from the edge of trucks and carried them lengthwise down their backs to the elevator where they flicked them lightly onto the machine. At the top of the stack, other men strode back from dumping their last load to be in position when the elevator got to the up-and-over point where the bag would fall unless there was a man to receive it. The lumpers – the job was known as wheat lumping – timed their movements to bring their backs under the elevator as the bags began to topple. I marvelled at them, and felt sorry for them in their shadeless, rhythmic lives, strong, but only to carry bags, disciplined, but only to obey machines. Father said city people were parasites, and rural industry carried Australia. These lumpers – and the shearers who lived in the line of iron sheds, freezing in winter and ovens in summer, beside McGill's shearing shed – carried rural industry. In a way they carried me. I feared them. They were another outcome of fate I didn't want to accept. I wondered what else they had beside their bodies, their corned beef and pickle sandwiches, and the bottles they left at the foot of the stack; it seemed there wasn't much beyond the football club, a few bets and the billiard tables at Bertie Thomas the barber's.

There was something else about them I found hard to accept, though I liked it. The wheat lumpers, like the soldiers on the trains, were too cheerful. Their Goodays and their Howareyas were enormous. Their warmth came out in a roar while their eyes, it seemed, watched shrewdly. They must then have a dark underside, or had it been excised in their growing up, just as Mother had become inexplicably unselfish? There was no way of knowing since rural people didn't discuss their feelings. Emotion, even in women, embarrassed people. The drama productions in which mother participated were set in English drawing rooms serviced by bustling maids and witty butlers; theatre, I grew to understand, was a matter of choosing plays, hiring sets, and affecting accents. The argot of the wheat lumpers would never do. Theatrically gifted people could affect the voice of another class, another country. A taboo surrounded the examination of our lives; the plains, apparently so open, supported closed and claustrophobic lives.

Houses sat like fortresses half a mile apart. Tracks and gates as idiosyncratic as the farm families themselves set the mood of entry. On windy days, Southern Cross windmills flicked their vanes like fishtails behind walls of pollarded sugar gum. Boobialla sprawled on fences, and bougainvillea, climbing on anything, sprinkled verandahs with magenta. Marigolds curtseyed left and right of steps. Father approached others' houses with a mixture of vigour and respect; after hammering loudly with his knuckles on the weatherboards, or the flywire door of a brick home, he would call loudly 'Anyone home?', repeating the cry if there was no response: 'Anyone hooaaohme?' Mother, who rarely arrived unexpected, would tap doors ritually before sending a dulcet 'Yoohoo!' down the passage, followed by the other woman's name: Agnes! Edna! Ma-arj! Both Father and Mother then stood back so that the occupant, entering the passage in silhouette, could identify the visitor before letting her own face be seen. I loved my parents for this circumspection; in this case, I could see, to be noisy was to be discreet, and discretion was something my parents practised carefully, editing discussions in the presence of 'little ears' and handling the gossip they picked up in town with mental gloves. Sitting in the back seat as we drove home from shopping, I would hear them discussing the feuds and fights of Finley, dealing with them before we turned in at our gate, which said NAIRANA (N. P. Eagle). Mother would get out, or I would, Father would take the car through to the first and largest pepper tree in the avenue, then, the gate being closed, we would cruise at thirty miles an hour between the trees I knew individually. We were home. While Mother unpacked groceries, Father lit the fire, then Mother cooked frankfurts, overlooking my tomato sauce, and I would be intensely happy to be under my parents' roof. Sometimes, as we sat reading, 3AR broadcast concerts, which we neither listened to nor turned off; the clapping that concluded these concerts, on nights when reception was free of static, had an uncanny resemblance to the sound of rain on iron, so that it would jerk me out of Champion or Mickey Mouse, believing that rain had enveloped our farm, then Father would turn off the wireless, which changed its name in my childhood to radio, and Mother would make me a cup of cocoa, tea for herself and Father. Mother took pride in remembering how many sugars people had in their tea, and whether they had it black or with milk; it was one of the first things established with new people in her life.

As codes of approach were important, so also were codes of departure. When I was bored and wanted visitors to go I would prick up my ears when one of them, usually the wife, said, 'We really must be getting on our way.' Mother would then make supper. This notice had to be given several times, it seemed, before anyone rose from their seat. Then an artificial form of exit took place, in which men and women maintained two conversations as the group stood in the hallway, or at a later stage, between front door and car. When a male conversation ran out, the visiting husband accused his wife of never stopping talking. She had then to defend herself in the cockatoo voice of farm wives before resuming her topic with Mother; the men started on something else. When the women ran out, and the visiting wife asked her husband if he was never going to stop talking — a minute ago he'd been accusing her of holding him up, now it was him! — the visiting husband would airily assert his right to talk stock prices while the women moved a few steps before developing a new topic which would in turn come under threat when the men finished theirs. Thus, on a basis of real or assumed sex war, couples levered themselves out. I found it maddening, particularly when I wanted to go home and Mother and Father were performing this dance. 'Why don't people just go?' I would ask, and Mother answer 'People think it's rude if you rush off.' My parents enjoyed my satirical descriptions of this rite, but changed their ways not at all. Indeed Father was critical of Bill Shattock, an engineer with the Irrigation Commission, because when he'd had a few glasses of beer he became boisterous. Father, like most farmers, distrusted changes in behaviour. Anyone who altered according to circumstances wasn't properly centred, thus you couldn't be certain of them, so that a measure of trust had to be withheld. Father expected to know how people would behave and Mother how they should behave; this split between recognition and morality was at the heart of them as man and woman. 'Is he sound?' Father asked (of men) while Mother's conversations with her fellow workers for charity were full of directive statements of ideal intention. Father detested some of these women, yet Mother saw their involvement as corrective of those flaws in their personalities that Father objected to. That there was a void between my parents' understandings was something I was distantly aware of; that there were gaps in our way of life I knew when my imagination played on something outside it, such as the cardboard model of Carnarvon castle, incomplete and crumbling, which someone gave Mother for me; but what these things had to do with my larger, heightened sense of nature surrounding us was something I never even formulated, though I felt it. The chimney that didn't fall down in the storm protruded from the western wall of our dining room, returning to form a corner. On days when a cold wind combined with clear sunlight, this was my favourite place. I wriggled my bottom in the dirt and pressed my shoulders into the warmth absorbed by the bricks. If I leaned forward I could feel the wind, but if I pressed my head back I could watch the trees, and further out the windmill, thrashing in the wind while I remained blissfully sheltered in my comer. I sat there for minutes at a time, trickling dirt through my fingers and marvelling that it was possible to have full comfort and protection with full awareness of what, had I been in it, would have been uncomfortable.

This combination of sensation and viewpoint allowed me the intense involvement in, and awareness of, the otherness of nature which rural people mostly have. The smells of rotting carcasses floated in our car windows, or at certain points in a square of ploughing where the team, or later the tractor, crossed a drift of air. Father, like other farmers, didn't burn corpses unless they were close to the house, preferring to leave them for the crows. I thought crows were repulsive, most cruelly so when they picked the eyes of lambs or dying ewes. They flew high above our farm crying Caaaaahhh and it seemed to me that their throats were as expressive as any singer's; their cry was what they were. Magpies carolled in the highest points of trees, dangerous in the nesting season when they darted you if you approached; cockies settled in clouds to steal the seed wheat if they could find it, not quite covered by the back row of the combine's tines, and galahs, too, drifted about the wheatfields, scavenging, but crows, like a clear blue sky, embodied the neutral pitiless void which surrounded everything else.

The formal and informal institutions of our world offered little explanation of life. The churches were small and poorly attended except by the Catholics who, Father said, were under the thumb of priests. Women took more notice of the clergy than men did, yet they seemed unable to be convinced of Christianity's description of things. The words I heard at funerals – 'the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come' – must have reverberated powerfully in the places whence they came, but they lacked grip on the Murray-Murrumbidgee plain, where the world to come – the future – was all too clearly caused by today's weather: no rain, no crops. Religious cycles and natural cycles had little to do with each other. It was no use believing in God when your harvester broke down. You either had a spare part, or you improvised. Nor did Sunday matter; Father never seemed to rest except on Saturdays when he went to cricket and occasionally football. Mother began her work as soon as the stove was lit by Father, and continued to darn after he'd settled by the fire with the *Argus*; it was Mother who put towels on the dining room table, brought in a basin and washed her son by the light of an Aladdin lamp before putting me to bed, but it was Father whose piggyback rides were more fun, and Father who, tired by a day's work topped by milking, could usually be persuaded to bowl a few balls at my wicket painted with Silver Frost on the gritty, sand coloured bricks with which Mr Erskine had made our home.

There was a crack in the dining room wall which troubled Father not at all; the soil had moved, he said airily, and waited several years before trowelling in cement and repainting. There were two hornets' nests under the verandah which my parents never knocked down. An ants' nest, sandy and gravel headed, occupied two yards of the path near our woodheap; one either deviated slightly, or strode across it, bringing the ant population up to see the giant. I thought it the height of daring to gouge the earth with bare feet and rush away before the city of ants reacted. A snake at the same point in the path didn't frighten me; noting that it was drowsy, I did what Father would have done – I detoured, got a stick from the woodheap and despatched it with a blow behind the head: Father picked up the corpse and hung it on a fence, as other farmers strung up foxes, or stretched the bobtailed skins of bunnies on wire devices like coathangers in rows of hundreds in their sheds. Life, when it pressed against the existence of a farm, was expendable.

There was also a barely disguised cruelty in the human perspective, not only in the righteous indignation that greeted accounts of Japanese and German atrocities, but in the treatment of human failing which, in the way of frontier communities, was condemned rather than assisted. I remember my malicious delight, shared by a dozen or so kids, when a drunken man lurched along Murray Street one Saturday afternoon – shops then opened on Saturday afternoons – swearing at the top of a coarse and powerful voice. I had not long since inquired of Mother whether the expressions Blast! and Go to blazes! came within her ban on swearing and was delighted to hear that they didn't; I found these expressions intensely powerful and whispered them to myself in bed, feeling that I'd got away with something. But the words used by the drunk were certainly taboo, and to shout them in the main street in the district's most sociable hours, was to defy the community. He had to be punished! The group of children, keeping safely to the road, taunted him as he lurched along the footpath cursing the occupants of benches and customers in shops. We sensed the precise distance at which we'd be safe from an angry rush, yet close enough to needle him by laughing; the pleasure lay in helping him to destruction. Some of the town's most respectable people had been insulted by his abuse, it could only end with the arrival of the police yet when Sergeant Dwyer and his constable reached the scene, I was not wholly in accord with the satisfaction expressed by adults about me: it was good to see the men in uniform twist the drunk's arms behind his back and lead him in a stooping position, not raving any the less for having his head down, toward the lockup, but it was also a disappointment. I had hoped he might do something more terrible, like smash a plateglass window, so that community response might be even more forceful, and I think, remembering the relish with which Sergeant Dwyer did his job, that he felt the street full of people wanted a performance to match the drunk's. 'Drunk' songs, when performed at variety concerts, sometimes ended with the uniformed sergeant leading the singer offstage by the elbow, the hall applauding and the sergeant beaming.

Another moment when I felt my outlook to be in accord with the community at large came at a concert when Ray Mann, bus driver and occasional sideshow wrestler, came onstage at the conclusion of a song, clad only in bathers, and dragging a rope. Without glancing at the audience he moved to the far side of the stage, gathered the rope in his hands, and tugged. Nothing happened. Since he was known to be strong, it could be inferred that something heavy was in the wings. He strained for some time without success, then put the rope down, apparently disgusted, and left the stage. Another item followed. When it ended, Ray and a second man in bathers strained on the rope once more. After what seemed like minutes of tugging, they drew across the stage a flat-bottomed tub in which sat a third young man, naked for as much of his person as was visible, sprinkling himself with a watering can and lathering himself with soap. The audience shrieked, I shrieked too, feeling no separation between myself and those about me, a deeply satisfying state which came at concerts, sporting events and showdays, although on the latter occasions the excitement of boxing, hoopla, celluloid rosettes spinning in the wind, and trotting events always gave way to a mood of emptiness when I wanted to be home, isolated, secure. I think this mood was partly a reaction to the sight of sideshow people morosely boiling billies on fires in front of their tents; negro boxers seemed the most dejected, displaced figures I could imagine when they were not in the ring, or on the stand with a drum beating beside them. I wondered what it would be like to wake up knowing that before the day ended you would have seven or eight fights in which you punished wheat lumpers or railway workers unless your boss told you to take a beating so that local pride could be stirred and an extra show squeezed into the day.

The sideshow women were caked with makeup, had gaunt faces and were dressed to please their males in things that were spangled, frilled, tasselled or studded. Watching them in the doorways of their tents, their vans, I wondered how much they did of what Mother did, and how the security they must have needed compared with hers. Did their children go to school, or did they remain mysteriously childless? The Finley showground, an enclosure of iron sheds, gum trees and a sporting surface where cricket balls were lost in grass or bounced into the faces of fieldsmen, was open to the brilliant light, blinding in summer, cold in winter, of the western sky. On the edge of town, next to the golf course where the greens were brown and the bunkers flat, it was no more hospitable than a drover's camp. Once a year it blended the wandering outsiders with their giant snakes and two-headed calves, their crystal balls and their heavyweight champions of Arizona, with the domesticated offerings of the locals - sponges, embroidery, cakes — and copybook writing from primary schools. Once a year a member of parliament opened the show at half past two; I used to wonder why he hadn't been there, like Mother, at half past eight. My parents' explanation - that his was a *formal* opening - never satisfied me. *Morning* was when the fires were lit, the scones unwrapped, the bowls of jam and sugar spread along the Red Cross trestles for afternoon tea, the Red Cross, I noticed, being one organization where mother's work didn't come within the ambit of an Auxiliary or Ladies Day. I wondered about the sideshow women; they looked harder than Mrs Pinchen, further alienated, and less kind. They even hunted us from the back of tents, suspecting that we had it in mind to slip in without paying.

Their men, meanwhile, spruiked the crowd with voices developed without benefit of microphones, offering to reveal the future, or proclaiming the reputations of bored, broken mouthed boxers. The dialogue was direct:

Sharman Is there anybody out there who's game to get in the ring with one of my boys? A round or two for a pound or two! It'll be a fair fight but if you get hurt it's your own lookout. If you stay three rounds with The Killer, I'll give you five pounds! But if he knocks you out, you get nothin', just a bucket of water. Is there anyone who wants to have a go?
Voice Yeah.
Sharman Who said that? Whereareya? Giveusalookatyer!
Voice Here. (A hand goes up.)
Sharman Whatsyername?
Voice Ron Jenkins.
Sharman Whereareya from, feller?
Jenkins Barooga.
Sharman Okay Jenkins, step up onto the platform. (Much drumming and whistling) Let everyone havealookatya. Okay Jenkins, you've seen my boys, you know their weights, which one dyawanna fight?
Jenkins Him. (Indicating a second string negro while the heavyweight champ of Arizona looks contemptuously over the crowd.)

Sharman Okay, we've got one contestant, he looks as if he might make a fight of it. Now is there anyone game to tackle The Killer? Five pounds if you're still on your feet at the end of three rounds of boxing …

I found the spruikers fascinating. No one in Finley, as far as I knew, talked as they did, yet their approach was formulaic, as if they knew exactly what was expected. In the furthest corners of the showground one could hear their exhortations building crescendos into the day, until, their work done, they directed their wives to let the paying public into the tent. Like the racecallers whose voices boomed out of bars and Bertie Thomas's barber's shop, they had a certainty of address I envied; it would be good to call out as they did, but what was there to say that wasn't intensely private or too mysterious to be understood?

Being a child meant having inexplicable sensations, and if I look at them now I can only put adult understanding on them, or leave them as mysteries, the most pressing, the most demanding, being my sensations of distress and respect when I came on Mother at the kitchen table, with Father down the paddock and some altercation, some tension at the dining table, unexplained. Why was Mother crying? I didn't know then, I don't know now. I'm tempted to surround her with the voices of spruikers, the click of billiard balls, the bare brown backs of wheat-lumpers, wanting to explain her tears by the ethic of frontier masculinity that faced her at every turn - but is this true? Was it a door and a wind that broke her dinner service, or her life position? I have no answer, only a sense of mystery surrounding the two surviving cups and saucers; the white pieces with their green rims were more precious to me than the goblets, in their rows of six, stored in the dresser since my parents' wedding, because they were survivors of something that had once been bigger, complete. Looking at the period of my childhood, from the depths of the depression to the return of Bradman, I would like to find it available, ready, at the ends of paths discoverable by memory, to be expressed. But there are gaps. Why did Bradman go out? What balls bowled him? What lay behind the statistics in the 1930 Report? What rainy days were summed up by 'Match Drawn'? Who was more nervous when they shook hands, His Majesty, or The Don? Why couldn't Father describe for me, ball by ball, as I wanted it, the 254 against South Africa which he had seen and which, embedded in his mind, gave him something I wanted for myself and couldn't have? What was in Mother's mind as she sat at table, head down? Mr Murdoch, our grade four teacher, told us, while trying to explain the workings of wireless, that there were people who believed that once a message had been broadcast it circled the earth forever, slowly getting fainter, but, if you had the right equipment - and this hadn't been invented - you'd be able to pick up something said years before. Being unable, now, to remember his tone of voice, I don't know if he took this seriously, but, however unscientific, it is an idea which is attractive to a writer in the act of recall; reality no sooner occurs than parts of it evaporate, more of it disappearing every day, year, decade, until, like strands of wool caught in a fence, there are only fragments to show that someone, something, a period, passed before.

I asked Father for later cricket reports than the 1930 book. He said he didn't have any but they would have been issued and if you wrote away, as he put it, you might be able to get them. Somehow it wasn't done. In-between Bradman had to be pieced together from newspapers, captions under pictures, and the reminiscences of Peter Wells, who hadn't forgiven The Don for moving to South Australia. Peter, Father explained, was a dyed in the wool New South Welshman; I thought this was a good thing to be. I was mystified when people said that we were 'really' part of Victoria, or that the Riverina should be a separate state. On the bridge at Tocumwal there was a sign saying NEW SOUTH WALES/VICTORIA and it was planted, I was pleased to see, on the southern bank of the Murray: we owned the river!

A redgum forest fringed the Murray on the Victorian side. If we drove to Yarroweyah, Strathmerton or Wunghnu (which Father never entered without asking 'What's the smallest sheep station in the world?' Answer – ONE EWE) the first mile beyond the bridge twisted along a high embankment, deeply enclosed in a mood of water, reeds, water birds, and an open crowd of trunks. For once there was a canopy between sky and humans. No obstacle blocked my view from the car, yet, a few hundred yards into the forest it closed itself, knowing something about itself which I could never know. Entering the open plains meant a return to the exposure I felt in our paddocks, an exposure which was both wonderful and terrible; it was overwhelming yet exhilarating to be small.

The towns of northern Victoria drew from Father comments on the raw deal handed out to soldier settlers. Not having his knowledge of land and stock, I could only judge this by the timber and fibrocement homes which sat on bare blocks attended only by lines loaded with washing. The cars parked by these houses seemed tied to something, yet ready for instant escape. I pitied the children in these homes; their imaginations couldn't possibly be stirred as mine was by the loneliness of our farm. The roof of our house, seen among its pepper trees from roads running north and south of it, was like a giant wing ready for takeoff. Inside its walls, I knew, as I pedalled home from school, would be Mother, toast and a hot drink, or Mother, ice cream and cordial. In its supporting sheds, swallows flitted, perching on wires and encrusting beams with their nests and their droppings just as Mrs Pinchen's chooks built mounds of dung on her bed. Willie wagtails favoured the blacksmith's shop, sometimes fluttering around the noses of horses, as if to tease. Stray cats fed on mice, which apparently abounded in the fields, though I rarely saw them; I used to marvel at Mother's daring in setting a trap with cheese, fearful that the wire would snap on her finger as it would certainly, I felt, snap on mine. I was sorry for the mice when Mother threw their corpses over the fence, angry with them if they stole our cheese in the night, and I actually took sides with them if I saw one sprinting towards its hole in the skirting board. Nor could I bear the thought that one might be skulking under the sofa; it should either be killed or allowed to reach its hole.

When irrigation first came, it brought fish, not only in the Mulwala Canal, which looked like a river to a dry farmer's son, but in our smallest channels. In water banked up behind concrete stops, scarcely deeper than the top of Father's gumboots, could be seen the silver flash of redfin. There was something biblical about these creatures, which belonged in oceans or at the most in the Murray, finding their way to our farm; Reg Young the surveyor never predicted that when he drew the layout of our checkbanks! I loved them and wanted to catch them, but Father didn't seem interested in fishing, nor Mother in having them for dinner; she had a wariness of bones in children's throats, or she may have been sceptical about the land being able to produce, unaided, anything edible. Father shot two galahs one day, and Mother cooked them; they were too tough to eat. Thereafter, when flocks of galahs crossed the path of our brown Ford on its way home after shopping (Father would say 'You'll never knock one of them, you'll knock a magpie sometimes but never a galah!) I would think of the hard brown sinews under the delicate plumage and when Mr Murdoch or Mr English told us that Sturt, or Burke and Wills, had been able to shoot birds when food was scarce, I felt sorry for the explorers. They must have been awfully hard up!

The second summer of irrigation brought no fish, and they never returned to our channels; there were only yabbies in the smaller watercourses and swamps, and exotic goldfish, of which we had a number in our horse trough. I wondered that the horses didn't conflict with the fish in some way, but Father said their real enemies were birds. I found it hard to know how birds, which belonged in air, could get fish from water, but Father was right, and our goldfish dwindled to nothing. Their other enemy was turbulence; Father said that if their water got too muddy they couldn't breathe. I stirred the horse trough vigorously with a stick, muddying it as hard as I could.

The fish thrashed about, then rolled over on the surface. Father was right. I left the scene praying that they'd recover and my deed remain hidden.

Another time when I needed a cover on my life concerned a Dinky Toy ambulance given to me by my cousin Frank, who was six years older, and whose toys and stamps I coveted as he grew out of them. I cherished the grey ambulance with its black mudguards and its silver radiator attached to the car by three lugs. I'd taken the ambulance to Finley to play with it on the vacant block behind Shattocks' where we had a system of roads and tunnels. A marauding band of bigger boys came through, sneering at us and flinging our toys away before they passed on. The radiator came off and wouldn't be clipped on again. When Mother came to pick me up, I kept my hand over the disfigurement. For a fortnight I played secretly with the car, unable to fix the radiator, desperate that my parents shouldn't notice. One lunchtime, as Father sat drinking a cup of tea, I saw him glance idly at the car, making no comment on the damage. It clearly wasn't important. It was a crisis passed; my shame had been disregarded. The ambulance lost all its importance. I rarely played with it again.

A similar thing happened when I lent my bike, which Father had bought at a clearing sale, to a boy in a higher grade who wanted to go up the street for lunch. He rode it roughly over a culvert, dinking someone, and burst a tyre. He brought it back, apologizing. I cried. In the middle of the afternoon I asked Mr Murdoch if I could leave because the sky looked threatening and I had to walk home. He let me go. I'd just passed the bend where the road headed due west when someone picked me up. I had only to walk the length of the avenue. I did so full of dread. Mother made me toast and a hot drink. When Father came home, he commented 'That tyre was rotten when I bought the bike. It was due to go any day.' My obsession disappeared.

I wondered whether adults had these obsessions. My parents seemed not to, but other farmers had hobbyhorses, were religious, or fought their sons. Father came home with stories of fist fights, usually outside pubs, and broken up by Sergeant Dwyer. Wimpy Halligan the blacksmith aspired to be a boxer and a violinist. Father thought he ought to stick to what he knew. Wimpy was matched with an airman from the Tocumwal base on a boxing night held in the School of Arts. In a terrible rush the airman, who had been billed as the welterweight champion of Queensland, took Wimpy to the ropes and knocked him out. The fight was over in a minute, and Wimpy, so capable with his forge, his horse shoeing and his welding, was a skinny white figure on the canvas. On another night, a fundraising concert in aid of Miss Finley's bid in a local Queen Competition (proceeds to the hospital), Wimpy, clad in his bandsman's uniform, played his violin. The popularity poll was won by the Nigger Minstrels who gained over a thousand votes. Wimpy got five penny votes, three of them mine. When the results were read out I wished I had given him the other half of my sixpence to make his tally more respectable. I think Mother was proud of me. Father thought Wimpy's playing sounded like a cat meowing. 'God, what a screech,' he said. 'It was painful.'

Music came to us from 3SR Shepparton, 2QN Deniliquin, and the A.B.C. My favorite listening was the old time music hall half hour from 2QN, partly because it came at a time when, huddled near the wireless or sprawled full length on the sofa, I could have the room to myself. Father insisted on silence for the Newmarket sales reports and took a passing interest in the stock exchange, which I found boring. Mother never stopped to listen; she had no sense of pitch and one might come upon her drying dishes or stacking them beside the basin, whistling for what seemed minutes on one note. Her defence when mocked was that she wasn't as bad as Father's brother Teddy who couldn't recognize God Save the King until everyone stood up!

The anthem, flashed on the screen at the School of Arts, was a signal that the projectionist, who brought the films from Berrigan, had arrived. Most concerts or afternoon functions such as school speech days began and ended with the anthem on a piano, with all present obligated to sing. Loyalty needed to be demonstrated. Father mentioned Germans who'd changed their names during the Great War and whose sons had fought for Britain. Later in the war, American films showing squadrons flying in formation excited me; there would be something rich, I felt, in being part of a line of fighter-bombers peeling off for an attack. How I loved the newsreels where enemy planes blew up in midair or plunged to the earth in smoke. I was enthralled by the news that in one day's combat above Great Britain 186 German planes had been shot down. 186! It was a cricket score - and only eight or nine Spitfires and Hurricanes had been lost. I loved the shape of the Spitfire and read everything I could about it; it had been developed by a man who'd studied the flight of seagulls and had made, as the prototype of his fighter, a seaplane. Someone gave me a toy seaplane for my birthday and, detaching myself from the party, I took it to the horse trough, the largest available stretch of water apart from our dams, where the plane, if it stopped in the middle, would be unreachable. With exhilarating verve my seaplane dashed about the trough, pulling itself by its propellor. When it needed winding, a boy who'd come with me overwound the spring and the plane refused to go. For a week or two I took it to the horse trough and tried to get some enjoyment by pushing it around by hand, but it was useless. The seaplane joined the ambulance as a discard.

American bombers filled the hangars at Tocumwal. These were the biggest buildings I had seen. The planes were painted ugly colours for camouflage. At a time when petrol was rationed and car owners fastened charcoal burning gas producers to the backs of their vehicles, the aerodrome acquired a set of underground petrol tanks, on which trucks dumped loads of sand. The tanks were hidden in a clump of trees to reduce the risk of them being blown up by an enemy bomb. It became known that thousands of gallons of petrol had been wasted because a tanker driver failed to turn off something and petrol had run into the sand all night. I found this incredible because I saw how carefully Father handled the seven gallons worth of ration tickets he received each month, and how he cut down on using the car if we were planning a visit to Barham where Father's family lived and where he had met and married Mother, a young Victorian teacher. Father also bought several forty-four gallon drums and stacked bags of chaff around them when he sensed that petrol rationing was likely. When it came, people were ordered to declare their stocks, but Father held that some things were not the business of government officials, except that you couldn't make it too obvious that you were using more petrol than your ration allowed or you'd be inviting questions.

Trips to Barham meant passing through Deniliquin, a pastoral town built on a river crossing. The road followed the ruled lines of surveyors until it came to a belt of trees on the Edwardes, an anabranch of the Murray. At this point Father would point to a homestead nestling among the trees and say 'That's Mrs Windeyer's. Bit peculiar. She lives on her own with a lot of cats. They've all got little boxes and they eat separately. Her brother's something pretty important in the government, but she's a bit dotty.' Mother never offered any comment on Mrs Windeyer, even when asked at home in the kitchen. The trees along the Edwardes, like the trees at Tocumwal, held some promise of difference. Nearing the river, the road twisted to stay on high land, and a bank had been built to lead it to the bridge, straddling pools of muddy water when the river was low. A pub stood at either end, one a shanty below the road, the other with a bland thirties facade. Father said Deni used to have twenty-one pubs; counting the ones I knew, I could only get eight or nine. When I questioned him, he skipped on to Echuca, which had once, he thought, had a hundred and twenty pubs. Pubs for me were heavy, two storey buildings sitting over dark cellars, with verandahs turning blocks of brilliant air into shade. They smelt of beer and of men who drank beer, yet they served meals on immaculate table cloths featuring silver cruets which shone as if intending to reassure Mother. What had happened to all these pubs? Father never explained that most of them had been wayside shanties consolidated, now, into the eight or nine fortresses of Deni.

Finding the way out of town wasn't easy because there were few, if any, signs, but with a few turns and a right hand fork at the aerodrome, we found our way onto the plains. I always experienced them as overwhelming. Their first expression was a farmhouse, its roof and verandah painted with red and white stripes, standing in a clump of native pines. It felt fearfully exposed to wind and heat, yet it did have the support of the trees, like an explorer with a bunch of feckless porters. Beyond this last outpost of the town was an even emptier infinity than the one I sensed in our western paddocks. That infinity was a forerunner of this one; were there even deeper ones further back? The plains beyond Deniliquin were a sea of mirages. The trees at the horizon floated on a blur. Our car rushed at the elusive water, making it reappear on the road behind. Stretches of road were fenced on one side only, or not at all. Five bumpy cattle grids made of pine logs partnered five gates in fences cutting the road. Signs said SHUT THE GATE but Father engaged low gear and crawled across the grids, saying to Mother, 'Remember when there were ... how many was it ... twenty-three wasn't it ... twenty-something gates between Deni and Barham?' Mother's number always differed slightly. I thought of opening and closing twenty-something gates and the cattle grids seemed a great advance.

Other pinelogs, all knotty and few of them straight, had been embedded in the ground to carry telephone wires. Sometimes, when the wind had been active, we saw crossed wires and my parents spoke about people overhearing each other's conversations, something which was possible for the Taylors and ourselves since we shared a party line – 73 I and 73 S, with distinguishable rings for the two houses. The telephone lines, which hosted flocks of galahs, crossed the plains on the backs of stooped and leaning poles, something about them, for all their obedience to the laws of perspective, suggesting that they too were making a journey. The earth was flat. I could never judge distances between Barham and Deniliquin, though there were a few landmarks – a railway line, a store in the middle of nowhere, Cobran station with its name painted on the roof – and a few places where the road, built up to provide a bank through lowlying patches, was so rough that Father veered into the sandy scoop below the hump. Then, as we approached Father's birthplace, the horizon was once again marked by belts of trees; there were, again, forests of redgum, rattling bridges, waterbirds, piles of blackened logs, and roots running above ground to the bottom of dried out watercourses. Sometimes there were floods, gates standing unapproachable in sheets of water, and boats tethered at the last point possible for a car. Crossing the creeks on the eastern side of Barham, re-entering the system of anabranches and tributaries which embroidered the Murray's curves, I felt that we were approaching not only Grandma, and Father's home, but some earlier time than Mr Erskine's, something known before our house had been built on its square mile carved from Tuppal Station.

Barham was further back; our family had been among its earliest settlers. Grandma talked about the paddle steamers and their barges laden with wool, and Father knew about them too. He drove about the district with Mother and his sister, pointing out houses sitting calmly under palms and sugar gums, which had once been held by members of the family. They seemed to be everywhere, always backed by trees; Grandma's house, and her former home now occupied by Father's brother Teddy, clung to the Murray, with the older house defended by minaret-like palms, kurrajongs, bunya bunya pines and redgums on the riverbank. Illawarra flame trees, bougainvilleas and hydrangeas decorated Grandma's more colourful garden; pruning roses was one of her specialties. With my cousins I made cubbies in her cypress hedge and pedalled trikes around her curving verandah, avoiding the fronds of the aspidistra at the door.

We ran barefoot, dodging the dried leaves of the bunya bunya. At Father's sister's farm we couldn't go up the sandhill which nurtured her orange groves without our feet being pricked by bindi-eyes, hard spiky seeds that buried themselves in sand. Aunt Olly grew oleanders, and reminded us that their leaves were poisonous, as if we might take it into our heads to eat them. Her farm, which had once been Grandpa's, had a kiln for curing tobacco and a shed which we said was haunted, an idea deriving from Father's story about an earlier generation rattling chains on the roof to frighten a superstitious workman. There were other stories about tin kettlings; newlyweds were allowed to reach a state of sexual engagement - fulfilment, if they were lucky - before being intruded upon by their neighbours banging pots and pans. Tradition had it that the cacophonous party had to be invited in for drinks and cake. There were also stories of the rougher identities of the district, told over the dinner table with the task of recall passing from one member of the family to the other, each disclaiming that they knew much about the events recounted. Thus, if conversation touched on the Simpson family, who worked for Father's brother Aston, dialogue of this nature might ensue:

Cousin Mary The Simpsons were those crazy people that lived in a caravan at Aston's, weren't they?
Aunt Olly Yes, a whole tribe of them. I don't know what they lived on.
Mother Didn't Mrs Simpson try to keep the place neat?
Olly Oh, she tried in a sort of a way but with a mob like that it was an uphill struggle. And she wasn't all that bright.
Father Jack Simpson was a character, but by God, rough!
Me (sensing something) Why, what was he like?
Father Oh, I don't know …
Olly Tell him about the time he told Aston to sell the sheep.
Me What was that?
Olly You know that one, don't you Alice?
Mother I believe he did do something like that. You know what happened, Norm ...
Father This agent rang up and offered Aston a price on some sheep he had ... and Jack Simpson was listening in.
Me How could he do that?
Olly They had a party line, didn't they, to Aston's house and the Simpsons' van?
Father Aston always claimed that whenever he answered the phone he could hear a click as one of the Simpsons picked up the phone to listen ...
Mother What a cheek!
Me And what happened?
Father Well, Aston kept hanging out for a higher price.
Olly Of course he knew he'd have to sell, he just had no feed at all …
Cousin Mary Did the agent know that?
Father He might've ... but Aston was hoping he wouldn't know, and he was hanging out ... 'Oh, I don't know,' he was saying, 'I might hang onto them a bit longer.'
Mother He knew he'd have to sell eventually.
Olly Yes, but he was after a price ...
Me What did Jack Simpson do?
Olly Well, he was listening in ... and what did he say, Norm? He just couldn't contain himself in the end, he had to say something ...
Father He must have got it into his head that Aston didn't know what he was doing, because suddenly he burst into the conversation. 'For Christ's sake, Aston, sell! You know you haven't got any grass!'
Me (in the general mirth) What price did Aston get?
Father I don't know, I'd have to ask him.

But the question would never be asked. Father's family weren't interested in detail, and the purpose of their folklore was to make them look good against a background of less capable, less discerning people. I wanted the stories recorded, but no one had a mind to do it, and, recalling the tales when we were back in the house we'd bought from Mr Erskine, I found that they lacked the feeling of shared adventure they'd had in a room full of uncles, aunts and cousins. In my cousin Alison's room there was a photo of a slender youth in the uniform of an Australian soldier. Alison claimed it was her father. Since my uncle Teddy was a corpulent and to me slightly amusing figure as he pedalled, at 11.15 every morning, from packing shed to pub, with a session on the sofa after lunch, I couldn't believe her. How could this boy be Teddy? Nevertheless, both Grandma and Aston, now a paunchy figure in waistcoat and chain, had on their walls photos of another slender soldier with emu plumes in his hat; something about his nose was recognizably Aston's, so I had to believe that these youths were my uncles. I never heard them speak of France, Germany or war.

When Grandma was dying, her sons and daughter gathered. Mother made sure I had plenty of plasticine to occupy me on the trip across the plains because, she explained, 'Your Father's mother's very ill, and he'd like you to be quiet.' I played happily through the plain of mirages, making bombs, unable, if I think about it now, to discern any difference in my father, hatted, at the wheel, patiently finding his way out of Deniliquin and across the cattle grids. If he thought his mother was dying he appeared to treat it in the stoical way he accepted everything else.

The family came together in Teddy's lounge, awaiting the outcome. When the telephone rang, they moved at once to practicalities. The funeral ... arrangements ... the will ...

Father's family didn't treat children as young adults. On the day of the funeral, the barefooted grandchildren were left to kick their toes in the dust beside the saleyards which lent something to the air of the street where Grandma had lived, and Teddy lived still. We watched the adults driving in cortège. It was an impressive affair which we, being children, made fun of; there was something silly about parents, solemnly partnering each other in the back of cars driven by other people. Grandma had died; so what? We knew we were alive!

The cars came back from the funeral. The will was read. Grandma's house was to be sold and its contents divided among her five children. How, she didn't say. They decided to stack everything moveable in the large front room at Teddy's house, cut a deck of cards to establish the order of choice, and to take turns until nothing was left. I was pleased to discover that Father's choices included Grandma's mantel clock, her rocking chair, and a decorated walking stick she'd bought on a trip to Colombo. When the adults finished, the children were allowed to pick through the leftovers; Alison discovered a Finnish matchbox Aston had brought back from the war. I thought it more exotic and more precious than anything the adults had taken.

The house was sold and new people moved in, respecting Grandma's garden but conveying by their unselfconscious use of the place that it had passed out of our hands. The clock chimed above our fireplace now, not Grandma's. It was Father, now, who remembered to wind it at eight each night as his mother had done for years. Father, like Grandma, kept the key beneath the clock. Which of my aunts took the ebony elephants, also from Ceylon, which used to flank it, I didn't know. I missed Grandma's silver biscuit barrel and the sugar server with the silver tongs, but since they'd gone to another branch of the family there was no getting them back. Nor could I, with my cousins, scramble through Grandma's flywire door and out her back gate when some idea occurred to us. We could no longer, if caught short, dash into her dunny, parked behind the garage under a mass of bougainvillea. Other people took her place at the Church of England, doing the altar flowers. Other people had to live and die in the town for other generations to say 'That was the biggest line of cars ever seen in Barham.'

Something that had made the family proud of Grandma was that she had been the first person to cross the town's new bridge over the Murray. This heavy construction, with a section that could be raised for steamers, was on the verge of completion when a friendly workman, slipping away at lunchtime, alerted Grandma to the fact and she, with a friend, harnessed a horse into a gig and drove across and back on the unattended bridge. This was a tale told often over the table; being first was important in pioneering country!

A sense of empire was never far away in my childhood. Keith Dawe, our neighbour to the south, liked to sing 'On The Road To Mandalay', accompanied by a piano on the back of a truck:

On the road to Mandalay,
Where the flying fishes play,
And the dawn comes up like thunder
Out of China 'cross the bay!

It was pure British Burma, as was the attitude, both condescending and accepting, that my Father and his brothers took to Indian and Afghan hawkers - fine people; dirty; cunning; unusually scrupulous in business; somehow acceptable though inadmissible in circles that mattered. Father's father had owned a store, and had dealt with such men, respecting them; Father used to say 'You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din,' as a good-natured way of giving in on some point of difficulty.

It was less easy to locate Mother, since her sources were not compacted into a place and tradition as Father's were; if I look for something to put beside the cluster of homesteads, properties, orange groves, and the sturdy sense of rural continuity which gave Father his ambience, I think of the constellation of names that were important to her, the innermost being her parents, brothers and sisters, but extending to the teachers' and bank managers' wives who'd moved from the town and with whom Mother corresponded; Mother's esteem, once affixed, was irremovable. I noticed early that although Father named men in distant places as friends, he never wrote to them; Mother was always a good correspondent, but her attachments were also registered in her growing collection of recipes, some cut out of magazines and pasted in exercise books and others handwritten, but all identified with the supplier. Recommendations for a biscuit mix, or a cake, fixed Mother's acquaintanceship as firmly as her small collection of photos recorded bayside holidays at Rosebud, Aspendale, Rye.

The little babies in the nest of women in these photos were my cousins Della, Jill, my brother, and myself. Touring cars at picnics were the only evidence of men. My Mother's sisters and their friends were vivacious, at home with sea and beaches as Father never was. He drove us to a rented house at Aspendale where a plague of flies made life miserable and the preparation of food impossible unless carried out under nets. Father took himself back to New South Wales, saying he couldn't stand it, though Uncle Bert, an Englishman, stuck it for the full three weeks, at the end of which Father returned to pick us up. On the farm, Father seemed untroubled by flies; a small army travelled around on his back, and he dealt with strays venturing near his face by blowing out of the corner of his mouth or giving a swish with the branchlet he carried for the purpose.

Mother's photos included two studio portraits of my brother and I sitting upright, naked, hair brushed, plump little *putti* in gilt frames. These images were inscribed 'Mendelssohn Studios, Bendigo' and had been taken six years apart, when Mother had returned to her family. My attitude to them went through several stages of growing up — unseeing; seeing but not recognizing; wondering who they were; disbelief; acceptance without caring; finally, an embarrassment which led me to demand that they be taken from the walls. Mother moved them once or twice (I had an ally in my brother) but finally, wrapping them in several thicknesses of newspaper, stowed them in the wardrobe which held the fire and brimstone book. She refused to destroy them, intending to put them back when my selfconsciousness had passed. Her physical warmth meant as much to me as the photos did to her, particularly on nights when, having woken to be sick, I called; she cleaned up, changed sheets and pyjamas, then lay beside me, on the side opposite to a towel and basin. 'Just in case,' she reassured me, and I felt the adult warmth flooding from her side of the bed, and I pressed my back against hers and slept, waking in the morning to find Mother gone to the kitchen but the towel and basin still there, as the gold coins and treasure chests of my dreams were never there, to validate my hazy memory of the night.

Vomit was more disgusting than the smell of dead animals, both intrinsically and because it came from myself. How could Mother bear it, kneeling sleepily on the floor of my uncarpeted bedroom, slopping whatever she could pick up with a rag into a basin which, washed, would stand sentinel by my bed all night? It was another case of her heroic virtue when forced to do what no one could possibly want to do. When Father slit the throats of sheep that would, after a night of draining, be cut up for our table and a neighbour's fridge, I sensed in him neither like nor dislike for what he did: it was a task. Mother's task, talking to me as she knelt, nighty-clad above the mess I'd made, seemed less endurable. How did she do it? How was Father always warm when I crawled on his knee as he sat reading the paper? How did he find the energy, after a day's work, to give me a piggyback around the dome-topped well Mr Erskine had sunk in front of the kitchen, me clinging to his neck as if he meant to throw me off? Why were parents unable to refuse their child?

In later impressions I find myself more ambivalent about the physicality of my parents. This was not to do with anything I sensed between them as marital partners because when their double bed became twin beds I was only passingly curious, and enjoyed crawling in with one or the other to talk, the morning sunlight bathing the mauve bed ends and the knotted pine boards of the ceiling; the happiness I felt with Mother on these occasions spread easily to Father, and vice versa. It was more to do with my reaction to their bodies as things which they inhabited but which had something to do with my own. One hot afternoon in the pre-irrigation days, Father announced that he was going for a swim. Could he mean driving to Tocumwal? He waited until after tea, then waited another hour because, he explained, if you swam straight after a meal you could get cramp and drown. Then he put on his shoulder to knee bathing costume, a wool-cotton mixture, I think, coloured black, with thin bands of brown and white girdling it like stripes on a butcher's apron, and headed for the dam, towel on shoulder. I followed him, disbelieving. The dam was a shallow rectangle of muddy water on which I sailed paper boats and into which I threw cowpats and clods of earth. A single pepper tree presided over its fishless waters. The banks were just high enough to provide the excitement of running downhill. In later years a friend and I used to take the pram which had been mine as a baby to the top of these banks, and then, one crouching at the front and the other jumping in after giving a push, we bumped down the bank until the pram's momentum was spent, twenty yards into the surrounding paddock.

Father waded into the dam, the water covering the bottom of his costume. The sun was down but the air was still hot. He asked me if I wanted to join him. I, with dusty feet and skinny legs poking out of my shorts, said no. Father strode further out until the water was above his waist, then eased himself forward and began to swim ... I presume it was the Australian crawl because he talked about it in the way he spoke of our cricketers' achievements. The alternative, I gathered, was to dogpaddle. Father swam. At the northern end of the dam he stood, then swam back. I supposed he would be cool as he walked to the house in his wet costume, but for me the astringent heat and soft dust were just as appealing.

Years passed and a channel brought fresh water through our farm. This was the place for me to learn to swim. I liked paddling an inflated tube under the supervision of a parent, but was nervous about the teaching process whereby Father held me, one hand under my tummy and the other on my back, while I thrashed my arms and legs. When he felt I was going well, he subtracted the upper hand, telling me to trust the water and occupying my attention with encouraging cries so I wouldn't notice him withdraw the lower hand. This was a variation of his method of teaching me to ride a bike: Father ran behind me as I wobbled about the yard, keeping a hand on the seat until he felt I was steady enough to let go for a few yards. The trick worked with the bike, but I was always afraid of the water despite Father's explanation that it was natural for a body to float, and that one had only to relax. I felt there was something more.

It came one afternoon when again the sun was down, though the water at the top of the channel was still warm; the mud, and the water at the bottom, were always cold. I stood, watched by a parent, parting the water as one did for the breast stroke. Suddenly there was an almost audible click in my mind, and I plunged forward, fearing the water no longer. I swam. I turned and said ... I want now to say that I called 'Look Mum, I can swim,' but I can't remember which of my parents was there. It seems only just to give the moment to Father since he had tried to teach me, and it was at an hour when Mother was likely to have been cooking tea (we gave the name dinner to the midday meal) but something in me wants to think that it was Mother who watched me as for the first time I moved unafraid in water. This is perhaps a reaction of guilt to another sensation felt some weeks later when Mother did take me swimming in the channel; my memory clothes her too in a costume of black and brown. Mother, so at home on a beach, looked strange on the kikuyu clad channel bank, her bottom on a towel, and there is another reason, beyond this strangeness, which made it hard for me to look at her; moths, despite Mother's naphthalene flakes and mothballs, had attacked her swimming costume. A hole they'd made allowed a nipple to protrude.

Men's penises, on the few occasions that I'd seen them, excited me, or were fascinating; why then this shame at Mother? If I look into the mind of my younger self as he looks unwillingly at her exposure, I can only find a wish not to know, a rejection as strong as my earlier wish to study the naked woman in Truth. What Mother gave me was necessary; how she did it, and how she produced me, were to be kept out of sight. Men were, and women supported. Mother in her farmhouse was a source, Father in his paddocks an achiever, even through the years of low prices and dry farming when Mother stored her presents so she'd have something to give when needed. When I was small, Mother sat me on a chamber pot in the corner of the kitchen; Father, drying the dishes, complained of the smell. Mother, washing, said I wasn't big enough to go to the lav, as she called it, at night. In later years I enjoyed swinging my hurricane lamp to show up the red berries of the pepper trees, or to cast giant shadows, but the dunny was gone and a septic system installed before I overcame my fear of spiders. Sitting on the dunny seat, in the years before I went to school, I would cry 'Finished!' at the top of my voice and Mother would call back 'Rightoh!' or 'Coming!' and she would appear, after a brief delay, to wipe my bottom. If she, then, could accept my body, why could I not accept hers?

If, searching for an answer, I parade before me the people who inhabited my childhood, I hear their voices more clearly than I see their bodies. Nor do I see their clothes, apart from a few scraps of memory attached to people - the clomp of Father's gumboots; the shiny back of Arthur Coulter's vest; the round, priest-like hat of Pud Marantelli, driving his gig to Finley: as we approach him in our car we recognize him because his heavy frame slumps on the side of the vehicle where the springs have weakened so that he, hat and the arm he flings along the back of his seat are forever at angles to each other. We usually say, passing him, that we pity his horse. I see the pork pie hat of Hacker Thompson, the storekeeper turned stock agent, and the lean body of Norman Taylor, putting his weight on a shovel and amiably refusing to talk about the Melbourne clubs that wanted him to play football. I see the newsagent's hearing aid and the red coats of the Finley bandsmen, but the items which come most alive for me are two helmets, a garment worn by Mother to a fancy dress ball, and my costume at another such occasion. The first helmet was given to my brother, was fur lined, and was like the helmets worn by pilots. I loved it. It seemed far more to do with its time than the balaclavas some people wore, ugly things which I associated with the Great War, as Grandma and her generation called it. But my brother loved the helmet too, and when Mother looked for another one, she could only get me a blue one without fur. I wore it unwillingly, and when my brother went away to school the greatest benefit for me was not the extra privacy this gave but the fact that he left the brown helmet behind. Now it was I who could ride to school warm eared, and flying.

Fancy dress balls were common in my childhood. They were the adult, public form of charades and dress-ups. Some weeks before one of these occasions I observed Mother stripping labels from jam tins and cutting out the brightly coloured pictures of fruit which they featured. She also looked through magazines, scissors at the ready. These pictures were then pasted or sewn on a simple blue dress she made; from the night of the ball I retain a memory of myself craning into the dancing crowd to find Mother, who'd entered in the section where costumes had to relate to a well known slogan: Mother was EAT MORE FRUIT!

She didn't win a prize but I won one for her another night when she dressed me in a white shirt, white trousers and sandshoes. A bat was put in my hand. I felt very pleased with myself, circling the hall under the eyes of the judges and parents in the section called Character Impersonation. At Mother's signal, my brother underarmed a tennis ball. Blissfully free of selfconsciousness, Don Bradman hit the ball into the orchestra and was awarded the prize. Searching my memory of that occasion, I remember feeling that I had deserved the award through some merit of my own; Mother's ingenuity in tapping the public adulation for my benefit is something that only becomes clear to me now.

Bradman was Father's only hero, and when he stood for the Don returning to the Melbourne wicket, I felt my life had caught up with Father's and with everything the cricketer represented. While the great man batted more sedately than I, expecting fireworks, would have wished, Father's friends discussed the condition of the Melbourne ground. It had been used during the war, I learned to my surprise, as an army camp. I found it hard to replace, in my imagination, the applause rippling from the stands with bugles and shouting sergeant majors. Where had they slept and eaten, these soldiers? There was no trace. The prewar world had reconstituted itself, but Bradman, despite centuries in Sydney and Brisbane, was not what he must once have been until an English bowler aggravated him with bouncers; the Don smashed two of them to the boundary with devastating power and I knew that I had at last seen the man behind the reputation. The two boundaries, and a third hook intercepted by a fieldsman, had something invincible about them. No more bouncers were bowled at him and he returned to normal, more fallible batting, playing a ball onto his wicket when he was 21 short of the century I wanted him to score. Going back to the hotel that night with Australia 6 for 255 and the *Herald* saying ENGLAND ON TOP, I felt, for the first time in my life, inside events: I had seen, and would see again tomorrow, things *Herald* readers would only read about.

Bradman's second innings also fell short, ending at 49, but his presence on the field was strong, and his throws from cover good enough to remind me of the single stump and my own attempts to hit a kerosene tin. His most convincing demonstration of mastery came when he interrupted the bowling of his left arm spinner to give advice, then removed himself from cover to a position on the drive, three quarters of the way to the fence. Hutton, whose prewar innings of 364 had broken one of Bradman's records, moved to drive the next ball, checked his stroke, and lifted the ball in a graceful arc; the Don had only to run back a few paces to take the catch on his chest. It was so simple. Bradman congratulated his bowler. Hutton departed. Father and his friends nodded knowingly. I marvelled that one man could so easily outwit another.

The hotel where Father had booked us in for the week was the Victoria Coffee Palace, next to the Town Hall, It felt very central, though to what, I couldn't have said. Each morning I got the papers from the stand in the foyer and compared my perceptions with those of the writers. English journalists amazed me by stating categorically that certain Englishmen had been given out wrongly. Watching the umpires shake their heads or raise their fingers, it never occurred to me to doubt; I found something obscene in journalists doing so. I decided they couldn't take being beaten, and in this were typically English. They might have won a war but our cricketers were putting them in their place!

The hotel was full of wrinkled men, down for the test. Teams filled the corridors and lifts in their club blazers. When they spoke, it was with the nasal, slack-jawed habit of Australians, which I found reassuring, though part of me wanted something more exotic. This wish was to some extent satisfied by hearing Father paged over the loudspeakers; his name sounding over the chatter in the foyer had an importance it didn't have in New South Wales, where he was simply the farmer between Taylors, Dawes, Maxwells and Marantellis. The last named family had high pitched voices and the volubility we associated with being Italian; their pigs wallowed in mud holes within a few yards of the house, and their voices, as they shouted at each other, could be heard in my bedroom, a mile away, on winter mornings. The Marantellis always addressed Father by his surname, making the word sound intense, yet familiar; Father paged for a phone call at the Victoria was a more important person. Nowhere else in his life was he - nor was I, apart from Mother - surrounded by service. I enjoyed being waited on at table, and having my bed made by people I never saw, but it was stranger, more unreal, than disguising oneself in fancy dress.

Melbourne's Sunday was empty. There being no play in the test, I decided to explore. There was little to find. Returning to the hotel, feeling as alone as I did in our paddocks, I was stopped by a man who asked if I believed in Jesus. It seemed best to say I did; after all, I didn't disbelieve in him, and the fire and brimstone book had left its scar. He asked me if I read the Bible and I evaded his question by saying that we had a heavily bound family Bible which had come down to us when Grandma died. I didn't describe how the deck of cards had been cut. He gave me a New Testament which I promised to read. Then he asked if I would join him at his corner every Sunday. I explained that I was about to go to a school where chapel was compulsory and that boarders wouldn't be allowed out. He seemed to find this satisfactory. He then put his hand on my head and prayed loudly. A group of sailors on the opposite corner fell about laughing; I wondered that he wasn't as embarrassed as I was, but he appeared to think that his devotion rebuked them. When I got back to the hotel I told Father what had happened. 'Religious cranks,' said Father with contempt. 'You want to avoid 'em.'

The match resumed on Monday. I saw the greats of their time - Miller, Lindwall, Morris: Hutton, Washbrook, Compton. When Wright caught Tallon at 92, I said, 'He might have let him get his century,' but Father replied, 'No, you get 'em out whenever you can. They're usually nervous in the nineties.' The statement had authority. Religion might be stupid but the values of cricket were being solemnly enacted before me. That they were male, anglosaxon and imperial, goes without saying. That the code embodied the restraint of personality known as sportsmanship, and obedience to umpires and captains as legitimate authority is also obvious. These things had already been part of my upbringing, but what was new for me was the bonding experience of a days-long drama in which one was free to participate by comment as well as observation. Father told me, in a quiet patch of play, of the English captain J. W. H. T. Douglas stonewalling to the extent that he caused a voice in the outer - voices always came from the outer - to dub him Johnny Won't Hit Today. The appellation stuck. There was also the distancing from, or support of, players implied by the use of their names. Home crowds used Christian names for their players and surnames for visitors; thus Lindwall was 'Ray' but 'Larwood' had never been anything else. The players were thus owned and disowned by the spectators and so were forced to become, at least in part, what their viewers wanted them to be. Are champions chosen, or do they force themselves on their adulators? Bradman the personality, it was sometimes said, was not liked by some of those who played with him, but Bradman the instrument of his country's will had no flaw. How had he done it? In an era of big scores he made more runs than anyone else. In a nation that characterized itself as young, he was a wunderkind, having played for his country at nineteen. His scores outstripped those of earlier legends like Grace and Trumper as Australia, in the nineteen thirties, thought it might outstrip the world. He was, like films, an escape for depression dominated people. He was focal, as Phar Lap had been, and Hitler. One of Mother's sisters, my Aunt Ella, had once taken me to the museum to see Phar Lap, whose cleverly stuffed body was central to Melbourne mythology, but was turned away by an attendant because it was five to five, and they were closing. I have no memory of the occasion but Ella talked about it for years. 'Couldn't you just let us have one minute to see Phar Lap? My nephew's down from the country and he's going back tomorrow.' Her appeal was refused, but it linked me with The Boy From Bowral as it linked the frontier to Australia's urban life: the Don, fortified by austerity, could beat the Old World at its own game and thus validate those who lived in separation from their source.

These of course are the thoughts of an adult, not the child who mapped the paths of sheep in the paddock of a Riverina farm. He took the puritanism of his surroundings as natural; Father, discussing World War One, mentioned some portly Rumanian officers who had been discovered to wear corsets. There could be nothing more unmanly! No Finley farmer, however fat, would have dreamed of such a thing. *They* strode loosely about their properties, diving wildly into flocks of sheep to drag one backwards on three legs for examination. They rang each other to say that two, three, five of Norman Taylor's ewes had got through the fence; Norman Eagle would cull them out if he could, and drop them back, or Norman Taylor could come over next time they were yarded. This meant a conversation against the stockyard fence even more drawn out than country farewells. Most drawn out of all were the bargaining sessions when Father and an agent, or butcher, leaned on a fence suggesting prices to each other, then skirting around the topic while each tried to guess the other's final offer. If I felt that this bargaining took hours it was probably my response to the tension underlying the laconic yarning and the occasional clutching of a sheep by what was left of its tail, this being the popular test of an animal's 'condition'. Having an aversion to sheep shit, I wondered that buyers and sellers could so easily put their hands where they did. I also wondered at the long distance calls made by agents to places as far away as Wentworth and Narrabri, and the trips made in eight cylinder cars to inspect the sheep thus located. When he came back from such trips Father would spread his map to show me where he'd been. Knowing the emptiness between our farm and Grandma's, I was unresponsive to the fondness Father displayed when his finger traced a line between towns like Gunnedah and Gilgandra; his sister, my Aunt Oily, told me one day as we stood by the copper Mother lit to boil our washing, that there was nothing she enjoyed more than 'just looking at country'. I thought it boring, the imagination having nothing to feed on in those spaces. It was many years before I could see that emptiness, and unrelieved stretches of the same vegetation, could underline one's existence, reaffirming it.

Father and his sister saw everything done to the land as something achieved. An orange grove laden with fruit brought them deep satisfaction, while the sight of a paddock taken over by thistles, or Paterson's Curse, was painful to them. As I walked about the farm with Father, irrigating, I knew, as we neared a thistle, that he would slide his shovel from his shoulder to dig it up; he was proud of me if I recognized a Paterson's Curse seedling on a channel bank because, he said, it was a noxious weed and you could be fined for having it on your property. If he was without a shovel he grubbed weeds with his boot; there was something brutal yet cleansing in the action.

I remember no Aborigines in my childhood. No one spoke of their disappearance, and no knowledge of the land as they understood it had been subsumed into the farming community of which my parents formed a part, except in place names and in a certain dry acceptance of the vagaries of the seasons. 'Blackfeller country' meant useless places fit only, by implication, for useless people; thus contempt for what couldn't be turned to advantage underlay the possession by my parents' community of the land they worked. Scornful of Christianity, uninterested in the spirit life of those they'd displaced, the community – and perhaps this means mainly the male members of it - rested their existence on what they knew and had achieved. If this was limited, it also meant their pride was aggressively secure. Mother, however, believed in a divine creator, never defined, who must, if I understood her rightly, have looked on the world with the same anguish as hers. If I try, now, to imagine Mother's God, I imagine a force that, in choosing not to use its power, has undergone a process of attrition until it offers only a moral illumination which can be ignored but never quite extinguished. But these are again adult thoughts, and it is time to return to the child mapping the paddock. What does he want to know? If he couldn't achieve it at the time, can we find it for him now?

He knows he is central to his mother's life because she will sacrifice for him. One night, lying in bed, he hears his parents talking. Mother wants to send him away because education is important and the local school is limited. Father says it will be costly. Mother says she means to do it, and if necessary she'll pawn her wedding ring. Father refrains from observing that this won't cover a term's fees, sensing, as he must, the passion behind the words. She wants her son to be more than the farm boys and village kids he goes to school with. She believes in him. He is deeply touched. He turns side on in bed, as if this will more clearly identify the voices as whispers of his future. Mother names a cousin who is going away to school. It has to happen for her son. Father agrees to put his name on the waiting list. His teacher writes a reference. He's accepted. A Melbourne store sends clothes, Mother returns the ones that don't fit. Father teases him gently about boatraces because the boy prefers the red of Scotch to the blue of Melbourne Grammar. Father says he'll have to barrack for his school, not the colour he likes. He doesn't understand this, his individualism having been trained in another direction, but Father seems to know. On the night before he is to go away, Father comes into his room with a lamp to explain that what's being done is more than the family can afford. His parents will try to keep him at the school but if, after a term or two, they find they can't manage, he'll have to come home. Does he understand? He has no doubts at all. He doesn't fear coming home because he hasn't been away. Father must understand this, but says nothing, considering his son, and kisses him. He understands the importance of this act. He is being given his chance. The paddocks, which produce twelve bags to the acre in a good year, and run three sheep to the acre since irrigation, are paying for him. In his first year, Father gets him out of school for a wool auction. The buyers shout. Father and I are the only spectators. We follow the lot numbers and hear our wool sold for sixty-two pence a pound. Father is pleased. He takes me also to the wool store, an enormous construction near Spencer Street railway station where bales stretch away in rows and up like blocks of flats. The New Zealand Loan staff offer tea. There is also beer and whiskey. Father takes tea. One bale in each lot is open for inspection. Men who know what they want are fingering samples. The whole warehouse smells of wool. I think of Johnny Hamilton.

Johnny lives alone but is related to McGills, who run the shearing shed. He pedals a bike with a hessian bag hanging from the bar. His felt hat is battered, his nose is hooked and his voice is a rumbustious instrument for shouting 'Hoy!' at sheep. If he lumps wheat he doubles a chaff bag so that it cowls his head and shoulders. He leases his farm because his inheritance doesn't include the knowledge required to run it. Father rents Johnny's five hundred acres so he can put in extra crop. Johnny's gates contain the ingenuity not visible in the rest of his life. They are fascinating contrivances of chains, bolts, wires and levers, like puzzles; which part do you move first, and what happens? Johnny also hangs rusty iron - mostly machinery parts - from his fruit trees to frighten birds; his garden is therefore heavy at all seasons with the most improbable fruit. This doesn't disconcert me as much as his way of blowing his nose; bending, he presses one nostril with a thumb and blows snot from the other. Some delicacy allows him to do this only in our paddocks and our large yard, not in our garden - but where, I wonder, does he do it at home?

Johnny works in McGill's shed when the shearing is on. His job is to work the press. When his nephew, Wagga McGill, decides that a bin is full, wool is lifted into the bale slung under the press. The press is lowered, the wool squeezed. More wool is added. When the bale, to my childish observation, is crammed, almost as much wool again is added. It can't possibly be squeezed in, I think, though the bales already sealed prove me wrong. The wool will only fit if Johnny, in greasy trousers and a singlet of grey flannel, can exert enough force on the lever. Steel bands will be needed to restrain the bulging bales once his job is done ... but how can he do it? Sometimes when the men have knocked off for tea, which they drink from enamel mugs, with milk supplied from a sauce bottle, I look at the task in front of Johnny, disbelieving. Usually I go outside because I can't bear to watch him straining, but sometimes, if he's penning the next batch of sheep, I study the press, convinced that human strength isn't equal to the task. I know Johnny can do it but I'm scared that he'll find, one day, that he can't; how then will the wool be baled?

It is also, like the job of stacking wheat bags, an occupation so entirely physical that I'm daunted. Is Johnny only a working bullock? The shearers, too, sleep in sheds of corrugated iron standing on ground from which sheep have eliminated any trace of grass. On the job, they rush into pens, dragging wethers backwards between their knees. They stand stiffly, spines taking time to straighten, when the whistle goes for smoke-oh. Their shears cut through the fleeces, sometimes gashing the skin; the sight of blood absorbed by what's left of the wool seems to me even more brutal than the way in which shorn animals are hurled down the slide. The shed smells of shit trodden into the boards, as well as of wool, so that in some sense the New Zealand Loan warehouse in Melbourne has gained a measure of distance, of abstraction, from the source of what it contains. Have I?

To face the question involves returning to the back paddock where the boy began his mapping. As he stands in the gateway, the tree where he hid his biscuit tin of treasures, hoping a magical force would add others, is behind him. In front of him, settling inside its screen of pepper trees, is his house; beneath its roof is Bradman, are also Kippax, Ponsford and Archie Jackson. The Don's centuries are on every other page of the V.C.A. Report which the boy fingers, lying on the sofa beneath the zigzag crack in the wall. Tim the dog moans, in the years before he's shot, when he hears music on the wireless that brings us news. England is at war with Germany. Australia follows. The Japanese bomb Pearl Harbour. Father has a medical examination. Mother says ordinary people don't want war, the leaders of the world are false. I know this isn't true. War is in the hearts of people. I hate the Huns. The Japs' atrocities should be given back to them in kind. I imagine myself in the full length position of a bomb aimer, dropping blockbusters on the invaders of France. Twice in twenty-five years they've upset the world, so they ought to pay. I am also half in love with the enemy. I love their Stukas, their arrogant caps. Their swastikas, their mindless rows of storm troopers, invite me to indulge myself in hatred and contempt. I think destruction might be a cleansing power, if you survive for the rebuilding. Hitler has a plan for a thousand year Reich. It's his justification for destroying. He says he's clearing the way for peace, but he makes war. This duplicity is something I understand.

The Allies, too, are hypocritical. They hope, by imposing unconditional surrender, to establish a lasting dominance over their enemies. I sense that neither the millennial Reich nor the lasting peace will eventuate, but I can't do anything with the thought because I'm caught up in the rhetoric, the emotions, of the propaganda machines. I look at books of pictures, I see ships sinking, Panzer divisions advancing, refugees struggling down gangplanks. They stir me so deeply that I boil with hate. Emotion must go down into violence to be resolved.

Or up, into peaceful performance. The Don has made 254. 309. 334 at Leeds. He's been carried off the Brisbane ground by the bowlers whom he has punished to the tune of 452 not out. He is radiant in a setting made to order. With the single scar of bodyline, his arena is white, green, gold. The Marylebone Cricket Club's colours, though different, are friendly because they obey the code. Men are clad. They oppose. They acknowledge each other's skill. There is a game which, mirroring reality, defines the acceptable. Bodyline is a mistake of the Depression. Cricket is forever.

On the day when the atom bomb is announced, I am standing in the detached dining room which progress hasn't yet demolished. The radio is close to the door where Tim lies, paws out like a Sphinx. The sun is shining. Germany's given in, the Japs can't be far behind. The righteous Allies are crushing them. Emperor Hirohito is said to be considering ritual disembowelment. The radio, speaking into our mundane farmhouse, says that Hiroshima has been devastated. I stare out the window. The trees I've attacked with a metal hook so that they weep gum from their wounds are in my view. So are Mr Erskine's pepper trees. The world is as it was, the world is changed. The basis of my twelve years has been undercut. The old world can't come back.

Father, who has said he might write away for later V.C.A. Reports, isn't going to do it. He'll take me to see the Don. I'll see him. Swiping bouncers served up to annoy him, he will be only sporadically the man he was. Somewhere in the middle of the war, when Mother has become concerned about my education but before she thinks of sending me away, she tells me I must learn a language if I'm to go to university. She discusses the matter with my teachers and settles on German because someone has told her it's easier than French. I have no idea how many languages there are. I presume that for every country on the map there is a language, though I know that English is spoken in the countries coloured red, and these are strung from one side of Mercator's projection to the other. Mr Murdoch has tried to explain what a projection is, and that there are several. He asks us to imagine peeling the skin off an orange and then trying to flatten it on the table. This strikes me as silly. If I peel very carefully I can bare an apple in one go, but the skin dangles in a pleasing, if somewhat flaccid spiral; why would you want to lay it flat? Mr Murdoch shows us another projection where big sections are left out. There's ocean, a gap, then more ocean. This is even worse than the Bible story about Moses parting the Red Sea. I decide I'm not interested in other projections, I'll stick to Mercator, even though he's unfair - he shows England and west Africa on the left of his maps and again at the right while Australia is only shown once, down the bottom and about the middle. On Empire Day and at other times we're told that the sun never sets on the British Empire. Mother explains this to me with the aid of Mercator, and it seems to be something to be proud of. It's part of what we're fighting for. Father tells me that our part of New Guinea once belonged to the Germans, and I can't understand how England ever let them get so close.

None of this spills over into my reaction to my German text when Mother enrols me in a correspondence course. They send me *Deutsches Leben*, *erster Teil*, and a sheet of instructions. I do the first lesson and receive an encouraging comment. I find the second lesson harder, but mother hasn't studied the language and is also puzzled. The comment is not so favourable. I give up in the middle of the third. Father comes in from the paddock one lunchtime and says 'How's the German getting on?' Mother gives a non-committal answer. I'm pleased that she's able to bury it. The German text goes on the shelf with the novels of Warwick Deeping and a Complete Works of Shakespeare. These are almost as incomprehensible to me as the German, but I regularly check to see that the volumes are in the right order, and sometimes I study the names: *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Twelfth Night* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. Somehow I know at an early age that *Hamlet* and *King Lear* have dynamite in them. *Romeo and Juliet* is about love, which means foolishness, but tragedy commands respect; it's something I might have to face one day. I don't connect the word with what happens in war. I dimly understand that tragedy is about bringing yourself down and others with you. I wonder if real people let this happen, because I have it in mind that *Hamlet* and *King Lear* are stories. Mother says Shakespeare took old stories and made plays out of them; he must, then, have used his imagination as I do when enemy fleets of flat boards are attacking the island which Father's sand heap has become. I name the lead soldiers as I dispose them about the sand heap's defences; they become the heroes of the British campaign in Burma, about which I know nothing except that it is conducted in jungles. Australia's soldiers too are fighting in jungles, proving once again, papers say, that they are the best fighting men in the world. It is a schoolyard joke that Italians are the worst because their tanks have one forward gear and four reverse. The parents of my peers are also scornful of Wops or Dagoes, though they treat them fairly enough when prisoners of war, clad in dull red, are given farm and construction work to do. Occasionally I see numbers of them in paddocks near the Tocumwal road; I ask Father why they're dressed in red and he explains that it makes it impossible for them to escape. This seems a clever tactic until I remember the oceans separating us from Italy; since no one could swim them, why the fuss? I also hear of people being interned for security reasons but it doesn't happen to the Marantellis or anyone else we know so I presume our district is wholehearted in its support of the war. I am secure in my ambivalence because I am six when it starts and no one expects it will last twelve years, but there is a race between the war ending and my brother turning eighteen. Mother speaks of it only once, when she cries, head on the refrigerator. It never occurs to me to ask my brother if he's scared, or wants to fight. Most of the time he's away at high school and I'm not very interesting to him when he's home. I content myself with studying aircraft recognition charts in the *Argus Weekend Magazine*, neat graphic views of planes from head on, side and below. The planes that cross our farm are either so low that I can see the pilot's head, or they glitter so remotely that I can scarcely tell their shape at all. I make clumsy models out of balsa kits and when I see photos of air crews receiving instruction in recognition I covet the models they have access to. I can think of nothing better than to have hundreds of them suspended from my ceiling, bombers and seaplanes, fighters and transports, in an endless flypast. Aeroplane models make me tingle. I think that at any moment they'll emit a deadly fire from rockets mounted in their wings. I'm excited by newsreel film of planes bearing down on each other; it's satisfying to see the victim burst into flames, spiralling to earth while the victor lifts his nose in search of further conquest.

This part of my imagination is stimulated by Rockfist Rogan, a regular feature in the boys' magazine *Champion*. I consider girls unfortunate because their magazines are prissy, Worralls isn't a patch on Biggles and the school stories set at Saint Ermintrude's lack the zest of the dorm feasts and the mysterious disappearances which appear to take up so much of the time of English public school boys. As my going away approaches, I wonder how much of my reading will be replicated by what I encounter; my only way of knowing is to look at the back section of *Pioneer Families of Victoria and Southern Riverina*, a volume derived from Grandma in which the six leading schools of Victoria are portrayed. Everything seems to be about sport, scholarship and stately buildings. The playing fields are immaculate. The book implies a connection between the families and the schools. Our family is in the book, with a one and a half line entry listing the birth of a child with my name. This pleases me, but Geelong College, Xavier and the rest have little to do with the native pine near Norman Taylor's gate and the casuarinas sprinkled through the paddocks of his neighbour, a reclusive woman who lives alone but, I gather, farms successfully with the help of her brothers. Her name is Dora Killeen and as far as I know I've never met her, though a boy with the same surname is in my class and we fight when games of hidey become overheated. There is a pepper tree in the yard of our school with seats enclosing it in a square, and I sit on these seats with Douggy Killeen, Jock Dawe and Robby Bennett, none of us showing the faintest perception that our lives will lead in different directions. Years later, Mother shows me a class photo; she's kept in touch, as I haven't, and I'm shocked by the number of my classmates who've died or been on the receiving end of fortune. That this might be on the cards I think about only on the death of Kevin Baker, though I might perhaps have had some intimation of futures shaped by forces difficult to control when I hear boys who come on the Tocumwal bus making sexual allusions to someone in their town. I ask them what they mean. Ben Solomon, the biggest and nicest, whose short trousers bulge when he has an erection, says I'll know when I'm older. The strange thing is that I think I know already; I'm puzzled, reading *The Finley Mail*, to see that a certain horse is 'standing' at a nearby property. I perceive that this has to do with stud farms, which we visit when Father wants to buy quality rams, and occasionally ewes. Father lowers his *Argus* briefly, says more abruptly than usual that Mother will tell me later, and resumes his reading. When Mother comes to my bed that night, she lies beside me, propped on an elbow, and tells me that there are male and female, cows and bulls, stallions and mares ... In a flash I see what she's getting at. 'Oh that!' I say. 'I know all about that!' Mother kisses me goodnight and it troubles me no more. Bulls hop clumsily on the backs of cows. Stallions rush about the yard, penises extended. Father puts his arm into the bellies of ewes to help them lamb. I don't think of Romeo and Juliet, nor of Georgie Malone and Betty McGowan, least of all myself. It's the commonplace stuff of farming and I'm not going to be a farmer.

Yet I love walking the paddocks with Father. He irrigates, and I trail him, bare feet behind his gum-boots. He sews wheat bags and I sit, bored, in the shade if there is any, or I perch on the sewn bags listening to the men. They call each other by shortened versions of their first names: e.g. Ronald becomes Ron, not Ronny, Thomas becomes Tom, not Tommy. Nicknames, I perceive, derive from somewhere else. *Finley Mail* advertisements and occasional shop windows reach back to an earlier form of abbreviation: Chas, Thos, Geo, Wm. Most of our visitors give me my name in full; my parents shorten it, and I can sense how close visitors are to my parents by whether or not they treat my name in this way. Mother speaks fondly of me to her friends; I overhear her telling them I'm boisterous, and it surprises me. This is not because of the description, which I suppose is true if Mother says so, but because of the fact of being delivered by definition into other people's hands. In the paddocks I'm free of selfconsciousness though intensely aware of self. The landscape, giving back no description, and being as far as I know undescribed, is perfect for release. I walk in it as though it is the world, though I rarely go beyond our boundaries because if I'm on a road or in someone else's farm I may be asked to account for myself and I prefer to remain invisible. Besides, our paddocks are big enough; when Father comes on a piece of wire, which is often, he flings it towards the nearest fence. This is a practical thing to do because it means the wire won't get tangled in our harvester, but if he's in the middle of the paddock - and the middle means any point from which his throw can't reach a fence, or tree - then he's only, I recognize, making a gesture. It's one I enjoy. He drags the wire out of the wheat, whipping it over his shoulder. I keep out of the way because long pieces flick as I imagine snakes would if anyone was game to do what the men are always saying is the best way to deal with them - grab them by the tail and crack them like a whip. Father hurls with his bowling arm and away goes the wire to settle once more in the wheat. I find it satisfying to think that if farmers who come after - because I can see it will be a long process - hurl these wires fencewards every time they come on them the land will eventually be cleansed! This is a concept that pleases me. Father is always fixing things with wire but he doesn't drop it on the ground, so who's responsible for what's in our paddocks? Mr Erskine? The boundary riders of Tuppal Station? I know I'll never know, and it's an irritant which I can only find tolerable if the process of tidying goes on. I do what father does, carrying the wire to the fence where he would throw it, because I'm not as strong, and the wire, looping about me if I try to throw it, is likely to catch in the heads of Rahnee, Federation, Farrer.

I love the dust of the wheat harvest, the trash swirling from the back of the harvester while the grain gathers in the 'box', the name given by McKay-Massey Harris for the receptacle which sits to one side of the masticatory process carried out by trays shuffled by cogs which I find impossible to understand but which Father seems able to fix when they break. Rummaging through the tin at the driver's seat, he finds what he needs; if not, he walks back to the shed. Occasionally he has to go to Finley, and the part he brings home is shiny. Our shed is full of rusty objects which might come in handy one day. Father says, 'You never know when something's going to be needed.' It's Mother's attitude to buttons, which she snips carefully from garments before they become rags.

Mother and Father live economically because their period and their land, their upbringing and their temperaments, lead them to live this way. Our bathroom is a fibrocement lean-to on the back of the main house. Hot water's brought by bucket from the copper, or the stove. Cold water comes from the tank. In times of drought that too comes by bucket, from a tap fed by the windmill. Mother wastes nothing, her soups are full of barley. When times are bad, Mother serves a lunch which Father eats and I nibble. Mother eats decorously, then announces that the greens have been carefully chosen nettles. Father is not amused, but Mother does it again, a few days later, with marshmallow, two of our most prolific weeds. Mother says she's heard they're wholesome, and to me they're no worse than silver beet or spinach, but Father bans them, and Mother reverts to cooking that doesn't bear the stamp of poverty.

We are poor. I feel this when I wear sandshoes to school because my leather shoes are being mended. Father drives to Deniliquin to see the Rural Bank manager, and answers my queries about certain phone calls with 'Farm business'. Sometimes he refuses to let me accompany him on trips because he's on 'farm business'. I know this means money but I don't understand my exclusion; does he think I'll tell the other kids about our financial affairs?

He does; sometimes he says, 'Just don't mention *that* to anyone else, if you don't mind,' and I'm careful not to do so. Father has a rich friend who runs a flour mill, and he says in my hearing that Father will make a success of his farm; since we've never had money to spare, I wonder what change this will bring. Mother says she'd like to go to England, Father thinks America: both content themselves by saying 'See Australia first.' My parents seem to think that these countries will be intrinsically interesting, whereas I don't know where and when magic will spring out of the ground. Father visits a cousin in Merrigum and I'm delighted by the house, which has stood still for the lifetime of an unmarried daughter. The huge yard full of discarded machinery and ancient cars is everything a child could wish to play with. When Father calls me to go home I know I'm being pulled out of a pocket of time which may never be rediscovered. Are there places like this in America? I don't know what freedom kids have in other countries and I'm not really clear whether I'm free or restricted in my home; my parents' rules seem sensible, and the things my imagination craves - bursts of glory, drama and destruction, and the intrusion of magical forces which can do impossible things like make you fly, or cause aeroplane models to materialize - don't seem to be providable by the world my parents do their best to manage. I am happy, therefore, insofar as my quarrel's with what's impossible rather than with what's not allowed.

The magic of Bradman is that he has pushed back the bounds of the possible. His reward is recognition. Father tells me of a letter posted to the Don while on tour; a photo of the upper half of his face has been pasted on an envelope and beneath it, simply 'Somewhere in England.' That it was delivered promptly makes some point for Father, and thus for me. The same face looks from the dining room mantelpiece in the years before demolition; it moves to the new house but no longer takes pride of place. Mother's lakeside scenes and her parasoled lady made from chocolate wrappers are also relegated to less prominent positions. The wedding photos continue to move about. What was Mother's and Father's bedroom becomes our lounge. The old lounge, used only for formal occasions, loses its elaborate kerosene lamp which was raised and lowered on counterweighted chains. The books move, a few of the older novels go out. *The First Year of the War in Pictures*, a Sun News-Pictorial publication, is something I open constantly. Hitler drives through Berlin in his limousine, hand outstretched. His bombers bring out in the British the tenacity on which they pride themselves. We admire them most when they cross the Channel in little boats to rescue their army at Dunkirk. We're amazed when Hitler attacks Russia, and there is some justice when his soldiers meet the fate of Napoleon's, something I know about because we have a book of Great Cavalry Officers and Marshal Ney is one of them. I cannot imagine fighting, let alone sleeping and eating, in snow, which I've never seen. Wolves and marauding peasants complete the nightmare which the German armies are living through in Russia.

I live only once in a nightmare. I'm four or five, and Mother drops me at the Shattocks' while she plays golf. The older children are to look after the younger because Mr and Mrs Shattock aren't there. We play for a time in the dining room, then I realize I'm alone. This in itself doesn't frighten me. I presume that the imaginations of the others have swirled them on some current I've failed to notice. Unfortunately, I'm right. The older children have decided to terrify the youngest. Through the double doors of the lounge bursts a troop of ghosts, dressed in sheets and pillowslips. I know who they are, but they possess my imagination in the most terrible way. I scream, I cry. They dance, blocking my exit. The room behind them is dark. Mother is playing golf. I don't even think of Father, who's ploughing. I'm taken over by terror. Eventually they go. I ask Mother never to leave me there again. Thereafter, if I can't stay on the farm, I go with her to golf, or tennis; they bore me, but are better than the house where the supernatural broke loose. I can't face that a second time.

Thus I've failed when that magical, demonic existence I sometimes crave is visited upon me. I can't stand a breakdown of order. I need the world Mother and Father define for me, inside that larger world which is waging war. My brother wants to be in it but I'm terrified of war. My parents continue their work as if the war is an ugly cloud that'll pass. Mother says every cloud has a silver lining. Does she think that out of hand to hand combat, submarines, and troopships sinking in shark-infested waters some good can come? I dare not question. Mother may be unrealistic but she's the centre of my security, as Father is the centre of hers.

My parents are always right. I invite Allan Close and Roger Woollard home to play. They ride out on their bikes. I'm with them the whole time except for a few minutes while I go to the shed, and they remain in the garden. Next day Mother notices that the young apple tree she's been nurturing and which has produced two large Granny Smith apples, has been robbed. The green globes are gone. Father says, 'Those mates of yours must've taken them.' Mother thinks so too. Believing in my friends, I say they wouldn't have stolen. Father says no one else could have taken them. I say I'll ask them the next day. They deny the theft. I reaffirm their innocence to Father. He says, 'Of course they took them. Who else could have done it?' Mother is silent, but annoyed. I accept this conviction on circumstantial evidence, and feel let down. I don't invite them again. They don't ask to come back.

Sometimes men walk down our drive. Mother takes a cup of tea out to them while they wait for Father. If he has half a day's work to give them, he does so, but for the important jobs he relies on locals. I feel sorry for these men, tramping down the long lanes from road to house. I wonder where they sleep, since they can't tramp the thirty-seven miles from Finley to Deniliquin in a day. Father appears not to consider this. He and Mother say if you're too generous, swaggies will make a mark at your gate for others to see. I study our gate carefully and can't see any mark. I wonder if it's because I don't know where to look, or because these men on the tramp haven't found my parents very generous.

When these men arrive, they tell Father the things they're good at. He isn't impressed. Even I can sense that they're claiming too much, because the men I know who are best at their jobs never boast. Operating on reputation, they've no need to. I wonder if these men who walk the country have names, and where they come from. As the war proceeds, we see less of them. By 1950 they are a thing of the past, as are the jar of humbugs on the worn pine counter at Grover's, which becomes Sammons Edwardes; small children, in the days of Hacker Thompson behind the counter

– before he became a stock agent – are offered a lolly while Hacker and his customer wait for the change to come flying back in its wooden cylinder on one of the wires which join the office, high on a mezzanine, with the departments of the store. The dockets, like the books of dockets from his former shop which Father's stacked in the wash house, have blue bands on them, and advertise Bushell's tea. Gone also, by the time of the Don's retirement, are the stacks of Bluebird jam in front of Hacker's counter, though IXL and AJC still make jams, and Hearnes still buy newspaper space for their drawing of a knight, sword upraised, before whom flee the naked gnomes of bronchitis, catarrh, etc. I find this advertisement fascinating, both for its concept of a radiant figure triumphing over evil, and for the weird spelling of names given to illnesses. Doctors are said to have bad handwriting; I find it no wonder if they have to deal with such words.

Other brand names of the time are Bonnington's Irish Moss and Buckley's Canadiol, both of which claim to overcome colds. The Canadiol ad begins with an unconvincing blizzard, and I'm surprised that anyone can put as much ardour as their reader does into a mere advertisement. We have bottles of cough mixture in our house and none of them seem effective. My parents, if troubled by colds, go to bed with a hot lemon juice, and their conviction means more to me than anything I hear on the radio. When Mother says that to chew chewing gum is disgusting, I believe her, despite the fact that Wrigleys bring us *Dad and Dave*, and so, to allow myself to continue, because I like P.K. and Spearmint, and because other kids chew gum and I want to be like them, I explain to myself that chewing is something I'll grow out of. I think of this excuse in the back seat of our Ford, nosed against the fence at a Finley football match. I've no intention of detaching myself from my age group, despite Mother, so I join the group of children who run into the goal square sneering at Numurkah's champion, a man called Dudley. Bald, lanky, and immeasurably old to the Finley kids who hate him, he kicks off after a behind then moves upfield to outmark our players at the other end, and goal. On the back of his jumper is a neat, sans serif one. Captains often wear this number but in his case we take it as a declaration of self esteem, and it irks us that the pale hands high above everyone else's when the ball descends on a pack will be Dudley's.

Dudley is the only Australian I can remember hating, perhaps because the Australia of my childhood is well endowed with enemies. There are Goering, Goebbels, Himmler and the mysterious Hess. There is Tojo, and the kamikaze pilots who dive on American ships. Mussolini is farcical because the soldiers that back his strutting don't frighten us, whereas the Japanese are imbued with ancient codes which mean they don't fear death. Their midget submarine, captured after penetrating Sydney Harbour, is taken around the country and I cannot believe that humans could submerge in anything so claustrophobic. Just as Mother, in becoming adult, has ascended to a plane of selflessness, it seems that men who make war must overcome fear to destroy others. Both are, for me, beyond the confines of ordinary human nature, since I am selfish and afraid. Nor can I bear pain. While Father has the combine jacked up so he can check the working of its cogs, I poke my finger where I shouldn't; the cogs jam it against the wooden grainbox. I cry. Father examines the situation, then reverses the wheel. I extract my finger. 'Just a bit of a bruise,' says Father, and hoists me on his shoulder. He carries me to the house, and though I'm crying and licking my finger I'm also enjoying the lift he's giving me, in bright sunlight, towards the gate that leads to the opening in the pepper trees and the path beside the wash house to our kitchen.

Mother comes. I'm handed over. She applies ointment and a bandage, and I'm placated. I even go back to the combine, but I want less to do with it. Thus I discover that I have not the mechanism for fighting pain, nor the determination to push up the level I can stand. Yet I am intrigued by those who can. Hundreds of ordinary mortals not only win Military Crosses and Air Force Medals, but gain bars to their decorations, so it seems possible for people to go, more than once, where fear and commonsense should stop them going. The papers tell me about men sprinting up beaches, dodging machinegun fire, to drop grenades in the mouths of pill boxes. Their courage is held up for admiration. The feelings of the German gunners as they see their fate tossed through the slit, and their activities in the seconds before annihilation, are never considered. They are the enemy. We are us.

We must win.

I don't doubt that we'll win, just as I don't believe Father will be killed by a horse rolling on him, or a machine. Vera Lynn sings 'There'll be bluebirds over/The white cliffs of Dover/Tomorrow, just you wait and see,' and I ask Mother why these cliffs are a symbol of England. She explains that the cliffs are a returning Englishman's first sight of his native land. This I understand. I know the poem 'If I should die/Think only this of me/There is some corner of a foreign field/That is forever England.' Father tells me that one of his uncles died on a troop ship returning from the Boer war; this strikes me as peculiarly sad. Death in a foreign land is the likely lot of soldiers, but death on the water is an unresolved passage into extinction. I ask what happened to my great Uncle Alfred; did they throw him overboard, weighted, or bury him in Perth? It seems to matter. Only one of my family, my cousin Jack, is in the present war, flying fighters 'somewhere in the Pacific', as the papers say. The whereabouts of troops is never stated precisely because, says the propaganda machine, the enemy listens! I wonder if I'm supposed to know about the trains that go through Finley, but decide there aren't any spies I could tell even if I wanted to, thus there's no danger in riding up to the station after school and staring in awe at the guns and armoured cars as they roll through. A photo of cousin Jack, smiling in a blue R.A.A.F. cap, sits on the piano at my Uncle Aston's house, not far from his father in his slouch hat with its emu plumes and its side turned up. If Father is proud of Aston for having fought, it is more because of his Australianness than for the details of his service, about which Father knows little. He likes to repeat Aston's story about his troop encountering a British column in a narrow lane in France. There is no room to pass and the mud is deep on either side. The two forces come to a halt. A British officer makes his way to the front of his men and urges the Australian lieutenant to give way. The Australian refuses. The British officer grows exasperated. 'It seems,' says Father, enjoying his exposition of something British to which he doesn't adhere, 'that in the British army there's a tradition that the King's household regiments, the Coldstream Guards, the Grenadier Guards, and so on, take precedence over other regiments.' Resuming his brother's story, Father says, 'The Aussie wouldn't budge and the British officer got very annoyed. My man, he said, don't you know who we are? We're the GUARDS! And the Aussie,' Father said, 'replied, I don't care if you're the bloody engine drivers, we're not getting out of the way!' I loved this story, which I heard often. It was right that the British should be outfaced by colonials. That my uncle should be one of them was a matter of pride. Poms! I shared Father's scorn.

Mother admired the British because they were brave under bombing, and because of loyalty to her sister, married to an Englishman. There was also the Anglo-Australianness of her upbringing; she and her sisters, when holidaying away from the beach, chose Warburton, Daylesford, Hepburn Springs, or perhaps Olinda or Ferntree Gully, places with mild climates, deep green foliage, and guest houses for the non-motorized population of Melbourne. Mother loves flowers, and towns with gardens; inland towns, so dusty and short of water, make her heart ache: there is a yearning inside her, unfulfilled until, years later, she sees, and loves, England. I also admire the British because they keep calm when faced with invasion. They evacuate their children and they slope brooms and garden hoes for rifle drill with unselfconscious determination. If this is play acting, or self-convincing, I see nothing wrong with it because I do it all the time. The weapons of the mind are nearly as powerful as guns; something tells me Hitler won't cross the Channel.

He doesn't. He attacks Russia. The Japanese bomb the American fleet while their ambassador's telling lies in Washington. We've got right on our side, it's only a matter of time. We are the Allies, they are the Axis. I have no idea what this word means but by analogy with axle it suggests something greasy, and that, as anyone in my schoolyard could tell you, is what the dagoes are. The third of our country's enemies is vilified in the expressions 'yellow-bellied' and 'having a yellow streak right up your back', meaning cowardly; we make no attempt to square this with the way the armies of Nippon fight. I recall no expression peculiarly hostile to Germany, so perhaps Hitler has us bluffed in the same way Churchill makes us confident. This portly figure, sublimely self-assured, and his slender, wistful King, visiting the bomb damage, tell me that England, beaten to her knees, will get up. People say, 'The Poms'll take one beating after another, but they'll always win the last battle.' The other thing they are good at is 'muddling through'. The propaganda machine gives a two-faced picture of the British military. Half of them, it seems, are carrying out brilliantly conceived and executed bombing raids, while the others are forever being caught unawares but manage to fight their way out of trouble with a mixture of luck, pluck, and the English genius for producing the goods when they have to.

Australians, of course, are better fighting men, but England's problems are senior to ours because they're next to Germany and France; this has been the world's hot spot for years. German inflation in the thirties was a nightmare. 'If you wanted to buy a house, for instance,' says Father, 'you'd have had to take a wheelbarrow load of notes and by the time you got there they wouldn't have been worth as much as when you set out!' I translate this into the value of a sixpence Mother might give me for lollies; if German style inflation were to hit us, I'd have to make my purchase before school, not at the deflated value of half past three!

A devaluation of this sort does hit our town when American airmen reach us, because they have more money than sense, as we're all agreed, and they spend this money on beer, spirits and lollies, consuming the disparate substances one on top of the other. Our cafes are cleaned out of chocolate. I'm unconvinced by white 'chocolate' frogs and other white bars which should be brown. The Americans are naive, and those that don't understand Imperial currency are short changed. Kids pester them to give them money, some of them even enticing a Yank to part with a pound, or ten bob, note. There are incidents in lanes on Saturday nights. I'm glad their real base is Tocumwal because they add nothing to our town. Father says they're hillbillies who haven't the practical sense of Finley farmers. I believe him because I want to, and because the Yanks I see don't impress me.

Who then designs the mighty warships, the powerful fighters which, unlike our Wirraways, can stand up to the Zeros, and the landing barges which disgorge marines for death or glory on Pacific atolls? Is there some other breed of Americans manipulating these gullible, loudmouthed men who break the peace of my town? I think of America as a vast machine, producing Liberty Ships at the rate of one a day by some adaptation of the production line philosophy of the originator of our Ford, with its stylishly written F on the radiator, and above it the thin metal strips slicing the breeze which, seen side on, say V8. English cars are no good in Australia, Father tells me; they're weak in the springs, underpowered and unreliable. They haven't the guts of a big V8.

So there is something about the Americans we can accept, if our car is any criterion; they, too, are big unhampered people, not tied down by the traditions which tie down, and strengthen, people in Europe. Is there some connection between the titles which the British aristocracy hold dear, and the Rumanian officers' corsets? I have the feeling that the forms and traditions of Europe have weakened; the French have some validity left, but it's mostly to be found in the followers of de Gaulle and the resistance fighters who risk their lives to get our airmen across the Channel. Where then are Australians? Who are we?

We are the rising sun soldiers (no one makes a connection between the badge on our slouch hats and the red and white rays of Japanese imperialism) whose deeds 'somewhere in the Pacific', 'somewhere in North Africa', make our name in places of ancient civilization and in cannibal domains far worse than blackfeller country. We are playing in the big league, impressing ourselves and, we hope, the powers who protect us. We admire the American who says 'I will return', we hope to be there on the day. We're not fussy about how the Axis is brought down. Mussolini is strung up by his feet. Hitler suicides in his bunker, Eva Braun beside him. Goebbels puts himself and his children to death, a nest of poisonous spiders. The Japanese High Command are expected to take out their ritual swords ... It's satisfying to think of these creatures covered by a blanket and thrown on the scrap heap of history, whose judgement can't be doubted. Postwar reconstruction can then begin, and a period of peace, with less injustice than in the past, can roll back the war, light replacing dark. Cartoonists are altering their symbols. Mercator's map lies ready for rainbows. The Americans drop the bomb.

Hiroshima, Nagasaki.

It's too much. The means used to bring peace have altered the meaning of peace forever. 'Those who sow the wind reap the whirlwind,' clergymen say, supporting our efforts against Germany and Japan, but now it seems that this is true for victor and victim alike. If we've won, it's at a price humanity can't pay. Father tells me the Harbour Bridge isn't paid for, as well as being endlessly in a state of repainting. I understand that this has to do with interest, and repayment, and that these will go on forever. 'Can't we just say to Britain,' I say to Father, 'here's some money, that's all you're going to get, so just clear off!' He smiles. 'It isn't like that,' he says. 'If you default on a loan, they'll get it out of you some way, and then you won't get another loan when you want it.' I can't see why we want to owe British people money so they can live in big country houses but no one sees any way out of the financial system; I perceive that the Depression, which Father and Mother hope never returns, has to do with all this, but what about the bomb? I know most of the terms of finance, like foreclose, mortgage, security, and so on; Father, who has never voted Labor in his life, says Jack Lang did farmers a service when he stopped banks taking people's properties and putting in managers who were then paid a higher wage than farm families needed to live on. 'What they were doing was sheer bad business,' says Father, and I wonder why bankers, who are supposed to be clever as well as greedy, did what they did. Jack Lang could also be frustrated, I see, because when he gave himself the honour of opening the nation's grandest bridge, someone rushed in front of him with a sword. I ask Father what Jack Lang did about that, and he says, 'They tied the ribbon together and he cut it with scissors,' It seems a poor second best. Grandma did better at Barham. Jack Lang's big moment turned out to be less than he'd expected.

So has mine. I stare down Mr Erskine's avenue, the air sickened. The radio gives details of the raid. Hiroshima's been burnt alive. A surrender is awaited. It's described as if it's the Japs' problem only; at twelve I know better.

As the minutes pass, the peculiar mood which has come upon me dissipates. I venture outside. Everything on the farm is normal. A few mornings later I ride to school, having heard of the surrender. Tocumwal and Berrigan kids are told by their drivers that they're sure to get a holiday. Kids tie ropes around the legs of chairs and hoist them to the rafters. The teachers are in the headmaster's office, drinking tea. Mr Waters comes out to say we can have the day off, as if we didn't know. We run around the yard in a flurry, then cross the road to ring the bell of a church. It isn't a very impressive bell so we stop. None of us really know what to do with ourselves. I ride home. There isn't much to do in Finley, peace or war. I am happy as I pedal in the still, mild air. 'The war's over,' I tell myself. 'It's all over!' I forget what I do when I get home. Mother is relieved. It's business as usual for Father. An occasional drinker only, he has no wish to get drunk as I know some people in town will do. The marching soldiers, the tickertape processions, will happen in bigger centres than Finley. I have only a farm to return to.

It is a rectangle of 640 acres. The Deni road runs across its northern boundary, then the Mulwala Canal. The 'back road' runs between the main farm and two back paddocks. A lane separates us from Maxwells. Norman Taylor shares our fence to the east. A channel, wide as a room, brings water to the comer of Norman's property, then swings west to cut our farm in two. If Taylors, Maxwells, and Eagles are irrigating, the channel is full, we say, though it's never full; we mean that water is running clear across the kikuyu grass planted by Father, my brother and Vic Lapierre, a corpulent fellow who gets odd jobs with the Irrigation Commission, though he never acquires the status of a Water Bailiff, with a utility and house attached to the job. In the early days of irrigation I mishear the word 'bailiff'; having been asked at school to make a model of the Egyptian shadoof, I assume anyone responsible for distributing water must be a 'bailer': Mr Murdoch puts me right.

An agricultural science teacher called Billy Williams asks me to join the Young Farmers Club. I say no. Surprised, he discusses this with Mother, who is friendly with Joyce, his wife. I think it is Joyce who suggested that German was easier to learn than French. Mother says I must make my own decision. Billy asks me again, standing on the verandah close to the tank where Kevin Baker queued for a drink, several summers before. Billy respects Father's ability, and Father, despite his distrust of theory, allows that Billy has sense. I can see that the teacher is embarrassed at having to approach me again. He has a red face and curly hair. He says my brother is keen to go on the farm (I have my doubts); why don't *I* join the club? I can't give a reason. I sense that I'll be trapped if my relationship with the sandy loam, as Billy describes it, of our district becomes a closer one than looking at it. It's my earth, but I don't want it.

It can be sticky. The Deni road has a low spot near our gate. There is a heavy fall of rain and Father sees that his front paddocks will be flooded unless he does something. He works along the fence with a spade, making a mound. It stretches over a couple of hundred yards, blocking the water. A council engineer says Father's not to do this because he's interfering with the natural drainage. Father says the water's only there because irrigation channels prevent it taking its natural course; in fact everything that's been done for years is counter to the 'natural', and he doesn't want the water on his farm. The engineer threatens, but goes. Father wins, I feel proud of him in his gumboots, telling this bloke where he gets off.

I am forced to get off there myself when the muddy road clogs the forks of my bike so the wheels won't go around because I'm not strong enough to push them through the mud. I walk the bike through a three hundred yard patch on mornings after rain, and even pushing the bike is hard enough, Sometimes I almost carry it; it's hard work and I hate it. Reg Young the surveyor comes along one morning and I expect I'll get a lift. He sees my difficulty, grins, and passes. I'm furious. Then his back wheels spin, he revs the engine, he loses traction, he bogs the ute. I shove my bike a bit harder, pass him, and mount again when the ground's dry enough. Vindicated! I wonder if he'll walk down the avenue to use our phone, or wait till someone pulls him out. Revenge is sweet. When I come home that afternoon, Father's amused to hear what's happened.

Stormy weather prompts one of our domestic rituals. Mother says to Father, sitting by the fire, 'The line's heavy,' and he replies, 'Probably crossed.' He puts on his gumboots and oilskin coat, finds a stick, and sets off for Norman Taylor's. Eventually he returns, having uncrossed the telephone wires, to report where he found the trouble; it may be as far away as Johnny Hamilton's bridge, beyond which Father doesn't walk; someone else can fix it after that. Some farmers hang ploughshares from the lower line to steady it in the wind, a practice frowned on by the local exchange.

There is a swampy patch beside the road at Johnny's bridge where plovers nest. They dart me as I ride, though I pedal as fast as I can. I can always go to school along the back road, but this means entering Finley near the saleyards, and there are magpies in the trees near the saleyards which are even more ferocious. Most ferocious of all are the magpies which nest each year in a tree just across the channel where I learn to swim; they take off when they see me cross the bridge. I pedal furiously, heart pounding, using the hummock to give me a speedy start. I know the exact spot where the divebombers will call off the attack because I'm out of their territory. If I can get there before the birds notice me, or catch up with me, I'm safe. I sometimes make it, more often I don't. The pilot's helmet stops me getting pecked, but does little to abate my terror. I thrash the air with a stick as I ride, hoping to keep the maggies away. Their beaks snap just above my head. Once I actually hit a bird, making it peel off; I feel a deep satisfaction at this. More often they pursue me like furies through a tunnel of trees. I scream in fright, and ask Father to shoot them. When he comes with his gun they stay in their tree. Father says birds, especially crows, can recognize a gun. I ask him how they tell it from a crowbar or a shovel handle, and he can't give me an answer, but he knows they know.

When I'm small I'm more tender towards birds than they are to me. I adore them for their lightness and for what I imagine would be the delicious feel of their bodies. I long to hold them. One day I have the chance, but choose not to take it. Mother has taken me to the dentist in Tocumwal. We wait. She senses that the sounds and smells are frightening me and suggests I go for a walk. I walk along the picket fence near the surgery, and see a sparrow next to the fence, trembling. I reach out my hand. He's scared, but doesn't move. I have only to close my hand, but I don't; he's more scared of me than I am of the dentist. I go inside, saying nothing of my bird to Mother. He's gone when we come out to the car.

Going out with Mother means a last minute inspection at one or both ends of the journey. If we're still at home, Mother takes to my face with a facewasher, banishing smears and smudges. If we're about to become public when Mother notices a spot, she takes a hanky from her bag, licks a corner, and insists on me remaining still while she removes the offence. Sometimes she thrusts a hanky under my nostrils and says 'Blow!' I blow. I'm not yet at the stage when I can say no, and she seems to know when I need to; Mother says she'll have to sew buttons on my cuffs if I wipe my nose on my sleeves. I never seem to have a hanky, though there are plenty in Father's drawer, beside his celluloid collar case, a cream thing slightly smaller than a cake tin with 'Collars' written on it in elongated cursive; I am fond of the double L because my own attempts, with a steel nib, to put pressure on the downstroke while lightening the up produce an ugly result, scratchy on the way up, fat going down. I envy people who write well; Mother says it's an art that's being lost. We have copybooks in grade one, and I blot mine many times. I notice that old people's writing is jerky, as a child's is, and wonder why. The old people I know speak with an assurance which must be missing from their hands.

Father has less education than Mother, having started work when he finished primary school, but he writes, on ruled pads, with the confidence of one who has pencilled thousands of dockets, carbon under top copy, in his store. I search through the docket books stacked in our wash house; most of them mean nothing, but they are mingled with letters on which I find state stamps, postage due stamps and penny red kangaroos. I am more familiar with George the fifth, through his stamps, than I am with the reigning monarch. My cousin Frank has the 1937 coronation stamps, including the £1 grey, and I wait for him to give it to me; I understand that there has been another king between the Georges, but, not understanding what he did wrong, I don't know why he got off the throne since my idea of a king is that he tells others when they may and may not approach. Father says the British send us Governors and Governor Generals; Sir Isaac Isaacs is the only one he has time for. I understand that this person is Australian, but am suspicious of the name; it reminds me of the Bible, and that reminds me of the two Sundays when I go to Sunday School. I find it oppressive and dislike the rose-bordered texts they distribute, showing Jesus smiling on children. It's so effeminate! The Sunday School teachers are women and most who go are girls; they're dressed to some ideal that isn't mine, nor Mother's either, because she'd much rather be stylish than saccharine, but hasn't the money: it's only in the years of my going away to school that I remember Father in a suit. I wonder how Grandma and Grandpa got to Colombo, such a Kiplingesque place to visit; I imagine their ship garlanded by dhows and sunsets, surrounded also by grinning native boys who dive for coins dropped by white people. Our only souvenir of this trip is a brightly painted walking stick, one of Father's last choices in the division of Grandma's things, which I take with me on walks about the farm, and which meets its end at our dunny. I forget how I get rid of it, but I keep from my parents the circumstances in which I broke it, more because I don't want them to know about the fear involved than because I'm scared of them knowing it's broken.

Our dunny houses tarantulas. They lurk between the wooden uprights and the corrugated iron. I acknowledge their residence and can cope with it as long as they're not in the open when I'm there. Thus, getting ready to go to the dunny means peering in the door and looking around to make sure the coast is clear. If a spider is visible, he has to be frightened into hiding. I do this by banging the iron on the outside, about where I judge his hairy feet are gripping the wall. The walking stick is ideal for this because it makes a satisfying sound on the iron and because if I place my blow correctly, the stick will align its length with a trough in the iron. Usually the spiders flee, but late one afternoon, with the western light gilding the maroon walls of our dunny, a spider doesn't want to move. In a paroxysm of rage I thrash the iron, breaking the stick. I'm upset, use the seat quickly, and get rid of the evidence – where, I no longer remember. Since I'm the only one who's interested in the stick, no questions are asked.

My rages and fears are kept secret while the world throws itself about with a violence both more and less disciplined than mine: more, because navigators use skills I don't have to bring their planes above the cities they destroy; less, because no one checks the nations with a conscience. The world lacks a mother to smack Germany, and wag a stern finger at Great Britain and France. The morals which divorce judges ascribe to barnyards are in fact the world's; there is only once, that I can remember, when they can be said to enter our yard, and that's because thousands of mice have taken over our shed. It's a plague, says Father, and it centres on our bags of wheat and chaff. My brother brings a group of friends home to slaughter the mice and I'm allowed to participate. We get sticks from the woodheap and dash about the shed, turning over everything in sight. More mice than I've ever dreamed of are nesting in the chaff. We beat them with sticks, half a dozen screaming, laughing boys. I'm the youngest and least effective but I run like the others, pursuing the mice to all corners of the yard, beating the earth when we miss, killing mice with abandon. Just as I am safe from the magpies at a certain point in our avenue, our victims aren't pursued beyond the fence which separates yard from paddocks. We probably don't kill very many, but by the time we stop there are no mice left in the shed. Father is pleased when my brother tells him about our holocaust but Mother says 'Goodness gracious', and hopes we didn't let any mice get in our clothes or hair. My brother and I laugh; as if we'd let the smelly little creatures get close to us like that!

Yet I fondle the cats which breed with equal indiscrimination, if less fertility, pressing them against my clothes and holding them to my hair. I rub my face against them because they feel beautiful. Their number reaches twenty-seven, and they all have names. The last two, when I'm running out, are christened Governor Phillip and Governor Macquarie, whom I've heard about at school. I know these names are silly but I've no others to give them. I don't want to give them the names of racehorses because they're even sillier, being hybrids of their progenitors' names, and who knows which cats are parents to the pussies that prowl our paddocks for mice, sleep in the shed, and hang around the kitchen for bowls of milk? The cats in cartoons, prowling New York lanes, are at their happiest when they discover a fish skeleton but I can't test the reality of this because we never have fish; we eat Murray cod at Grandma's but elsewhere, fish are something we eat only at a hotel, which means stopping somewhere on a long journey and in the years of my childhood such journeys are made only to Barham and to Melbourne, and the Melbourne journey is normally made by train.

Father takes me to the test. The journey goes on for hours. I look out the window and see purple hills. The sun is setting, we haven't crossed the Divide. I ask 'How long till we get to Mangalore?' as if he might restart the train. Father doesn't know. I rest my elbow on the vertical red boards of the carriage, assuming that the catch which holds the window won't let it fall on my neck. I love the land – the hills, the dark. Given a train to take me through the landscape, I feel it's mine. There's a farm at one end of the line and a test at the other. Father's always promised he'd take me and it's happening. There are 61/60/59/58 miles to Griffith Brothers Tea. I'm going to see the Don.

Bradman comes onto the field with Hammond. They toss. Hammond does a little jig, like Hitler when France surrendered. He wants to fool the crowd, but in fact he's lost the toss. Australia bats. Barnes, who made 234 in Sydney, goes out at 21. Bradman comes to the wicket. Father stands. The huge ground, with its thousands of spectators, envelops him in applause. He walks slowly, adjusting his eyes to the light. Some of the English players clap. He takes block, straightens, tugs his cap, then bends over his bat. Bradman is where he belongs.

Mother is at home, my brother's working. In five weeks I'll be away at school. Norman Taylor's son, and the Maxwell boys, will be working their farms. Joe Marantelli will marry belatedly; his brother won't. Johnny Hamilton will grow old, and die. His house will fall into ruin. His fruit trees, as they age, will have the extra burden of the iron objects he's tied to their branches to discourage birds. I'll dream no more of flying. Bradman will make 79 and 49 and I will be able to say, because of one over in which he's savaged an English bowler, that I've seen him, but, if I'm honest with myself I'll have to admit, returning to New South Wales with Father, that I saw him more vividly when I thumbed the V.C.A. Report and walked behind Father in the paddocks, listening to him talking about the Don. Bradman is Father's, not mine. I am tied to Father and he to me, therefore I have to take Bradman from him. I watch him keenly. The throws from cover are flat and fast and they find Tallon behind the bails. His team walks in as the bowler bowls while the Englishmen stand flatfooted, unsure of their purpose. His fieldsmen watch him, adjusting their position when he moves his fingers. He seems to know where the ball will go. One feels that his mind controls the play. If he has insecurities, they're invisible. His pace bowlers send thunderbolts at his direction. His spinners bowl to orderly, well placed fields. His keeper is at the stumps as the ball comes in.

The arena has been mown in circles. The heavy, medium, or light roller is brought out between innings as the batting captain directs. Groundsmen sweep the wicket at lunch, tea, and before the start of play, repainting the creases with whitewash as Mother whitens our fireplace every winter morning. The brilliant light of Australia pours on the ground and I wonder if the Englishmen squint when they get off the boat in Perth. They must feel strange in front of a crowd which wants them beaten. I shout every time an Englishman goes out and am grudging of applause when they bat well. England has had its day – that's the message I want them to get. The V.C.A. Report says Australia has won more tests than England, and it's as it should be. That the struggle is now irrelevant is something I might realize if I think back to the way the war ended, but I don't. Some part of me, hearing the bomb erupt, is like the English schoolboys illustrated in the books I read – one, further forward, restrains his companion (boys of this sort don't say 'mate') with a directive hand, and, according to the caption, says 'Cave!' For the life of me I cannot understand why, faced with danger or the unknown, they say this. A cave is a hole, a tunnel, a mysterious orifice in the earth. That it also means 'Beware!' in Latin is something I don't learn for years. I've encountered the word many times by the time I see Bradman, I've inferred from its context that it's a warning, and I've not inquired of anyone why this misplaced word means what it appears to mean. Cave? When it's said, everyone freezes, or they silently melt back to their dormitories while the wily master who's in league with smugglers or the kidnappers of Forsythe-Brown, sneaks, overcoated, into a moonless night. Convention has it that Ponsonby, or Treloar - whichever is the upright lad who restrains his less forward companion - will purloin a bike and follow the teacher who is really a criminal, down lanes and hedgerows that I've never seen, to a lonely cottage on the moors where a lamp will blink three times, seawards, before being extinguished. Somewhere about this point in the plot the smugglers, or kidnappers, will rush from the hedgerow and overpower Treloar, leaving him without hope of rescue unless Ponsonby, whom we know to lack courage, is prepared to confess the many times he and Treloar have broken bounds and convince the Headmaster, whose real interests are Caesar and the Battle of Hastings, that he must call the police.

The unreality of these books never troubles me. Reality is something I'm prepared to leave to newspapers, and to the English, because the part that affects me is defined by Father and softened by Mother. The world beyond our farm is, I presume, being managed by wiser heads than mine. Hitler was, after all, defeated; the Japs, after all, were forced to board General Macarthur's ship to sign. Our peace has been imposed without condition, we have right on our side, therefore what's been imposed must be right, must it not?

The moral dilemma of the world I've entered is something I don't really want to know about. It's been easy to say that the Huns are godless and the Japs are heathen. It's hard to admit that the evil, which we thought we were confronting when we fought them, has entered us. People seem to find it peculiarly shocking, when reporting bomb damage or the results of long range shelling, if a cathedral has been destroyed, as at Coventry. Not having seen these cathedrals, I wonder why. It doesn't occur to me to realize that the warmakers want to have their cake and eat it too. The British vote Churchill out of office so perhaps they've seen, as I haven't, the limits of a hero. I feel sorry for them, with their bomb-damaged cities, and glad we've been untouched. Wildflowers are reported to be growing in parts of London where they haven't been seen for years. People take heart from this, just as they saw a miracle in the Flanders poppies twenty-five years before. Nature can restore herself (why is she always a she?) but is that any use?

Nature as I know it is embodied in hot winds and occasional cool changes whose delivery or refusal of rain is the starting point of every conversation. When visitors come, Mother opens windows - louvres, by the end of the period - and waves a hanky, saying, 'There's a nice little breeze, now,' when some imperceptible movement of air makes itself felt on her face. Edna Morris, referring to the weather forecast, will say, 'They say it's going to be hot again tomorrow,' to which Mother will rejoin, 'Still, it's nice outside of an evening.' Mother would find a breeze in hell. Father will say to Bert Morris, 'Finished stripping, Bert?' Bert is as keen on cricket as Father. He will have half a day's work on his own property and a couple of days for someone whose machine has broken down. This will lead to a discussion of gates, headers with a twelve foot cutting-comb needing wider gates than some farms have; I'm always amazed at the lack of concern with which our neighbours pull down panels of fencing and put them up again. I sometimes help Father trample the soil around a new fence post and I know the effort he puts into breaking the earth with a crowbar and shaping the hole with his spade. I wonder how many grunts are represented by a mile of fence because some sound is drawn from Father every time the crowbar hits bottom. The earth shines where a crowbar or pick compresses it, and the single furrow plough, turning over the earth, produces a smooth, sheeny sod. The iron wheels of our machines make tracks on the matt earth; I love these traces, just as I love the feeling of our car when it's travelling on sandy stretches between Deniliquin and Barham. 'You can't beat a good dirt road,' says Father. 'It's the best surface you can travel on,' and I agree, because there is a roar, and a grip, with bitumen, but on sand, or dusty earth, the car runs lightly, floating, and the plains and the mirages are a joy, boring, yet releasing. Father needs a spacious country, whereas Mother is most at home in drawing room dramas as Miss Anita Mullett, peering through reading glasses as the curtain rises and Dale Grover, a taut, moustachioed butler, brings the news which will generate *The Rest Cure's* plot, a story I've completely forgotten. Mother, like Father, has a past I'd like to be able to enter, because she says the Finley Drama Club's presentations have been less interesting since Mr Davies the electrician left; he, it seems, had a talent for thunder and lightning effects. Mother sucks her breath in mock fear as she recalls the (presumably forked) lightning he conjured from the School of Arts' switchboard. Despite having seen some spectacular effects of nature, I don't doubt Mr Davies did better because anything theatrical excites. I go to great lengths to build army camps and air force bases on a card table surmounted by another card table whose legs support drapes; I illuminate these dioramas with a hurricane lamp, or a single torch globe and peep inside, half expecting to catch my soldiers marching and my planes taking off. There is a song I hear on 2QN about a toyshop coming to life at midnight. The wonderful part about it is that by morning, when the owner returns, everything's in place. It is this deceitful nature of inanimate objects, secretly alive, which I wish to surprise. I want to be privy to the secret, and if I saw my soldiers move, would I tell Mother, or keep it to myself?

I'm not sure, now or then. Mother might be afraid, and I can't afford that. Father wouldn't believe it, and somehow his disbelief prevents miracles from happening, so he too protects me from the world of magic and imagination that I yearn for and half believe in when I read. On hot days I ask Father to read me The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe (had so many children she didn't know what to do). It takes ages, yet Father, who reads me little else, cheerfully puts aside his paper for the miscreant Anne, Benjy, Charlotte and the rest, who are turned into poplars by the Frog King and redeemed by Zed, who, if his brothers and sisters don't act out of character and work solidly all night, will remain a frog forever. In my imagination, though I'm sitting on a cushion at Father's feet, I help Zed sprinkle the poplars' roots with a watering can and say:

> Brothers and sisters, work with a will,
> The Frog King says there is hope for you still ...

If it's not the Frog King that exercises my imagination, it's The Snow Queen or The Marsh King's Daughter. The books Grandma gave my brother are full of Ali Baba, Ulysses, and a macaw called Kree. Sinbad the Sailor has his adventures, as do Gulliver, Dick Whittington and the monkey that fooled the dragon. Theseus slays the minotaur and genies swirl in and out of bottles in the most startling fashion. I contrast this intense imaginative world with the flatness of our farm which needs Reg Young's theodolite to discover its rises and falls. Father walks about with a measuring stick given him by Reg, taking twenty-two of his determined paces, slightly longer than usual, between each sighting. Reg lifts me up to the lens and I see the red and black lines on the stick brought up to my eye, but how this is translated into a map, I don't know. Father explains that each little number on the chart for which Reg is paid ten pounds is a reading of elevation, and that the distance between each number represents a chain. That I do understand, because a cricket pitch is a chain long, and most Riverina roads run through three chain reservations. My parents think Melbourne's better laid out than Sydney because the roads are wider and cross at right angles while the older city's streets are based on bullock tracks: it might have been good enough for the old world but Father's not impressed, nor does it please Mother's sense of neatness and order. Cities as well as lives need firm rectangularity. If Father is ploughing, sewing or harvesting, he takes his machine around the four sides of a paddock, reducing the time for each circuit as he diminishes the square in the middle. The job's finished off by four journeys, out and in, along the diagonals, to deal with the boomerang shapes missed when the machine swings wide on the comers. I like the geometry of this final X, just as I enjoy allocating favouritism to the four sides of the trip around the paddock – sun in your eyes/crosswind/downwind, with dust hovering about machine and driver/crosswind again. The crosswind legs are cleanest, the downwind stretch best to look at, worst to be in. But sometimes Father wants to sew two strains of wheat in one paddock, or may want to cut the first furrow for a new ditch; on these occasions he stands near some fixed point - a boundary fence, or an irrigation channel - and steps along his six strand fence the required number of paces, then hangs a bag on the fence. If the top strand is a barbed wire, its grip on the bag is better. He walks to the other side of the paddock and repeats his measurement. The two bags give him his line.

Mother hangs the washing on a line that has two wires strung from posts with crossarms which swivel, as our telephone poles do not. This equipment is incomplete without a couple of poles eight or nine feet long with a fingers-and-thumb sized fork at the end. Mother pushes one wire high with the forked stick, bringing the other low enough to let her peg the clothes she lifts, still dripping a little though they've been through the wringer, from the washtubs which, in emergencies, are spaced under drips in our hall. The pegs are cylindrical, with flat heads and parallel legs. If one breaks, Mother says 'Blast' and the peg will finish up in the stove with its clenched-knuckle handles which Mother sometimes cleans, if that's the word, with Zebra polish. At least the stove isn't made to pretend it's white, though I'm puzzled to know how Reckitt's Blue will whiten our washing. Blue has associations for me with copper sulphate, which Father mixes, after reading the directions on the tin, with water. Sheep suspected of footrot are made to stand in a bath of this liquid, which rapidly turns muddy, for five minutes at a time. I don't remember Father timing this with a watch so I imagine that five minutes is the length of a chat with whoever's near.

If this is me, I'm happy, though I'm also bored. The easy parts of farming are a pushover. I like herding sheep into the draughting race, or going to the shed for something Father's forgotten; I'm good at finding things because I'm always trying to unravel the mysteries of things for which I can guess no purpose. The moment Father starts to describe some implement I know what he wants and where it is. I've spent hours lying on the chaff bags, reading comics and watching the swallows dart in and out. Their droppings stretch along the wires. Their nests are an internal decoration on the shed's gables. I wonder why other birds don't come in, and presume that they're either afraid or they're obeying some incommunicable sense of what's right for them. My house is double brick, therefore no wolf can say 'With a huff and a puff I'll blow your house down!' Our pigs have a sty next to the sheepyard and it's so filthy that I wonder how they manage to keep most of their bodies the peculiar pink-white of pigs. Father tips grain and milk into their trough and they snuffle it greedily. Mother tells me that it's from pigs we get bacon, pork and ham. How can this be possible? The only things I know they produce are oink oink sounds when they see the milk bucket, and screams of hysterical power when Joe Marantelli comes to take one to be sold. I stay in the house at such times, haunted by the screaming. I wonder how Joe and Father can stand it, yet Joe, having secured the pig in the wire cage of his trailer, is as cheerful as a man can be when he comes for a cup of tea. His voice is penetrating and I wonder if he knows that I can hear him when he's shouting at his brother, and why aren't they selfconscious about the noise they make?

I am not so much selfconscious as aware of being inadequate. Not all children seem to lack daring as I do. Kids from school pinch detonators and put them on the railway line, whereas the closest I come to interfering with trains is to watch Robby Bennett and others put coins on the track when the diesel's pulling out for Berrigan; I wonder how it occurred to them that the coin, when reclaimed, will be flattened. They seem proud of the fact that what they've done is illegal, being called 'defacing the currency'. I assume that the real crime is to despoil the monarch's bas-relief; after all, far more coins slip down cracks in floorboards or through holes in pockets than are wilfully damaged by kids. Father also explains to me that at certain times the silver in a coin is worth more than its face value. Since money is something tangible for me rather than a concept, I cannot for the life of me understand how a coin can be worth more than it's worth! Its value is fixed for me by the numbers of lollies it buys - a chocolate frog is worth a penny, and so is a packet of steamrollers. A box of Fantales, a luxury, costs one shilling and fourpence. People chew them, and read the wrappers, at the pictures. On the night Little Nelly Kelly is shown, the School of Arts is full; Father explains that all the Irish have turned up to see it. I didn't know we had any Irish in our district. Father grins and rattles off a list of names like O'Rourke and Walsh. I gather that he finds them quaint, if tolerable, likely to get overheated about things sensible people wouldn't make a fuss about.

What matters, then, to Father, Mother? Both take a long view, constantly trading a little to gain a lot. They've invested deeply in their position. They know who they are. Despite Father's digging of the air raid shelter and Mother's fears for her elder son, I believe that neither really thinks the war will reach them. It's an ugly wave washing over them but leaving their basic purposes unchanged. Mother, knowing Father won't fail, wants her sons to do well. My brother says he won't be a farmer, but he leaves school to work for a pastoral company, getting ready to return. I go to school, doing whatever my teachers tell me, because they are authority and even more than most adults, are supposed to know; Mr Murdoch has his grade three sing 'The Ash Grove', a Welsh song, he tells us:

Down yonder green valley, where streamlets meander,
When twilight is fading, I pensively rove ...

He explains 'meander', assuming we can work out 'streamlets' for ourselves. The words are not my difficulty, though like most children I sing them as if they have no connected meaning. I don't know what an ash grove looks like, let alone one which has a sweet maiden buried 'neath its green turf. A valley for me is something shaped like a V, with mountains on either side. Though I live in what is called the Murray Valley, the term makes little sense; we have to travel miles beyond Berrigan to find more than a minor undulation in the earth. If I only knew it, 'meander' is a good word for the big river running thirteen miles to the south, but it is only later, when I see it from the air, that I can visualize its ornate progress, embellished by anabranches and billabongs, as it divides the Victorian tribe from New South Wales. Nor do I know its immensity, yet I've only to recall the view from the bridge at Tocumwal, or Barham, to be mystified by 'streamlets'; there are no such things in my world. Finally, though, my rejection of the song comes down to the business of wandering at twilight; I've already had the same idea put to me in different mood by Sir Harry Lauder, a great favourite with 2QN, who sings 'Roaming in the gloaming/With a lassy by your side', the chuckle in his voice having to do with his singing of 'Stop your tickling, Jock!' but it is the association of moods with twilight that puzzles me. Day and night, sky and earth, are more clearly separated in my experience than in these songs. Is my landscape harsh? I don't think so. Mist rolls across it in winter, while the wheat crops eddy the light that pours on them in summer. I am stirred more deeply by what I see around me than I am by foreign landscapes because I only know them through the words of poets; my brother's story book contains a poem by Tennyson:

The splendour falls on castle walls
And snowy summits old in story ...

I say the words to myself because they sound marvellous. Mother says them too, they're refinement, culture, they're to do with Elfland and the echo of distant bugles. Bugles I associate with the Last Post and Reveille; I admire this poet who can turn them into something else. Reveille is very solemn; I understand it to be something to do with the impossible, the waking of those who aren't going to wake again. My uncles Aston and Teddy, though they've got their names on Honour Rolls, aren't among what another poet and endless memorials call 'the fallen'; they're alive and kicking in Grandma's town, Father's town, his sister Olly's town where his earliest memories belong. Mine come from the place where he's transplanted himself and Mother to have my brother and I. My life begins, if I take it over at a point where I can claim it with memory, in the Chrysler that precedes the 1936 Ford, dandled on Mother's knee with the big gum tree at the front gate partially visible through celluloid curtains, and it continues with my picture of myself clutching the diagonally gridded wires of our gate as an unfamiliar vehicle makes dusty progress down Mr Erskine's avenue. His pepper-trees mark the important lines of our farm; even the pigs have one, shading their sty in summer but preventing the ground from drying out in winter. Mud, or baked earth, stretches for miles. The sheep make tracks where they walk. Johnny Hamilton makes crazy gates. Lambs get through the fence and can't get back; they suck their mothers, heads between the wires, until the ewes walk away leaving their offspring helpless until Norman Taylor or Norman Eagle hears their plight. Sitting in our lounge, I can't differentiate between the various calls of our horses, cows and ewes, but Father always, and Mother sometimes, seem to know when something's wrong, I wonder why animals can't look after themselves, not realizing that we've made them what they are. There's some menace in male and female wanting to force their way through fences to be together. Father tells me to round up the calf and lock it in the yard because he wants the cow to have time on her own before he milks her, and the calf is the rival of our table. I run about the paddock, trying to separate the two; when I finally manage it with some trickery at the gate, I stare at the cow's eyes and see they're streaming: suddenly I'm sorry for her. I've been shouting forbidden words in my frustration at not being able to stop the calf doubling back to its mother, I've hated the pair of them because their instincts lie perversely across what I've been told to do: now I'm sorry, and I promise the cow that when she's been milked she can have her calf. Her separation, which is upsetting me, won't be forever.

Father, I must assume, will have released the calf that night and let it run back to its mother, because he always does things in the orderly way of farmers; I cannot imagine him in the blind fury I feel before I see what's wrong. The animals have feelings. Ours ride over theirs. They live and die at our behest. No one outside does that to us, despite Mother's belief in a divine creator. We do it to ourselves. There's a war on, there's peace. There's an end, and now a beginning. The earth stretches out forever. Farmers still ringbark trees. The dead ones in our paddocks are girdled by blademarks. I wonder at the few hands that have shaped our farm, as opposed to the ancientness of England where battering rams and boiling oil were in use while our land, if what Mr Murdoch tells us about the aborigines is correct, lay in its dreaming. Wide awake, my childish mind blazing with curiosity, I wonder where my country will take me, thinking, wrongly, that some destiny associated with it will direct me instead of me taking responsibility for my own life, and my children, as Father/Mother take responsibility for me. Since my parents can't shape the world, I have to steady myself, there being no Treloar to hold me back, crying Cave! as he peers at the cloud on the horizon. I have to put down the map of childhood and go on, pausing only to look back and see a period perfected as Hutton, whose 364 surpassed Bradman's 334, these enormous figures having burgeoned in a prewar time of confidence; Hutton, batting serenely, causes Australia's captain to leave his place at cover, say a few words to Ernie Toshack, and place himself on the drive. When the next ball is bowled, Hutton, falling neatly into the trap, lifts the ball in a graceful arc and Bradman – radiant, art deco Don – has only to run back a few paces, cup his hands on his chest, and take the catch.