A high-contrast black and white photograph of a mountain trail. The scene is dominated by a large, bright, billowing cloud that fills the upper right portion of the frame. Below the cloud, a rugged, rocky path winds up a steep slope. Several figures are visible on the trail, including pack animals (horses or mules) and people. One pack animal is prominently featured in the lower right, with a person walking alongside it. The overall atmosphere is one of a challenging, high-altitude journey.

The Pilgrims

Chester Eagle

The Pilgrims

Books by Chester Eagle

Hail and Farewell! An evocation of Gippsland (non-fiction, 1971)

Who could love the nightingale? (novel, 1974)

Four faces, wobbly mirror (novel, 1976)

At the window (novella, 1984)

The garden gate (novel, 1984)

Mapping the paddocks (non-fiction, 1985)

Play together, dark blue twenty (non-fiction, 1986)

House of trees (reissue of *Hail and Farewell!* 1987)

Victoria Challis (novel, 1991)

House of music (stories, 1996)

Wainwrights' mountain (novel, 1997)

Waking into dream (novel, 1998)

didgeridoo (stories, 1999)

Janus (travel pieces, 2001)

The Centre & other essays (essays, 2002)

Love in the Age of Wings & other operas (librettos, 2003)

Melba: an Australian city (essays, 2004)

The Wainwright Operas (librettos, 2005)

Oztralia (essays, 2005)

Cloud of knowing (novel, 2006)

Benedictus (essays, 2006)

Central Station Sydney & other operas (librettos, 2006)

The Sun King & other operas (librettos, 2007)

The Well in the Shadow (literary essays, 2008)

All the Way to Z (memoir/essay, 2009)

This Enchanted World & other operas (librettos, 2009)

Running The Race (novel, 2010)

A Mob Of Galahs & other operas (librettos, 2011)

Brighter Than Black (libretto, 2012)

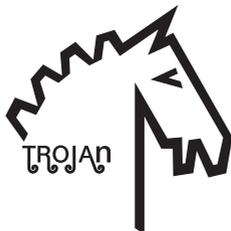
The Pilgrims (novel, 2012)

(See also mini-mags over the next page.)

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This book is dedicated to the memory of
Thornton Wilder
author of
The Bridge of San Luis Rey

Mini-mags

Escape (story, 2004)

Hallucination before departure (memoir, 2006)

Mozart (memoir, 2007)

Travers (memoir, 2007)

The Saints In Glory (story, 1991/2009)

So Bitter Was My Heart (memoir, 2008)

Keep Going! (memoir, 2008)

Who? (memoir, 2008)

At Baldy's Feet (memoir, 2008)

Othello's Rage (memoir, 2009)

One Small Step (memoir, 2011)

Castle Hill (memoir, 2011)

Chartres (memoir, 2011)

The Plains (memoir, 2011)

Four Last Songs (memoir, 2011)

The Camera Sees ... (memoir, 2011)

Freedom (a reflection, 2012)

Men In White (a reflection, 2012)

World Cities (a reflection, 2012)

Mountains

Australia is strangely made. Mountains run down the eastern side, then turn the corner. Rivers flow out of them, to the sea at their feet, and to the inland. The inland rivers are tedious, straggling, in the habit of forming billabongs. Between their origins and their end, they have only a little way to fall. It's an eroded country, but such mountains as it possesses are full of character. Anecdotes abound; this book hopes to present a few of them, not so much as they happened but as they might have happened. The consciousness of earlier generations is something we can only guess at, and our need to guess, the reasons impelling us to guess, will make themselves inherent in what we say.

This is a book about men who called themselves pilgrims: journey-makers to holy places, holy regions, where their minds, their souls if they believed in them, might be changed en route.

It's the journey, rather than the end-point, that gives rise to meanings. I invite you to come on a series of journeys, to see what happened when, where and to whom. The pilgrims we will come to shortly. Let me introduce you, first, to their guides.

Bill Gillio led the Skyline Tours. He was a bushman and an ex-soldier, two of his country's strongest traditions. He was big, strong, loud, and practical. He was thoughtful. He saw the need to be organised. If you wanted something done well, you planned. To delegate, you needed good people. You had to trust them, and you couldn't do that unless you trusted yourself. Everything started from the self. It had to be without flaw. Bill could ride, he could build, he could explain. Above all, he could lead.

deCoursey was something else. Nobody understood him. He was a tall man, of French and Irish descent, quite unworldly. It was said of him that he wanted to fly like the birds, but whether he said this himself we cannot know. He died of cancer a little after fifty: not a long life. He was a great runner and a fast walker; he played the violin. He was at home in the bush but got lost at times, something that never happened to Bill, whom he revered for possessing a certainty impossible for one who sought spiritual states that could never be taken for granted. Some people are proudly human; deCoursey was an escapist, too conscious

of humanity's failings to be comfortable. He loved the mountain bush because it could be inhabited without looking into the self. What he saw within rarely pleased. The mysteries of the mountain world made him free. Did he really want to fly like the birds? Riding in the forest, walking, sitting and observing, were just as good. Contemplation meant looking outwards rather than in. He needed an 'other', and the world around him supplied it. He followed social rules because it was safer to do so, rather than from an instinctive wish to be like other people. He loved Bill because he never felt questioned by him; Bill accepted him as he accepted everyone else. Bill had the common humanity deCoursey never possessed. He was an average horseman, an average handler of cattle, a poor-to-middling farmer, someone who intuitively misread social situations as barriers separating him from the world where he belonged. He took up Bill's offer to join the Skyline Tours with enthusiasm because he would surely know better than the pilgrims, as he called them, and taught them to call themselves, what to feel in the presence of the mountains.

These too are characters in our story – Mount Wellington, Trapyard Hill, The Pinnacles, the Crosscut Saw, Bennison's Plain, Mount Howitt, Wonnangatta Station on its river of the same name, Lake Tarli Karng, Spion Kopje, the Snowy Range, right out to Mount Hotham and the long descent to the inland, where there were no magic mountains and the stories that grew on the flat had a different character from those conceived in the hills. Erosion confirms the character of mountains even as it flattens them. The mountains, abraded as they may be, cling to things that have happened in their secret places. Mountains recall. They don't let memories die, though they kill off careless travellers. Bill told his pilgrims they'd be safe if they did what he told them, and anyone who didn't wouldn't be coming back. Bill was the guardian of experience, memory, of proper bush ways for dealing with the dangers of getting lost. He knew where he was, while deCoursey had sometimes to climb trees to find out. Bill had only to see a distant peak to know, by its shape, the angle he was seeing it from, and therefore where he was. On the very first of the Skyline Tours a pilgrim said to him, 'You're different from us. We need to be told where we're going. You know where you are wherever you are. In a way, you're not going anywhere because you're already there.' Bill nodded to this as to

everything people said. He rarely disagreed, but then he rarely let the observations of other people affect him. He knew who he was, where he was, and what he was doing. Didn't everyone?

The first day

Jan and Tommy Burke ran the Briagolong Hotel, and they'd supplemented their rooms with tents, and put up a marquee because their dining room was small. Bill told the men from Melbourne that if they wanted a bath they should have it before they slept because breakfast would reach the tables at 6.30. 'By 7.30, we're off! Any packing, do it tonight. First day's an easy one, but we're hitting the road early. We've got distance to cover, and we're not going too fast because I don't want you breaking down on the first day. We're taking it nice and easy, and that means getting started so we're not in any rush!' Geniality shone out of him, but they felt his force. Tiger Rowe, the cook, had gone on ahead, with Billy Dibbs, the hut man, who had to have their second night's accommodation organised and firewood cut for billy-boiling, companionship, warmth, and meals. 'deCoursey,' Bill announced, 'will be leading the horses, so everything has to be in a stack ready to load. That'll start the moment we finish breakfast. You can help him, but don't get in his way. Just do anything he tells you to. If he doesn't need you, keep out of his way. He knows what he's doing, or so we like to think.'

The birdman, the famous runner, was unaffected by this jibe. 'Every horse,' he said, 'will carry four men's packs. You'll be free, when you walk, to look at the world.' The men from Melbourne sensed something unusual in these simple words. Look at the world? They'd be doing that, though Bill's understudy seemed to have something else in mind. But they were in a mood of enormous geniality, laughing and tossing things around as if the day might bring anything at all without upsetting them. Bill had more to say. 'To have a good time, *everyone* has to have a good time. If something's worrying you, tell me about it. Don't go in on yourself and brood. Do the opposite. If you feel like singing, let'er rip. If someone sings beside you, and you know the words, join in! If anyone starts to drop back, see if you can push'im

up the front a bit. I was in the army and it taught me something. If someone weakens, it weakens everybody. If things are going well, it's hard for anybody to feel bad. We're in this together, so let's make it good. First stop'll be a cuppa round the middle of the morning. When you see Billy Dibbs standing beside a fire, that's morning tea. Okay boys, we're underway!

Jan and Tommy Burke watched the party plod along main street. The hotel keeper was much affected. 'Got a way with him, hasn't he, Bill.' His wife was thinking in another dimension. 'How many of them will see what deCourcey sees?' The publican had no time for the birdman. 'deCourcey never organised the show like Bill did. All he does is what he's told. That, and make a nuisance of himself.' Jan Burke told her husband, 'deCourcey's different from the rest of us ...' but Tommy wasn't listening. 'Aaaargh,' was the noise he made, and he spat. Jan Burke headed for the kitchen and Tommy to check the barrels of beer.

Birds

The party walked well, the first couple of hours. Bill moved up and down, getting to know them, shaping them too. 'First person you got to look after's yourself. Then everybody else. Just keep an eye out, see if everyone's okay.' It was simple, it was a rule. Bill had brought it home from the war; it had validity behind it: this was how his pilgrims felt about him. His off-sider? They weren't so sure. He was ever so polite, but he lived in another world, and what it was like, they had no idea.

They came on Billy Dibbs' fire, and deCourcey handed cups around. They drank. The sun shone imperially on the party. Bill wanted to know about the walkers' feet. Any problems? He wasn't expecting anything, but let him know ... He noticed that the attention of one of the party, George McGeorge, was wandering. 'What's that, mate?' McGeorge indicated a bush. 'There's a little bird in there. It's quite agitated.' Bill hardly needed to look. 'It's got its nest in there. It's thinkin of havin a family. But it's worried.' He pointed at the sky, and his party looked up. A hawk was hovering high above. 'That's why it makes its nest in a bush. It hopes it won't be seen. Problem is, the

ones that fly high have got super-good eyesight. They can see the nest all right. Only protection for this little fella is whether or not the bush is thick enough to make that fella' – he waved at the sky – 'stay up there instead of comin down like a thunderbolt to pick the little fella off.'

It should have been clear to them that the bird in the sky wouldn't drop on its victim when so many people, and horses, were standing about, but they weren't ready for what deCourcey had to say: 'Even the skies are impure. It's all very difficult.' McGeorge and the others expected Bill to clarify, but he was filling his cup, Billy Dibbs appeared to take deCourcey's words as an inexplicable act of nature, and the birdman said no more. It seemed to McGeorge that the bush men had made some sort of settlement of a moral problem which he and his fellows weren't aware of.

This incident, or rather its outcome in deCourcey's words, affected the party. The skies are impure? The skies were full of light, the skies were a blessing on the heads and shoulders of the walking men. It didn't seem silly to call the sky the heavens. They were heading for the mountains and the mountains would lift them higher, and higher again as they got further out. They had horses to carry their packs, Bill and his men had everything organised – huts, fires, food, places to sleep: their souls were liberated, or on the way to being so. What would it be like to have left the world behind?

The skies were impure? Well, yes, the skies were the realm of birds of prey, but wasn't the earth the same? And the oceans too? Or was that what deCourcey meant? They supposed it was. If the sky wasn't pure, what about themselves? It was one thing to be calling yourselves pilgrims, and walking along happily, stopping whenever you wanted to look at something, or ask if anybody knew the name of a flower, but purity meant perfection, and no one thought that could be maintained for very long. They all had jobs, and homes, families and children, responsibilities and a need to make money, so they couldn't be away forever. They rather envied Bill and his men who lived within reach of these places, who seemed in some way to own what nobody could own, because mountains were not only places, but states of mind. They were envious when they noticed deCourcey and Bill pointing at distant peaks and murmuring names, and distances, talking about things that had happened there. They sensed the mountains were full of stories, just

as they knew that birds, animals and insects were all around them, but out of sight. Trees began to look different after a while. They seemed bigger with every passing day, but ageing too, getting ready to die as they declined. Occasionally the pilgrims heard the crash of a branch falling somewhere in the forest. They knew what was happening. It was happening to them too. These were glory days, these days of walking, and no one held onto such things forever. When their trip was over they'd go back to Melbourne, and then, when the photographers had done their work, they'd gather for a dinner to re-live the experience they were now in the middle of, albums of photos would be given out, signed by all members of the party, Bill would be there, and his assistants if they could be persuaded to travel to the city, to be flattered, and thanked, and asked if they were ready to make another trip the following year.

This, it might be said, all lay ahead, but that was the nature of a pilgrimage, was it not? To walk in the present with the future always a pace ahead, always another day, another vista, destination, something marvellous to talk about, to be set up as an aim and finally to reach! They were impatient in the foothills, a little restless, wanting to get to the high country where trees were taller, and even the names, scattered carelessly, had a largesse the lowlands couldn't support. Trapyard Hill, Mount Tamboritha, Bennison's Plain, the Crosscut Saw beckoned them forward, ennobled their chatter, made them feel as mystically important as the places themselves. It was good to be alive, but ...

... deCoursey said the skies were impure, and amazing as he might be to any sensible professional from the city – where reputations were earned, or lost – they sensed that he knew something they didn't. The skies were impure? How could that possibly be?

In the lowland, things are known

The beginning of a journey contains a problem. What's being left behind, in this case the township of Briagolong, with its surrounding farms, offers supplies and comfort: things are known. The next stage, the early foothills, don't offer much. They're an absence rather than a benefit. There are no great views, no waterfalls, people haven't got into

a rhythm of walking. Wilderness hasn't delivered anything to replace the civilisation being lost. Walkers know that their families will expect stories when they get home, and nothing's happening. Yet Bill seemed content, Billy Dibbs had his fires, and even deCoursey unbent a little. Tiny Barton, a huge man, made so bold as to ask him why he thought the skies were impure when to the travellers they seemed radiant. The birdman told him, in his quaintly mellifluous voice, that struggle was everywhere. The trees, so noble and healthy as they reached for light, were the outcome of struggle. 'Millions of seeds fall on the ground,' the birdman said, 'and a few thousand germinate. They become little fellows like this.' He touched a tiny plant with his boot. 'Most of the seedlings die when they compete against each other. A few of them will become trees and they'll still be competing. We say the shafts of trees are like gun barrels, shooting for the sky. Most of them will die. They'll be killed off by the others. Those that survive look so splendid that we forget the crimes they've done on their way to maturity ...'

'Crimes?' Tiny retorted. 'Trees committing crimes? That sounds a bit odd!' He said it loudly so that others would become involved. He wanted, also, to know the basis of his trip. They were making jokes about being pilgrims but what could they call themselves if their faith couldn't hold? He wanted the next few days to play themselves out within understood terms, and the birdman, the secondary figure in the leadership group, was, he felt, a subverting influence. Bill, the old soldier, was more reassuring. Here he was now, catching the anxiety in Tiny's voice, coming to see what was going on.

'I'm trying to find out what deCoursey's on about,' Tiny told the leader. 'There's a few things I'd like to get sorted out.' He was trying to keep within limits of restraint because the bush men, he'd sensed, had bonds of loyalty and understanding that the Melbourne men didn't possess. They didn't know each other as well, however like-minded they may have been. Genial Bill, however, sounded amused. 'What's he on about? Nobody knows that. He's a mystery to us like he is to you. But that's a good thing. You don't want to come out here thinking you know all about it, because you don't. There's always something gonna turn up when it's least expected. It's a bit like the war. Ya sit around for days until you think nothing's going to happen, you get used to everything being quiet, then all hell breaks loose. Fellas are dead, fellas

are being carted off to hospital, if there is one, and suddenly, you're in action! Nothing's ever the same again.' He looked at his friend. 'That right, deCoursey?'

The birdman was flattered. 'You were a volunteer, Bill. You were very brave, and I stayed home, but I know you must be right. I wanted to inform this gentleman ...'

'Tiny,' Tiny said, feeling foolish.

'... that we must not misunderstand what we are looking at. We are not under threat, out here, but the world we are walking through is not as peaceful as it seems ...'

Tiny, a dentist who thought that problems once diagnosed should be fixed, said, 'This world we're walking through seems peaceful enough to me!' And so it did to the others who were keeping their opinions to themselves because the birdman, they sensed, saw more than they did, and must know what he was talking about since he wasn't rebuked by Bill. Suddenly deCoursey took another tack. 'The trees don't live on the same time scale as we do. We, if we are lucky, live to three score and ten. The Bible tells us so. These trees, the ones we are looking at, will live two hundred years, maybe three hundred, maybe five, or even more. They can't talk, but they're aware of each other, as are the birds that nest in them. They all live by patterns we find hard to see, but the patterns can be discerned if we are quiet, and detach ourselves from our humanity to listen to what we otherwise wouldn't hear.' He looked sternly at Tiny, the only man in the group as tall as he was. 'We can only understand if we get beyond our limits.'

Briagolong

Jan Burke saw Billy Dibbs' horse, and a pack horse, outside the butchers. She had a meat order, so she went in, greeting the Skyline man with, 'Supplies, Billy?' He agreed. 'Gettin a side o'lamb and a heap o'pork ribs. Ernie's had'em in the freezer.'

'Won't stay frozen very long.'

'Tiger'll cook'em soon's he's got'em cut up. We're out on the Moroka at present. Stay there for a coupla days. The blokes go for a walk, come back for a feed. Quite handy.'

She knew why she'd come in. 'How's deCoursey getting along with the tourists?'

'Can't understand him. Funny thing is, he makes'em curious. Whatever he tells'em, they talk about it.'

'Hasn't done any flying yet?'

'Nuh. We took'em to the Castle, just before I come back here. Remarkable.'

'Remarkable, Billy?' What did he mean?

'They was crawlin all over it. Reckoned they could stay there for days.'

'What'd Bill say to that?'

'Said the Pinnacles're just as good. They'd be out there today.'

'You missed out?'

'I been there before. None of it's new to me.'

'What is?'

'What's what?'

'New to you?'

Billy groped for his hat. 'You're right. There's somethin, dunno what it is.'

'Something new?'

'Yeah. They're city blokes, got plenty o'money, doin well. They look up to Bill. He's just Bill, I've known him for years, but they hang on every word he says. An' they listen to deCoursey, even though they don't understand him.' Jan saw that he was respectful, somewhere inside his scorn. 'Tiger giving you plenty to eat?'

'He's doing a good job. But it'll be good to get back to the pub, Missus Burke. Nobody round here in your class when it comes to tucker.'

She nodded. 'I'll feed them up before they get on the train. But it'll be all over by then. Back to the city for the pilgrims.'

She'd used the word deliberately, and it had its effect. 'Pilgrims! They laugh about it, but they're serious too. I dunno what else to say.'

Jan analysed all this, back at the hotel. Her husband was in the bar with two men sipping beer. He flattered himself that this was work. Jan went to the kitchen. She had a sixteen year old called Denise to help her, but Denise wasn't in yet. Jan started cutting onions to go with the beef she'd put in a stew. A part of her mind hovered over the hills.

Pilgrims: where were they going? Where was she going? Where had she come from? She thought of deCourcey's elderly mother, and his sister, living on his farm, coming only occasionally into town. How could you be reliant on him? But they were, and she was too, in the same strange way as the men from Melbourne, over whom he held some advantage, well-to-do though they were. People said he lived in the clouds, meaning that he couldn't see, but she knew he did see things, but they sounded silly when he spoke of them because he could only use the words, the language and ideas of those around him, and these were lacking.

This, she saw, meant that those around him were lacking, and that included her. Suddenly she realised that Tommy, her husband, was at the door. 'Bucket and mop, Janny, where are they?'

'What do you want them for?'

'Stupid fuckin Griffio had a skinful last night, said he wanted a hair of the dog. I was stupid enough to give him one. Well he's brought it all up on the way to the dunny. Oh, there they are.' He'd spotted the mop and the bucket couldn't be far away.

'You want me to do it?'

'Nuh. You're busy. My fault anyway, I shouldna given him what he wanted. Fuckin fool, that's what I was.'

He was gone. Jan started crying, over the onions presumably, or that's what she would have said if anybody had walked in, and asked.

deCourcey

deCourcey had few memories of his schooling, but waking up in the mountains with pilgrims around him made him feel like a teacher. They were so noisy and had so little idea of what they should be doing. It was true they were helpful about the camp, happy to fetch firewood or chop up vegetables, but they hardly noticed the way of the mountains in the morning, or the way they took on darkness as if somewhere in the middle of the day they had secretly married themselves to night. A mountain range might run for twenty miles, more, yet somehow be conscious of itself from end to end. He remembered what Bill had told him of amputees who felt pain in their feet when the feet were no

longer there. A nervous band, something like wiring, had been set up so one end of a leg knew what was happening at the other, and it still knew, or thought it knew, even after the other end had been detached. The mountains had been formed in a time of upheaval; the surface of the earth was no longer turbulent, but the connections of knowledge were surely still there, sending messages, sending consciousness here and there, even if there was no central mind to manage the system.

A central mind: was there one, or not? It seemed to deCoursey that consciousness was flitting everywhere – in birds, in worms, in leaves seized by grasping winds. Clouds seemed to know things; they clustered about the Castle, making the surface of the molten sun a red the colour of blood, then they renounced this mood, drawing back quietly, causing the sun to change. The winds let everything be still, the winds gave everything a lashing. Everything was wet, even drenched; everything was dry. Dust hung in the air. Romance floated through the sky like a story in the minds of people simple enough to believe. deCoursey wondered what he believed. Was anything true for more than a few minutes at a time? He found himself thinking of Janny Burke, back at the hotel where Bill liked to drink. He knew she resented him, but was intrigued as well. The pilgrims were the same. They said that being in the mountains was a great experience, but when he showed them what it meant for him, they were impatient. They flared up in anger or resentment which they only managed to control if Bill was there to quieten them. They all had settled views on how the world worked and that was the last thing a man could have, in his opinion. What about women? He knew he didn't know. That was why the tension he felt with Janny Burke was fascinating to him. He wished he'd married her, decades ago, before she coarsened, had her children, and let Tommy affect her ways.

Somewhere in her, somewhere out of sight of any definition, or any dogma she adopted to keep her priestly guardians happy, she was as challenging as he was, and they both knew it. He knew she thought of him as often as he thought of her. He knew what it meant to be Catholic because two forms of it had combined to form him, and he'd determined, very young, that he'd be held captive by neither.

Yet getting free wasn't easy. You could reject as much as you liked, but it was still rejection you were caught in. Pushing a horse wasn't like

pushing a cow. Being swallowed by a whale wasn't the same as being swallowed by a tiger. He laughed. He looked at the trees around their camp, the smoke wisping from the remains of last night's fire, the Melbourne men clambering into their clothes, doing up their boots, and making unseemly noises as they brushed their teeth by the river, and it seemed to him that he was surrounded by ignorance. Well-meaning ignorance, of course, a happy, humorous ignorance, but an absence of enlightenment, yes, yes, yes! The pilgrims talked too much. They asked too many questions. They couldn't let their minds float free. It was all so new to them that they couldn't ready their minds to explore what they barely saw. Shadows of the clouds rippled over their little plains and they couldn't see how it might connect them with the sky. They were heavy, earthbound, fat, most of them, and they had little ambition to be free of themselves, so that everything – well, almost everything – they said anchored them to where they were.

Poor things. They wanted to learn. They hung on Bill's every word. They asked Tiger about cooking in the bush. They asked Billy Dibbs about finding his way to Briagolong on his own – they thought this remarkable! – and then back to their camp again ... they asked questions all the time as if the answers weren't obviously about them. He realised that they were trying to apprehend his mountain world so that they could take it home with them, and explain it to their families. It was as if a language that made the most perfect sense had to be translated for the benefit of people who couldn't understand it in the original.

I'm not despairing, deCoursey told himself, but I'm a man alone. They've come out here for a lesser version of what it is, not the real thing.

Bill

Bill was far from simple but he'd created a simple framework to operate inside. He'd built his life on this position – don't say anything you can't live by. Don't let yourself be caught out. Put yourself in the middle of what's happening and follow it without voicing its standards, or values. Exist without contradictions and move when you have to, that is, when

everyone else is moving. If you can't move with the times, find a safe spot. The Skyline Tours was a good example. Most of the men who came on tour had a car to run themselves around. They were doing well enough to stay ahead of their time, but they didn't know the bush and they knew they didn't know. So, in the guise of being fresh, fashionable and new, Bill gave them something from another age, the years of his growing up. He'd roamed the lowland bush, the farming areas, then he'd gone into the mountains. He'd found grassy spots and bought a few cattle. He'd taken them into the mountains and he'd sensed that he had to make them feel at home. His tent, his fires, and his singing – yes, he sang early in the morning and late at night – told them they had a home. He went down to Briagalong to drink when he felt lonely but never stayed long, before finding his way back to the animals he knew well. He spoke to them, and they knew it. He sensed their moods as he walked among them. He said goodbye to them when he took them to be sold. He slept with women who frequented the hotels of Sale, the big town further on than Briagalong, expecting that if he was quiet enough, not too much of what he did would filter back. He never spoke about these things. He bought more cattle and took them into the bush, repeating his cycle, keeping himself free by the quirky path of committing himself to a quiet life. Yet he was known for his bushmanship and when others needed him, he worked for them, briefly, before resuming his modest pattern. He knew the mountains of Gippsland back to front before he went to war, and when he came back it was simply a matter of finding a new way to make himself one with them.

The tours were the answer. Within a day or two of Bill's thinking of them, deCoursey came to him, asking if he could play a part, and Bill said, 'Of course, mate. What would you like to do?' Bill knew his limits, knew also that the birdman liked to reach into spaces where humans had never belonged. Even the black people, as far as Bill could tell, had only found pathways through the forests, preferring, for the most part, to stay on the lowlands, where there was game, fish, birds, fire, grass ... plenty. There were wallabies in the mountains but the black people didn't need to chase them because the wallabies were more easily caught by the lakes and river flats where the white farmers had made their homes. Bill was genuinely curious to know what deCoursey found on his mental journeys and he encouraged him to provoke, to

nettle, the pilgrims, not that words were needed to do this. Bill used quiet, or showed amusement around the corners of his eyes, by way of encouragement. Occasionally he prodded the birdman to go further by asking a question or two, then not commenting on the answer he got back.

deCoursey knew that Bill, unlike most Briagolong people, thought his thoughts were no sillier than anybody else's, and that this was a compliment of sorts. Bill never told anybody they were clever, or even right. He nodded, accepted, politely deferred. He was not afraid of mystery, nor did he have any great need of definition. If he could find grass for his cattle, a good place to camp, and a way to get back to town when he needed to, he was content. He was, we might say, in this world without needing to own it. The Skyline Tours weren't meant to make him rich but he ran them generously and expected his pilgrims to pay. They did so freely. Bill understood the mystique of the mountains for these city-based people. He knew they had money, so he charged a good fee, made everything easy, told them stories everywhere they went, never let anyone go hungry, and made sure they got each other's names and addresses when they left so that even back in Melbourne they could remain the special coterie that Bill had made them when he had them in his hands.

For the rest, he built Briagolong a Returned Servicemen's club, made sure there was always a manager to keep the place both open and central, and thereafter he went about his business, buying and selling cattle, exploring, listening to men who thought there might be gold in the hills, guiding them occasionally, keeping the mountains alive, mostly, unforgotten in the minds of lowlanders who had respect for his knowledge. Bill made the fringe somehow central, the unexplored the to-be-explored, the past (the war) the present, and the future something you faced one day at a time. If the mountains were eternal, something of their quality settled on his shoulders. If Bill said something could be done, people felt it could. If he said something would be done, they knew he would do it, or do it with a party that he trusted. The pilgrims accepted this when they encountered Tiger Wood, Billy Dibbs, and deCoursey. Something of Bill, rubbing off on these men, made them reliable. Men followed them into the mountains, trusting them, because they enjoyed the trust of Bill.

The pilgrims

We've already met George McGeorge and Tiny Barton. A Skyline Tour took up to thirty men, and each year there were new walkers when family arrangements caused others to drop out. Weeks in advance of the party leaving the Burkes' hotel in Briagolong, Bill would mail the Melbourne men his roughly drawn map of where they would go, making sure that there was one stretch of the tour that could be regarded by the pilgrims – that word! – as their destination. Then Bill had to plan a route home different from the way out to the Pinnacles, the Crosscut Saw - whatever was that year's end point. 'There isn't really any destination at all,' Bill would tell Jan or Tommy Burke, 'we're just having a walk. Going out for a look then coming home again. But that's how they want to see it so that's how I have to show it to 'em.' It seemed obvious to him, and Tommy Burke asked no questions, but Jan, Bill could see, was in some way wanting to argue. Surely the pilgrims would feel let down once they turned their back on the Crosscut Saw and headed for home? 'Not really,' Bill said, 'so long as we show 'em a few other things on the way back. They start to get tired, of course, but then I remind 'em of how good it's going to be when they get back here! They can have a bath and a meal that's been cooked in a kitchen. When we talk by the fire I ask 'em what they're gonna tell their families when they get home, and that usually gets 'em going. What *are* they gonna tell their families? Some of 'em want to bring their missus along but I tell 'em it's a man's trip ...'

This never failed to annoy Jan Burke, causing her husband to get angry because she wouldn't stick to the clear line separating men from what women had to do. This line was sacred to Tommy Burke, to Bill, to most men of the period. It suited them for the line to be where it was. Jan Burke wanted to rebel but didn't know how to stage the coup she desired. She had a feeling she'd missed her chance, though when, exactly, it had passed her by, she couldn't have said. Her husband depended on her because she was the brains of the family. She, he knew, would have everything at the hotel organised for the tourists. Her genial acceptance of them reconciled the locals, her hotel's drinkers, to something they didn't particularly welcome, though it brought

money into the town, always a good thing, and they couldn't really object when the whole thing was Bill's idea and nobody had any wish to get offside with Bill. She also carried the burden of motherhood, with a son and daughter living away from home but still connected, the son working in a hotel in Sale, learning his father's business so he could come back and take over one of these days, and her daughter acting as receptionist for a doctor in Sale, nursing the doctor, it seemed to Jan, who was cynical about an arrangement whereby her daughter carried the emotional load of a practice while the doctor pocketed the rewards. The world was oddly divided, in that rewards and reputations didn't directly relate to the burdens carried. If men did something it was skilled, if women did it, it was a domestic duty. Jan couldn't see how this apple cart could be upset.

But the pilgrims. The senior member of the group was Martin Casey. Anything that had to be circulated went first to Martin. He thought of Bill as his right-hand man, though Bill thought of Martin in the same way. He was the one who listened most closely to deCoursey, because he wondered that anyone could let go of so much normality in favour of whatever spirituality he had acquired. As city-end organiser of the tours, as he described himself, he was as sceptical as anybody of the birdman, an opinion he revised as the second of the tour parties was pitching camp a short distance from the Crosscut Saw, a place where the Great Dividing Range narrowed to a few paces, with a steep decline on the inland side and a precipitous drop on the other. Bill had gathered the party together the night before to explain their options. 'It's quite a safe walk. I wouldn't be letting you go out there if I thought you was going to be in any danger. But not everyone's good with heights, so if you're at all nervous, stay well back and watch the ones who feel like doing it. Keep the fire going and give us a cuppa tea when we come back.' Martin, listening to Bill, had his eyes on deCoursey, in whom he could feel a strange exhilaration rising. What *was* the man like? What made him what he was? Martin found himself divided by the choice he'd have to make. Climb out there on that narrow, rocky track, or stay back and watch? He decided he'd make his decision in the morning. He sensed, also, from the chatter about him, that he was not alone in his indecision. The Crosscut Saw was frightening; it was also challenging. That fall! If you took a tumble you'd surely be dead

when they got you out, if they could; even collecting someone from the bottom would be hard. He couldn't see that you could get a horse down there. He wondered if Bill and deCoursey had any plans to deal with that problem; or didn't they think it would arise.

He spotted deCoursey and moved for a chat. 'What are you doing tomorrow? Going out there, or staying here?'

deCoursey indicated that he'd be on the Crosscut Saw.

Displaying, had he known it, his own uncertainty, meaning fear, Martin asked, 'You going to lead the way? Show us how it's done?'

'Bill will lead. Pilgrims in the middle. I will bring up the rear.'

Martin thought he had his man cornered: 'You going to ride that horse of yours?'

It was a silly question. deCoursey told him, 'I will lead him. It is my responsibility. He has walked out there before, without minding.'

'Will you put blinkers on him so he can't look down?'

'If I put blinkers on him, he will turn his head. Besides, I don't want to stop him knowing where he is.'

It felt like a policy statement. Martin wondered what the policy was behind it, though. 'It's the knowledge that makes it frightening, isn't it. If there was a cloud and we walked along there without being able to see where we were, we wouldn't be frightened at all.' He added, 'That's the way I see it.'

deCoursey murmured, 'Knowledge. Being conscious of being men. It's our burden, and we have to carry it. If we can't carry it, we shouldn't come to a place like this.'

'So you think it's a challenge?'

deCoursey may have been mad, Martin thought, but he wasn't afraid. The birdman said, 'I live for moments like this. You will have heard that they call me the birdman. Unfortunately I am too heavy. Heavier than air, I think is the term. But when I walk along that ridge, with a fall on one side of me, a drop on the other, and the skies above, I am most alive. Will you walk in front of me tomorrow?'

Martin had thought that he was doing the prying, the investigation, and now he'd been singled out for question himself. 'I'll see how I feel in the morning.'

deCoursey moved away. He knew he'd pressed this Martin man more than Bill would have liked, and Martin was the leader of the

Skyline men. He had 'face' to be protected. If he didn't do the walk in the morning he would have to restore his authority in some other way. deCoursey began to gather branches and leaves to build their fire to the point where Bill chided him: 'Not too big a fire, mate. We've got to put it out in the morning. Can't leave it burning when we head off.' This meant the fire had to be allowed to subside. Martin, George McGeorge, Tiny Barton and the rest of them sensed that they had passed a moral peak of some sort, not readily visible, but ominously there, like the narrow dividing ridge they were conscious of even though they couldn't see it any more. Darkness had fallen. A day had ended. They'd have to make their peace with themselves in the morning.

Flexing his wings

Breakfast was hearty, then Bill told the pilgrims he was ready to cross the Saw. 'If you don't like the look of it,' he reminded them, 'don't do it. We're out here to enjoy ourselves, not to get stressed about something that looks dangerous. Have a look around instead.' Half the party elected to follow him, half to stay at the camp. deCoursey, with his horse, was last to venture onto the feature. Martin, though well back among the trees, was watching. deCoursey's excitement was visible, even from a distance, in the way he fondled his horse, which he led confidently to the spot where the dividing range narrowed, almost to nothing. Bill was halfway across, with his pilgrims strung out behind him, when deCoursey took the first step.

Martin watched, feeling himself linked to the birdman, as if he embodied, carried, something fearful. Martin, watching deCoursey amble out, his horse a pace or two behind, the two of them connected by a pair of reins, loosely held, felt a little of his soul detach itself and fly towards the birdman, who chose that moment to do an unusual thing. deCoursey stepped onto a large, horizontal rock, embedded in the range, stretched his arms to the surrounding horizons, his fingers fluttering as if gauging the breezes affecting the flight he felt inclined to take, then bent his knees so that the bulk of his body lowered itself towards the rock. For a few seconds he was on his haunches, crouched, those arms quivering, fingers twitching still, before he raised himself,

glanced at his horse and gave its reins a gentle tug.

deCoursey and horse were moving on; Martin felt his detachment, that part of his soul that had separated for a moment, returning to him, yet, surprising as this was for an urban man unused to such things, he felt something flooding in to him that he'd not felt before. It was an access of knowledge, but where had it come from, and knowledge of what? He felt confused. Into his mind came a picture of his wife and children, seated beside their fire at night, charming, conventional, apparently able to deal with anything normal, and he knew he wouldn't be able to explain his state in that moment. He looked again at the Crosscut Saw. Bill was well advanced in his crossing, the pilgrims behind him didn't seem to be in any fear, and deCoursey's horse looked distinctly comfortable, yes, comfortable, out there. 'I should have gone with them,' Martin thought, knowing as the idea passed through his mind that he had in fact gained more, learned more, by watching from where he stood.

He went back to the camp site. Tiger and Billy Dibbs were tending the fire. Noticing Martin's eyes looking around, searching for something, Tiger said, 'We'll make tea in a minute. Soon's they get back, we'll put it on.' Martin nodded, because that was what he was expected to do, but he knew he had something to deal with. He was envious of the men out on the skinny ridge. Was he frightened? Not really; he could look into the precipitous drop on the eastern side of the Saw without much more apprehension than he'd felt half a dozen times in the preceding days – it was awe-inspiring rather than frightening – but something had entered his soul – something had come back with his soul and entered him when it re-entered him – and it had stirred him up, churned his thinking in some way he wasn't ready to deal with. He wanted his peace of mind, his conventionality, back again, though he knew that what had happened had enlarged him, enriched him. He disliked having his thoughts in a muddle, he hadn't made the fortune that had allowed him to make this trip – this *pilgrimage* – to get himself reconsidered in a way that made him feel his inadequacy, but the fact of it was that he'd been made to feel stupid, empty, by what had happened.

What had happened? He couldn't have peace of mind until he could answer that question, and he couldn't feel any answer forming.

He looked out. Bill was at the far side by now, waiting for his pilgrims, and deCourcey, not to mention the horse, to finish the crossing before they made the return journey, the sky was as distant as ever, the humans were tiny, but heroic too, not in the sense of having countered an enemy, or having been 'brave', because they were plainly quite un-scared, but heroic in the sense that they had, by virtue of a simple undertaking, increased their moral stature. They had followed their impulse and he had followed his, and he felt sure, as, watching, he saw Bill take the arms of a couple of walkers in that friendly, ever-accommodating way he had, that his pathway through the experience that had settled on them from a cloudless sky, was the one that was most difficult to accept. To deal with. He'd done nothing that morning but stand aside, stand back and watch, and the most painful lesson had been reserved for him.

How could he tell his wife and children that?

The race

They left the Crosscut Saw the next morning, and Bill led his party through some stands of mountain ash. 'Y'll notice that they grow on the southern side of the range,' he pointed out. 'More water on this side, deeper soil. Where it's drier, and the soil's not so deep, it takes a different sort of tree to survive.' His party was impressed. Martin Casey spoke for them. 'So we're actually travelling through a series of micro-climates?' Bill nodded at this, though they weren't the words he'd use. 'Whatever you see, it's telling you something. The bush is pretty good at expressing itself. But you have to tune in to see what it's saying. That right, deCourcey?' He turned to look at the tall man, who knew that in some way Bill was giving him a chance to show the travellers what he knew. He took his long hands out of his pockets. 'Everything lives in its own way. Everything has to find its place.' Thus far, the travellers understood him, but he went on. 'It's ourselves that present the problem. We can live anywhere, but we don't know where we belong, so we get confused. Lost.' That was a word Bill didn't like when they were in places unfamiliar to the walkers. He looked at them. They were flat after what they'd seen the day before. Walking on the Crosscut Saw

had been a peak, they'd taken any number of photos of themselves in the photogenic place, and they were in the shadow of yesterday's experience. 'There's a big open plain about half a mile ahead,' Bill said loudly, wanting to cheer them up. 'We're gonna have a race! deCoursey, you'll step out a hundred yards, and start'em off. I'll be the judge.' A fat man called Edwin Mickle answered him. 'What's the prize?'

Bill hadn't thought that far ahead. 'Ooh, whaddaya reckon? No dish washing till we get back to the hotel?' Mickle had a better answer, or one that he preferred. 'The four who come last have to carry their packs for a day. The one who wins gets to ride. That all right with you, deCoursey?' The birdman looked startled. He hadn't been expecting this. 'You want to ride the horse if you win?'

'That's the idea!' Mickle ignored the look on the birdman's face, which expressed his disfavour all too clearly, and appealed to the men around him. 'It's only for a day! The winner gets a prize. It's paid for by the losers.' The travellers needed something to shake them out of the mood they were in. They looked at each other, weighing up their chances, sure, at least, that Mickle wouldn't win because he was the tubbiest by far. They agreed, some with enthusiasm, most because they saw nothing to do but agree. Bill read the mood. 'Up here a bit. Follow me. Only a hundred yards, nobody's gonna have a heart attack. It'd be too far to carry you if we did. This way, boys!'

They reached the open plain. One or two of the travellers were alarmed. 'This is huge!' Bill soothed them by saying, 'deCoursey'll measure the track. One hundred yards, mate, offya go!' To the tourists he said, 'Count his paces ifya like, make sure there's no cheating!' They counted, to themselves at first, then aloud: 'Sixty-four, sixty-five, sixty-six ...' By the time they reached the nineties they were almost hysterical, and very noisy. The plain had heard no such chant before. deCoursey could hear them, and he was chanting too, loudly. As he reached 'One hundred!' he turned and waved. Bill was quick. 'Down there's the starting line. Offya go and line up for the starter. We haven't got a pistol, a clap of the hands will hafta do. No cheating now, make it a fair run. First man home gets to ride for a day. Last four place-getters carry their bags, one day only. The finishing line's right here, I'm the judge, and no complaints will be listened to. Away ya go, now, and good luck!'

The pilgrims assessed each other. One thing they felt sure of was that the winner would be one of the more athletic men, of whom there were several – Herb Ellison, Sid Thorpe, or Denzil Davis. Someone wanted to know if there was to be ‘a book’ on the race and Carl Taylor, an accountant with a prominent Bourke Street store, said he’d take their bets. ‘No cash needed,’ Carl said. ‘It’ll be an honour system. You say your bet and I’ll repeat it in the hearing of everybody, so there’ll be no way to slide out!’ They wanted him to lay odds on them so they knew how much they stood to win or lose. A couple wanted to back themselves to win. Most put their money on Herb, Sid or Denzil. Edwin Mickle was favoured to be in the last four – ‘the quartet of losers’, Carl called them, and nobody imagined he could win. This taking of chances was so enthralling that Bill had to call to them to get themselves to the starting line. ‘Ya so busy with who’s going to win that y’ll never start! Shake a leg! deCourcey’s waitin for ya down there!’

He was. The spirit man thought the party was running in the other direction. When finally the runners got to him, he told them, as he lined them up, ‘You think you’re running to the finish line, but you’re actually running away from the starting line.’ This made no sense at all, it was another of those cryptic ideas they expected from him by now. Bill roared down the track, ‘Give me a signal when you’re ready, deCourcey. And Billy, there’s no cheating allowed. Anybody who trips anybody else gets disqualified, you’re the steward for this race!’ Billy smirked. One or two of the pilgrims had asked if he was going to run, but he had no intention of making a fool of himself. He looked at them with something like contempt. These men could buy and sell him, they had quids where he had only pence, they were educated and he could barely read a letter when he got one, which was rare enough, and here they were, chattering among themselves as if life was a perpetual picnic. Fuckin’ Bill, how did he get them to do it?

deCourcey got the pilgrims into line with his high-pitched, sing-song chatter, waved to Bill, a hundred yards away, then clapped his hands. Edwin Mickle, least likely of the runners, had placed himself on the outside, starting on ground a little higher than the rest. He ran across the field at a speed they would never have thought him capable of, and disconcerted them by getting in their way. Several of

the runners bumped into each other. One or two fell over and had to pick themselves up, ensuring that they, at least, would be in the last four to reach the line. Sid Thorpe and Denzil Davis made a professional-looking effort to catch the man who'd mucked up their run but he was much quicker than they'd given him credit for, and crossed the line in front of Bill a yard and a half clear of those who looked more athletic. Only Carl Taylor was pleased with the result. 'Nobody backed you Eddie. Clean sweep for the books! Now who came last?' He turned to Bill, who ruled that the last four to cross the line were the three Peters – Gill, Stedman and Abbot - and George McGeorge. The Peters thought it funny that they were linked to George. 'Did you think a hawk was going to drop out of the sky and grab you, George?' He had the grace to smile. 'I had my eyes on the ground. It's not much of a track! Never been mown!' When deCoursey rejoined them, he pointed at Carl: 'This one is the happiest of all!' Bill was watching the excited men, puffing as they recovered from their run, as if he was judging horses. 'Don't sit down boys. Get up off the ground and walk about. Ya gotta get your breathing steady, that's the thing when you've done some work y're not used to.' Genially enough, he went among them, talking to soothe them, then turned his attention to Billy Dibbs. 'When're these blokes gettin a cup of tea, Billy? Find a spot over there on the edge of the plain and get a fire going. It's too early for lunch but we'll have a cuppa before we get going again. Takes a bit out ofya, this sprinting, when you're not used to it!'

Asking for release

The race – 'Just a bit of foolery', Bill called it – loosened the travellers. They put Melbourne behind them. They were curious about each other. They asked questions about the horses, birds they saw, and animals living in the bush. They wondered how they'd find their way to Briagolong if the bush men weren't there. They asked about the seasons. They could see that certain places were rain-shadow areas and they wondered why. How had the gold-seekers, the first men in the mountains, known where to dig? Where would you travel, and where would you camp, if you were moving stolen cattle across the divide?

How could you avoid being caught? Why were there no mills in the area when the trees were the tallest they'd seen?

They spoke of their wives, their children's schooling. They spoke of their ambitions, hopes, some of them realised, some not. Occasionally they gave voice to plans they'd long harboured in their minds, locked away. Bill observed, one night as they sat, or stood, around their fire, 'It's good to talk, but we'll have to forget some of the stuff we've told each other'; they accepted this as a decision made for them by someone who understood what they were going through better than they did themselves. They became aware of themselves taking notice of Billy Dibbs, whom they'd regarded as an underling good only for lighting fires or sweeping floors. It dawned on them that if the leaders of their party abandoned them they'd be dependent on Billy to get them home, and he'd do it. He knew the ways of the bush, and that meant a lot because there were rules to follow if you wanted to survive. Most of all, they'd learned a little about the value of silence; after Bill spoke of forgetting, nobody spoke, but all were thinking, and conscious of each other considering if there was anything to say. This silence was broken by Martin Casey addressing the flames: 'I'm beginning to understand the way my mind works. I've never stopped to think about it before.' He looked at their leader and asked a question simply by nominating him: 'Bill?'

Bill was ready. It was as if he knew that such a moment would come sooner or later. 'I'm in the bush a lot. People ask me if I'm not lonely out here. I tell'm of course I am. What else would you be, on your own? But it's good once you get used to it. Ya listen to the wind in the trees, y'hear the birds goin on about this'n that. Sometimes you'd swear you knew what the stars were saying. They're not really talking o'course, it's your own mind, but ya get to hear it, out here. I'm always pleased to get into town and get a few drinks into me but once I've sobered up I get back quick as I can. I don't suppose it's right for everybody but it suits me. It really does.'

They hadn't heard him say so much before. Thoughts were whirling in their minds. What would the birdman say? Would they be able to make sense of him this time? Edwin Mickle, the race-winner, took the step of asking. 'You're another bush man, deCoursey; is it the same for you, or different?'

The birdman glanced at the stars, then into the fire. They had a feeling that the words he spoke were addressed to the world around him rather than to anybody in particular. Edwin waited for a moment, then spoke again. 'Put your words into the flames. Say whatever you want as if we weren't here. I think that's the best way to handle a question without notice.' He saw at once that he'd reassured the tall figure. deCoursey was comfortable, with the dark behind him and the fire in front.

The man they were looking at said, 'If we don't ask questions of ourselves, and make judgements, we can be easy with ourselves. Once we know what sort of thing we are, we can no longer be comfortable. We can only look on ourselves with scorn. We are lords of creation but we turn everything we touch, not into gold but into trash. This is bad, and the more we know about ourselves the worse it gets. All we can do, then, is ask for release.' This caused a stir. Half a dozen of the pilgrims said things, questioning, disagreeing, finding what he said unacceptable, and so on, but deCoursey appeared to take in only the words of Edwin, who was closest: 'Release into what? If we get out of ourselves, where are we then?' to which the birdman answered, 'That I cannot say.'

In the pub

Jan took a cup of tea to her husband in the bar but he waved it away. He was already sipping a beer. Knowing better than to comment within earshot of drinkers, she left, but not without hearing someone asking, 'When're the Skyline people due back, Tommy? Is it today?'

It was the following day, and she expected them to stagger in and take their boots off, have showers and baths till there was no hot water left for the kitchen, to drink freely, to have forgotten which was their room, or tent, and above all to talk! Bill and the bush men would hardly say a word but the city men, so reserved, dignified and plain bloody superior when they arrived, would talk your ear off if you listened. She determined to keep out of the way. They had a way of expecting service, and they talked to you about places you knew very well as if they'd just discovered them. Common knowledge became new knowledge once it got within their grasp. Grasp! That was the

word. If I was a bird, Jan Burke thought, I'd keep right away. Listening to them would make you too heavy to fly. She moved to the doorway of her kitchen. Birds? Flying? She was in deCourcey's realm, he'd snuck into her mind without her realising! She wanted him out. He had a mad mother and a mad sister, everything they did was silly. She could tell a few tales ... She glared at the kitchen. Denise, her helper, wasn't due for twenty minutes. They'd be busy until the bus came for the pilgrims, the day after tomorrow. How had deCourcey crept into her mind? She despised him for not being married. He was afraid of life. She couldn't see how Bill, who knew how to manage himself, could be bothered with him. Bill appeared to enjoy the rubbish the man came out with. It struck Jan Burke that she wanted to tell the birdman where he was wrong and how he could fix himself, but she'd never bothered to pin it down so she could give him the withering burst he needed. So what was wrong with him? What did he need to do to fix himself up?

Something like a smile appeared on her face. She moved around the kitchen, opening drawers, laying out things she was going to need. She took peculiar delight in a long knife, very sharp: she'd put the fear of death into him if he walked in just then! She put it down, getting to grips with him in her mind. He wanted to be unlike other people, other men: women were unthinkable to his quaintly stated ambitions. He was so polite with her that she knew it was a mask. Hidden behind it was a man unlike all others, who didn't want to be seen. No wonder he wanted to fly! He wanted to be out of sight, unobservable, and then out of mind in every way but as an example ...

She thought hard. An example of what? Her thinking took a strange twist. She wanted to oppose him. To put herself in his way. To be an obstacle he couldn't get around. How to do this? By telling herself who she was, what she stood for. By tracing herself back to her earliest origins and grasping the cord of her life as she'd pulled herself forward, that was what she had to do! He wanted to fly like the birds, fly with the birds ... it was a way of escaping his humanity and that was why she felt insulted by him. You couldn't escape humanity when you were running a pub! You couldn't escape at all. There'd be thirty of them the following day, all wanting baths and showers, meals, places to rest after all their walking. They'd want bandages, liniment and things

she hadn't even thought of. They'd want to use the pub's phone to let their people in Melbourne know they were on the lowland again, ready to come home.

They had homes to go to. She not only had a home, she *was* the town's home because everybody who had a drink came to her husband to be served. Every drink had to be poured into a glass and the glass washed when the drinker went away. Table cloths had to be washed, starched and ironed. Sheets had to be washed, rooms swept out. All the extra tents they'd borrowed for the pilgrims had to be taken down, folded and returned. Stuff that got left behind would have to be picked up and mailed to the co-ordinating man in the city, Martin Casey ...

She thought of Martin, a man who couldn't have survived in Briagolong. Not many of them could. They were a useless bunch, for all their money. She thought of herself as a pillar, something that sustained, and was furious with the birdman for looking down on her, as she believed he did. He wanted to fly? Well, fuck him! He thought he was spiritual because of his difference? Fuck him again. She was as ordinary as a woman could be and she was proud of it. What she wanted, she saw at last, gathering a pile of onions and deciding that they would be Denise's first job when she arrived ... what she wanted was to do something as spiritual as anything deCoursey had ever done and make him give her the credit she deserved for doing whatever it was ...

But what was it? What music could she find that took her in, expressed her, and would make the birdman confess that she, Jan Burke of the Briagolong Hotel, was the equal of any man in any dimension? When she knew how to bring about that result she'd have succeeded in the eyes of every man, woman and child that mattered. 'I've gone in search of something,' she told herself, 'and I don't know what it is.'

The lowland

The tourists were a little later than expected. Some were having trouble with their feet. Bill set a slow pace, and sent deCoursey on ahead with the pack horses to tell Jan and Tommy Burke it would

be mid-afternoon before they reached the hotel. They'd rest a little way north of the town before they tackled the final stretch. Jan wasn't impressed. 'You're not changing the time of the bus, I hope? They're still catching the morning train in Sale?' deCourcey hadn't thought about that. That was for Bill to decide. Jan erupted. 'You get back and tell him I had lunch ready for his party. They'll be getting it heated up for dinner! I'm not wasting it. If he can't stick to his arrangements that's too bad!' It didn't occur to her that deCourcey wouldn't be going back to Bill. He took the travellers' packs from his horses and stacked them on the pub verandah, then he let the pack horses loose in a paddock behind Bill's cottage, and rode his own horse home.

This was a bark-roofed construction on a property more uncleared bush than farm, and it was also to the north of town, across a line of hills from where the travellers were resting. It was where his life sprang from and it contained his problems. There were fruit trees in rows, and a huge vegetable garden. His mother and his sister tended to these, indeed they gave their lives to them. It was uncommon for Mrs O'Donovan to move off the property and visits by her daughter Maeve to the township were rare. Neither was vegetarian but they insisted to their son and brother that any meat they ate had to come from the butcher. They found killing on the property repugnant. deCourcey accepted this willingly. He would have said he had to eat but he didn't want to kill. This of course was a problematic position because it left the dirty deed to be done by someone else. Indeed the lives of Louise and Maeve O'Donovan had been crippled by the death of husband and father Guy; deCourcey, on a rare and dutiful visit to Melbourne had found them living in confusion and squalor, unable to maintain the household after his father's death: he had insisted that they join him on his farm in the bush, and they had come, obediently but with little understanding of what it was they were doing. It was deCourcey who, alone, had made the trips into Sale, or to neighbouring farms, to get the trees his womenfolk were to plant, and seeds for the vegetables. The soil on his river flat was fertile but the women brought to it a limitation, born of desperation: they could do almost nothing else. If deCourcey played the violin, the melodies and memories came from far away. Louise O'Donovan's whole life was a state of exile, and this had transferred itself to Maeve as an absence,

an inability to imagine society as anything but a threatening unknown. They were dependent on deCoursey in a way he'd never learned to manage. They were a burden, yet their problems and inabilities were the basis of his thought. When he got home after the Skyline Tour he told them they must 'put the garden on the table', as he used to say; he'd return to town the day after and get some of Tiger Rowe's leftovers – 'what he and Bill and Billy don't want, of course': he was putting himself last, as was his custom. Yet he was happy to be home. It might be impossible, but it was also invisible, that's to say, out of sight. The kitchen was full of jars of preserved fruit, and Maeve's bread was filling. He could drink tea by the fire with his boots off, aware of his animals bedded down by the creek, and his horse in its tiny stable nuzzling chaff. He had chooks but no dog, no pets: they were a responsibility he didn't care to accept. Farm animals were burden enough, and philosophical problem too. When he sold cattle, he knew that he was accepting what was known in the old-fashioned way as blood-money. Their death was on his hands though it was the butcher who cut their throats and carved them up for sale. His bark-roofed dwelling was, then, connected to the slaughterhouses of the world, and it released him, when asked by Bill and the pilgrims, to reach out into the mountains north of him, to Bennison's Plain, Trapyard Hill, the Crosscut Saw – how he loved that place! – Mount Wellington and the rest. There were places not so far away where his soul could soar, ever within reach, available, where his humanity with all its beastliness could be forgotten. He was lucky in Bill's need for him as a guide, a workman and protector, for these men from Melbourne. He decided that when, in three months time, the pilgrims had their annual reunion, he'd go with Bill to meet them on *their* home ground, to smile on the photos in the albums given out, and he'd accept his copy for himself, and not be dependent on Bill to collect it and bring it home.

No, he should go and see what they were like, those pilgrims, when they'd turned their back on the high hills and resumed their lives in the city.

Return to Melbourne

The pilgrims were quiet on the train. At the start of their journey they could see *their* mountains through the windows to the north. Soon, the hills were different, and unfamiliar. These new hills must have stories too but they didn't have the aura of the places they'd been in. They knew they had to go home but they didn't know well enough what they were leaving. Someone asked Martin Casey, 'When are you writing to Bill to organise next year's trip?' Martin felt a need to appear organised. 'First, we've got to get the photos printed, then we get the printing done and make the albums, then we book the hotel, and send out invitations. I'll ask Bill and his mates to come down if they can. Bill will come, I'm sure, and I'll write to him about dates for the next trip, and places we might go. He can make an announcement at the dinner, after we've given everyone their copy of the album, of course, so they're really keen to hear when they can get back.' He smiled, an inward state that he hadn't expected to be available until the night he was describing, when they'd all study pictures bringing to life again the things they'd been doing.

And so it was, deflated, that they sat on their train and got off in their home city. So it was that they resumed their family lives, their work and responsibilities, and the attitudes, having nothing to do with mountains, that had brought them the prosperity that allowed them to get away, have a look at the big wide world, and all the other clichés they employed to deal with the fact that their daily lives were limited. Pilgrims no more!

Or was this untrue? Had something changed inside them as a result of being taken into the hills and far away? How would they know? What would it take to tell them what they didn't know?

Martin Casey had a moment of insight the very next day, after getting off the train that brought him in from his suburb. He came out of Flinders Street station and found himself looking at the Anglican cathedral, a building he hadn't entered in years. If questioned, he would have said he was a Christian, but he thought little about it. Business was what should rule his city, indeed the whole world, if it was carried on with some guidance from principle. Principle equated with decency in his mind rather than with propriety: the distinction

mattered. Decency involved respect for people about you, while propriety was bounded by rules, laid down for the most part by people who wanted to manage your life instead of letting you do it yourself, people he hated for their lack of trust. A society that was good, even virtuous (a suspect word) trusted its people to do the right thing and most people, if so trusted, did what was right. Law should confine itself to the irregularities that cropped up occasionally.

It was the spires of the cathedral that affected him. They pointed up. They reminded the public of heaven, and where it was placed in relation to earth: earth was where humans belonged, in their inferiority. The mountains he'd been in came to his mind and he faltered. Heaven and earth? If there was such a place as heaven, and he really had no idea, then it needed to be on earth, because that was where we had to live, and a heaven that was out of reach, or was only a notion produced to satisfy the agonising mind, was little use. What was the good of God if he sat, or floated, or whatever else he did, in heaven all day? What did he do by night? Suddenly the idea of an organised religion was offensive to Martin, and he ran his hand across his brow. What had brought this about?

He knew, of course. The Crosscut Saw had changed his ideas by setting up a challenge. At least he'd had the strength, and the gumption, to consider it. It was a test, and you passed the test, not by crossing, though you could do that if you wanted to, or found it exhilarating to move cautiously along it, clinging to rocks when you had the chance, but by seeing that it was a test, even if all you did was to consider the reverberations it set up in the mind. He thought of the remarkable feature, and the spires before him seemed suddenly very orthodox, tight, restricted ... words tumbled through his mind, a stream of them, but what was fixed, and consistent in his thinking, he knew, was that nature was more challenging than anything that man built, because a building was an embodiment of an idea, that's to say it was replete with human limitations, and mountains were the opposite. They implied, by their very presence, that man didn't matter much, and could disappear, or be put by some later-coming powers into something like the zoos where men caged things they found too challenging to let run free.

Knowing he'd been made unsteady, Martin walked past the cathedral to the emporium – the words people used! – where he was

a senior manager. He greeted the people in his office warmly, told them a little about his holiday, as they called it – he certainly didn't mention the word pilgrim – then called for reports on what had happened while he'd been away. He checked accounts, and read a file of correspondence, putting aside those that had been left for him to answer. These he read again, then dictated replies, which meant that Miss Greene, a capable fifty-year old, came into his office and briefed him, in her subtle way, while he played the part of a manager resuming his duties. It occurred to him that Miss Greene was both a woman of extraordinary grasp and a patient secretary accepting of her lot. How did they do it, these women who'd never had the opportunities that he'd seized? How did they put up with it? After dictating eight or nine of the twenty-odd letters he'd have to deal with, he told Miss Greene, 'My concentration isn't up to scratch this morning, I'm afraid.'

Miss Greene was tactful. 'It's your first morning back after a break. You're doing fine, Mr Casey.'

He said, 'Thank you Miss Greene, you're very supportive, but I want to tell you something that happened while I was away.' She looked at him in a thoughtful, receptive way, so he told her about deCoursey hopping onto a rock, settling on his haunches, and stretching his arms wide, fingers quivering ... he told her of the strangeness, the unexpectedness of the man, and the effect it had had on Martin, retail executive, as he watched.

'Did you think he was going to jump, Mr Casey? Was that what he wanted to do?'

'Something like that,' Martin said. 'He was exploring an idea in his mind and I had no idea what his idea was, because if he'd jumped he'd have killed himself – the drop was considerable ...' He sat in silence while Miss Greene, notes in hand, waited for him to come back from wherever his thoughts had taken him, then he said, 'If he'd jumped, he'd have killed himself, as I was saying, so it wasn't a failed jump that I was looking at, it was a fantastic exploration that was happening in his mind ...'

'Did this man talk to your party, Mr Casey?'

'Several times and I don't think we understood him.'

'What about the other guides, Mr Casey, do you think they understood this man you're telling me about?'

‘I don’t think they had any more idea than we did, but they were fond of him, they *knew* about him, and we didn’t. We were men from the city and it was all a bit beyond us.’

Miss Greene was reliable, and sensible, enough to say, ‘You’ll have to go back, Mr Casey, when you get your holiday next year.’

Photographers

Hank Ellison had a darkroom big enough for three. Peter Gill and Terry McAuliffe joined him for an afternoon of printing, then Martin Casey came over to inspect the results. They spread the pictures on a bench in Hank’s sunroom. Terry thought they should put the pictures in sequence from first to last. This took no time, and even after a couple of hours involvement, the sequence moved them in a variety of ways. Martin pointed to a picture taken at Sale station as they waited for their train. ‘Glum looking lot, aren’t we!’ The others agreed. They turned to the early pictures, where the party was excited by the journey in front of them. ‘We didn’t know how good it was going to be.’ That led them to a series taken at the Crosscut Saw, including one which, to Martin’s amazement, had captured deCoursey in the pose which Martin thought he alone had witnessed. ‘Where were you, Terry, when you took that? I thought I was the only one that saw him. It’s been haunting me ever since.’ Terry struggled to remember. ‘I must have been a bit lower down, and on your right. You didn’t know I was there.’ Martin, curious to know his companion’s reaction to what he’d seen fit to photograph, put out a feeler. ‘What did you make of him? Did you think he might have jumped?’

‘No,’ Terry said, ‘I didn’t think that. I didn’t think anyone would be that silly. I thought he was offering me a glimpse of what he was like when we weren’t around. He knows those mountains nearly as well as Bill, and he’s got a special affinity for them, or something to do with them. To tell you the truth, my main reaction to that picture is to hope he’ll be on next year’s tour and that I’ll have done enough thinking – made enough advance in myself, I think I mean – to get him going in conversation.’

‘What do you want him to tell you?’

That was something Terry didn't know, or not yet. 'We're all caught up in words,' he said. 'What does this mean, what does that mean? But if you have to ask somebody something, you're not sure. You know, I looked at that man, crouched on that rock, arms out like wings, and I knew he was dealing with thoughts that were familiar. He knew the thoughts in his mind because he'd been thinking them for ages. Familiar to him, strange to me.'

'Strange to all of us,' Martin said. 'Or that's what I felt, watching him.'

They studied the other pictures on the bench. 'We have to pick the ones for the album,' Peter Gill said. 'Thirty should be enough. One at the start, and this one as we're getting ready to come home. The birdman, yes, that should go in, if only because it makes us talk about what we think the mountains do to people. And I think this one should go in too.' He tapped a picture taken from a low angle, of a dozen or so pilgrims moving along a horizon with another range further back, a couple of them carrying sticks and staves, the sun shining down, a horse at the right hand edge, walking out of the picture. 'I like this one,' Peter said. 'It makes me think of how good it felt as we strolled along, heads in the clouds – when there were any – enjoying our freedom ...' His voice trailed off. 'Would you put it next to the birdman picture?' Martin wanted to know. Peter had his answer. 'I would if we had a good one to go on the other side of it.' They moved around the bench, studying the pictures with purpose. They began to move pictures here and there to see which ones created meaningful contrasts. 'What about this one?'

Terry McAuliffe touched a picture looking down a slope at some walkers and a couple of the pack-horses passing beneath. 'It gives an impression of height, but it does it by looking down instead of up. I'd put deCoursey in the middle, getting ready to fly ...'

'Flying in his mind': this was Martin Casey.

'I'd put this one, the men strung out on the ridge-line, before deCoursey ... No! After it, sorry, and this one, looking down, I'd put this one before him.' He arranged the three pictures as he'd suggested, and the sequence was good. 'We've got a beginning, a middle and an end,' Hank said. 'It shouldn't be too hard to fill in the rest. I must say I thought it would be harder.' They bent over the bench, shaping and

then reshaping the holiday they'd had. It wasn't long before they'd chosen their thirty pictures and agreed on how they'd get them printed.

'How many copies are we going to print? Who's going to design the cover? What sort of paper and how are we going to mount the pictures?' There was much to discuss. Hank Ellison said he'd arrange it all with a printer he knew who had a top-class photographer in-house. 'How many copies are we printing? What's it going to cost?' Suddenly Hank thought of something he'd forgotten. 'We've got to print one extra.'

'Who for?'

Hank was almost embarrassed. 'Mrs Burke, the publican's wife. The lady that ran the pub.'

Peter Gill was scornful. 'Lady? I think that's called an honorific, isn't it? It seemed a pretty rough place to me.'

Hank had to defend himself. 'Well, she was curious about our expedition. She even used the word pilgrims. I think it stuck in her craw, somehow. But she wanted to know how much it'd cost to get a set of the pictures. She must have heard me talking about what we were going to do. She caught me when I was in a good mood ...'

Peter Gill laughed. 'And you said she could have an album for free!'

'I did. It seems a bit odd, now we're back in town, but down there, after we'd had a good dinner ...'

'Lunch heated up, actually. To be accurate.'

'Well, it was all right, and the pub was part of our trip, at both ends ...'

'Book-ends.'

'So I said we'd do her a copy.'

Martin concluded the discussion. 'We need to keep sweet with those people. We want to go back next year. I vote she gets an album, even if we don't invite her to the dinner.'

'Bill can take one back for her.'

The high hills recalled

They had dinner at the Cathedral Hotel, near Flinders Street station. Twenty-eight of the pilgrims were there; two apologised. Bill was the

only man from Briagolong. deCoursey, he told them, had problems getting away because his mother and sister felt nervous when he wasn't around. 'They don't mind if he's with me, or you fellas, because they reckon the mountains are close, but if he says anything about the city, they think he'll be gone forever.'

One of the pilgrims observed that deCoursey, unlike Bill, hadn't gone to the war. Thinking he was being witty at the expense of the birdman, he asked if he'd been handed a white feather, the accusation for cowardice. Bill was concerned to end this line of thought. 'Oh no, nobody ever gave deCoursey any white feathers, that I know of. Ya gotta understand that people respect him, even if he's a bit unusual.' This was said almost vehemently, and the men in the dining room saw that the matter had been closed. Bill didn't want to hear any more. It was not lost on them that since he'd been away at the war when white feathers were being handed out, he couldn't, perhaps, make the statement he'd just made. But he was beyond their question, so they asked him about next year's trip, and Bill was ready. 'I'm keen if you are,' he said. 'I'm interested to hear what you've got to say about the trip tonight, to see if it gives me any ideas for next time.'

So they dined, drank beer and wine, and came, eventually, to the distribution of albums prepared by Peter, Herb and Terry, with Martin to introduce them. 'I think,' Martin said, 'that what we'll do now is to give out the albums and let you have a minute to look through them, see what memories they bring back, and then we'll ask our photographers to say a few words.' This was agreeable to the gathering and the albums were passed around as the hotel staff cleared the tables of everything but the glasses, which were refilled, 'for toasts', as they said.

Herb was first on his feet, to talk about the printing processes and their methods of selection. He expressed regret for a few things that had happened on the walk but hadn't been captured by the cameras. 'A trip like this,' he said, 'tests what a camera can do. I know I came back a different man after those days in the hills, and I don't think that's in the pictures I took. There's nothing wrong with them, and I think I took a few pretty decent ones, but you'd need a different sort of camera to show what I'm talking about. Maybe we should have had a couple of poets along with us to say the things I find too hard to say.'

He noticed as he said this that Bill, beaming, was taking a healthy sip of beer. 'People who live in the far east,' Herb went on, 'are used to having the mountains beside them, but those who live in the city aren't sure what to make of them. It's as if they're a part of ourselves we're not used to looking at, so we pull out our cameras and blaze away, not sure of whether we're getting them down properly or even what it means to think of getting them down properly. They're something we're not used to making a judgement about.'

Peter was next. 'We spent some time getting these pictures in order, and that meant trying to find good ones from each stage of the trip. I'm not sure that we did that very well. I think next year we'll have a better idea of what we're doing. But then again, maybe our pictures won't be so good next time, because the country we're walking through won't be so unfamiliar. We sometimes take our best pictures when we're in the early stages of discovering something. The other thing I want to say is that going into the mountains changed me. I'm not sure what the change has been but I know it's happened. My wife says I'm easier to get on with, and she also says, and this seems a bit of a contradiction, that I'm sometimes remote. She says she isn't always sure that I'm actually there.' He looked confused. 'Sorry, I should have said here. She thinks I'm somewhere else. Well, the truth is, I am. I'm out where these pictures were taken. Well, we can't be out there every day, so the pictures will have to be our substitute for what only Bill, of those of us here tonight, can get to all the time. But one thing I'm sure of, the exercise of getting these albums ready for you has made me quite certain – when the next Skyline Tour sets off, I'm going to be there!'

Applause. Martin asked if Bill would like to respond. He shook his head with a grin. 'You fellas get practice in public speaking. All I do is talk to myself when I'm out in the bush.' He thought it was funny and they all laughed. Martin introduced Terry as the third and final speaker. He stood.

'Peter mentioned his wife. My wife's the same. I think she's a bit envious. She says I can go on another Skyline Tour, she doesn't want to stop me, but she wants me to take her and the kids on a trip to some of the same places. Well, I know she's got a good point, and the kids are really keen, but I can't seem to make them understand that we were in

the hands of locals who really knew the country. If Bill and the others hadn't been there I couldn't have found my way home. I felt helpless out there, I don't mind telling you. The trip had the effect of making me feel pretty useless. Unimportant. When I saw a good picture and got it in the lens of the camera, it was as if I was useful again. I tried very hard to take good pictures, and there's a few in your albums that I'm pleased with. The idea of having these albums was a good one because we'll never be able to forget, now, what we did on our walk. It was great, and I'm dying to do it again, or not the same of course, but wherever Bill wants to take us next time.' They drank Bill's health, then they drank to his helpers – Tiger, deCoursey, Billy Dibbs – and then, their glasses having been refilled, they drank to Briagolong and its modest hotel. This prompted Bill to call out to the tables, 'Let's finish it off with a drink to ... well, they're too worn out to be mountains, I always call'em the high hills.' They drank to the high hills and the dinner, as a formal function, was over.

Martin said to Bill, 'When are you going home? Tomorrow? Or the day after?'

Bill hadn't made up his mind. 'Not tomorrow. Maybe the day after, or the day after that. I like to have a look around.' Martin told him where he worked, a block or two away, and offered to collect him for lunch, or, if he wished, to take him home to meet his family at their home in Malvern, but Bill excused himself: 'When you came down to the bush, it was all new to you. This here in the city, this is new to me too. I'd like to look around without a guide. I can manage. I'm just curious.'

Martin: 'You won't see anything half as good as you showed us.'

Bill: 'I wouldn't be so sure of that. I saw a few cities when I was in France. Blown to buggery, half of'em, but they got me interested. I liked being in France, because everything was strange. New.'

'Melbourne might be disappointing after the old world. I could show you a few interesting places though, if you'd like me to?'

Bill, however, wasn't to be moved. As politely as he could he restated his wish to do his exploring on his own.

Bill on his own

Bill wasn't used to linen cloths at breakfast, but the Cathedral had them on every table. The dining room looked as smart as it had the night before. He found himself wanting to banter with the young woman waiting on the hotel's guests, but the chimes of a clock and the sound of a tram in the street warned him to be unobtrusive. And it was nice to have stylish service even if scrambled eggs on toast was much the same wherever you ate it. It was a change to be offered coffee as well as tea at the beginning of the day, something he couldn't have in the bush. He sipped the coffee and thought himself daring. When he went onto the street a few minutes later he was offered a choice of newspapers and was even tempted, for a moment, before shaking his head. The man selling the papers said to him, 'Whereya from?' Bill didn't feel obliged to release that much about himself. Stickybeak, he thought. 'The bush.' The newspaper man was more experienced in this sort of battle than Bill. 'I can see that,' he said. 'Whereabouts?'

Bill told him.

'Briagolong?' the newspaper man said. 'In the far east, isn't it?'
'Near Sale.'

Bill saw that the other man belonged to what was known as the working class, and scorned the idea that what he was doing was work. He wanted to get past this obstacle outside his hotel. 'Where do all these trams go to?'

It was the newspaper man's turn to be scornful. 'They got signs on the front telling you where they go. Where do you want to go?' Bill pulled himself onto the first tram that came along. The sign, he noticed, said East Brighton. He had a vague idea where that was, and vague was good enough. He'd take a ride to the terminus, and then he'd take a ride back. The conductor came to him. 'How far you going, mate?' Bill looked vague. 'How many stops?'

'End of the line,' Bill said. 'Terminus.' He reached in his pocket for coins. The conductor held out his hand. 'One and six. It's a long line, you see.' Bill gave him the money. 'I'll tell you what,' the conductor said. 'Seeing as you're from the country, I'll clip the ticket on this side so you can use it on the way back. I don't think any inspectors will get on for the trip out. Might see one coming back. If anybody starts

to question you, give me a call and I'll fix it up somehow.' He added, 'Going to see someone in Brighton?'

It made Bill feel a little stupid. 'Just having a look.'

'Good way to do it.' The conductor moved away, whistling quietly. Bill decided that the conductor thought himself a character. People in the big smoke could get away with things that wouldn't do where he came from. He supposed he might see the bay somewhere along the way, and shifted so he could see out that side. Saint Kilda Road was full of big homes. People had money for gardeners and servants. Bill realised he hardly knew what wealth was, or what you could do with it. It was somehow different from money, because ordinary people had a bit of money but when you had enough to call it wealth, you had to show it, and that meant living on a scale he didn't understand. The men at the dinner last night were all comfortable but he doubted if they were wealthy; perhaps he should have accepted Martin Casey's offer so he could question him about the men who'd come on the tour. Moving away from the city, the tram rolled past the solemn hill where the Shrine of Remembrance had been built; the grass was still establishing itself. Bill thought of the mud in France, of shells blasting muck in every direction. Even when you ducked you couldn't avoid getting splattered. Thinking back to that time, Bill knew what a sorry-looking lot he and his comrades had been. Marching to the rear after one nasty bit of resistance to a German attack, Bill's company had had to stagger past an officer on horseback, the commander in charge of that part of the line. Something about the man told Bill and his mates that he despised them for being filthy when it was unavoidable, and with any luck they might get a chance to clean themselves. There was a town not far back with the houses still in reasonable shape. A bath was a possibility. Hot water! Soap!

The officer on horseback said, stupidly in Bill's view, 'You look like you need a break.' Well of course they did, and it wouldn't be long enough before it would be their turn to go back, in the opposite direction, to where hell was breaking loose all the time. Nobody answered the officer but someone broke into song, a dirty ditty about a prostitute working 'flat out' to make soldiers happy enough to 'do it again'. Do it? They were ready to do it, or do any woman available, but something about the song and the way they sang it said they didn't want to be

pitied. Bill looked out of his tram. There was something about the people in this city he was visiting that told him they hadn't been worth fighting for and they never would be. They were so complacent. As for soldiers – in the eyes of these people, they'd been mugs to get caught in the war and even madder if they'd volunteered. Bill thought of men, dead and dying in their hundreds, giving each other a helping hand, a bit of encouragement, a smoke if they had some tobacco, and it seemed to him that the condition of poverty, of being stripped back to a fighting animal surrounded by destruction, was somehow superior, more spiritual, than living in suburban comfort. Next time the conductor passed him, Bill told him, 'Don't think I want to go to the end of the line. It's not where I belong. I'll get off next stop and go back. Can I use that ticket you clipped as a return?' The conductor told him, 'No mate. Not unless I get off and go with you, and I'd lose my job for that. No mate, you'll have to buy another ticket to go back from here.'

It looked simple then. 'All right, another ticket it is. Seeya. Have a good trip.' What sort of trip, what sort of day, was this man going to have, Bill asked himself. He'd travel up and down, back and forth, for months at a time until he got another job as meaningless as the one he had. It was no sort of life for a man. Those high hills were looking good. Beckoning. Summoning him to a place, a land, where his dignity would be given back. Bill remembered the times of the trains to Gippsland. He'd go back the next day. There wasn't much for him, down here. And then, having made this decision, he was content, and curious again, as he looked out of the second tram of his day, the one taking him back to the centre of the city he didn't want to be in.

Jan's album

Bill put his album above the fireplace. 'I'll turn the pages and see a different picture each day,' he thought. It was logical, he knew, to start with the first one, but he fancied the picture of the men against the skyline, with deCoursey's horse moving out of sight on the right. They were crossing the plain the day after they'd reached the Crosscut Saw. It wasn't much later that he'd called on the walkers to run their race,

and run they had, though most of them were in no condition for such foolishness. deCoursey had started them off, unaware that he'd been photographed the day before, doing his flying act on a rock near the narrowest part of the divide. Bill turned a page to look at him. Silly bastard, Bill thought, but by now he'd turned the pages several times on his train trip home and the flying business, the bit of nonsense on the rock, was the heart of the album. The pilgrims from the city would feel the same, he felt, especially the three photographers, who'd know a great picture when they saw one. Bill looked at his friend's back, or was it his friend's mind? Odd that you should be able to read a man's mind when you couldn't see his face, but that was how it was. It occurred to him that he should deliver Jan's copy, and he set out to walk to the hotel.

He was a familiar figure, but it was too early for drinking, so he waved to the man in the bar. 'Morning, Tommy. Got a book here for your missus. Photos of our trip. She in the kitchen?' The publican nodded. 'If she hasn't cleared out. I think I woulda heard by now.' The bushman went inside, calling out as he neared the kitchen. 'Ya there Jan? Got something forya. Booka pictures, Skyline Tour!' Jan came to meet him, feeling that she needed to justify herself in some way. 'Those fellers were talking about the pictures they'd taken and I was curious. They said they'd do a set for me.' Bill offered the album, wondering why she wanted it. 'Lotta good pictures in there. I got mine open on the mantelpiece above the fire. I'm gonna turn the pages so I get a new picture every day.'

'That's a good idea, I might do the same.'

'Whereya gonna put it? In the bar so everyone can see it?'

'I'll have a think about that after I've had a look. I need to see what I've got.'

Bill left, Jan took the album to her bedroom, a room only occasionally shared with Tommy, who mostly slept in a space two doors down the passage, though still in the part of the building beyond a 'PRIVATE' sign. She turned the pages swiftly, almost furtively, as if she didn't want it to be known that she was fascinated by something she would publicly have scoffed at. Pilgrims! What nonsense. How she hated men for making things easy for themselves, which was about all they ever did. Even these men with money didn't bring their families

with them. She didn't stop to ask herself where she and Tommy would have put the women and children if they'd come; more tents, probably. It wasn't that she wanted the families. Men were easier to deal with on their own. If they were family men they were usually polite enough, not hard to manage. No, it was because they were so smug and they'd given themselves a treat without even understanding what it was they wanted to claim as their experience. They put an edge of mountains on their world, something she and other women couldn't do. They took the best of what was available and made it seem natural when they claimed it as theirs, as if it was natural for them to have access to the high country while their women stayed away. It made her angry, and she wanted to have her frustration confirmed. What she'd do after that she didn't know but by god she'd be doing something. Things couldn't be allowed to stay as they were.

It occurred to her that she hadn't asked Bill if she owed him, or the photographers, any money. Bill might have paid for her album himself. Or maybe the travellers had paid for their albums when they paid for their tour. She didn't know, and the fact that she didn't meant that she'd been shut out, again, from whatever decisions had been made. Bill was so casual. Leave it to me. He was so adept at doing the right thing by everybody that nobody brought him under examination, they adopted his ways, whatever they were or might be.

Was he running another tour next year? She supposed he was, because if he wasn't, he'd surely have said that the album would be the last. He hadn't said that, so they must be heading into the hills again. She wondered if she'd be able to get Tommy to take her out there in the months ahead. She'd like to see the snow. Bush men talked about it but they never had a camera with them, hence no snaps. Only the experts in Bill's tour could take pictures like the ones she'd been given. She was fortunate, then, an insider, to be given what she had.

She opened it again and turned its pages slowly. The pilgrims on the day they left the hotel. Tommy was there; she must have been inside, unaware of the picture being taken. She'd remedy that next time! Morning tea. Billy Dibbs looking stupid by his fire. A few shots of them making their way through the foothills, then the party broke into the open air of Bennison's Plain. Mount Tamboritha. Further and further until they reached the dividing range. A hair-raising walk along

a narrow ridge, and only half of them in view, meaning that the other half hadn't dared to go where the camera's lens was pointed. Then a picture of deCourcey O'Donovan, getting ready to fly. She rather wished he had, he'd have broken a limb or two and they'd have had to carry him all the way back on a litter, that or leave him there, which she supposed they wouldn't do. Not while Bill was in charge. He'd bring his pilgrims home if it was the last thing he did.

She felt jealous. Nobody asked women to go on trips like this. Nobody said they could take time off and sort themselves out in relation to the wilderness abounding to the town's north. Nobody had ever asked her if she wanted ...

What did she want? She didn't know. She didn't want what the men wanted. She wanted an alternative to it, and she didn't have it. More, she didn't know what it was or where you looked for it. She knew how angry, how irritable, she felt, and wondered if, by ceaseless searching, she could find an alternative for herself to what these boring, wretched, wealthy men could grasp without having to think about themselves and how they stood, in relation to the world.

Jan goes for a drive

There weren't many cars in Briagolong and the Burkes had one of them, an A-model Ford. Naturally it was coloured black. Jan told Tommy that she was going in to Sale to look at fabric for chairs in the lounge. 'It's been years since we did anything with those chairs. They need re-covering.' Tommy did no more than grunt. The domestic side of the business was his wife's. She set off after lunch with a funny feeling that she was going in the wrong direction. What she really wanted to do was drive north of the town and spy on deCourcey's mother and sister, who hardly ever came into town. Louise, the bird-man's mother, had a dignified old grey suit which she wore on the rare occasions when she left the property in the bush. Jan couldn't even remember when she'd last seen Maeve, his sister. What did they do out there? The only clue the townsfolk had was the shopping list deCourcey brought into town every once in a while. It was known that

the trio was pretty well self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables, but they didn't kill their own meat. It was known, also, that the birdman made occasional trips to Sale to come home with fish. Briagolong had also picked up that Louise made bread for the three of them; deCourcey's hut had a detached kitchen, a common defence against cooking fires burning down a house. There were stories going around about a bushfire burning the O'Donovans' furniture, placed by the birdman in a clearing for safety, but Jan didn't know if this was true; it had happened – if it did – before she and Tommy took over the hotel.

Jan was curious, and suspicious. She had to go into Sale but the temptation was in her, raging, to see what she could see from the road. She didn't even know how far back in the bush the O'Donovan household was situated. Unwillingly she drove to the bigger town. Feeling snappy inside herself she went to a department store and looked at fabrics. There was a dark green that looked serviceable. The man behind the counter gave her a good price, asked how many chairs she had, and offered to do them all at once or one at a time, whichever suited her customers at the hotel. There'd be a couple of weeks delay while he got the fabric in from the manufacturer. He was so affable that Jan felt trapped, all the more so because she wasn't where she wanted to be. She'd no sooner ordered the fabric and promised to phone in the dimensions of the chairs – he showed her what measurements he needed – than she got back in the Ford and took it home on a road that would take her around the town instead of through it. She wanted to reach the foothills without being seen. Tommy would think she was mad if he discovered that she'd gone looking for the birdman's family dwelling, if 'family' was the word for a widow and two unmarried eccentrics. She got as far as the track that passed the O'Donovans' without, as far as she could tell, having been seen. Though you could never tell. A little way from the dwelling which was her goal, her preoccupation, she stopped.

Why was she making this mad excursion? What did she want to see? To know?

She wasn't sure. In her mind she flicked through the pictures she'd received from the Skyline people. Something told her the pilgrims, as they called themselves, needed deCourcey because he embodied the craziness they could feel stirring in themselves. They needed him to be

mad, and obvious, to show them the way. They could dress themselves up in suits for their privileged occupations while a particle of their brains flew – flew – in another direction. She, she had to admit, if only to herself, was as mad as they were because she'd come to spy on the birdman, wanting to know what he was like, wanting to know what was misconceived, or maladjusted in him, that led to him being sought out by men who'd made, first, the trip – and there'd be another one next year, she was sure - and then the album. The bloody album was flying around in her head. Tommy didn't know how it had taken over her thinking. Thoughts like this were churning in her mind when she saw the birdman on the road a hundred yards ahead. She froze. He made no acknowledgement of her presence but he must have seen her. What would she do now? Drive away? Sit still? Wait?

She wasn't sure. She wasn't afraid of being sighted by the birdman, because he wouldn't tell anyone about her prying; what she wanted was a closer contact with the people in the bark-roofed dwelling, and it came far more quickly than she expected. A woman was stepping out of the bush. It was Louise, the birdman's mother; Jan knew her from the suit of exhausted grey fabric she was wearing, and from the quirky gait, as if her body wasn't constructed about a set of bones. The old lady – sixty? Sixty-five? – in a whisper of great carrying power, addressed her from fifteen yards away, standing among the shrubs and bushes at the side of the track, 'It's not a very cold afternoon, but would you like to come in beside my fire?' Jan felt a freezing in her neck. Go into the house with the strange old lady? No. She wouldn't get out unchanged; that was the feeling emanating from Louise. 'Thank you, no,' she said, 'I haven't got time!'

Louise O'Donovan looked as if the words had attempted to capture her and imprison her in an unknown dimension, endlessly available but a trap nevertheless. She dropped her hands to the pockets of her grey coat, raised her head in a way as birdlike as her son's stretching of his arms and fingers, and said the one word, 'Time?' In an intuitive moment, Jan Burke knew that the old lady thought the word was meaningless, and whatever dimension she lived in, it wasn't controlled by clock or calendar. 'I need to get back to the hotel,' she said. 'I've got to get dinner on.' This would surely have done as a formula for escape, but she added, 'I just came out for a drive. I wanted to see what things

were like out here.’

That was foolish enough, but the old lady took her seriously. ‘We try to escape, but escaping’s the surest way of imprisoning ourselves.’ She stopped, and Jan had a feeling she was going to say the same words again, but she didn’t. ‘That’s why I live out here. I can concentrate on what’s happening inside.’ Jan assumed that she meant inside herself. There wasn’t anything else she could mean, was there? She wasn’t sure, and she was backing the car, reversing it and rolling it forwards as she twisted the wheel. Backwards and forwards on the narrow track until the car was pointing towards the town again. ‘Don’t tell anybody I was out here!’ she called to the old lady. ‘It’s none of their rotten business what you, or I, or people like us’ – people like us; she’d never voiced such an idea before; she, Jan Burke, wife of Tommy, proprietor and proprietress of the local hotel – ‘It’s none of their business what people like you and I like to think!’

And she drove away.

Jan makes an ally

Jan was sure there’d be another tour. She wanted to be close to it, understand it, even as her mind sought another direction. She wanted to know what the tourists were planning, where they were going, and most of all she wanted to know if they really thought they were pilgrims. They made such a joke of it that she sensed the word was taken seriously. How could she tell? She’d need to cultivate Bill; the tours were his idea. She waited until he came in next, a matter of weeks because he was mostly in the hills. Then she waited till he’d downed three beers; she wanted him amiable but not drunk. Was he going to have another tour next year, and if he was, what time of year? She needed to be ready, she told him, she thought the hotel might do better for his visitors if she started to work on it nice and early.

Yes, Bill told her, there’d be another tour the following year. The blokes in the city wouldn’t let him drop it even if he’d wanted to. They’d all had a good time, he’d given the city men an experience they couldn’t get anywhere else, yes, there’d be another trip. Numbers? Same as before. They’d got the catering pretty right. Where were they

going? Well, he wasn't sure but he thought the Mount Wellington area looked promising. 'They like big views but what they liked most, I discovered last time, was tramping across high plain country. They all said that was when they felt most liberated. They liked to walk on the plains but they liked to camp in the bush, or at the edge of a plain, like Bennison's Plain, I don't know if you know it.'

She didn't. 'Well, there's a good hut there, right at the edge. For some reason they liked to sleep near the bush, or even in it, more than the open country itself, though that's where they liked it best to walk.' And was he going to use the same helpers – Billy, deCoursey and Tiger?

Bill was adamant. 'Couldn't get a better team.'

She switched to the birdman's family. Had Bill ever met his mother?

'Yeah, few times. She's been around when I've gone out there to see him about something or other.' He didn't know, she saw, that she'd been to the O'Donovans' property, spying. She groped for a question that might probe without giving herself away. 'What was Mrs O'Donovan's husband, when he was alive? What was his job, do you know?'

Bill, it seemed, had met the old lady's husband when she'd been young, many years before. 'He was an Irishman. Spoke funny English, like his wife does, and even deCoursey, today, he sounds a bit the same. The old fella used to make maps, in the city. What do they call it? He was a cartographer. Sounds like he made carts, but he didn't. He made *charts*. deCoursey explained the difference to me.'

'Would you say deCoursey's like his father?'

This caused Bill to think. 'deCoursey's dad spoke very clearly, as if he thought you wouldn't understand him. deCoursey's just the same, you know how he talks.' Bill dropped into a sing-song. 'My, cheval, does, not, think, as, I, do. Cheval means a horse, you understand. He'd say that to the horse and bugger me dead, the horse'd look at him as if he was agreeing.'

'Agreeing with deCoursey or the father?'

'Eh? Oh, deCoursey, of course. I don't think the father did much talking to horses. He was a city man who made the mistake of coming down this way. Only lasted a couple of years. Got deCoursey started, after a fashion, anyway, built him the cottage where he lives now, then he went back to the city. He never had much money. After he pegged out, his missus and daughter struggled for a while, then deCoursey

brought'em back here. His mum started up a great big garden. Quite a sight in her city clothes, diggin' and prunin'. What she'll do when that suit she wears gives up the ghost I'm blown if I know. Funny thing is, I couldn't imagine her in anything else.'

A fortnight later, Jan saw deCoursey's mother in the street outside the pub. The old lady was surprised, perhaps alarmed, to be addressed by someone she didn't know, but thawed a little when Jan asked her if she'd care to have lunch at the hotel. 'We're having curried lamb and rice,' she told Mrs O'Donovan. 'Should be very nice. I'd be honoured if you'd take a table in my dining room. You did meet me once before,' she reminded her. Mrs O'Donovan looked closely, then remembered. The process of her remembering was a sight to behold. It was as if she had had to confront a confusing state of mystification, then sensed that her mind might clarify if she could brush figurative cobwebs from whatever it was that she was considering. 'The lady with the car,' she murmured. 'The unannounced arrival. Nobody to protect me.' A long pause. 'Then I knew I needn't fear.' Another pause. 'Are you staying at this hotel?'

'I run it. With my husband. He's in the bar right now, serving. Or more likely he's propping it up,' she added sourly. Mrs O'Donovan was accepting of this. 'Everything needs to be propped up. By faith, mostly. Men most of all.' No trace of humour partnered this statement. 'You are inviting me to lunch?'

'You'd be most welcome.'

'My son has gone off somewhere. I never know when he'll be back.'

'Then he must wait till you've finished your lunch.'

'I suppose he can do that. If he's aware of where I am.'

'What about your daughter? Will she join you, or is she still at the farm?'

Mrs O'Donovan went into her mysteriously withdrawn state again. 'She doesn't care to come into town. She'll lunch on a glass of milk and two slices of bread.' She made this sound regal. Then she added, 'She may slice a tomato, if she considers it proper.'

Jan didn't know what that meant. 'Come in at once. It'll only take a minute to serve. This is quite an event, I don't mind telling you.' She knew that Mrs O'Donovan wouldn't have any money on her, so a free lunch was her way of paying back for the intrusion of a few

weeks before; besides, she needed to trace the origins of this mystical mountain-gazing, this retreat from the world of women that she observed going on around her. She needed to have them all on her ground if she was to explore their ground, their base, for the high-jinks which, she knew, had occupied the town as represented by Bill and his assistants and would do so again. She was now some way towards getting two of the other group, the perhaps-opposing group, if not on her side – because she didn't have a *side* – then at least in a position for her to examine what it was they stood for – in her terms of observation, not the terms they proposed for themselves.

The town waits

Tommy Burke knew something was going on in his wife's head but he couldn't work out what. It was too deep. She wasn't giving him any clues. It occurred to him that she might be hiding an affair but after nosing around, he gave up that idea. There was nothing to back it up. He had a feeling, next, that she wanted to turn the natural order on its head, but how could you do that in Briagolong? The place was too small. He asked if she'd like to go to Melbourne for a day in the shops, get some things smarter than she could buy in Sale, but she told him she was fine as she was. 'Bill came back from the city saying he didn't need to see it again,' she told her husband. 'Why would I want to go down there?'

Something about the way she put the question told him told him that he'd been locked out of her thinking and had no hope of finding a way back. 'Bugger me dead,' he told himself. 'This is what happens to a marriage when it settles. You're tied hand and foot to somebody but you can't make a connection with their brains, or not any more, so you're forced back on habit.'

As he was. They got up at the usual times, according to the seasons, they ate the things they'd been eating for years, he poured the same beers for the same drinkers, and it made him the money it had always done. They'd never be rich but they were comfortable. 'I'm not going anywhere,' he realised. 'Where I am is where I'm gonna stay. I'm permanent.'

Except of course, nobody was. Briagolong, like everywhere else, had a cemetery full of names on blocks of marble. Preacher-men came out from Sale when there was a body to be interred, and the same old things were said. So and so was the last of that generation, such and such had outlived his time, lives that were too short were said to be tragic, et cetera. It seemed to Tommy Burke that life was nothing but cliché. Nothing had happened to disturb the district since the young men went off to war, and now they were back, a few of them. Bill was running his tours and men from Melbourne with money were keen to look at the high country. It occurred to Tommy that he'd stumbled on the answer to his problem. His wife must have picked up some of the ideas that were infecting the country about women's place not being in the home. Where else did they bloody belong? Where could she have got this nonsense from? Not from the *Sale Gazette*, which she hardly looked at. Not from anyone in Briagolong, they were sound enough. Where? He couldn't find an answer to this, there was no key, but he sensed he was right. She wanted the applecart tipped upside down, and she wouldn't succeed. The world was as it was and it couldn't be any other way. He remembered that she'd had deCourcey's mother to lunch one day and suspected the old lady hadn't paid. What on earth was going on? Louise O'Donovan was harmless on her son's property because the town didn't have to listen to her ravings, but as sure as eggs hatch little chickens, if she'd been in the big smoke she'd have been locked up. What made Janny bring her in as something special?

Why?

If that had been the first step in some succession of things that were going to happen, what would be next? Tommy drank too much beer to let his mind get itself clear but he was smart enough to know that his wife was in a state of readiness for something to change, though what that something was, he couldn't guess. He remembered hearing Bill Gillio say to some of his mates that the officers in the war had known what was supposed to be going on – they got reports at all hours of day and night, numbers of men fit for duty, men expected to be back off sick leave the following day – but they had no idea of what the men in their care were thinking, feeling, talking about. They couldn't predict anything because they were missing the vital evidence. He, who hadn't gone to war because he'd been able to convince a doctor that he wasn't

fit enough for battle, regarded the officer class as fools, but he wasn't any better. She'd locked him out of her head. He was vulnerable, and alone. When he insisted on returning to the marital bed where she slept, she took herself to the tiny chamber she'd allotted him, closing the door in a way that was clear enough. She was obedient to the habits that caused the hotel to operate, but she'd left the marriage to travel somewhere out of sight. They were only occasionally one flesh, and never, it seemed, one mind.

This distressed him. He couldn't escape her. If he sold the pub he'd have to give her half the money, and then what would he do? What could she do? They were together now, and it was for keeps. All he could hope for was a way out. When Bill came in for a few beers, Tommy asked about the next Skyline Tour, and Bill chatted, happily enough. Yes, late summer, like last time. Thirty men, like last time. The route? He hadn't decided, but he thought it would be mostly in the Mount Wellington area this time. The pilgrims liked to walk across high plains and Wellington's back would give them plenty of that. Then he'd take them down to Tarli Karng, and no, he wasn't sure which way he'd bring them home. Tommy was hoping he'd say they needed a man to get the huts ready, but Billy Dibbs was still willing and available.

Tommy knew Bill was loyal and he wouldn't ditch anybody who'd given him good service. deCoursey? That was the question mark, but Bill positively beamed at having the birdman leading the horses again. 'He's got a way with them. They like him. He treats them like they was his brothers, it's nice to be around when he's feeding them. You can tell they've got a good feeling for him.' So did Bill want anything done differently at the hotel? 'No, ya did fine last time. It was good. No grumbles there.' Bill's satisfaction meant, for Tommy, that the future looked the same as the past, and the unspoken differences with his wife couldn't find release through things done for the tourists. Tommy wished he could join them but it would be fatal to say so. Bill's faith in him would be shaken. Every town needed a pub and it had to be run the way people expected. He was running it, there was no way out. Tommy was puzzled. He didn't even know why he wanted a way out but he was at a dead end and couldn't see how to escape it.

Sorely he accepted his reduction.

Though he didn't know it, his wife too was wishing she could join

the tour. She could take Tiger's job, he was a rough and ready cook. She could do better, but ... one woman and thirty men: the thing was unthinkable. She sounded Bill out, but no, the pub did everything he expected of it last time, he couldn't wish for better. 'Those blokes live in the lap of luxury down here, some of them at least, and it does'em good to rough it a bit.' Bill's good humour was enormous. He commanded the hills. He was their keeper. The mountains knew he loved them. He read the country by the things growing on it, the trees, bushes and flowers. Birds were to the air what fish were to the sea. Clouds expressed the skies they floated in, they were talking to you all the time, if you bothered to look. He'd made up his mind that he wanted to send his pilgrims home, this time, with a better understanding of the world they'd visited. It had languages they needed to know ...

And why was that? They were competent enough in the city where they operated. They succeeded, or else they wouldn't be able to pay for their tour. No, they needed to know lots of things they didn't know, but first, they needed to know that they didn't know. What they needed to understand, and he couldn't quite get this into words, either for himself or for his mates who drank with him, was that there was an air of mystery surrounding every one of us, and that the most expert, the busy and successful men, were so busy that they couldn't give any time to that field of ignorance. They needed to be pitched into it, like a dark and murky pool, until they saw at least the need for clarity. Bill didn't have the least wish to interfere with the men, or get them self-conscious instead of simply enjoying themselves, but he rather wished they'd formalise their inner needs, and do something about them. How they should do this he had no idea. It wasn't in his nature to interfere, but he wanted them to feel the freedom surrounding them, and which they knew to be there. Why else would they pay good money to walk where the going could be pretty tough?

The second tour

When Bill led the second batch of pilgrims down the street, after a photo in front of the hotel, Jan Burke realised that she was seeing

her town differently. It was a prelude to something else. She wouldn't belong any more, she'd be a relic, unless her mind extended too. Bill, she thought as she watched, had it easy. He'd started at the front and was still there, talking as he led, but she knew he'd drop back as the morning wore on, until he was chatting as affably with the last of his troops – pilgrims, indeed! – and then, in his inexhaustibly casual way, he'd make his way forward, yarning all the while, until he was again at the front, and there he'd stay, well-filled with the ideas going through the minds of those behind him. Leading was so natural that nobody would notice, except that his personality was so strong that he couldn't be put out of mind. He was only vulnerable where he was like everyone else, the commonest of common men, the humblest, yet full of a wonderful pride. He loved the mountains he was taking his party through; it hardly seemed too much to think, silly as it was, that the mountains must love him too. And yet, despite all this, she felt bitter.

She busied herself cleaning up. There wasn't any hurry because the men wouldn't be back for days, but some surge of self-regard forced her to be swift. By lunchtime she had the marquee spotless and neat, the tents tidy. She rather wished she had her children with her, to help, she would have said, but, busily brushing the tables before she swept the ground they stood on, she sensed that her wish to have them with her sprang from a feeling of inferiority: with two underlings she might feel a little superior, and that was the drive in her activated by the pilgrims. She needed to feel something other than wretched. The men in the street were headed for the mountains, and she was headed nowhere. She cast her mind over the place where she was domiciled. It was a pioneering venture. The settlers had got so far, and then they'd settled. Feeling settled didn't mean you'd achieved, it meant you were going no further ...

... and she had to have that feeling of progress, of betterment, or she'd start to die, with her children not yet the adults she'd hoped they'd become. Tommy was no use to her, no help, because he was a victim of the self-same malaise: being stuck. I've got to un-stick myself, she told herself, I've got to find a high ground of my own, and it's not in me, I'm an Irishwoman and all I'll do is joke, laugh, drink, swim in my own self-satisfaction, or worse than that, my own self-hatred, until there's nothing left of me but features, characteristics I've laughed at

so many times they're only excrescences on a 'me' that isn't there any more. They'll be able to plunge a dagger into the centre of my soul and when they withdraw it, it won't have any blood on it, because there's no life in the middle of me, only habits, characteristics, a few scraps of genetic inheritance, but not a throbbing, living life any more ...

She was seething, and she knew it. It reminded her of something. She'd been through something like this before, and when was that? She searched her memory. Ah! It was when her children were small and she'd had to give them pride of place. It's the challenge that every parent faces and few are fully prepared for it, if at all. The child thinks it's the centre of the world, and the love and adoration of parents, wider family, and a genial adult world confirms this lusty egotism, until, of course, the child becomes a sexual creature in itself, and then a mother or a father, vulnerable in the supremacy of its pride. The dominant ego has produced a child of her own and must now concede its godly status to the one that's replacing it. Jan had done this, perhaps one could say accomplished it, with ease enough, when she saw the conflict between herself and the children she was rearing. She'd given in willingly, and taken the status of a mother. Mothers, in being second, somehow retained some of the status they'd had when they were first. Being second, as she'd become, years before, had still allowed her to think of herself as the power, *a* power, behind the throne where her children sat ennobled.

It was time, now, for another move, another change of status, of being, and she hadn't foreseen what would be demanded of her. She wasn't ready. And yet, she knew, if she could only see what it was she had to do, she'd do it willingly because self-preservation was pushing her to accept. She swept the ground between the tables lightly so as not to stir up too much dust. There were mice around, and birds, to clean up any leavings, but she used the broom as a brush, put the refuse into a pan and dropped it in a bin. No opportunities for scavengers there! Was this what she was going to be like as she grew old? Hard, determined, unyielding? Or could she enlarge? Could she tolerate, and take in? She rather thought she could. She knew she must. She'd been tolerant of the pilgrims when they'd been with her, this time: curious, wanting to know about their families. She wanted, she sensed, to be like them, but from the other side. She'd created herself as a representative of those

they'd left behind. Whatever their consciousness was of themselves, she'd appointed herself their guardian. It was necessary, therefore, that she be left behind. If they managed, as at least a few of them dearly desired, to bring a little spirituality back from the world to the north, then it must be she, and their other womenfolk, who transferred it to the everyday world, which needed, heaven knew, to be improved. This made her feel radical, political, and she wondered how she'd get their experiences from them, in order to transfigure them and use them to remake the common, daily world.

My God, she groaned, whoever put this burden on my shoulders? But she braced herself. She'd done it with her own mind, the adaptation had been as easy as the realisation. All she'd had to do was open her mind. Could she keep it open? Still developing? She knew she had to; the thought of not being able to develop was sickening, like watching someone who'd been healthy, strong and active, in an inevitable decline. There had to be hills in her mind, created by her for her own inner search, and if the pilgrims wanted the experience of loftiness as the outcome of their doings, then she, she sensed, had to show them that what they thought they'd discovered in the hills where Bill was leading them, right now, had been there, always, in their own minds, but they hadn't perceived this and wouldn't have perceived this without Bill and his men taking them into the hills, lifting them up because, as boys-become-men they needed to be shown it whereas, Jan told herself, feeling triumphant at last, after days of being glum to wretched, a wise woman knew the same things as a permanent condition.

Permanent? Wise? That was a challenge, and it needed to be achieved before the pilgrims came down from their various perches at the end of a week.

Man's animal nature

There was a newcomer in the party and Bill found him stimulating. Neil Kitching was a baker with a chain of businesses across Melbourne's south-east, and he had a habit of working in one of his bakeries for a few weeks until he thought those who worked there had absorbed his

dynamism, and then he moved to another: his American style of leadership was unpopular, but effective. It was obvious before the Skyline people were out of town that he thought the party's attitudes were lazy; they needed focus if they were to achieve. This was the best formulation he could manage, and it might have annoyed fellow walkers had they not noticed that Bill enjoyed the man. He talked with him about the building of bush huts. You didn't need all that many, but in certain places, depending on the movements of men and cattle in and out of the mountain runs, they were essential. They had to be simple because maintaining them mustn't be allowed to become a big job, and because they had to be put up when the weather was right. The distance between them related to the movement of a mob of cattle in a day, so they needed water close at hand. It was best if they were in the open with less chance of being burned and of course they needed to be waterproof, especially the roofing. Corrugated iron was better than shingles, but the iron had to be carted to the site and that mightn't be easy. Bill told him the saga of getting a truck to one mountain hut, getting the thing bogged, unloaded, dug out again before being reloaded, and then getting the truck back to the lowlands after rain had made the open plains almost uncrossable. Kitching enjoyed this tale because he wanted the high country to be full of challenges to be overcome. Problems were there to be solved. Bill got the impression that he rather hoped that problems would be encountered by the party so that he, Kitching, could be the proponent of their solution. 'Tellya what, mate,' Bill had to say, 'whenya spent as much time in the hills as I have, you go a long way to keep outa trouble. The easier the better. The cattle know when things are going well, 'cause things are easy for 'em. They sense if things are goin wrong. They get cranky. People think animals are dumb, but they know more than you might think. If things are not right, the animals usually know it before we do. If they start looking atya as ifya stupid, ya probably are. It's time to ask yourself a few questions. What'm I doin wrong?'

Kitching thought this amazing. Animals quicker than humans? That was hard to swallow. 'You reckon they're intelligent? How can they be, if they can't tell you what's wrong? Humans are at the top of creation, believe you me!

Bill was amused. He'd encountered this before. 'I learned a lot in the war. Ifya listened to the officers, they had all the intelligence. Fellas

in the front line were only there to kill or be killed. Orders came out of headquarters 'cause that was where the brains were. So they said. But the poor bastards in the trenches, they were the ones that suffered. The more they suffered the quieter they became. There were blokes that I fought with and nobody in headquarters would have looked at them twice. They would have said they were dumb. Maybe they were, but ifya was near'em, you could feel how much they were suffering. Y'only had to be in the front line for a coupla minutes to know how well or how badly things were going. Ya didn't need anybody to tellya, ya just took it in with your nose, ya could feel it with your skin. Something wrong here, things're not going well. Sometimes the blokes could tellya easy enough what was wrong, sometimes they couldn't, but ifya took any notice of th'atmosphere, ya knew soon enough and once you sensed it in the men aroundya, ya knew what was what.'

Kitching knew he'd been chided, though Bill would have said that he was simply 'sorting him out' or making him see what was right. Obvious, perhaps, if not to Kitching. He'd had a limitation in himself pointed out, and had to accept it. It was Bill's territory they were entering, while his places were far behind him. 'So what are we going to get, when we get into the high country? We're not a mob of cattle, or horses. We need more than that.'

Bill had his answer. 'Best thing's to be quiet. Take it all in because it's got plenty to say, ifya listening. Start with the names. Blackfellas had names for these places, but they're mostly forgotten now. Whitefella names tellya what the first fellas thought. They never knew much, those fellas, just poking around tryin to find out where they were, half the time, but they pinned their experience in the names they give to things. We're comin'along later. The names are already there, can't change'em. We don't have the right ... unless something new happens to us, or we discover somethin nobody's seen before. Then it's okay. Also, think about your family back home. What'm I gonna tell'em when I get home? Ya don't wanta insult the mountains by tellin'em something that isn't true. We gotta responsibility to say what we really feel when we're here. Lotta great places. Each one's different. That means that some of us'll understand one place better than another. So we gotta listen to each other and see what others think of a place that maybe didn't do much for you. Me. Whoever. There's meaning in these

places. Stories o'course, but meaning that hasn't got into a story yet. It isn't in the words, because there aren't any yet, it's in the feelings we have when we're there. They're inside us, waitin to be discovered. Silly, isn't it? I'm telling ya to keep quiet, and I'm telling ya to listen, and to say whatever ya feel.' Bill was at his most affable.

'Put that together any way ya can.'

Morning tea

Kitching irritated Bill when he queried the spot where Billy Dibs lit his fire for morning tea. It was beside a stream, and the party had had to drop off a ridge to reach it. Kitching objected. 'Why hasn't he got his fire up there where we were a couple of minutes ago? We're going to have to climb back up again!'

Bill said, 'Have a look, then have a think.'

Kitching was used to being terse with people but didn't like it happening to him. 'I had a look. That's why I'm asking.'

'Ya feel like carrying a pump onya back?'

The baker was used to being the one who asked hard questions. 'Why would I want a pump?'

'How'reya gonna get the water up the hill?'

'You've got a man whose job it is. Billy – that's his name, isn't it? – he can cart it.'

'Up the hill?'

'If he's too lazy to cart it up, we have to come down. And climb out of here again.'

'Now look, we're tryin to make this trip as easy for each other as we can.'

Looking scornfully in the direction of Billy, Kitching said, 'I'm paying that man's wages. I expect him to do what I want him to do. Isn't that how things are?'

'No.' Bill's voice was ominous in its weight. 'Not like that at all.'

'Well, how are things supposed to be done, since you're the one in charge?'

Bill said, 'We're in this together. I say it every time. Gotta look after each other. The water's down here, we come down to the water.'

Can't expect Billy to cart it up to the track, he's not a beast of burden. deCoursey's in charge of those. Aren't ya mate?'

The birdman's look of surprise made it clear that he wasn't used to hearing anybody question Bill. He patted one of his horses. 'They don't mind. They know they're lucky to be brought along.'

'Lucky?' Kitching sensed he was on slippery ground. Bill took him up. 'They like bein out here. They're bein treated well. They got a good man lookin after them.'

'Thank you, Bill.' This was deCoursey, and Kitching knew that his situation was one where what he thought of as normal didn't apply. The only thing he could do was grumble. 'You people have ways that I don't know about. I run a chain of businesses in the city, and that includes horses and carts delivering bread to near enough to thirty suburbs. I know what I'm doing, believe you me.'

Bill: 'We know what we're doin too. We got a party of city blokes into the hills and home again last year. I reckon we'll do it this year too. Ya gotta put in some effort, though. Can't come out here and start givin orders. That right, George?'

This was to George McGeorge, who'd asked a question about birds of prey at the same point of the previous trip. He looked sympathetically at the baker. 'It's a different world out here.'

Kitching glared.

'These fellows know what they're doing. Anything they do, it's for a reason.'

Kitching, who didn't know what to say, said, 'So why are we all out here anyway?'

Bill laughed. 'Shoulda asked yaself that before you handed over ya money. Which reminds me! You haven't! I meant to askya before we left town, and I forgot. Silly bloody me!' He grinned at the baker, who lacked the grace to make a fool of himself, or apologise, or otherwise reconcile himself with those he was with. He looked stupidly at everyone looking at him. 'Whatta we gonna do?' Bill roared. 'Takeya the other side of Wellington and leaveya there unless ya pay?' He might have gone on if he hadn't noticed deCoursey looking uncomfortable. 'Whaddaya reckon mate? Give him a week's credit and let him pay at the end of the trip?' The birdman said, 'I will go guarantee for Mr Kitching. I vote we let him continue.' Kitching, a stubborn man used

to being dominant, still hadn't grasped that he was being rescued. 'I've got assets! I could buy and sell that pub we stayed in. Without noticing!' Then he saw that most of the city men were grinning. He was being foolish. He needed a way out. It wasn't easy for him, but he took what was available: the birdman's offer. 'Thank you. You're a stranger to me, but it's a good offer. I accept. I'll settle when we get back. And there'll be something in it for you.'

deCourcey looked amazed. For him? In confusion, he said, 'Bill?' The leader of the party said, 'It's a good offer. Ya'd better take it. Give it to the Red Cross. The Salvos. The hospital in Sale, ya might need them some day. None of us gonna be able to ride the high hills forever!' He patted Kitching on the shoulder. 'Billy! Our mate needs a cuppa tea. Ya got it ready?' Billy handed over one of the mugs. 'Sugar's on the log over there. Spoon's with it. Dry the spoon with the cloth. We don't want lumps in the sugar. We're refined fellas out here, no rough types allowed. That right, boys?'

The baker finally yielded, and laughed, or tried to. The others started talking, and soon had him included. Bill, genial as ever, found something to talk about to the man that had annoyed him. Only deCourcey, letting his eyes roam the air, as if searching for the hawk that had frightened the wren last time they'd been here, appeared to be troubled by his own humanity: if people couldn't be easy in themselves without aggression, he wanted to escape whatever it was they showed about themselves. The turbulent baker tried to find an opportunity to say something grateful, but deCourcey kept away, and when the party resumed its trek, the birdman made an early start, and, being quickest by far when it came to walking, he allowed Kitching no further chance that day.

Damper

The next morning, however, Kitching found Bill and took him aside. 'I made a fool of myself yesterday and I'm really sorry for that. I apologise. I'd like to do something. I'm a baker, as you know. I'd like to make some fresh bread for the party.' Bill told him, 'Ya'd need an oven for that, wouldn't ya?'

The baker had his answer. 'I'd make a special damper. Currants and raisins, that sort of thing. I think the boys'd enjoy it, especially if they weren't expecting it. It wouldn't be hard.'

'Currants and raisins. Goodness me. I don't think Tiger's got any. They'd be a bit flash, he'd reckon.'

'I'd go back to the town and get them from the store. Then I'd catch you up. Then we'd get a big fire going, let it burn back to coals ...' His eyes were gleaming. Bill saw that he was in a state of contrition, and needed to do what he was suggesting. 'Trouble is,' Bill said, 'the party's gotta keep moving. Y'd never catch up with us, unless ...' He thought. 'Yeah, I'll lend you deCourcey and a horse. You can ride the horse, deCourcey can walk just as fast, or nearly. He'll go withya, and come back. I've got a hut out near the Castle, on the way to Wellington, where we're going. We'll meetya there. We can stop for a day while you catch us. We'll have a look around Wellington till we seeya. Should be all right.' He called the birdman and told him what he planned to do. 'That all right with you, mate? It's making you do one part of the trip a coupla extra times but our friend here wants to make up for yesterday. He's gonna do something special for us. Recipe for damper, all his own. He's got a chain of bakeries, it should be good.' deCourcey saw that the baker had a need to be forgiven. 'Distance is no problem for me. Your hut can be the base for a day. We will catch you there.' deCourcey also saw that Kitching had no idea what a nuisance his wishes were, what a distortion of the party's purpose, and he further saw that Bill was in forgiving mood. Normally, he'd have scoffed at the idea of letting men go back to town for something to put in a damper. 'Swallow it the way it is,' he would have roared; but he wasn't doing this. Kitching had a need to be forgiven, and there was enough catholicism in the birdman's Irish and French ancestry to let him know the need for expiation.

'You'll have to manage the horses, Bill. Tiger's too busy and the horses don't take to Billy. He's too brash.'

The bushman was up to it. 'I'll manage the horses. Don't you worry about that! Now I suppose I'd better tell everybody what we're doin.'

deCourcey thought not. 'Let them think we have fallen behind. If they ask, tell them they'll see what's happening when it happens. It will be a lesson in virtue, after a fashion.' His leader nodded. 'I'll do it the

way you say. You two slip away. Let people think you're down the back of the party until they realise you're not there at all.'

And so it happened. Kitching the baker and deCourcey the birdman fell to the rear of the party, then turned back to Briagolong, where, by mid-afternoon, and after a rapid movement through the foothill bush, they achieved the town. The two of them went to the little store; deCourcey left it to the baker to go in. He tied up his horse and sat on a bench, and that was where he was sitting when Jan Burke came upon him.

'What on earth are you doing here? Why aren't you out in the hills?'

deCourcey told her he was taking part in a mission of forgiveness.

'Forgiveness? Has someone done something wrong?'

'An atonement has to be made. It will take the form of a damper.'

Jan was tickled. 'Are you going to cook it? Nobody's ever had a damper made by you, deCourcey! I might ride out and eat a bit myself!'

The birdman waved a hand to the door, meaning that her answer was inside, and at the moment that he did so, the man he was indicating appeared. 'Mister Neil Kitching, baking professional, from the city of Melbourne.' Jan said clumsily, 'I remember you.'

'I remember you.'

'What're you doing back here in town?'

'Getting what I should have got before I opened my big clumsy mouth. And now ...' he was looking around '... I need some yeast from the bakery. There it is, over there.'

Jan was unsure. 'If he'll give it to you. He reckons he's got a special brand, and he doesn't like to let people in on his secret.'

The birdman said, 'I will explain the need to him. I hope he will be kind.' Jan considered him afresh. Who else would have been willing to backtrack for some yeast, and some fruit to go in a damper? She said to Kitching, 'You're a baker, you say?'

'I am.'

'When you come back to the hotel, I might get you to give me some lessons. There's a lot I don't know about bread. It's not one of my strengths.'

'I'm happy to show you anything you want to know.'

'You're a fair way behind the rest of your party?'

Kitching looked at deCoursey, dependent on the birdman's understanding. deCoursey said, 'We will catch them at Bill's hut. Between my Castle and Mount Wellington.'

Jan was amused. 'Your castle? You're laying claim, are you?'

'There is an ownership. Though whether it's mine or I belong to it, is not decided.'

It struck Jan Burke that now her life had been changed she must expect conversations to be as illogical, unexpected, or damnably queer as this. 'When are you going to announce the decision?'

deCoursey was ready. 'When the decision has been made. And for that ...'

Jan, full of curiosity, found words in her mouth: 'For that?'

'... we must await our signal.'

Definite as he was, she had more to ask. 'Who's going to give it? Can you tell me that?'

'No.' She had never heard him more certain. 'But it will come. I will know, one day, of that I'm sure.' She looked at him and he looked at her. Was he mad, or did he see things nobody else could see? 'Those clouds that swirl around the Castle, are they God's mind, revealing itself? Or simply clouds? Can clouds be simple, if they remind us of things we cannot understand? Are they not a metaphor but a simple representation of what happens when a thought is being thought? How can we know? We live on the brink of uncertainty, all the time. It is precarious, but, strangely, it's the only way I can think of for being safe.'

He looked a little tired, as if exposing the clouds swirling in his own mind had drained him. She thought it best to say, 'The brink of uncertainty? Well, that's true enough. Look at you two, if anybody wanted proof. You should be in the mountains, but you're not. But you will be, and it'll all be happening for a reason that's too hard to understand ...'

Kitching broke in. 'I made a pig of myself. I have to make up for it. I'm only good at two things – baking, and business. deCoursey's helped me. I'm finding my way to something else. With any luck, I'll get here. Without that luck, I'm lost!'

She bowed her head. 'Spoken, truly, like the pilgrim that you are!'

Missing the birdman

Bill wondered when, or even if, the birdman, his dearest friend, though he hardly knew it, and the baker fella – Kitching – would catch the rest of the party. He slowed down for a return visit to Castle Hill, telling stories a-plenty of deCourcey's association with that luminous peak, then, heavy with emptiness, he led them to a hut he'd built himself. Gillio's hut! Strange to have something named for him, known because he was known. How did he know himself?

Bill was not an introspective man. He thought of himself as part of everything he knew, and his years in the army had shown him where he belonged. He'd felt unchecked in France, despite the danger. Death was so close that you lived as if your last minute was around the corner. Coming back home had meant assuming responsibility for more than himself. He was far from the first to take cattle into the mountains – there'd been generations doing that – but the responsibility for the mountains, as well as the cattle, was something he took on with knowledge of what he was doing. The mountains all had names, if they were important enough to matter, and there were tracks between them, around them, into the valleys and up the ridges. He was fond of telling his travellers, 'Ya gotta know whatya doing,' but what that involved wasn't something he bothered to analyse. Why do that when you had the mountains to test your knowledge? If someone had said to Bill, how do I get a mob of cattle from here to there, Bill would have told him to get on the road and do it. What he didn't know he'd soon find out. That or get lost! Cerebration wasn't the way he worked. As they said in a later age, you jumped in the deep end and swam. The sun was there to guide you and even on the gloomiest days you could tell which side of the ranges you were on by what was growing – dry-side stuff on the north, deeper-rooted, mossy, ferny stuff on the south. East and west? Well, if you couldn't tell that by the time of the day you might as well be ...

... in Melbourne! Bill was an instinctive bushman, and it was only when the pilgrims pursued him with questions that he realised how much they didn't know. They had no frame of reference so they allowed the silliest thoughts to slip out of their mouths. This was what made him aware of how much he depended on the missing birdman,

somewhere on the track between the town and where they were, a little west of Castle Hill. deCoursey, so different from the veteran, had access to aspects of the mountain bush that Bill couldn't see for himself but knew must be there. Each of the places they visited had personality, anyone could see that, but what that personality was and how it affected those who came to feel it was barely in Bill's range. The birdman might be strange but he was familiar with the places' characters. The combination of fear and humility he offered made him not only a familiar inhabitant of the ranges but almost a mobile aspect of them, soaring through the morning light, the storms, the swirling cloudbursts, deepening snows, the days of scorching sunlight and threatening fire, a presence that moved among them like a flitting succession of local gods, negotiating with the humans wanting to make residence in places where whites had done little more than linger. deCoursey was no anthropologist; what the black people had thought of his ranges he had no idea. It was doubtful if he wanted to know. The mountains could speak for themselves if they wanted to, he would have said. You can have a conversation any time, so long as you were humble enough to leave silences for them to fill.

They were not to be interrogated. They were Delphic oracles that might, or might not, respond. They were like Bill in not needing words. Eloquence was in the presence, they might have said, had they bothered, or been able to bother, to speak. But why fall back on words? They drew a line against the sky. It could be traced by the eye and the following mind. Like everything else, they changed according to the angle from which they were seen, so they made no statement to be maintained consistently, like a politician's policy. You couldn't say to the mountains, 'You said ...' because they didn't. They were arbitrary, and whimsical. They ignored you in their commitment to silence, but if you were respectful, and looked for suitable places, they weren't inhospitable. They didn't mind you nestling against them, or sliding your body, or your horses – or even lighting your fires – somewhere along their extended, stretching arms. They opened their eyes to get a glimpse of what you might be doing. deCoursey knew these ranges, accepted them as he didn't and couldn't accept his own humanity. If that was a shortcoming, it was also a gain. Bill was relieved when, on the morning of the third day, deCoursey, and Kitching, moved into

a still-sleepy camp having breakfast by two of Billy's fires, one inside Gillio's hut, one outside, so they could warm their backsides as they sipped tea or coffee: yes, they got a choice! This was a Skyline Tour, and it was luxurious by the standards of the ranges, represented by the taller of the two men who'd just walked into camp – or rather, it was deCoursey who was walking and Kitching, on horseback, who was only just keeping up with him. Bill heard the commotion and stepped out of the hut that bore his name.

'Didja get whatya went back for?'

Kitching waved a pack. 'Certainly did!'

'Whenna we gonna get the benefit?'

Kitching was off his horse. 'Soon as you like. Now? Or lunch time? Or morning tea? Tell us what you want, and when, and it'll be yours!'

It was a special moment, Bill saw, for the baker-bloke. He'd been accepted. He'd made good his mistake. They'd better take up his offer. 'We wasn't planning on going anywhere for an hour or so. Why not right now?'

'Right now?' The Melbourne man was relieved to be given his reconciliation so easily. 'I'll get to work on the dampers. That fire's too big. We'll let it die down if you don't mind, then I can use it to work with. That okay?'

A wave from Bill was all he needed. He found a board in the hut, spread the ingredients he'd gone to the town to get, and began his mixing and rolling. The pilgrims drank their drinks, and waited for him to get the dampers he was making into the coals. The sky looked down in blessing and the mountains were amused.

After mass

The Burkes were driving home after mass when Jan told Tommy to stop.

'Why? Ya not getting out here?'

'I need to have a look down there.' She indicated the track to the cemetery.

'What on earth for?'

'Father said something that's made me think.'

‘Not too hard, I hope. What’s there to think about down there?’

‘It’s where we’re all going to end up.’

‘Not for a long while yet, Janny. Let’s get home and get the roast on.’

They haggled, but only out of habit; Tommy knew the firmness of his wife. She gave him instructions to pass on to Denise, then she straggled down the track to where Briagolong’s dead were buried. It was a ragged clearing in the bush, much bigger than the town’s dead demanded; just why the area set aside was so much bigger than the town’s population required was probably buried in the foolishness of some council debate half a century earlier. There were some marble crosses, and plinths, a few cast-iron fences, some wooden grave markers, and hummocks of dirt hardly higher than the ground they’d appropriated. Death had brought honour to few of the town’s residents, yet the publican’s wife – the boss of the hotel, to all intents and purposes – felt her mind settling as she approached. Something that had been troubling her was on the point of resolution.

The first grave she came to was a double one, and both headstones spoke of meeting in the after-life. Rubbish, Jan told herself. They’re lying together in a state of deception. She wondered if the reference to life in the next world was an imposition of a priest, the undertakers, the dead themselves or their family, getting rid of their anxieties by making an affirmation on the headstones. The next grave also referred to the glory of life everlasting, and again the publican’s wife reacted strongly. More rubbish! Father O’Neill had been preaching, that very morning, about the certainty of God’s love for his creation and Jan knew that it was the word ‘certainty’ that had set her off. Nothing could be less certain, indeed improbable, than life everlasting. She rested her hands on the rail of this second grave, feeling better for having brought her thoughts to the surface, instead of letting them be suppressed by the ‘certainties’ of the church.

If the church says it’s certain, she thought, it’s most certainly not.

She moved on a couple of graves, still groping for the centre of her disquiet. What the church said was rarely true unless it was obvious. That much was clear. She had a feeling, looking about, that her disbelief, her doubting, was being turned against her. Father O’Neill had also preached, a few weeks before, on the situation of those who

doubted whether god existed. He said it was common, indeed natural, to have moments when faith showed itself as weak, and then he guided his flock through these periods, telling them how to recognise such moods when they were coming on, how to counter weakness of faith, and then to rebuild one's strength by 'getting back in touch through prayer': it had been a convincing performance, but Jan wasn't having it any longer, indeed it was why she'd got her husband to let her out of the car so she could come to the graves to think. She brought to mind the priest in his robes, the smoke about him and his altar, the trickery she sensed in his rhetoric. What Father O'Neill and his like were most skilled at, she saw, was their choice of ground on which to ... not so much fight as conduct the conversation they had with the people they called their flock.

Flock! Jan was furious. They were making her a sheep in need of guidance, when everybody in a rural town knew what happened to sheep: they had their throats cut after a lifetime of fleecing. Father O'Neill's *flock!* She didn't belong to that mob, or if she had, she was releasing herself. So far so good, but what was the rest of the trick that she hadn't got hold of yet?

Ah yes, the choice of ground on which to allow dispute. The trick was to set up an argument, a point of difference, as to whether god existed or not. This was where the church was clever. By allowing that you might wonder if god existed, and by discussing your doubts, and the evidence to and fro with you, they were keeping you within sight of believing again, the moment your doubts were resolved, or simply disappeared for one reason or another. The real question was, and she could feel her thoughts racing to keep up with the new assertion taking over her mind, the real question was not whether god existed or not, but, since he clearly wasn't around any more the question was, who had abandoned whom? Had god got sick of the human race and left them to fight things out for themselves, or had humans got sick of god because of his incompetence and walked away?

That felt better! She was pulling the argument onto her terms. Her situation was that much less frightening. The thought of the pork roast Denise would now be putting in the oven brought pleasure to her mind. But there was still work to do. What else was there to think about, and resolve if possible?

She looked at the bush. It was so scrappy! The bush was like that; it needed to be complete. Once you started clearing, you interrupted, you broke into, the completeness it had once possessed and that second state, of interruption, was much worse than the first because the chief quality of the bush was its completeness, the wholeness it gained from everything, great or small, interacting with everything else. It was a bit like believing in god, actually. Once you cut out a few areas, cleaned them up for purposes of your own, the system's wholeness was interrupted, and once that happened breakdown was never far away.

She looked at the bush. It needed to be healed. It was a pity that a cemetery had been cleared, or semi-cleared, to allow burials of the dead when fire was nature's way of dealing with the dead of other species. She started to count the graves, got to twenty, then gave up. Too many, or not enough! Then it struck her that what she was doing to herself was what she'd accused Father O'Neill of doing to her, that is, of falsifying the terms of debate in order to create a ground where she could feel safe. It was a favourite trick of the church and she'd let it take over her mind. She shouldn't be worrying about the dead. They could look after themselves, or not be looked after at all. What about the living? If the church was so busy preserving itself, it was time for the living to look after themselves too, because if they didn't the church would enslave them, as they had for centuries. Boldly she realised something of the scope of her rebellion, and didn't step back. What about the living? They too must look after themselves. She and her husband were doing their bit. They offered drinks for those who needed the strains of their minds eased a little, and meals for those who needed strength. They had rooms for those wanting somewhere to stay the night. They offered conversation and contact for the lonely, the miserable or those who felt themselves separate from the rest of their kind. What they did was worth doing ... and then she felt a moment of doubt. She was throwing religion out the door, but she needed to borrow a little of it back, and the bit she needed was human love. She might have offered it to the dead in Briagolong cemetery, but what was the use of that? They couldn't, or wouldn't take it. Bigger them, they'd had their turn. They were finished now.

No! Let the living look after each other, and the only way to get

them to do it without quarrelling, getting drunk and having punch-ups, was the path of love, which needed a little bit of the fencing which kept people on the straight and narrow, the fencing known as humour.

Jan Burke turned for the gateway. She didn't need the company of the dead any more. The living were more necessary, thank you very much. Denise would have the roast on by now, or by heaven she'd better have! It was a lively, re-fashioned Jan, full of confidence and purpose, who strode down the track to the main road into town. There'd be no more negativism from her, thank you very much. As soon as she'd had her lunch she'd have a little sleep, and then she'd start going through the rooms, checking them out, sweeping and cleaning, so that the old place would feel brighter and warmer than it'd done in years. Their little town was like the cemetery, half built, half done, in a wilderness that had been broken into when maybe it would have best been left alone, but now that the interruption had been made, something more had to be made of it, and that would come from the positive stream – the stream of love – she felt rising inside herself and getting ready to flow into the world. Father O'Neill! And his church? Bugger them, they weren't half the force she was going to be. She had all the advantages on her side, she was sure; she knew where everybody would rather gather, for laughter, and stories, and a drink. In the Briagalong Hotel, where the bloody hell else?

An abiding silence

They lay on the edge of Spion Kopje and looked down. 'Ya can't see the lake from here,' Bill told them, 'but it's down there all right.' Some of the pilgrims were for making the descent there and then, but Bill put an end to that. 'Nuh. We'll do it tomorrow when we're fresh. It's not easy on the legs, going down. Besides, Billy and Tiger are expecting us at Miller's hut. Not far from here, a pretty easy walk. It's good that y're keen but you'll enjoy it more tomorrow. Let's get going now, and get ourselves to that hut!'

As the party walked towards Miller's hut, and the fire and food they would welcome, Bill found himself beside a man called Peter Abbott, who looked glum, disappointed, perhaps blocked in some secret

purpose he'd brought to the mountains. To encourage him, Bill told him there wasn't far to go. He could get his boots off and his feet up in a few minutes. Abbott surprised him, however, by saying that what was troubling him was the silence surrounding them. Unsure what to make of this, Bill told him, 'They're not a very talkative lot, these mountains. They encourage us just by being there. At the end of a day's walk, we think we've heard lots of ideas flowing into our brains, but it's actually the other way around. We're doing all the thinking and they're sittin' quiet as can be, but they set our minds working and we think we must have overheard them talking.' He chuckled. 'Silly idea, but then that's how our minds work, isn't it!'

Peter Abbott was clearly uncertain, so Bill told him, 'I wouldn't call myself a thinker. I just like being out here. Talk to deCoursey when we get to the camp. He's the thinker in the party.' So the disappointed pilgrim found a moment when the birdman had finished distributing their packs. 'Bill told me to talk to you. He could see I was disappointed.' deCoursey looked at him. 'What did you come looking for?'

Peter Abbott: 'That's a good question.'

deCoursey: 'Wisdom? We have to find that in ourselves.'

'I realise that. It's the silence that's upsetting me. To be honest, I thought I might find god out here, and I haven't. The mountains aren't giving me anything. They're holding back. I thought everything would come clear, once we got in the high country, but it hasn't. I'm walking along tracks, following you people, and surrounded by others like myself, and I don't seem to be uplifted ...'

'That was what you expected?'

'Knowing myself, I thought it would be a sure thing.'

deCoursey smiled. 'How well did you know yourself? Not so well at all.'

Peter Abbott felt trapped. Somewhere inside himself he was squirming. 'They're just rocks, and snow gums, and some very beautiful flowers, yes, nice enough, but ...' He gestured impatiently.

'If you were looking for an answer, what was the question?'

This took the traveller by surprise. 'Perhaps I'm not a pilgrim at all!'

The birdman said nothing, but, standing stock-still, he looked into Peter's eyes. Abbott, surprised again, and out of his depth, said, 'Maybe

I made a mistake when I decided to come out here?’ deCoursey shook his head. ‘You are learning about yourself. You thought the mountains would tell you, but they never tell us anything.’ The traveller was surprised again. ‘That’s not what they told me about you, at the hotel.’ This appeared to annoy the birdman. ‘Talk, talk, talk!’ There was condemnation in his voice. Peter tried to placate him. ‘I wasn’t on this trip last year. I was listening to some of those that were ...’

The eyes were piercing his defences.

‘... they were quite respectful. They more or less indicated that you ...’

The birdman was stony in his silence.

‘... understood the mountains better than they did. You felt at home in them in a way that they couldn’t. I think that’s what they were trying to say.’

deCoursey spoke impatiently, as if it was painful to say things so obvious. ‘Mountains are not mirrors. They have personalities of their own. But neither are they minds. They don’t think. They have an enviable existence. Their life span is greater than ours. They have a curious effect on us. They make us aware of the living quality of our minds. They don’t get sick. They can’t go mad. They can’t get ideas above their station because their surroundings tell them how important they are. Or not. Even the highest of them are humble because they have nothing to be proud of. All they do is keep the air circulating about them.’

The pilgrim wanted to fight back. ‘So why do you and Bill and the others bring us out here? Can you tell me that? Why don’t you leave us to sweat it out in the city, working hard and paying taxes?’

It seemed that the birdman was amused. He smiled. For a tense, withdrawn man, he was for a moment genial. ‘Bill works hard. He doesn’t make much money. He decided to start a business.’

‘And?’

The pilgrim was wrong in thinking that the birdman’s mind must move in sequence. deCoursey looked over Peter’s shoulder at the party standing around, sitting on the grass, smoking and/or sipping tea: staring at the clouds, some of them, while others lay on their backs with their feet resting on the packs they’d recently had handed back to them. ‘It is a happy party. Some good must be being done.’

Peter Abbott looked, and it was as deCourcey said; nonetheless he rallied for a new attack. 'You're not the same as them. They're on holiday. You're here all the time!' This time, he felt sure, he could force some confession from the eccentric he was questioning, yet he was left uncertain of his success or otherwise when deCourcey answered, 'I live at the edge of my mind, curious about what lies beyond. Will a walk in the mountains make me better informed? Perhaps, if I'm fortunate. But you are all the same as me, though you like to think I'm different. Your minds have edges too. You wonder what's beyond, or perhaps you don't. Perhaps you concentrate on what's in front of your noses. When you do that, if you do that, the mountains will always seem amazing. The more you are aware of them, the more it's clear that you weren't aware, before, of that edge you live on. As for you and me, these men and me, that's easy. You can go back to the city and forget all about the mountains if you want to, but I can't. I live here, they're beside me, night and day. They make me come to terms with myself.' He looked stern. 'It is not easy, let me tell you that!'

The birdman wonders

Peter Abbott joined the other men and was soon making toast at the fire. deCourcey, on the other hand, felt a need to be alone. The conversation, he knew, had done something to him. Destroyed his base, perhaps? Taken away his wish to fly? Feeling troubled, he moved away in search of solitude, but Bill noticed, and called to him. 'Come and have a cuppa tea!' deCourcey told his friend he needed to check the horses, and kept walking. He'd given himself his exit, because Bill would accept anything to do with the horses, but it put a limit on him. Of time! It wasn't a dimension that troubled deCourcey, normally, but here, today, at the end of a day's tramping, it was pressing. Bill would think something must be wrong if he wasn't back in five minutes with no sign of worry on his brow. So what was troubling him?

He knew without much introspection that it was his last statement, that the mountains made him come to terms with himself. Was that true? If you came to terms with yourself, did that mean you found peace? No, but it meant you understood your position. You knew who

you were and you knew your position on every matter that came up. Bill was at peace with himself but he, deCourcey, wasn't. So what did he want? He knew the answer well enough. He didn't want to be a human being because they were vicious creatures, greedy, selfish and cruel. A trip into the mountains, such as he was making, gave him escape. There was virtue, and something positive, in everything they did, he, Bill, Tiger, Billy and the pilgrims. They were cooperative, communal, and on a higher plane than their normal lives. The country set a standard. There were no temptations so they couldn't fall down any drops. They travelled together, giving support. But when the trip was over ...

... they'd go back to the everyday world, a little better, perhaps, for having been high, and away, but brought down to what they knew was reality. They, for all the virtue of their excursion, were like drinkers who managed to keep off alcohol for a week ... and then went on a bender. Their virtue wasn't permanent. deCourcey looked around. The camp was out of sight, but Bill could be seen, making his way through the bush to see what his mate was up to. deCourcey felt weak. What was the good of making these tours if all that happened was that you went back home the same troubled, flawed man you'd always been? Bill was getting close. What was he going to say? What could he say to the friend who looked after him, made sure that he didn't get lost in a cloud of excess?

Bill was beside him. 'Everythin all right, mate?'

deCourcey loved this ever-ready consideration. There were no gods on earth, only mortals, but some were better than others. 'The horses are well, Bill. We will have a good day tomorrow.'

This suited Bill's one-day-at-a-time philosophy. 'Down to the lake, around to the Gable End, Mount Hump. I think we should make the Middle Hut by night. Long day ahead.' He peered at the birdman. 'Long day' implied challenges. He was asking a question. Was deCourcey up to it, or was he feeling some personal strain that meant he might fail the tour when they were vulnerable, unsupported, still a long way from home? The birdman felt strength flowing into him: did it come from the air, the mountains they both loved, the earth they strode across with their heavily booted feet, or was it mysteriously available because of some rightness of mind, some alignment of their

personalities with forces flowing through the universe around them, and occasionally, in moments like now, perhaps, flowing centrally through them because they not only allowed it, they wanted it, and had placed themselves correctly to receive the benefit of currents they barely understood but knew were there? deCoursey was happy, in a way that came rarely to him. He knew Bill would be happy too, when he heard him say, as he now said, in a voice full of confidence, 'Today was good. It will be even better tomorrow, Bill. That part of my mind that flies high to look around, has come down to tell me so, and I am feeling sure.'

Bill knew this was good. 'If that's how you feel mate, then that's how I'm feeling too.'

The world from above

In the morning the party went down to the hidden lake, and looked around for a couple of hours before struggling back. Tiger and Billy had a meal and a fire to welcome them. deCoursey noticed that the day had wrought a change in the men. They'd been down, they were up again, and they seemed to know it. They wanted to analyse what they'd done. They wondered why there wasn't a permanent settlement beside the lake, something Bill found amusing. 'Cold out here in winter, ya know. Most of the year, in fact.' They weren't sure whether they were dealing with certainty, or simply a man who closed his mind. What did deCoursey think, they wanted to know. He told them that settlement would be an invasion. Humans should stay where they belonged. This sounded ridiculous to the visitors. Humans belonged anywhere once they'd made a permanent settlement. Belonging was a feeling you had once you'd created a place for yourself – but the birdman merely threw twigs on the fire as he listened. They weren't touching him, they saw. Had anyone, any idea, ever touched him? They knew he wasn't married, as most of them were. Was he, then, only a freak? Some of them thought it was time to test him out. Martin Casey wanted to know who'd first discovered the hidden lake, and who'd given it its name? deCoursey, looking uncomfortable, said no more than 'Bill?' The leader of the party explained that the lake wasn't really discovered

because it had been known to the black people of Gippsland, though which tribe he had no idea. Nor did he know what the name meant, or whether it was an aboriginal word or not. 'We just take things the way they come, ya know. Lotsa things get forgotten, or nobody ever knew in the first place. It's how things are.' Then he had a moment of recall. 'Johnny Snowdon, he was a blackfella from Glenfalloch, it was Johnny Snowdon who first told the whitefellas where the lake was. Nobody had seen it, up till then. The bloke he told claimed he was the discoverer! Couldn't give credit where it was due, had to claim it for himself.' Martin could see that Bill and deCoursey had a low opinion of anyone claiming credit that didn't belong to him. 'Nobody owns the mountains,' said Bill; 'Oh, there's a few patches of freehold here and there, but there's an awful lotta bush in between. Which reminds me! We gotta get ourselves down to the Gable End, and have a good look, before we push on to the next camp. Up you get, you fellas!'

An hour later they were at an awesome edge, a rock face falling hundreds of feet in front of them, a plain behind them, and vistas to the east, west, and south. The photographers – Herb Ellison, Peter Gill and Terry McAuliffe – got busy, taking pictures of the pilgrims looking down on the lowlands to the south, lifting hands above their eyes to look sun-wards to the west, pointing to landmarks in the east. The more nervous of them wanted to know how they were going to get down and were only partially reassured by Bill telling them there was a bit of a trail to their right, 'and it's a steep drop the first two hundred yards, then it calms down a bit: shouldn't be too much trouble.' They wanted to know where deCoursey had gone with their tents, and packs, because he'd disappeared and they weren't at all sure they trusted him to find them again, or get their packs to where they were going to be.

Bill reassured them. 'He doesn't do things the way everyone else does, but he knows what he's doin, believe you me. There's a hut down there we were planning to use as our camp tonight, and he's on the way there now. He's just gone a bit of a long way round, the horses don't like the track where I'm takin ya in a coupla minutes.' Peter Gill asked Bill to stand in a certain position, pointing, and the bushman wanted to know what he was supposed to point at.

'The way home,' Peter told him, clicking the camera as he did so.

Bill heard the click. 'Ya got what ya want?' Then he pointed again.

‘That’s Maffra, that clearing over there. Briagolong’s to the left a bit, but Mount Angus is in the way, so ya can’t see it. Melbourne’s that way, of course, but well and truly over the horizon, so don’t imagine you’ll be able to see your homes from here. But at night, if ya looked in that direction, y’d see the lights of the city, a glow in the sky, ya can’t see them direct ...’

The pilgrims were impressed. A glow in the sky? No more than that? They were a little over-awed. They’d come so far that the only evidence of their homes was a glow in the sky. It was humbling. As was the precipice at their feet. ‘Who gave this place its name, Bill? The Gable End?’ Bill, who had no idea, said in his simple way, ‘Search me!’ and they knew that the firm information that their working lives were based on had run out. Bill knew so much, and he knew so little. Tiger, who got food for them when they were hungry, and that was every day, offered them extras if they showed interest, but he was no open book when it came to local knowledge. They suspected he knew just enough to get to the places where Bill wanted him to serve up meals, and Billy ... well, Billy didn’t have much idea. They felt that if anything went wrong and he had to walk out, he’d do it by instinct, not from following any line, or rules, of clever, well-adapted bushmanship. He’d struggle out of the bush at the edge of Briagolong, he’d go to the pub and get a beer from Tommy Burke and say, with relief in his voice, ‘That was a close call!’

Bill knew ever so much, yet he knew so little. deCoursey had enough bushmanship to be able to lead his horses but they couldn’t draw much confidence from him. They supposed he could find his way home if he had to. And they couldn’t? Yes or no? Perhaps? They looked to the south, the precipice yawning before them, and knew they were above the world, separate from it, detached, yearning for home, yearning for another life that did away with the necessities of home, and family ... yearning, a state of emptiness, unfulfilment, an uplifted state, a soaring that made sense of the birdman’s wish to fly and a feeling of imprisonment as the sun lowered itself in the western sky. They wanted deCoursey to have their tents, their haversacks, in the right place, ready for them to pitch, and unpack, they wanted Billy to have a fire, Tiger to have steaks sizzling and potatoes boiling, mustard or sauce ready to put over what they were going to eat. They wanted a good night’s sleep and another day tomorrow, they wanted

it all to go on forever, and they wanted, of course, to get home safely. Bill, they noticed, was stepping back, now, and calling, 'Have a last look everybody! We gotta get on this track before it gets dark. We're a bit later than I was planning. The last half hour, we'll be steering by Billy's fire and the smell of Tiger's cooking! Off we go, boys, we got no time to lose, but be careful where you put your feet, the next coupla hundred yards!'

The centre of a fusion

The pilgrims caught up with deCoursey at the middle hut. Billy and the birdman had a fire roaring and Tiger was into action. 'Tomorrow night's the last night I'll be cooking for ya, and then it's Mrs Burke. Briagolong pub's lookin' good!' His levity was mistaken. They no longer wanted to get back. Somewhere on the trek from the Gable End they'd realised what they were leaving behind, and it was hurting. Martin Casey said to Herb, Terry, Peter, the photographers, that he wanted to get shots of the group setting off in the morning. 'While we've still got the high country in our heads.' Pilgrims looked at him. 'Shining like haloes,' he added, and they laughed. Was it too sad to be funny, or too funny to be sad? They could have a few drinks at the pub, and do it all again in reminiscence, but the following morning a bus would take them to the train, and then the long journey home, leaving the mountains where they always were, forever and ever, amen, the god-like figures they sometimes seemed to be. Trapyard Hill, Mount Kent, the Pinnacles, Mount Arbuckle. The mountains all had names, which meant they had histories, and behind whatever stories had been affixed to them, they had bulk, they were linked in long-running ranges which lifted themselves every once in a while, demanding a name, offering a vantage point for looking at other peaks, other ranges, and then the deep declivities where the water ran, creeks made out of streams and rivers out of creeks, slithering ever-downwards until the lowlands gave an ease of lazy movement which said the hills, the great peaks, were above and behind.

Yet the walkers wouldn't forget. Even on the train they'd be hiking in those hills again, eyes on horizons, memories playing with names,

trying to emulate Bill's every-which-way recognition of places they'd never been to and he was familiar with. They envied him; they couldn't be him. Those who'd attended last year's dinner when the albums were presented remembered Bill as a fish out of water at the Cathedral Hotel, affable as he may have been. He had a place and he belonged in it. He'd get back there on the next day's train. deCoursey hadn't even made it that far. He'd gone no further than the hotel verandah where he'd dropped their gear, and he'd ridden to his farm which none of them had seen, and which he didn't want to talk about. Mrs Burke had told them about the mother who entered town only rarely and the sister who didn't. So the bush men belonged in the bush and they, they had to accept, belonged in the city ... but their tour, organised by Bill and Martin Casey, had brought them to this other land, this high country where they could walk in an air of freedom they'd never known, surrounded by stories of miners and stolen cattle, desperate men looking for gold, bee-keepers looking for whatever was in flower, and endlessly, invisibly, linked by birds in that ceaseless motion which contrasted with the regular movement of sun, clouds, stars and moon above. They agreed, standing by the fire blazing in the open not far from the hut where Tiger was cooking, that whatever heaven was, whatever it meant, whatever state of mind had the claim on that religiously-sanctioned word, they'd been pretty close to it in the last few days.

Bill took this as proof of enjoyment, and therefore success. deCoursey, still unsure how far, how much, his beliefs, his need for a spiritual quest, had altered over the last couple of days, showed how uncertain he was by dithering around the fire, adding bits of wood, moving billies to spots of greater or lesser exposure. Martin Casey, who saw himself as spokesman for the travellers, said, 'deCoursey, they won't boil if you keep moving them. Leave them alone and give them a chance.' It had a certain authority, but it appeared not to touch the birdman. 'Your friends were speaking of heaven?' Casey said yes, they were. What had they said that had caught the birdman's mind?

'It's only now you're coming back to earth that you can believe in heaven!'

This amused the few who heard him say it. Carl Taylor, who'd taken the bets for the race across the Snowy Range the year before,

called out, ‘Anybody want to get some odds on their chances of making heaven?’ Carl was noisy, a cautious man who made a front, a presentation of himself, that featured taking risks, giving chance a chance to do its work in sorting out the successes and failures of the (human) race, and he decided to challenge his companions. ‘Who thinks he’s been in heaven the last few days? Eh? Anybody want to put a quid on himself and say so? We’re not paying out except to those who’ve got evidence!’ This was all the more amusing because there was no way any of them could produce something signed, sealed by Saint Peter to say they’d knocked on the Pearly Gates, though that was where they thought they’d been. Yet it was deCoursey’s agitation that showed them they were not entirely fooling, joking, about Saint Peter. ‘People talk about bringing heaven down to earth, but we have done the opposite. We have found the earth uplifted to what we used to think was heaven.’

None of them knew how to take it, so they challenged his choice of words: ‘Used to think? Used to ... what do you mean by that?’

deCoursey, knowing that something inside himself had changed, and was changing still, said to them as they stood, kneeled or squatted by the fire that completed their day of walking, absorbing, and experiencing release, said, ‘Words are changing their meanings and I, no, all of us, we, are at the centre of this fusion!’ By now they were partially accepting of his combination of puzzling statements, querulous smiles, and deeply withdrawn disappearances inside his troubled soul, so, instead of pushing him to explain, they waited, but he said no more, leaving them with the word ‘fusion’, appropriate enough to use by a blazing fire, but referring, they realised, or some of them did, to something that had happened to him in the time they’d been with him, without him making clear to them exactly what had happened. So he was as much a mystery as ever, but this time whatever it was that had happened to him had been caused by his exposure to the same things that they’d been exposed to, so that they, in some way, must have undergone the same transformation that had affected him, changed him, if his words could be believed.

Home

They went home the next day, by train, looking with longing in their eyes at the mountains which had sheltered them, called them, hosted them, changed them, though how they could not say. When the Gippsland train got to Flinders Street they'd leave the station carrying their bags, they'd leave each other, they'd be un-bonded at last, and free – free? – to resume their normal lives. Each of them knew there was no avoiding it, each of them felt ambivalent. They'd been captured by the paradox that life-changing experiences happen quickly and, having ended, they push the central figure, the one who's been changed, out the other side, confused by what's happened, not having understood it yet, and feeling that the only sure ground is behind them, that's to say in the experience itself or in the secure period behind it when they didn't know what was going to happen.

The train trundled along its tracks, taking them back to Melbourne. The splendid places they'd learned to revere were dropping behind them, further and further with every passing minute. Trapyard Hill, Mount Arbuckle, Mount Wellington, the Gable End, Mount Hump, the Moroka hut, Bennison's Plain, Castle Hill, Mount Kent, the Pinnacles, the Wonnangatta River with its like-named station, abandoned now, haunted by tales of murder unsolved, the Crooked River, Briagolong where they'd had their first and last drinks, the Crosscut Saw, the Snowy Plain, long stretches of snowgum, strips of mountain ash (woollybutt), messmate, narrow-leaf peppermint and mountain grey gum, black sallee too, everything that grew in those uplifted places they were leaving behind.

They arrived. They shook hands, and went their several ways. Some of them had friends picking them up with cars, others caught trains, trams or buses. One or two who lived in the city walked. An hour or two after they reached Flinders Street, they were with their families, hearing what had happened while they'd been away, marking the date they'd provisionally set down for dinner at the Cathedral Hotel on the night the photo-albums were handed out. Would Bill be down, this year? deCoursey and the others? Martin Casey had even invited Tommy and Jan Burke to the reunion if they felt like coming. 'After

all,' he'd said to them, 'we spend the first night and the last night of our trip at your hotel, you give us beds and a drink or three for those who feel like it. You're part of our tour too!'

Tommy thought this was no more than a bit of palaver and couldn't imagine himself joining the city men whom he deigned to allow in his pub, but Jan, his wife, was more accommodating. 'That's a lovely offer. I'd enjoy a couple of days in town. It'd be good to see you all again, and hear about your plans for next year. You are coming back, aren't you?' And of course Martin and those who'd been standing around assured her quite vehemently that they'd be back the following year, it'd take another world war to stop them doing that! The previous great conflict that their country had been involved in had been supposed to be the war to end all wars but nobody believed that any more; mankind was too troublesome to be able to keep itself quiet, so, they had to suppose, there'd be another war another day, but until that time, and while peace was prevailing, their best bet was to revel in what peaceful days allowed – walking through the mountains on Bill Gillio's Skyline Tours.

They were home. Martin Casey slept late, then told his wife he needed to go to his office to pick up all the briefs that had accumulated while he'd been away. Sylvia, his wife, was disappointed. The break in the legal year wasn't all that long, she and the children hadn't had a break, she thought the family should have a few days at Sorrento; she'd rung the hotel and they had rooms. Martin conceded. He'd read his briefs on the verandah of the Sorrento Hotel while Sylvie and the kids paddled in the bay, then he'd join them. Then they'd have lunch ...

A day later, it was happening as she'd planned. The waters of the bay, and the sands that edged them, were gorgeous, and sometimes they walked to the ocean, wilder by far, and pounding on the shores outside the bay. The papers didn't arrive until afternoon, and they didn't read them anyhow. Her husband was content, the family was as one, and yet there was a difference. Inside Martin, her husband, something new was buried. There was a dimension Sylvie couldn't reach. She asked him about it, sitting on the hotel verandah, sipping gin and tonic before dinner in the spacious dining room. He put it down to the briefs. 'There's a ghastly rape case, I think it's going to be easy enough to get the man off the charge but the fact is, he did a horrible thing. He *is* horrible, and the woman he raped isn't much better, though I

suppose I shouldn't say it. And there's a fraud case. Man who'd worked for his company for twenty-seven years, had been making off with money in small amounts until he got greedy. Tried to get away with the lot. He's been caught up with, he'll go to jail for sure, but ...

Sylvie said, 'You've been handling cases like these all your life. What's the change?' He was caught. What was the change? Could he really say he was changed by a good walk and some splendid views? No, the change was in himself. The gap between himself and the people he represented was greater than before, and it had changed in the way he felt about it. It used to be so simple. He was clever, they were fools. He'd defend them if they paid the fees he charged. It was a job. He did it better than most, so they had to pay. The money coming in was society's estimation of his worth. He deserved it for being what he was. To ensure a bit of justice on an imperfect earth, good people had to be persuaded to work their hardest, to *perform* virtuously as well as cleverly, and he was good at it because he believed in it. He *was* what he was doing. He embodied the law, articulated it, applied it to the cases he took on. He was respected by the judges and his peers. People listened. They wanted to know his views. If they pointed out an error or inconsistency they expected him to correct them in return, or correct himself so that perfection, superiority in judgement, was maintained. The waters of the bay, on a shiny, sunny afternoon, were well-nigh perfect, and his arguments, his presentations of the law were, because they had to be, pretty much the same, and the truth was, he didn't feel the same about himself any more. The mountains hadn't agreed with him, or disagreed, they hadn't cared. They didn't care, and they wouldn't care when he went back.

As he knew he would.

'Sylvie,' he said to his wife, 'before I go on next year's Skyline Tour – and I want to go, don't have any doubts about that – I think you and I should take the children down there on a visit of our own. I'd like you to meet the people who took us out into the hills. Bill. deCoursey. The people at the pub. And I'm not sure how we can do it, but I'd like you to meet the mountains too. Trapyard Hill ...' He rattled off the names of the places he'd learned to revere. 'I don't suppose they sound much, but they're special. I'd like the children to see them. I'd like *you* to see them. You're going to be surprised, when you do.' He

paused. Sylvie was looking at her husband, estimating the quality of this new influence.

‘What would the children do?’

He thought. ‘I’d like to think they’d understand what’s happened to their father. And you too, darling. We need to be in balance, and I’m ... no, I’m not out of balance ...’ He laughed. ‘Unbalanced! That sounds like a recipe for disaster, doesn’t it! No, I’m in a new balance, a different one, and you need to see what changed me so that you can adjust yourself, or maybe it’s readjust me, so we can still be a true couple. How does that sound?’

He waited. He’d given her the power to make the verdict, and she was considering. ‘It seems pretty obvious that we have to do what you say. We’ll have a little break in the places where you’ve been, to give me, and the children too, if they can sense it, the chance to catch up with what’s happened.’ There was a sting in the tale: ‘Whatever it may have been!’

Photos

Herb Ellison didn’t waste any time. He developed his films, and rang Peter and Terry to see how they were getting on. They made a night for printing, and gathered in Herb’s darkroom, well supplied with chemicals and papers. They agreed that they’d each produce thirty-four prints – one for each member of the party, and they worked into the night. When the visitors left, the prints were drying on little lines across the space Herb had constructed for himself, and they’d agreed on a night the following week when they’d make their selection.

They met. They passed each other’s prints around. They talked about their criteria. No, it didn’t matter if some of their number didn’t feature in a photo. The ones they did include had to add up to the strongest possible representation of their shared experience. Bill had to be there, as leader, and the birdman and his horses; also Tiger, cooking, and Billy making a fire. The pub they started from, and their return to town, perhaps a sad one at the Sale station, boarding the train. Apart from that, they needed atmosphere, whether of bush – sunlight through the trees, that sort of thing – or of the peaks they’d

come to know: Trapyard Hill, the Gable End, all the rest. Peter had a wonderful one of clouds looking as if they'd arranged themselves to point to the spot beside Mount Wellington where they'd dropped off the mountain to go down to the lake, which had to be included, of course. They decided that one of Terry's pictures showed it best because he'd taken it as the none-too-friendly track got about half way down: a curve of lake pushing into endless trees.

Should they try to include each and every type of tree they'd encountered? They realised they weren't very good at distinguishing species. Bill said that a change in the bush was a change in everything; they knew he was right but hadn't got that far with their cameras, or not yet. 'How long do you think we'll be doing this?' Terry asked his colleagues, and they couldn't say: the Skyline Tours stretched in front of them until the next war ruined everything. It occurred to them that they'd started something without knowing how far it would take them. 'Doing this changes you,' Terry said. He meant the business of selecting with the eye and then recording with the camera; the camera didn't see in the same way as the human eye. It had a distanced objectivity that changed things, or showed them differently. Yet its products, the pictures in the albums, overpowered what they remembered as having seen, and pushed it out of their memories. What the camera recorded became, after a while, perhaps only a moment or two, what the brain remembered. Their minds accepted what their cameras told them. They knew this, the three camera-men, and wondered whether they should talk about this at the reunion dinner. They decided not to raise the topic. The rest of the party picked up their enthusiasms for the best pictures and it might upset the evening if they expressed doubts about their processes. 'After all,' Herb Ellison said, 'We're teaching them to see. I don't think I could ever walk across another high plain without knowing what I looked like from the side, with the sky above and the ranges behind me. And a line of other men walking before and behind. I can't think of deCourcey's horse without remembering its arse poking backwards at the edge of that picture we did last year.' Peter Gill thought they should try to get a shot, on the next trip, of deCourcey and his horse, both face on to the camera. 'We need to get him when he's not off with the birds in that way of his. A nice friendly horse might make him give us a smile.' But Terry objected. 'I don't

remember him for his smiles. I'm not sure if I've seen him smiling? What I see when I think of him is that strange look on his face which means he wants to float away. It's as if he wants to drift off with the clouds, or the wind, not be stuck inside his body in one place. It's uncanny. It's ghostly. It's unnerving. Yet I have to say I'd miss him if we went on tour and he wasn't there.' The three of them thought, then Terry added, 'He makes me feel ... not light-headed, and certainly not light-hearted, but just *light*. I feel less weighed down when I'm around him. It's odd. When we got back to the pub, Mrs Burke told me he had his mother and his sister with him on his farm, and the mother was a bit la-la ...' he twirled his hands in circles above his brain '... and his sister's completely ...' He couldn't finish, so he said again, 'Completely ...'

They laughed. They moved on to Bill. How he awed them, and when they thought of him as a soldier in France they imagined him as a frightening force, solidly concentrated, ready to put a bullet in any head lifted above the skyline. 'I reckon you'd know,' Terry said, 'which of the men in the trenches facing you were the really dangerous ones. I reckon you'd know which ones were keen to kill you and which just wanted to get to the end of the day alive. I think Bill would have frightened the fellas on the other side of No Man's Land.' This name for the mud, slush and shell holes between the opposing lines made them wonder what name they should give the places they'd walked through in the high country. 'It is a sort of no man's land,' Peter said. 'There's tracks and there's bits of freehold, Bill told us, and there are cattle leases, but it *feels* like it's everybody's land.' Herb thought the opposite. 'To me it feels like it's nobody's land. I suppose what I really feel is that it owns itself. We can walk around, take pictures, light a fire and all that sort of thing, but I always feel it's observing us, and waiting for us to go away, so it can be at peace with itself all over again.'

Peter told them that it was that self-contained quality of the mountains that he most wanted to record with his camera. 'I don't mind taking pictures of everyone sprawling around when we make camp, eating sausages or drinking tea, that's all part of it, but the real challenge is to imagine what the place is like when we're not there. I keep thinking I'm going to hear a mountain say Look the other way, or, You fool, you'd get a better shot over here. It's not that I think the

mountains are intelligent, or have a mind of their own, because that would be silly, but I do have a feeling ...'

Herb and Terry were waiting for him to finish, and he couldn't. 'Do you know what I mean? You must feel the same as I do?' Herb said, 'What I feel is that they know how to be different. If you look at a peak, or a range, and it's on the horizon, it's different, it's changed, by the time you get closer. And when you're right up next to it, it's something else again. I keep getting this feeling, when the mountains are changing like that, that they're testing you to see if you can notice them changing. I know it's silly, because how could they be doing that, but that's what I feel.' He looked at Terry, who ended the discussion, ended the night really, by saying, 'So we really need a few more tours, don't we, and maybe get a few more of the chaps to bring their cameras along, to see what they take when they get out there. What I want to do is take one really good super-shot that sums up everything I feel for those places, and I know that's unlikely to happen, so then I think I'll have to find the perfect picture inside myself, not on the films that I take, and print with you people. I know that's not much of a solution, but that's how I feel. What about you?'

Only a few sips

Jan and Tommy were coming home from mass and Jan, who was driving that morning, stopped where the track took off for the cemetery. Tommy said, 'You're not going in there again, surely!' and she said, 'No, but you are. It'll do you good.' He thought this a loony idea, so they had an argument. What good would it do him? He'd seen enough of the cemetery for one lifetime and he wasn't planning to go there, himself or to visit anyone's grave, *for a very long time!* She hacked away at his faults and when he demanded to know what she thought was wrong because he didn't see anything to be ashamed of, she delivered her king hit: she'd passed the door to the bar the other morning when there was nobody there but Froggy Delage ...

'That bloody old pisspot!'

... and he, Tommy, had been sipping a beer to keep the bastard company. So how many beers had he had that morning, and since

when had he forgotten their rule that whoever was behind the bar didn't drink with their customers? Tommy tried to squash her with scorn but she was unrelenting. How many beers had he had on the day she was talking about, and for that matter, since Froggy Delage was an early starter, how long had Tommy been starting his day with a 'few sips' and how much of a regular habit had they become?

Tommy tried to bluster his way out of it. Just because she happened to have seen him one particular morning didn't mean that he drank with Froggy every time the old pisspot came in ...

'He comes in every day, and bloody early too. You should send him home. Tell him you're not open till eleven!'

Tommy's voice was raucous. 'Not open till eleven! Then we'll start kickin customers out at five o'clock instead of six, and then we'll get to the point that we only open on Good Friday and Christmas Day. That the idea?' He thought he was being funny and showing her how ridiculous she was, but his wife, who'd been swimming in a flood of love for humanity in recent days, discovered that her heart was still made of steel. 'You fuckin fool! When we bought that pub ...' her eyes were filling with tears as her mind filled with rage '... we made an agreement. We solemnly swore, heart of hearts and no conditions, no excuses, no easy ways out, we swore ...'

Majestic in her rage, she was about to destroy her husband, who was, of course, bent on destroying himself: '... that we'd never drink with the customers we served because we knew what happened to pubs and publicans who went down that path. They became alcoholics. And now ...' she gesticulated in her fury '... despite the promises we *swore* to each other, you've broken faith with me, you've broken faith with yourself, and you're boozing with Froggy Delage – and what a failure of a man he's turned out to be! – within a few minutes of opening time! Froggy's so far gone he can't help himself, and you, Tommy Burke, are no better than that poor, sodden piece of wreckage who comes in as soon after ten in the morning as he allows himself, to spend another day – *yet another day* – in shame!'

She almost ran off the road. She managed to pull over with some appearance of having intended to do so. Turning her eyes from the road to her husband, she realised what she'd done. Tommy Burke was destroyed. Tommy Burke had become the alcoholic she'd accused

him of being. So full of shame was he that he'd never push on her door again, knock, tap, or whisper loving (however boozed) and affectionate words through her door. She'd kept him out by giving him the belief that from time to time, and when it pleased her, she'd let him in. The outburst he'd just heard had told him that they were apart for ever. The marriage, which had been in parlous condition for a long time, had ended. It had been broken because she'd smashed it on the floor, all the while pretending that she was telling him the truth in order to improve him.

She wasn't, and she hadn't.

She'd done what she wanted to do and it was the very thing that her womanly wisdom had warned her, for years, might be just around the corner.

He tried to recover. 'Let's get home. We'll work out how to sell the business and how to split the proceeds. I'm not as bad as you say ...'

He knew he was worse.

'... but I'll prove to you, by the way we live the rest of our lives – alone, apart – that I'm as good a man as ever I was.' Suddenly, having delivered himself of this, he said, 'Drive on. Home James and don't spare the horses. I'm gonna show you who's in charge. Me! Still me! World without end, amen!'

She'd pushed him too far. She knew it, and knew equally well that there was no getting back to where they'd been. Yet this was what she proposed. 'We've got a pub to run. A whole community of people depend on us. We're not letting them down.' Her voice took on immeasurable sternness. 'We'll serve lunch. There'll be drinks for those that want them, and you can open the bar at five, as we've done on Sundays for years. We haven't broken down, Tommy ...' the name sounded so childlike, so chastised, in the way she said it '... we're going on!'

It was an order and Tommy Burke knew it had to be obeyed.

A fall from grace

All over Melbourne they read about it. A pilgrim had let the party down. Erik Burchill had killed his wife. He'd been a keen vegetable

gardener and it took a while for anyone to notice a hump of turned-over soil among his potatoes, tomatoes, and lettuces. They'd married late, had no children, and it was only when Letitia was absent for the second week in a row from a charitable meeting she attended that people began to ask questions. Erik had been so offhand – she'd gone to see some relatives in Queensland – that those who had known her best began to wonder. Someone waited until he went out, then, inspecting the garden, noticed the hump of earth that seemed to have no reason for its existence. The police were called. Erik, when interviewed, had no more than a Queensland address to offer as her whereabouts. This was investigated; she'd not been there for years. The last time she'd visited that family she'd been recently married, she'd brought Erik with her, and the impression he left was of a most possessive and jealous man.

So the police were told.

They inspected the garden, and started to dig. It wasn't long before they found what was left of Letitia, decayed but recognisable. She'd been hit from behind with something damaging. The search was continued, an axe was found, recently washed. None of the other garden implements were other than shiny from lots of use. Erik didn't resist. He'd killed her, he said, because she'd been unfaithful to him. Who with, he was asked. He didn't know, but he had a number of suspects. The police checked these allegations, and decided they were untrue. He'd let a wild idea get loose in his brain and it had taken him over. The detectives formed the opinion that the late Letitia had probably never known what he was accusing her of. She must, surely, have sensed that something was wrong, but they doubted if she ever knew that it concerned herself. The murder, when it came, was unexpected, possibly as much by Erik, the killer, as by anyone else. 'I was amazed by what I'd done,' he told the police when finally they'd broken him down to the point of admitting what was obvious. He was locked up on remand while those who'd known him, and his wife, tried to absorb the realities of what he'd done.

Erik had worked for Britannia Motors at the northern end of the city. He'd been well regarded. Jovial, a good mixer with a trove of stories to suit all clients and occasions, he sold cars so successfully that he'd been promoted to the section that imported costly vehicles:

‘Luxury cars for luxury people’ had been one of his sayings, and he’d cultivated the manners, clothing and habits of speech that suited his clientele. Britannia Motors felt deeply let down by what he’d done. Three senior men from the firm attended Letitia’s funeral – her second burial in a month! – feeling that the firm owed her some signs of respect because she’d been a model of courtesy and support for anyone who worked with her husband. Indeed they felt, since Erik wasn’t present at this second interment, that they, between them, more or less amounted to the loyal husband she’d never had. They meant by this that what happened inside a marriage wasn’t only a matter for the two people involved, but that all members of a class, a group, carried some of the odium when one person, one member, failed the standards of them all.

And so it was for the pilgrims. If we say they felt let down, we would be inaccurately suggesting that they and their standards were untouched, when the opposite was the case. They had been *reduced*. What one of their number had done could not fail to be seen by outsiders as the standard of the group. Something needed to be done to restore them in the eyes of society and in their estimation of themselves. They needed to do something to make them feel that an awful action had been expunged. What could this be?

Martin Casey spoke to those closest to him among the walkers. His proposal was this: the pilgrims should, in the following summer, remain in Melbourne and send in their stead a party of boys still at school or not long since left, who were from areas of the city that were less fortunate than the pilgrim families, and these lads, suitably briefed as to what was expected of them, and what standards they were upholding if they did the walk, should be taken through the mountains by Bill and his men, in the by-now-customary way, and the costs of sending the lads on this trip of a lifetime should be met by the sponsorship of the pilgrim families, who would, of course, resume their normal status the following summer.

And so it was that Martin Casey, who’d promised his wife Sylvie and their children that they should have a private visit to the east, boarded the train that Martin knew well and took the trip to Sale, where they put their baggage on the little bus that ran to Briagolong. They unloaded themselves at the hotel, settled in, chatted to Jan and,

Martin noticed, a somewhat reduced Tommy who busied himself with their cases rather than making conversation, as his wife did, then, of course, they inquired after Bill. When was the great man likely to show up? Martin had written to him, telling him that he was returning on a family visit, and indicating that he'd like to discuss the possibility of a mountain tour by a group of younger people, and wondering if this idea, or some modification of it, was agreeable to Bill.

He'd had no reply.

This worried him, but Jan Burke assured him that Bill wasn't a letter writer. 'He'd have thought the two of you could sort it out face to face. He's been out in the mountains lately, looking after his cattle, but he's back in town and I'll be surprised if he isn't down for a drink about five. Sit yourself somewhere round about here, so you can see the front door, and I reckon you'll be seeing him pretty soon.'

And so it was. Bill spotted Martin on the other side of the bar and lifted a finger in an eloquent gesture, meaning, 'I'm pleased to see you, I'll talk to these blokes for a while, then I'll come around to have this talk you want to have. I'll be with you as soon as I can.'

Martin knew Bill's signals by now, and his ways of doing things. He knew his children were playing in the street outside, that Sylvie, his wife, was on the verandah watching them, and that she'd come in when he called her because he wanted her to meet the man they all depended on, the famous leader of the famous tours. In accepting a beer, Martin knew that he was accepting the ways, the rituals, of a tiny settlement where Bill and the people who ran the pub had not only status but the obligations conferred by status, and he, Martin, had to concur with the rules, customs, ways, obligations, etc, of the little town.

Bill, as we have said, appeared. The children saw him first and knew who he was because he came out of a cottage in the distance that their father had told them was where Bill lived. It looked insignificant, but they were quick to see that things were different in this rural place. Gillian, the older of the two, and Anthony, hung onto their tennis racquets as the bushman passed and they went as far as saying hello. Bill, who knew very well who they must be, greeted them as if they'd lived in the town for years, though, on getting to the pub's front door he made a point of not making eye contact with the woman on the verandah because he knew he'd be introduced to her in a few

minutes, and that was a formality that needed to be carried through appropriately.

Bill entered the pub, lifted a finger to Martin, and chatted to Tommy behind the bar and one or two others; formalities completed, he went around to Martin, in the tiny lounge. 'Martin! Didj'ava good trip down?'

They had.

'Your kids outside, I think?'

They were.

'Ya missus with you?'

Martin took up the monosyllables. 'I'll get her in to meet you. She's heard an awful lot about you.'

He got Sylvia, and she joined the men, something she was practised in doing. Bill was most affable, using this to conceal a thought that was nagging him: he felt sure he'd seen her before. Where? When? He didn't know, but the idea wouldn't go away. He kept talking. 'You were talkin about sendin a bunch o'lads down instead of you fellas this summer?'

Martin repeated what he'd said in his letter.

'How far've you got?'

'I've talked it over with some of the men. We all feel there's something we have to live down in what Erik did. But it depends on you and your men too. You'd have to be agreeable.'

'Same number of boys? Thirty?'

Martin could feel not only the directness of the questions but the rock-solid mind producing them. 'Yes. More or less the same numbers as we had last time. How does that sound to you?'

Again Bill was wondering where he'd encountered Sylvia Casey. She was a city woman, how could he have crossed paths with her? Was she behind this move to replace the pilgrims with boys? He didn't think so but he couldn't be sure. He wanted time. He wanted to feel comfortable, and he didn't.

'Boys'd be a lot more trouble. Might get silly ideas and wander off.'

Martin said, 'The rules of the expedition would have to be made clear right at the start. No one's to be out of sight of you and your men. You're running the show, you'd have to know where they were.'

Bill was brief. 'They'd say yes on the first day, nice as you like, and

then they'd forget. You need discipline in the bush. Might be better to start'em off on day walks. Don't ya think?'

Martin saw that he didn't like the idea. In effect, he'd vetoed it. Bill went on. 'Ifya did a few day walks, nearer Melbourne, out in the Dandenongs for instance, y'could see who was fair dinkum about the bush and ya c'd invite one or two to join you on the big walk, down here. That way they'd know they'd earned the promotion. It'd giv'em something to feel good about.' Martin felt that the bushman should be diverted for a moment while he, Martin, thought of another tack to take. 'Where were you planning to take us, this coming January?'

Bill said there were any number of places still to show them, but he'd been thinking that for the coming year he might use Dargo as their base, take them across the high plains to Hotham, then bring them back to Dargo on one of the ridges east of the plains: 'That's on the other side of the Dargo River, if y're looking at a map.' Something in Sylvia Casey's eyes when he mentioned Mount Hotham answered the question that had been nagging Bill; he'd run into Sylvia Casey – she probably wasn't called Casey then – at Mount Hotham, years before. Bill had been building a hut in the area, and he'd knocked off when snow fell, retreating to lunch and a drink or two by the fire at the Heights Hotel. There'd been a party of Melbourne skiers there, who'd skied in the morning, and then, when rain set in, had retreated to the fire for an afternoon of drinking. Sylvia, alone of the party, wasn't drinking, Bill remembered; he remembered, too, the keenness, the delight, he'd seen in her eyes as she looked through the window at the scene outside – snow, slush, drizzling rain, water running down the ruts of the unmade road, and the way the horizon disappeared, then came back from time to time: they were locked in, all of them, by the weather, but she had liberation in her eyes. It was beautiful, however unfriendly, and the difference between the two – beauty and unfriendliness – was something she could accommodate easily. He remembered thinking how unusual she was, this young woman from Melbourne. What he couldn't remember was whether Martin Casey had been part of that ski party. He thought not, because surely he'd remember him if he'd been there? Or was it that, as a young man himself, he'd put the men aside in his mind in favour of the woman, still handsome, who'd been so beautiful back then? Bill wondered if she remembered him

from all those years before. 'This ya first trip to this part of the world, Mrs Casey?'

'First trip to this part of the world, though I did a bit of skiing when I was at university. Mount Feathertop, Mount Hotham, places around there.'

'Great places you're talkin about.' He pointed at the bar. 'Jan Burke, lady that runs this place, with her husband Tommy, there, she reckons we ought to have a women's party every second year. Says the men shouldn't have it all to ourselves.'

'What do you say when she says that?'

'I tell'er she's right. But I have to tell'er that my offsidiers, who do the real work while all I do is wander around giving orders, aren't so keen. deCoursey, Tiger Rowe, Billy Dibbs, they're all what ya'd call men's men, I'm sorry to say.'

Sylvia Casey was venturesome for her time. 'Then you need some women to take charge of your party too!' Martin frowned at this, though Bill, he saw, was greatly amused. 'I couldn't callya me pilgrims, could I? There's plenty of people in this town'd reckon I had a harem!' They were all amused by this. Martin decided to be serious again. 'So you think we should maintain the pilgrims, the pilgrimages, the mountain walks, that's to say, as we've known them, and start a junior organization that does walks nearer to Melbourne and feeds into the groups that do their walking down here?'

Bill nodded. 'I got nothing against young people goin for walks, it'd do'em a lotta good. But we got something special going with our tours, it'd be a shame to replace'em with something else, even if it's only once in a while. Ifya got something good, ya don't wipe it out, ya build on it. That's the way I see it.' It was his last word, but something about Sylvia Casey made him defer. 'Howd'you feel about it? Ya still want a women's tour? I reckon you could organise it if ya hadda mind to. Ya'd still have to persuade my offsidiers to do the heavy lifting, though.' His brow showed how cautiously such an idea would have to be presented, and he was still uncertain about whether she'd remembered him from years ago, as he'd remembered her. He felt certain, now, that her visits to Hotham must have preceded her marriage to Martin Casey, and the children outside that she'd borne him. Marriage was an arrangement, and though it was supposed to be a spiritual union, it mostly wasn't.

He was conscious, too, that there was something proudly independent in the tours he ran for the men – men – from Melbourne, and they couldn't, these tours, put the rest of the world to rights. He didn't claim the high country for men exclusively, but men used their powers, their advantages, to claim the expertise of those who knew the spiritual places well enough to take outsiders in. Bill was sorry that he was single, when there were women like Sylvia Casey around to show him another sort of life, but since he was single, he had to get what benefits he could from the path he was on. He was silent, chewing on his thoughts, when Jan Burke came over.

'How's things going, everybody? Starting to get a bit cooler outside now, Mrs Casey; you want me to bring the children in? We'll be serving dinner in half an hour, if you want to get them cleaned up.' Women, Bill saw, managed other women at least as forcefully and much more skilfully than men could do, though Sylvia Casey was no slouch. She said to the publican's wife, 'I'd be really pleased if you'd do that. Tell them that we're in here – well, they know that – and we'd like them to join us when they've changed their clothes.' Nobody in Briagolong managed their family in this way. Jan Burke was startled as well as admiring, Martin Casey was proud of his wife, Tommy Burke was keeping out of the way, and Bill was asking himself if it would be such a bad idea to get married one of these days, if he could find someone that liberated him. If marriage constrained him, as it seemed to do to everyone he knew, that was no good, but if it could be an encounter of two freedoms, two free spirits, there could be a lot in its favour ...

The fringe

deCoursey's farm – 'our settlement' as he called it – belonged more to the bush than to the town to its south. deCoursey went in for groceries once in a while; his mother rarely, his sister almost never. He made no attempt to budge them. They were free souls. Maeve appeared to enjoy sitting in the garden with a spade or fork resting against her knee, and from time to time she turned the soil with vigour. She had a way of moving it, and talking to it, as if it had a mind. This made sense to her brother; perhaps it did. She said the soil needed worms to give it air,

and the worms needed encouragement. Louise, her mother, said the worms had never learned to speak her native French, and their English wasn't much better. deCourcey wondered, therefore, what their native language was, and how it was passed from generation to generation. 'Is there, then, a University of Worms?' The two women, older and younger, passed this silently through their minds. Louise, gesturing with her hands in a way that came from another place, murmured, 'They are a mystery to us. It is their trade!' She laughed at her own joke, expecting her son and daughter to see why she was laughing.

That, really, was why they rarely needed to visit the town. People in there didn't understand. Her son was almost normal enough to convince townspeople that nobody needed to interfere. Meals reached their table, they were healthy. Who needed more? deCourcey came back from his travels with tourists telling stories of things they'd said, and it seemed to Louise that they didn't understand, those city men, how much the earth offered, if you made yourself its partner. 'I was married once,' she liked to say, 'and now I'm married again.' Her son understood this to mean that she, as his mother, and Maeve's mother too, obviated any need he, or Maeve too, might feel for the state of marriage. Louise, in wedding herself to the soil they stood on, was sanctifying the three of them. deCourcey knew that his mother wished that her husband's body had been lying at the bottom of her extensive garden, instead of the Melbourne General Cemetery so she could continue to cultivate her husband, adding strength to his memory and using it to keep her going when she felt weak. 'Men are useful,' she liked to say, 'but they should be used sparingly.' It amused her to say this, and if deCourcey or Maeve saw her smiling as she worked on her garden they took it for granted that she was thinking of her days as a wife, with tiny children at her side.

Now she lived in the bush near Briagolong, a word she found hard to say, but her children were still at her side and she accepted that the garden she'd made in this foreign land would always be hers. One marriage, or the memory of it, between the three of them was enough, and besides, the difficulty if the children were to bring a partner to their settlement! Another woman, making three! Another man, an outsider, breaking the harmony of a family that knew the bonds between them and couldn't tolerate another line of existence? No, they'd created not

only a farm of sorts to keep their animals in, but also a settlement in their minds. They belonged to each other, they talked to their animals, they knew what their animals were thinking. Maeve knew when their plants were going to flower. She'd examine the garden and name the day when this flower or that would burst into bloom. 'There is a time,' she would say, 'for everything. Everything comes into flower so it can reproduce itself. We are no exception. But we can make ourselves an exception. I sometimes think,' she would say, 'that we ought to be able to die every year and come back, as the flowers do. Your beloved birds,' she would say to her brother, for there were few new thoughts in their bark-roofed cottage, only repetitions and developments of things thought year after year, 'have to die to renew themselves. We live on, letting others do the work of reproduction. Who wants to have a child appear in the middle of their lives? Not me!' Her mother never contradicted these outbursts. Perhaps she thought her daughter mad and thought it better than being sane. What was sanity but an agreement with other people, of no scope and severely limited, that certain things included you in the crowd that declared themselves to be in possession of a safe and central mind, while other things precluded you, and pushed you towards condemnation? No, it was all so silly, it was better to live in the bush, with the town at a distance – and it wasn't getting any closer, thank god – it was better to live in the pungent bush, with no more danger in it than the odd snake and fires that swirled in summers, it was better to live in the bush and keep oneself unpolluted, pure and really – this was the heart of the matter – *redeemed* in one's isolation. People thought, her son told her, that he was mad because he didn't care to be imprisoned in his humanity. Why should he, his mother thought. People who couldn't escape themselves didn't know what it was like to have escaped. Her son had a friend called Bill, who'd fought in the drama that had engulfed her country when the Germans stormed in. Thank god there were no Germans in the bush! Bill spent his days and nights in the bush, these days. This made sense to Louise. As for Maeve, her daughter, the sister of her son, she didn't want to reproduce her kind. That way madness lay! To reproduce, you had to have a man and a child and both of them, one on either side, tied you to all the others whose procreation continued the madness of the world, forever and amen. A few flowers, vegetables and fruit a-plenty,

and a little meat occasionally, brought from the butcher in the town she avoided, were enough to keep body and soul together and for the rest, time was an endless current, an ocean, in which the three of them could swim, safely enough, avoiding perilous reefs – whatever they might be – and accepting the years, the vanishing and re-arriving days – as cushions, comforters, on which they might lie, conscious of inevitable death but content with the way they prodded it back into the current of time in which they swam. It was a good life they'd made, Louise thought, and was thinking when she observed a man on horseback walking through the bush.

Nobody came to their farm, so it must be Bill.

'Mrs O'D, good morning.' He raised his hat, then held it near his stomach, as if to reinstate it would be rude.

'Bill. My apricots have flowered, the bees have done their work, and I'll be making jam. That's good, isn't it?'

'I'll bring a loaf of bread, we'll make toast, and spread your jam. I know how good it is.'

It was a mild morning, the sun was shining, the world was good. 'Tu cherches mon fils.' His service in their country had given Bill familiarity with the simpler sayings of the French. 'I do.'

'Then whistle, and he'll come. Make it loud. He may be far away.'

'Far in distance, Mrs O'D, or far in mind?'

'Qui sait? Sifflez, Guillaume. Sifflez fort!' He knew what this meant, and he did it, hard! His whistling rang through the trees, and called from deCoursey, when he heard it, a cry of joy.

'Bill! Stay where you are! I'm coming! Mother! Make tea! We will drink, and hear why Bill's come to us. Is it a job, Bill? Work?'

His mother and his friend could hear the birdman crashing through the bushes as he found his way. Maeve, excited, called 'It's Bill!' and waved shyly to the visitor who raised his hat, this time, in a flourish of acceptance. They were crazy, but in a way he understood.

The garden, the hills

Maeve was excited by Bill. She was a woman who'd never known a man, and Bill was so sure, he gave her a feeling that she was without fault or

blemish. She didn't know what normal was, beyond being a fall-back position, or side-bank, of happiness, and she felt happy when he was near. Bill beamed on his friend's sister, apparently unaware of her closeness to him, but managing, as he greeted her mother, to put the older woman between him and her daughter. If this was disappointing for Maeve, her feelings were masked by the arrival of her brother, moving through the garden at a speed that caused the visitor to say, and not for the first time, 'You move at a great pace, my friend. I want to get you in the four-forty at Sale, next New Year's Day. Ya'd win by the length of the straight, I reckon.'

deCourcey had been told this before. 'I have seen those races, Bill. Much is made of the winner, but those who don't win, they are humiliated.' The visitor knew that deCourcey would say something like this. 'That's what it means to be a good sport. Ya not allowed to show ya don't like being beaten. Ya gotta go up and congratulate the winner. So that even in losing there's a virtue, see?' It wasn't the sort of idea he cared to expound because he was regulated, both in himself and by his origins, to making things run smoothly. Bill had no time for tantrums or demanding personalities. 'The reason I come out to seeya, I had a visit from Martin Casey ...'

He didn't mention Sylvia, the organiser's wife.

'... in town the other day, about next year's tour. Him and some of his mates'd got themselves into a state because one of the pilgrims had killed his wife.' At once he apologised to Louise and Maeve. 'Sorry, ladies but I have to tell deCourcey what blew this storm in our direction ...' He told the birdman about the idea of a young people's tour replacing the usual party of older walkers, and what he'd said to Casey, putting him off. 'I jist wanted to make sure ya was in agreement with me. I got nothing against the lads having a look at the bush, but the way I see it, they haven't earned the high country yet.' He waved at the sky to the north. 'I told him – that's Casey, the fella I'm talking about – that you and Tiger and Billy Dibbs'd have to be in it and I didn't think you would be.'

It was clear from the birdman's agitation that he was in agreement with Bill's rejection of this scheme. 'No no no no no,' he said, spreading his big hands wide, as if to steady a spinning world. 'No. We would look silly in the eyes of those mountains if we took people

out there who weren't ready!' Then, for a few moments, he absented himself, his spirit somewhere in the high spaces he was thinking of, before he returned to his mother's garden. 'We mustn't lose credit with our mountains, Bill. If they respect us they will accept the people that we bring, even though they are still learning ...'

His voice drifted off. His mother, whose social sense had eroded in her years on the fringe joining civilisation and bush, said, 'Our garden has had a good season, Bill. I will have many jars of fruit, and lots of chutney will be made.' He took her by the arm. 'I love being in your garden, Mrs O'D. Ifya ever want to come into town and make me a garden as good as this, ya'll be welcome, believe you me. Butya see, I have to talk to deCoursey because if he and the boys have different ideas from me, we can't run the tours any more, and that'd make me sad. I'd be lost without'em. It's not just the money, though that's handy, it's ...'

Again he waved a hand at the hills, unable to say what they meant to him. Louise O'Donovan, far from the place where she'd grown up, knew that when his voice gave way to silence, something sacred had entered his mind. Should people try to put it in words? She thought not. The priests of her childhood had words in thousands for things they enforced on their flocks, and it had put her off. The silence of her second country was better. If there were words for something it meant that it was under control, or on the way to being so, and humanity couldn't be trusted as far as that. She encouraged her son in the way he was thinking, as far as she could understand it. And Bill too: the two of them, in their ways, had intimations of the sacred, which they respected. Bill, knowing it was there, kept himself at a distance. Her son, knowing it was there, was forever trying to find the paths of its movement. She thought he was mixed up, the mountains in their solidity were more eloquent than the clouds, storms, and winds that made you take notice. It was the immobility of the mountains that made the greater claim.

Or so Louise O'Donovan thought, but then, what would she know? People in Briagolong viewed her from a distance. Perhaps she was mad? She was in their eyes, she accepted that. Her daughter was madder than she was, because she had no models of the sane, and was better off without them. To hell with them, Louise believed. Aux

enfens! Her garden was her statement of what the world should be like, just as her son needed those enormous spaces to the north, with their skylines, their mountain-outlines giving him notes to sing! The test, for Louise, was what he was like when he came home, and that was his state of serene adoration. He came back as a man who'd found another place, and knew that it was where he belonged. She smiled on Bill, who engaged her son for his mountain tours, made sure the city men respected him, and even listened when they could hardly understand a word of what he intimated to them. She had a mother's wish to see her son made happy but couldn't bring it about herself; hence the importance of Bill.

'Is that settled then?' she asked of the visitor and her son. 'Can we go inside? No, I'll bring the things out here. There's a bench over there where we can sit. Maeve! You will carry the cups! I will bring the teapot, the sugar and the milk. We can sit in silence, then, and know the morning loves us!'

And this is what they did.

Maeve

The women went inside, Bill and deCoursey sat. When Louise and Maeve returned, they put things on a Bushell's Tea box Louise had placed in front of the bench: this was her serving table. None of them remarked on this improvisatory piece of furniture; Louise had been pulled apart and put herself together too many times to notice. She pointed out to Bill that of the cups she'd brought out, one came from France, one from England, one from China and the last was made in Australia. There was, she felt, some rightness in this. She gave Bill the Australian cup, as she always did when he called, and he was never sure whether this was meant to be flattering, or insulting, an emphasis on his rightness or a reminder that he wasn't French. So he didn't let it worry him. He drank.

'Your tea, Bill?'

He nodded. It was fine.

'The cake, Maeve?'

There wasn't any. Her daughter had finished it yesterday.

‘Then we must do without. Deprivation is good for us.’

Bill was amused. ‘I must tell myself that next time I’m out in the hills, I can’t find me cattle and I won’t get a feed till I get back!’

Maeve startled them by saying, ‘If you take me into the hills I would cook for you.’

Bill knew well enough that it was her mother and sometimes her brother that did the cooking; Maeve could scarcely be persuaded to cut up vegetables, claiming that all of them, not only onions, made her weep. Ignoring her offer, he took a swallow of his tea, then put the Australian cup on the tea box. ‘Where’ll we take’em this year, mate?’ This was to deCourcey, who could see, knowing Bill well, that it was a prelude to an announcement.

‘Wherever you think best, Bill. Somewhere we haven’t been before.’

‘Maybe start at Dargo, cross the plains, take a look at Hotham?’

‘They would enjoy the walk along the Feathertop ridge.’

This excited Bill. ‘They would! It’s years since I been out there. I built a hut out there, once.’ His thoughts drifted back. The excitement in Sylvia Casey’s eyes – except she wasn’t *Casey* then – still made him tingle. His thoughts fled from what that excitement had promised ... then. ‘Or maybe we oughta think of something else altogether?’

deCourcey was puzzled. ‘Where?’

Bill improvised. ‘We could start at Omeo, do a big circle around the town?’ His heart wasn’t in it, and deCourcey knew. ‘How does that sound to you, mother?’

‘C’est possible.’

She didn’t know either. Something about this uncertainty showed an opening for Maeve. ‘You’re going to need an extra cook! I’ll do that for you, Bill! You wouldn’t have to pay me. I’d do it for love!’

Consternation. Bill was first to recover. ‘We usually make it an all-men affair. Makes the fellas all the happier when they get back home again.’ Not him, he might have admitted.

This was no problem for Maeve. ‘Then I will dress as a man. And lower my voice!’ She said these last words in a soft, female baritone, if there is such a thing. Bill grinned, getting on top of the matter. ‘I dunno that anybody’d be fooled, Maeve. I reckon they’d wake up pretty soon. Then they’d all be onto me. They’d say they wanted to bring their wives when they know quite well they don’t!’

Louise was puzzled. 'What do they want?'

'They want to get away from wives, work, kids, responsibility, everything. They want to be boys again, even though some o'them never was boys, not properly, ya can see that by the way they fool around, thinking they're havin fun.'

The birdman said, 'That's why we don't want boys. The men are boys enough.'

Louise murmured, 'Men? Boys? What is this all about?' Maeve was troubled, and defiant. 'If you don't let me come, I'll sneak out in the mountains and join you when you don't know I'm there. I'll walk up and say, Here I am! Which is my tent? And when you haven't got one, I'll take yours, Bill, and make myself at home!'

He looked sadly at her. 'I shoulda hadya with me n France, Maeve, when I didn't know if I'd see another day. We used to talk a lot about what we were going to do after the war. They'd ask me, whaddaya gunna do, Bill? And I'd say, I'm going to give thanks every day I wake up and there's no shooting. No shells droppin down on us. I'm gunna give thanks.'

deCoursey looked at his friend. 'I have never seen you praying, Bill.'

'There's no one to pray to. But I still give thanks. I thank your birds, and the bush, that I'm surrounded by living things, no bloody madness any more. Those days are past, for me!'

Maeve knew there was a message there for her, if she could only unpick it. 'You are talking as if you are old, when you are not. You will always be young to me, Bill!' Her passion was rising. He seemed so complete, and she was so bereft it was as if she'd never been, and she was pleading to be allowed to exist. Bill, who'd been defeated years before when his hopes had vanished forever in the mud and shelling, said quietly, 'Marry, Maeve, that's whatya gotta do. Marry. Cook. Have kids, keep house, grow old looking after ya family. It's the simplest thing in the world yet half of us can't find it, or when we did, we didn't seize the opportunity ...'

His eyes grew distant. Even Maeve could see that he'd gone somewhere where he was untouchable. She knew this because her brother was the same. Men were so lonely, so much of the time. They wanted to be on their own, unfeeling. She suddenly saw why the two of them

ran the Skyline Tours. They wanted to be mountains, apart, withdrawn, alone ...

Why should men be mountains? Why shouldn't they be the boys they took on the tours? Why was it that the mountain-men, the men-mountains, thought they were superior to the boys? The boys were going to marry, and live! They had married, they had a huge city to go back to, and she, Maeve, had a lonely cottage with a roof of bark, and her brother's violin which he only played occasionally. 'Bach,' he would say, 'is too sad.' This was rubbish. Bach wasn't sad, her brother was sad, her mother was sad because she'd had a husband and lost him, but she, Maeve, had never had a husband and never would, not as long as she lived with her family on a farm no one knew about, surrounded by bush, alone, lost, never to be found ...

... never to be used ...

... never to be alive at all! She threw the last of her tea onto the ground and read the bottom of the cup. China, it said. That was where it had been made. 'When I grow up,' she said: 'no, when I grow old, I'm going to China. I'm going to marry a Chinaman. They've got lots of mountains over there! He'll take me into the mountains to show me he loves me! There!'

Neither Bill, deCoursey nor her mother answered. The only answer she got was from a currawong, making its sounds in the bush, a long way away, and then, even further, even sillier, came the hoo-hah-ing of a kookaburra – hoo ha ha, hoo ha ha, hoo ha ha ... The bird's cackling told Maeve that she didn't even have a heart to break.

The third trip

The third time the pilgrims gathered at the pub, everyone felt different. Erik Burchill was in jail, four others had dropped out and been replaced, so there was a mixture of experience and newness; there was also the quirkiness of their situation; they were beginning in Briagolong because that was what they'd done before, but the bus that brought them there stayed with them for their trip to Dargo the next day. 'It doesn't seem the same,' they said, and it wasn't, but neither could they imagine one of their pilgrimages beginning anywhere else.

They already had a past, and a part of it was troubling. In quiet moments, and furtively, they told each other what they knew of Burchill's crime. His wife struck down from behind with an axe, was it, or a shovel? The guilty man burying his wife in the garden. The way it had come out. The trial. His change of plea to guilty on the second day. The stupidity of the man convincing himself that she'd had a lover when there was nothing to support the idea. And people had to look, of course, for signs that might have told them what was going on in the murderer's head; had he been entertaining these delusions when he'd been with them, on the previous trip? Being men, they had men's ideas, and were curious to know what Jan Burke thought of the case. She knew little enough, not being much of a reader, but she had something to say every time the matter came up, mainly on the theme of human failure. We shouldn't, she said, do what our passions tell us to do. This was unexpected by the pilgrims, who thought, for the most part, that women were slaves of their feelings while men were cool and controlled. Not so, Jan told them, women have to live with their feelings and men try to avoid them if they can. 'Why else are you going into the mountains while your families stay behind?' Martin Casey was not the only one who felt the sting in this question, though he felt it keenly. Sylvia had accepted a beachside holiday at Sorrento with the children willingly enough, but he was aware, now, after much probing, that she'd been to Mount Hotham before her marriage, and had been fascinated by its elevation and remoteness. 'I want a good home,' she told Martin, 'and I must have my children leading good lives, but I'm aware, because of that visit, that you can put everything behind you and live on whatever the next day brings and it's very exciting, and challenging, if you do.' He'd probed no further, but he noticed her curiosity about the leader of their tours and sensed that she may have met him before he himself had done so. Bill was a mountain man. He hadn't always had, surely, the certainty with high places that he now possessed? Everybody has to *become* whatever it is they are, and that included him, his wife, Bill and all the other pilgrims. That meant that they all had a future waiting to deliver them their next stages, and, although they liked to think that they stood, each of them, on a firm base of commercial or professional success, they were, in fact, in a state of readiness or unreadiness for what they were about to receive. The

future was a great unknown. They had only to remember Erik Burchill - and how could they forget him? – to be reminded of that.

So they stayed at the Briagolong pub, once again, with their bus in the street outside, ready to take them, the following morning, to a place they hadn't been to before. deCoursey, Tiger Rowe and Billy Dibbs were already there. Bill had been to Dargo to check out the route, work out where they'd camp, and so on. He'd been to Hotham Heights to see how many could stay in the hotel and how many would have to camp in tents; sleeping bags, and various wind-sheltering devices had been organised so that those who slept outside shouldn't be too exposed; they'd stay at Hotham two nights, then the route would be down to Omeo, with a stop near Dinner Plain, before they stayed again in a hotel to be collected by bus and driven to their train. All this had required a good deal of planning and a certain amount of haggling by Bill, and there were times when he'd felt it would have been easier to do something less ambitious, but the spirit of the tours was in him now, and he wanted to do it; indeed he was driven to take the party into the places where he'd been as a young man, before his life had settled, finally, into its present shape.

He wondered, when he thought of his younger self, the man who'd built a hut near Hotham Heights, and the man, still young, who'd emerged from the horrors of France, when it was, exactly, that his life had taken the shape that wouldn't be changing any more? Or was he deluding himself into thinking that nothing could change his pattern? He didn't know and was too wise, was it, or settled – who could say? – to bother himself, so he pushed it out of mind. He had to make everything happen as he'd planned, and that made him feel a little more dependent, this time, on the pilgrims themselves. He sensed, as soon as he met them at the station in Sale, that their mood was different. They were expecting more. They'd digested their previous trips, asked themselves a range of questions, set themselves new expectations, and so on. They were ready to make a second start, stimulated by the expectations and apprehensions of those who were new to the mountains.

The mountains! They'd begun to think of them, to pick out the ones that meant most to them, and to ask themselves what else they could expect from those they hadn't seen. Yet! That was the word. They were curious to know how much further there was to go. They would all be

tested in their various ways. The photographers were keen to do better than they'd done before, aware, as they studied their albums, that there were things they hadn't captured yet, and moods, of shadow and bright sunlight, which the mountains hadn't yet revealed. Arrangements for supplies were new because they were in areas that were new to the Skyliners, deCoursey's horses had been sought out, and bought, by Bill and the birdman in a district they were not completely familiar with, even though it was a mountain area too. Everything should go well, they were experienced enough, but the unexpected was hovering and it was hard to believe they wouldn't make mistakes. Bill explained this to the party as they gathered at the bus in the morning. 'Everythin looks okay, can't see anything we haven't thought about, but ya gotta realise that's when trouble's gonna come out of the bushes. Somethin's sure to go wrong, so we just gotta be ready when the time comes, think about what we're gonna do, and do it! It's great country we're goin to, so let's enjoy!' The bus rolled away, leaving Jan and Tommy Burke feeling sad. This time, the third of the tours, they were the beginning but not the end. 'I said to Bill, next year ya gotta do ya trip closer to home. The whole business, the planning, the pilgrims' – he used the word for the first time – 'has come to mean a lot to Jan and me. It really has. I know ya want to show them something new, and I know you went out of your way to make our place the start of this trip, but don't go so far away, next time, willya?' This was Tommy Burke, and Jan, his wife, the real manager of the pub by now, heard him in tearful silence. She knew Bill felt a need to look at the places that had been his haunts in his younger days, she accepted this as his right, but she couldn't deny that the thought of it was making her feel old. No! Older than she had been ... She knew she was trying not to face the inevitable, she hoped the tours would run for years, but she knew that she, the tours, and Tommy, and everyone involved in them, were some distance along a path that, even though it still had a long way to run, was measurably closer to where it would end.

A spring, a grave

On a beautiful morning the pilgrims wound their way along the Dargo

River to a place known locally as 'The Walnuts'. Then it was a big lift which they found exhausting. 'Sorry boys,' Bill told them, 'I know ya not in condition for this, but it's here, so we gotta do it.' Later in the day they hit another big climb: 'Mount Ewen,' Bill told them, as if the name might ease their puffing. 'We'll get a drink, up here a bit. Best water in the world.' When they got to the spring, they cupped their hands and drank, with Bill warning: 'Only a sip at first, till ya tummies get used to the cold. We don't wanta gettin stomach cramps, we gotta way to go yet before we camp.'

Most of the party were sitting on the ground, a rock, a log, and a few were flat on their backs. 'No rush,' Bill told them. 'We're not goin anywhere till we feel good about it. Smell the bush!' The air of the eucalyptus forest was palpable. Tiny Barton, however, was confused. 'I'm bloody exhausted! The bush is beautiful and it smells like ...' He couldn't finish. Troubled, he burst out: 'My family thinks I'm having a wonderful time, and I'm having an awful time. Bill, you keep telling us this trip's going to be different. It's just the same as the last two. Bash through the bush all day, fall into bed at night. Bed? On the ground. Dig yourself a hip hole, you tell us. I've got a real bed at home. I don't need any hip hole. I'm comfortable. There's great places, you keep telling us, and yes, there are. But it's the bits in between that are hurting me. You tell me the bush smells beautiful. It does. But I'm too buggered to enjoy it. You could put the air in a bottle and if you gave it to me in Melbourne, I'd agree. Beautiful. But when I breathe it in here ...' he waved his arm at the forest of tall trees, cascading down the slope they'd just climbed – and had still to climb, because they were only halfway up this Mount Ewen they were supposed to be appreciating – '... when I breathe it in here, my nose and maybe my lungs get some enjoyment, but the rest of me's in serious pain. It's a hell of a place you've brought us to it!' He looked around for support, but the pilgrims were embarrassed. They had such thoughts many times a day, but managed to tell themselves lies about the balance between pain and enjoyment they were willing to accept. They sensed that Bill and his helpers didn't notice the pain any more, or took it for granted. Most of them had been through periods of financial encumbrance on their way to being the well-endowed men they were, and took such a period for granted. They were, if they thought about it, being asked to

go through a similar period again, for a different, perhaps transitory, reward. Transitory, or permanent? Bill knew what he was asking of them, and he was the embodiment of what they'd get if they followed him, but he couldn't spell out, couldn't express, the various ways they might assess the balance necessary before anyone got a reward. It was all reward for Bill. Tiger Rowe and Billy Dibbs didn't know anything else, and would have thought Tony Barton was too soft to be on such a trip if he wanted to complain. Too fat, too soft, that was how they'd describe him. Working in the bush requires considerable discipline, and they'd worked in the bush for years, as had Bill. The bush was the cleanest, healthiest place on earth, to which deCoursey would have added that it is therefore the basis, the springboard, for a further flight of the soul, a flight which every moment in the bush enticingly offered, or suggested, to those who were ready for the temptation and then the achievement. But deCoursey was ahead at the Mount Ewen hut, and so were Tiger and Billy Dibbs, Billy keeping the fire stoked and Tiger cutting meat with his chopper and working out how long he'd need by comparison with how soon the walkers would reach the hut. Bill had no backing as he looked at the men around him by the water bubbling down the hill. Purest water in the world! They believed him, their mouths and throats told him it was so, but, he realised, for the moment they didn't care. It had all been one hard slog since they left The Walnuts and they wanted someone, somehow, to give them a break.

The trouble was, once you started on an expedition like this, there was no turning back. If you said, loudly and with determination, 'I'm pulling out!', you'd find, when the others staggered to their feet and moved on, despite the agonies, the pain, in every muscle of their bodies, you'd find yourself alone, walking downhill, back to the Dargo pub where people would wonder what sort of weakling you must be if you couldn't keep up. And how would you get home after that? The bus had gone around to meet them in Omeo, and wouldn't be coming back. There was nothing to do but get on your feet and walk. Without complaining! What Tony Barton was saying was true and everyone knew it, but they'd started on a trip – a walk – where you couldn't allow such truths to be voiced. Other truths had to be found by way of compensation, and, as they knew from two earlier trips, the

compensations would come along ...

As they did, the very next day. They left the hut at Mount Ewen, and climbed for a couple more hours, though less demandingly than on the day before, and then they reached the plains. The track flattened, patches of open grassland spread about them, they were vertical again instead of tilted, and the ground they walked on was near enough to horizontal. Snow gums stood amid their own debris, bushes tangled the places you found yourself in if you left the open grass, so you didn't leave it, you bent in delight to examine, perhaps pick, the wildflowers, the grass was soft to walk on, there were a few head of cattle to be spotted here and there, the light was as mottled as the trunks of the trees, and the bark of the snow gums had squiggles and blotches of red and the colours nearest it in the rainbow. Bill led the party down a track to Grant, an old gold mining settlement, just a few chimneys scattered in the blackberries, or standing amid a few messy remains of what had been. Evidence that humans, in numbers, had been before them got them talking, Billy and Tiger made tea over a fire, they rummaged about, they found bits of glass, a bottle or two, a saucepan, scraps of vanished life, and somehow their humanity returned. They were explorers, now, archaeologists, instead of the pilgrims they'd been, or rather, failed to be, the day before. They found the remains of a cemetery in the bush, and were startled at the size of trees growing between the cast-iron railings that showed where a grave had been. Was still. A dead miner, or a member of his family – children often didn't always last in those days – had been replaced, as a living, active principle, by a tree, huge, vertical, something reaching for the air in a way that miners, eyes on the earth, didn't aspire to.

Miners wanted wealth. Gold. Only a few of them found it. When the unsuccessful outnumbered the successful by too great a proportion, the settlement was abandoned. 'They carted the houses down to Dargo,' Bill told them. 'The ones worth moving.' What had happened to the rest? 'Just rotted,' Bill told them. 'You're walking on'em, at times. An there's probably been a fire or two through here since then.' Fire was the eternal cleanser. The party left Grant and returned to the plains, pilgrims again, now, because aware of their mortality and the transience of things that humans did. Occasionally Bill pointed to a pile of bricks, and once to a grave, fenced and with a rock above the

sleeping person's head. There are few things more humbling than a lonely grave. Martin Casey, who would have said he was happily married, a family man, said of the grave that stopped the party, but gave it no explanation, no final statement, 'We die alone, don't we. There's no avoiding it.' The men beside him, having heard him talking about his wife and children at Sorrento – the family arrangement, apparently, whenever Martin was in the mountains – wondered if this was a statement of acceptance. We die alone? Even when surrounded by our loved ones, we die alone? They supposed it had to be true. If one died and everyone else was left to mourn, to talk about the one that had departed a moment before, then that one had surely gone on alone? In war, as Bill could have told them, death could claim dozens at a single explosion, but in the civilities of normal life, death took people one by one.

So it was better, it was comforting, to walk through the bush in a group. If one of them was called away, there'd be others to make ceremony of some sort, bury them, and move on, comforting, strengthening, each other with their presence. Awareness of death makes us aware of our singularity, and thus, and therefore, of our joint-ness. They were all one, they were together, they were walking on almost level ground, they were higher than any city in the land, the grass was soft, fine and green, the trees were stunted, small and tough, the flowers delightful, the sky close, each had a single, separate destiny yet they were together as if they understood that any of them might be taken away at any time, and therefore it was best to stay close, to be one, to be pilgrims, to pretend that they were approaching a common goal when each of them, in fact – and they knew it now, after the trackside grave – had something to face on his own.

When the men fell down

Jan felt less than herself when the bus took the party away to Dargo. She'd only been to Dargo once in her life, before her children had been born. It was small enough then and from what she'd been told it wasn't any bigger. Her memories of it made Briagolong seem big, though it wasn't. Soldier settlement, which had made a few settlements

around the state a bit bigger than they'd been, hadn't got as far as her town. Nobody felt like clearing scrub any more when existing properties were for sale, dirt cheap. Dirt! It was what they threw on top of you when they buried you; she fancied that that cremation might be better. After they'd put you through a fire, you'd be dirt yourself. Her son and daughter seemed to be doing well, Tommy was still 'sipping' his way through the day, docile enough, happy to have her running things; he'd slipped out of responsibility and she was never sure whether this enraged her or gave her what she wanted. Both. 'Give yourself a limit,' she'd tell him every now and then, but she never asked him what it was, or whether he counted his drinks to be sure he stayed inside the limit he pretended he'd imposed. Pretence! It was everywhere. They still went to mass on Sundays, and drove home again, usually with Jan at the wheel, though sometimes she deferred to her husband if appearances required. Tommy was sensitive to getting in the passenger side of the car if there were people standing around, so she normally parked a little way from the church in a side street, maintaining his status as husband and father.

She'd had a period of a few weeks when she was extra vigilant in and about the kitchen, anxious that her standards might be slipping, but not having anyone to tell her if they were. She didn't think so but couldn't be sure. She wished she had someone to ask, but if she said to the men in Tommy's bar, 'How was it boys?' they, knowing which side their bread was buttered, told her that the steak, the chops, the roast, had been terrific, best they'd had for ages, and so on. They weren't much use! Then she remembered Louise O'Donovan, gardening out in the bush. She had an idea that Louise grew things that nobody else in the area knew about. She had a mixed background and she'd been a mature woman – if silly, as they said – before she got to the town. She might well have 'green fingers' and be producing things Jan would like to use, or even find out how to use. She felt she needed teaching. Guidance. Some pathway to development. Her own son and daughter were nice enough whenever they came to see her, which was rarely, and very respectful when she visited them in Sale, but Briagolong, the site of their upbringing, was behind them now and, Jan sensed, they were not yet at the stage when they wanted to rediscover the place of their beginning. That was a long way ahead, and Jan was envious of her

children, because they still had big decisions in front of them, and the gigantic step of marriage to be taken. Marriage, Jan reflected, was like the high plains that the tourists visited, the places where Bill and the other mountain bush men were riding all the time, with the important difference that once you were married you could never come down again from those upper lands. They had you, they held you, because you belonged in them once you'd taken responsibility for another person, as she had with Tommy, sipping through his days until the inevitable arrived, somewhere far in the future.

It all looked so empty. What could women do? They could care. That was their advantage over men. Men cared about lots of things – principally themselves, Jan thought when she let her glances penetrate the bar – but they were rare if they aspired to caring as a way of life. They were respectful, as she knew from catering to the returned soldiers when they had dinners in the club house Bill had built in the style of a mountain hut, though mindful of council regulations too ... they were respectful, but somehow, having been brave in war, they'd given up caring, because what they'd been exposed to had shown them that nobody, and certainly not governments, cared much about them. Once they were beyond killing a few of their country's enemies, they dropped out of society's mind and were left to themselves, themselves and each other. So they did care, but it was mutual, and what Jan aspired to was an endless extension of the feelings she'd had as a mother. Someone had to be good to the world because priests were as fallible as other men, if not more so. There were nasty rumours floating around, not about the priests in Sale, who were holy men, if irascible, bossy, and given to more serious drinking than even her husband, no, not the priests in Sale but one or two a bit further down the line, in both directions, who had designs on members of their congregation, good, virtuous women, or even, heaven defend us, the boys who sang in their choir. Men! Men were so fallible, and it was women who had to pick up the pieces when the men fell down, it was women, really, who carried the world and made it liveable, or at least bearable, on a day to day basis. That was what Jan saw when she looked in the mirror, something she tried not to do very often because she didn't care for what it showed her, even though she understood that to love the world you must at least respect yourself.

She did. There wasn't much wrong with her. She was proud and had nothing to be ashamed of. Things ran smoothly when she was in control. She countered people's shortcomings: all she needed really was a friend.

What did Louise have growing in her garden?

Mount Blowhard

At the front of his puffing, grumbling pilgrims, Bill pointed to the left. 'That's Mount Blowhard.' They were not as amused as he intended. 'Not far ahead to morning tea,' he said cheerfully. 'Billy'll have a fire, though I have to tellya, this snowgum's no good to burn. He'll find a bit o'tea tree, or some rubbish to giv'im a quick blaze.' The pilgrims were at the stage of having had enough of Bill's simplicities. Their voices repeated his words from left, right and centre. 'Rubbish! Quick blaze! What's the good of that?' They wanted to rebel, though what against, they didn't know. Bill? He was their leader. They couldn't depose him because they couldn't find their way home without him. 'Rubbish! Quick blaze!' They kept shouting because it was all they could think of to do. Bill looked on them with scorn. 'I'm not gonna walk away and leaveya. Y'gonna follow me outa here because you gotta. Ya getting worked up because of the name, aren'tya. Blowhard!'

Someone said, 'Who gave it that name?' Bill almost smiled. They'd given in. 'Dunno. Nobody knows, as far as I know.' Again, exasperation flared in a few of them. 'Doesn't anybody know?' It seemed they wanted knowledge written down, sound, available knowledge with the comforts of certainty. Bill was withering. 'The first fellas that come through here had to bash through bush. There wasn't any tracks. Someone's gotta be first, else there'd never be anything built. Ya can't put a fence around a place ya haven't seen! Ya gotta find it first and that means scrub-bashing. It's tough, so you gotta be tough too. Haven'tya noticed? The harder it gets the better it is. Ya wanta get a good view, ya gotta tramp a long way. Ya want something good, ya gotta suffer a bit to get it. Ifya not bugged at the end of the day, ya never did anything worthwhile.'

They knew what he was getting at, though they hated to hear it. Those who'd been on earlier trips must have half-realised what he'd

told them but there were new men in the party, they were finding it hard, the bush seemed merciless, Bill sided with the bush rather than his followers, and they sensed, whether justly or not, that his war experience made him impatient of anyone not prepared to put up with discomfort. What he'd survived had made him hard, and demanding. Worse still, there was no easy way out. They couldn't catch a taxi at Mount Hotham and sulk as they were driven home. Much as they might want to bring Bill down, they had nothing to negotiate with. They were in fact pretty close to powerless ...

Then the sky came to their rescue. Clouds were scurrying across the heavens, moving west to east, and there was a line of puffballs approaching. One got between the sun and Mount Blowhard and its dome darkened, to startling effect. The cloud moved on and the mountain shone again. The next cloud blocked the light and the dome was dark a second time, sunlight returned and a third cloud repeated the trick. The tourists, disgruntled a moment before, came close to applauding. Nature was up to her tricks, or was she a he? Peter Gill the photographer said, 'It's like a bad joke. The cornier it gets, the funnier it is.' And it was. The skies were only doing what they did everywhere all day long ... but the trick had come at the right time, and drawn the sting of a bad-tempered group of men. They'd been wishing they could take their boots off and be pampered till they could get home again, or at least on the bus that would take them to the train, and suddenly the aches in their legs, the feeling that their feet were both paining them and yet at the same time were detached from their bodies, had brought about a change: the weariness, the distress, was a prelude, no, more, a pre-requisite to the attainment that had been delivered. They were no longer weary, the doors of apprehension that they'd sullenly slammed because it was hard work to be in the high country were open and they saw, with appreciation, that they were like fish in a mighty ocean, but that this was only a figure of speech for their situation, which was that they were already high enough to see that the trees were to the mountains what grass was to a field. Its normality was that it covered everything. It didn't begin or end, it was everywhere and it was a signal to their eyes that everything was endless. Mountains were enormous, nature, their mother-mistress, was bigger, and they were nothing. Wrong! They'd been a bunch of grumblers and now they were

lit up from within. Bill was right. There were *trees* everywhere, but the type changed according to the situation, so the tree cover was the best way to investigate what was being covered. The earth was telling them about itself. It was almost confessional. They'd already been through places where you could touch an alpine ash with your right hand and a snowgum with your left, and with your eyes you could follow the line between the one species and the other. How did the trees know which belonged where? You had only to dwell on the question, without even answering it, to feel the planet relating to you differently. It lived in a different way from humanity, but it was alive. It had names.

Mount Blowhard.

The names were given the mountains by men, as were the names of flowers. Everlastings. Bluebells. Mountain daisies. And the mountains too. They'd already learned a healthy respect for Blowhard, only a little way to their west, though a steep valley divided it from them. Mount Hotham was their next milestone, with Feathertop along the way. Who'd named it that? Why? These names were people's reaction to their first impulses, those earliest sensations that something living, however mute, had imposed itself upon their minds. People imposed themselves upon the land they were entering by giving names that were supposed to honour aristocrats far away. Sydney, Melbourne, Queen Adelaide. Evidence of aboriginal lives were in the names of the rivers they'd seen. Dargo, Wonnangatta, joined of course by white invaders – Mitchell, Avon, Wentworth.

One of the pilgrims said, nobody knew why, 'Crooked River!' and everybody laughed. You couldn't make a river straight! The bloody things wouldn't tolerate it. Peter Gill said, 'We're a helpless bunch, aren't we? Foul-tempered one minute, ready for a laugh the next. Nobody move! I'm going to take a picture.' He pulled his camera from the bag by his side and those with their backs to the east, that's to say, those who were facing Mount Blowhard, urged him to take his picture so they were shown against the backdrop that had changed them, only a minute before. He moved around, he squatted, he pulled a few leaves off a tree so his lens wouldn't be impeded, and he took his picture, then another. Beaming, he said, 'That was a good one. It'll find its way into the album, I feel pretty sure,' and that put everything to rights. Their moment had been recorded, it would be featured in their

recollections, and wouldn't be lost. They would all die, the albums would be lost or thrown out by careless relatives, but someone would give one or two of them to some library, some lasting strongplace, and the moment would be revivable. In their transition from frustration to enlightenment they had achieved what Shakespeare had said his sonnets would achieve.

A lasting statement had been made. A moment had been seized, and in the seizure, transformed.

The wearing o' the green

Someone in Sale gave Jan some cuttings of an Italian tomato plant. Her garden space at the hotel was limited and so was her interest in gardening. She thought of a better plan. She'd get Louise O'Donovan to grow them. It'd give her an excuse to call on the fringe-dweller and if anything developed ... so much the better. It was worth a chance.

She told Tommy who was sufficiently ashamed of himself by now to hold back from saying it was a silly idea. Instead, he said, 'Take a piece of paper. That way, if she hides in the bush when she hears you coming, you can leave a note.' Jan saw sense in this. As far as she knew, Bill was the only person who visited the fringe-dwellers, but then he was Briagalong's central person, something that made her a little jealous. How could you compare men and women for stature? They were different. Yet she knew that Bill's claim on them all was his common humanity, and she saw no reason why the same mightn't be said of a woman – except that it wasn't.

Well, she determined, it was going to be, one of these days.

It was a Sunday afternoon when she drove out. She parked some way from the house, but left the car in a place where it could be seen. She'd dressed herself in a red muslin she felt had been a silly purchase, but it was the most visible thing she had. She picked up the box that held the cuttings and made her way to the house. She stopped. She heard something she shouldn't be hearing, because deCoursey, she knew, was on tour, in the mountains somewhere. Near Mount Hotham, or maybe Feathertop, or thereabouts, and they were going to Omeo to meet their bus. Where the birdman would leave the party and whether

or not he had the job of selling the horses they'd used to carry the men's bags, she didn't know. Anyhow, wherever he was, he wasn't here, but ...

... approaching the cottage, hardly more than a hut, with its bark roof and logs tied together to weight the roof down so it couldn't blow away, she heard a violin. It was playing 'The Wearing o' the Green.' An Irish tune, yet it must be the birdman's French mother who was playing ...

... unless it was Maeve?

No!

So it was the mother, assuming the tastes, the impulses of the Irish race, her late husband's people. Did it belong out here, or not? She stopped to think. Was a violin out of place in the bush? At least it was human, and therefore welcoming, which meant that for deCoursey it was a contradiction to his never-comfortable being. Jan had heard about the birdman playing his violin occasionally, but the mother, never! Perhaps nobody had known? It must be so. Perhaps she never played it when her son was near. If so, why? Did she not want to contradict the contradiction?

Perhaps. That could be so.

Jan thought. Should she call out? Retreat and come another time? Or might she be doubly-, extra-welcome if she came in on a wave of music?

She'd take the chance!

She walked to the cottage noisily, aware of herself as the brightest object in sight, wrapped in ridiculous red. She realised that she'd have either to knock, or call out, but neither was necessary because Louise was at the door, no instrument, not even a bow in hand, as she welcomed, yes, welcomed, her visitor.

'I was playing to make you appear!'

A radiant smile appeared on Jan's face. 'And here I am!'

'On wings of song!' Louise, in her sixties, managed to look as if she'd just arrived on earth. 'What have you got there? Plants for me?'

Jan handed over the tomato seedlings, explaining their origins without having the slightest feeling that the plants needed words to accompany them. 'Let's take them with us,' said Louise. 'We'll see where they're going to grow.'

The two women walked through the garden as if they did it every Sunday. 'I read about these little things years ago,' Louise said, gesturing at her present, 'but I never expected to see them. Such things aren't grown around here.' Jan told her how she'd come across them, found no place for them in the tiny garden, and then ...

'I thought of you,' she said. The two of them were in close communication by now, though Jan, at least, hardly knew what they were doing. 'Your son's away?' Louise nodded. 'And your daughter's ... inside?' She nodded again. Jan wondered what they'd say to each other next, to be taken by surprise. 'You knew the tune. How far away were you when you first heard it?'

Jan said what the birdman's mother wanted to hear. 'At the hotel. It led me to the garden, to pick up the box, and then it led me to the car.'

'I've been playing the tune for days.' It occurred to Jan that this might be true.

'The thought's been in my head for a while. Ever since I was given the little plants.'

'We're like nothing else in creation,' Louise said. 'Thoughts grow in our minds. It takes us time to realise.' She pointed at another tomato, twining itself around some grubby string. 'I saw this two days ago and I couldn't remember planting it. You know, I don't think I really did.' Jan, she saw, was expectant. 'I think it knew what was coming and it got itself here to be a welcoming committee. I think that's what happened.'

Jan liked the way things were happening. 'Show the new plants to their welcoming committee.' Louise did this solemnly, then put the box she'd been given on the ground. 'We'll let them get to know each other. I'll show you around.' The two women walked through the garden, Louise in grubby garments that had once been pale blue, or perhaps silver-grey, and Jan in her cloth the colour of fire. She said to her host, 'You played an Irish tune to bring me. You knew I was Irish, of course, but how did you know the tune?'

The question sent Louise into the far-away. 'My husband was Irish. Why did he bring me to Australia? I think he wanted to throttle the French in my throat, but what he did had the opposite effect, bless him.'

'He's in the great beyond by now, I take it?'

Louise nodded distantly. 'Long gone. He said we were making a farm to hand on to our offspring. He was making a hole to bury us

in, and he succeeded.’ She laughed more loudly than Jan expected. ‘I enjoyed being buried, I outlasted him, and I’m happy to be here. It’s what you call the end of the line, and it’s where I belong.’ Jan said, ‘And your daughter?’ Louise answered simply, as if the query had no overtones at all. ‘She’ll have the kettle on now she knows you’re here. I trust.’ The last words sounded like an anthem, or a hymn, in her mouth. Jan gave her something else to deal with. ‘She doesn’t get into town very often?’

‘No more than I do. Less. It’s the end of the line, it’s the end of civilisation. We’re at the outer edge. I like it.’

‘And your son?’

Louise smiled faintly, thoughtfully, absently, thinking of her boy. ‘They say he’s mad but what else could you be if you’d placed yourself here with only those mountains in the beyond? They’re too much for me, but they’re not enough for him. He’d like it if they talked to him. I think he expects they will. He hears voices and thinks it’s them.’

Jan observed her shrewdly. ‘You’re not a little worried about this, maybe?’

‘No. What he thinks they are is what they ought to be. Companions. Our thoughts come and go, the mountains stay. Snows fall on them in winter, fires rage in summer, they’re ever so accepting. I couldn’t do what they do, could you?’

Jan had to agree. ‘I could not.’

‘Then come inside. I’ll show you our little home ...’ she was trying to think of an English word, and then it came ‘... *abode*. It’s all we need. Maeve and I like being on our own. My son says the mountains will look after us. He means well, and I think they take a look occasionally, seeing how we are.’

Getting ready to go home

It was, deCourcey thought, a region of the mind. He was at a well-known lookout between Omeo and Benambra. He’d stayed behind to oversee the sale of the Skyline horses, it was done, and he would hand them over the following day, not without a sense of loss because they’d served the party well, and deCourcey had become attached to

them. On this last day before he took the bus to the lowlands, he'd ridden to McMillan's Lookout, named for the explorer, and found it accorded with his spiritual condition. It wasn't a high spot but it gave him a view of the wide lake that collected the run-off from surrounding hills. No great mountains fed the lake, and even the dividing range, on the southern side, was only a low blue line. The view was broad, but without challenge. The breadth and openness of what he saw seemed to say that the mountains were, for the moment, in softer mood, their dramas far away. deCoursey knew the out-of-sight peaks. If he looked to the north-east, Mount Cobboras, The Pilot and Kosciusco came to mind, if not into sight. They were there, though, and could be imagined. And so it went for each and every direction. They were grouped in their various areas, and if you took the right line you'd find them, withdrawn, stony, challenging all over again.

Skyline Tour number three was over. The pilgrims had wanted to know where they'd go next time, and all Bill would do was laugh and say he needed a rest before he thought about that. 'You fellas take a lot outa me, ya know? All ya questions, and also I gotta be on the lookout to make sure nothing goes wrong!' They knew this was true, they realised how demanding they were, and how inexperienced, even those who'd been on the three trips so far. deCoursey had a feeling that Bill would want to return to the Moroka, to Castle Hill, the Pinnacles and the many vistas to be had from the edges of the plateau he, and deCoursey, knew so well. deCoursey considered his friend. Bill's mother had died after giving birth to a sister for her boy, his father had left, and Bill had been taken care of by another cattle-breeding family. He'd had no education, and the best guidance, the best protection for him was to do what everyone around him was doing. He grew into the life of a mountain man, a bush man, a cattle man, then a soldier, and now a guiding figure, not only for his township but for the pilgrims, who followed wherever he led.

deCoursey asked himself how much more *he* wanted; his quest was different from Bill's. The ex-soldier sought peace in the hills, and an opportunity to use his skills. Given a horse or two and a mob of cattle – or a mob of tourists – he could be the man he wanted to be. His lack of education was nothing beside the mastery he'd acquired. The high country had taught him, he'd found mastery there, and all he needed,

when he got back to the lowland, was to do what everyone else did to make himself secure. He had no quarrels and almost no ambition. Human society couldn't give him the rewards he needed because they were trifling in comparison with his achievement of unison with the high country; Bill could only wonder at people wanting to be lord mayor, premier of the state, on the council, or even wealthy. What was the good of such things if you couldn't stop yourself getting lost?

deCoursey looked over the brightly-lit land. The lake was a lacuna in time. It was there, inescapable, though you could ride around it, to Benambra on one side or back to Omeo on the other. It was a residue, the opposite of a peak. It was low. It accorded with his mood, because his days with the pilgrims were over for another year. He was proud of his bush skills. He'd shown the city men how to catch a meal for themselves in an almost aboriginal way – blocking a creek, lighting a fire around a rock, then, when it was suitably hot, levering it into the water. The black fish in the stream, unable to get away, found the new temperature of the water not to their liking, and came to the surface, to be netted and cooked. The pilgrims had been most impressed, as had Bill. 'Taught me a new trick! Good job I never said I knew everything, eh?' That had been an unlikely highlight of their journey, because nobody expected it. He'd shown them he wasn't a bad bushman after all! But the lake reminded him of his yearning for what high places meant to him, though the lookout where he stood wasn't doing much for him. It was high enough to give a view, but not the feeling of exaltation that he craved.

It occurred to him that he might be wrong in making an automatic association of altitude and spirituality. What appealed to him about height was that it took him out of the world where a casual acceptance of his humanity was the norm. But moving yourself away from human norms didn't necessarily make you better. You might simply be lonely, or depressed. You might find yourself to be *without* rather than *with* anything. Superiority might be a feeling that lasted only a second or two. If it was a permanent state then it must by now have become well-grounded in some human form.

The church? His father had never believed so, and had come to Australia to get away from the church, or so he said. Perhaps he had been on a journey too, and his son was his continuation. Why was it,

then, that he, deCoursey, was the last of his line? Maeve wasn't going to have children. He wasn't. They would die out, the O'Donovans of Ireland, France and now Briagolong. The last two would be buried in the town's bush cemetery after a service increasing nobody's faith. Increasing faith, if that was to be a result of anything he did, was likely to occur among the Skyline people. Did he want to convert them, then? This made him think. He wandered about. There were snow gums at the lookout, as well as trees from lower altitudes. Botanically, the place was a mixture. So were the Skyline men, but the comparison told him nothing. It didn't work. There were birds about, though, and they gave his mind openings. They had a daintiness, and a certainty of relation with the world that humans didn't have. For the thousandth time he cursed his humanity, but knew, for all that, that he could be no other thing. He'd been to the zoo in Melbourne as a young man, loved the animals for what they were, but saw no way out in them. All you could do with animals was be kind to them if they were docile and avoid them if they were dangerous. The ocean? Fish? He shuddered. Not for him. There was only the air, if you wanted to find release, and the mountains, it seemed to the guide who'd sold his horses the day before, were halfway houses, both immobile and yet released, accepting of humanity's descriptions affixed to them but blissfully unaware of what these ideas might be. It was as if humans covered them with thinking, and then, as soon as the humans went away, the mountains resumed their forceful silence. They accepted the droppings of the human mind but they could rid themselves of them the moment people absented themselves. That was their lesson. We'll outlast you. Even your cleverest thoughts will vanish, and we'll still be here.

deCoursey looked about him. The sun had moved a little from its zenith towards the west. He untied his horse. Tomorrow he'd catch the bus. His thoughts had altered nothing. Yet his mind was a little clearer. He was forty and in good health, a little older than Bill and nowhere as sought after as the more normal, more average, man. People didn't know what to do with him and, he realised, he didn't know what to do with himself. If you refused to take your identity from those around you then what were you left with? A set of impulses to find something more elusive than gold? He wanted something that

didn't exist, a state of spiritual permanence, he wanted to be a living, walking cathedral, and nobody had ever heard of such a thing. He was as stupid as people said he was, but when he looked at those who scoffed at him behind his back while they went through the motions of politeness to his face, the birdman knew he was somehow right inside himself.

Searchers were pilgrims, because they too made journeys. It was said of people who walked through France and Spain to Santiago di Compostela that the journey mattered more than the arrival. In that case, didn't his search hold more than any discovery he might make? It must. It had to. He mounted the horse he'd be handing over tomorrow and flicked the rein. Omeo had been the destination of the group, they'd arrived, they'd broken away from the mountains they'd been investigating, and they were on their way home. So now was he.

Where?

Bill wondered where the next tour, the fourth, should go. His thoughts kept hovering over the places his companion, deCoursey, was thinking about – Castle Hill, the Pinnacles, the Moroka River, where he'd built a hut ... country he knew well. Skyline Tours had already been there, so if they went again, what could they do to make the journey better? More of a pilgrimage, holier, more respectful ... he knew he was moving onto deCoursey's territory, and it felt right. That was what they would do. He rang Martin Casey, he sent his plan to the Tourist Bureau, who were curious about what he was doing. 'Never went to school,' Bill told himself, 'and they're takin notice of me. Not bad, eh?' And he told deCoursey that their ideas had coincided. They'd alter the emphasis of the trip, this time, to the edges of the Moroka country, and in particular the gorges where the river fell away to the Wonnangatta. 'Those fellas think water comes out of a tap. They got no idea how it springs outa the sides of mountains, or how it gets down to them.' And Bill had another request. 'That trick o'yours, heatin up the rock to catch the fish, ya feel like doin' that again?' He saw at once that his friend was embarrassed. 'Okay mate, sorry. Mustn't make a showman outa ya. Not your style, I shoulda thought o'that!' It

was a measure of Bill's humanity that when he made an apology it was accepted as simply as it was given. The two of them discussed dates for the trip in the light of seeing alpine flowers. 'There's nothing like walkin through those places when there's flowers noddin as ya walk along.' The bush men knew they were thinking thoughts that bush men found it hard to share. What did they want the pilgrims to think about the flowers?

Bill said, 'I want'em to know how lucky they are. There's plenty o'fellas I was with are pushin' up flowers on the other side o'the world. I'd like our pilgrim fellas to think o'the blokes that never came back.' He knew that his friend's ideas would be different, and was curious. 'Whaddaya say to that?'

deCoursey thought. Why was he so keen to help Bill take the city men away from their habitual places? He was selfish, he realised; he took the city men out because he wanted to be there himself. He was filled, also, with what the priests who taught him would have called the sin of pride. He was more advanced than the pilgrims. Their frequent incomprehension, their sometimes-silly questions, told him he was further advanced. This flattered him whenever he felt earthbound, which was most of the time. Having the city men to compare himself with gave him relief from his mind's merciless critique. 'Flowers,' he said to Bill, 'make us humble. They are good for us, therefore. That is how I see it Bill.'

His friend was thoughtful. 'You weren't at the war, deCoursey. It takes flowers to do that, for you. I had Germans firing at me every day, and we were firin' back. Ya had to keep ya head down, and that's pretty close to bein humble. Funny thing was, every now and again, somebody'd go mad, and stand up and blaze away unprotected. Sometimes they'd get shot straight away, sometimes they'd win a medal instead.' His face creased, though whether from puzzlement or contempt one could not have said. 'Stark, ravin mad. They'd get a citation for bravery but what it really was was madness. They couldn't stand bein' tied down, so they'd stand up and blaze away. I saw one fella do it. The Huns was firin back as fast and loose as they could. Why they never shot him, I dunno. You'da sworn some power was makin the bullets go round him. They never missed like that, any normal time.' He looked at his friend, who'd chosen not to go. 'Fella in charge of our company wrote

a report, said he oughta get a medal. He woulda too, except he never lasted long enough.' He paused, still thinking. 'We were taken outa the line for a few days, the bloke got drunk and somehow managed to fall under the wheels of a truck. Killed him. So he never got his medal.'

deCourcey listened in silence. Bill would find his own way out. As a man who'd chosen not to go, he had no right to comment. Bill said, 'Flowers're alive. Sometimes I think of the flowers we saw in France. I never seen anything so beautiful as the flowers that grew in the mud. Until ...'

The soldier and the pacifist were in agreement. The flowers of the high country were life itself, in all its radiance, and they came out every year, reminding ... reminding whom of what? Bill needed no answer, because life itself was a question. deCourcey needed no answer because if the earth could produce such flowers, surely mankind, so ingenious, so driven by all sorts of contradicting needs, could produce states of enlightenment as wondrous as the flowers? Or could it? deCourcey said, 'I don't think we need to organise anything special for our journey, Bill. If our awareness is on a high enough plane, we'll be rewarded in some way, and so will the men who come with us. It's up to us, my friend. They'll get their lead from us.'

Bill concluded their discussion. 'Well, okay, that's been decided, then.'

Anything at all!

Again it fell to Bill to tell the Burkes that their hotel would be needed only at the beginning of the coming tour. 'There's no sense in makin'em walk all the way back when what we're takin'em to see is near Dargo. We'll wind up the walk there.' He did promise, however, that the tour in the following year would begin and end in the Burkes' home town. 'Gotta do somethin' to give the place a boost.' Tommy Burke was sober enough to ask where these later trips would be going, and all Bill could say was, 'No idea at this stage. But we're givin you fellas a guarantee.' That was enough for Jan. She looked the organiser in the eye. 'Tell me why you never married, Bill.'

‘I never had a father worth following. Nobody set me an example.’

‘Bill, there were hundreds of people around here got married. And if you take in Stratford, Sale and Maffra, thousands. You wouldn’t have been anything out of the ordinary.’

‘Oh I thought about it as a young fella, and when I came home after the war I knew I oughta look around for a wife, but I never did much looking. I went out in the hills, I got a run in the high country, that kept me busy. An’ I was poor. I never had anything to give a woman if I found one who could be bothered with me.’

Jan was insistent. ‘Marriage is holy too, you know Bill.’

He wasn’t shaken. ‘I think it is. I don’t think I was ever good enough.’

That seemed to end the matter, though the three of them – Jan, Bill, and Tommy – knew it had been opened rather than closed. Tommy said humbly, ‘I’da never been anything without the missus.’ Looking for the things that separated them, Bill said, ‘I think if I’da had kids I’da been a fair sort of father, but to tell the truth, I was never all that keen on havin’ kids. I like other people’s kids but I never felt the need myself. Not sure if that makes me an odd man out, or what. Whaddaya reckon, Jan?’

He was putting it to her to take their gaze away from him. So he didn’t like being put in the position of being questioned. He had to have things simple. Left alone, in the positions he preferred, he could be himself, pure and simple. He had only a narrow base for quality and, removed from it, he was lost. He worked hard to prevent this because he knew his quality and intended to protect it. It was why he protected deCoursey and why he was so popular. He had no wish to unsettle other people and didn’t mind if they moved onto his ground; this was something he welcomed. In protecting traditions he created them. In that sense he was a father figure for the town, though not a father. ‘Not that I know of,’ he would have said. ‘I don’t think I’ve got any secrets hidden.’ He would grin. ‘Or not that anybody’s ever told me!’ He let people laugh at him if they wanted to, so, most of the time, they didn’t want to. It was a means of self-protection, though he never planned it that way. Jan said to him, ‘It takes all sorts to make a world. People think you’re silly if that’s all you’ve got to say, but it’s true. We need conflict and differences, otherwise we’d die of boredom.’

It was as if Bill had known what she was going to say. ‘That means, ifya come to think about it, that we need things to keep changin’ all the time, otherwise we’d be bored. And we do! When I’m out in the mountains, I wanta get back into town. And when I’ve been here a few days, I wanta get out there again. The mountains release me. I never feel alone. I feel they’re watchin’ over me, they don’t mind if I ride, or tramp, all over them. They haven’t got it in them to do me any harm, and they’re company. I feel sometimes that I’m company for them!’

‘You’re pretty well-adjusted, Bill.’

He agreed. ‘That’s right. I tellya what, it’s when I go down to the city for those dinners, after one of our tours, that’s when I know I’m a fish outa water. I wanta get back where I belong. I get back here and I want to get back in the hills. I get back to my little run and I wanta get back to the high hills. I get to Mount Howitt, or the Crosscut, the Moroka, and I’m a happy man. I know where I am, I know what to do. Ya can’t get any better than that.’

It was his affirmation. He had his place, or places. He moved easily, he knew what to do. He could look ahead, get everything organised, he was born to lead anyone who liked to follow. ‘Those fellas from Melbourne,’ he said, ‘some of them are brilliant. I hear’em talkin’ sometimes and I dunno how they can have so many brains. That Carl Taylor, the bookie-bloke, he’s smarter than a cage full of monkeys. Or Herb Ellison, with that camera, he knows a picture the moment he gets within half a mile of it. I said to him one day, ya might get a good shot down there, Herb, but he didn’t even look. Nuthin there, he said, take it from me. Bit later, I showed him a bit of a cave, well, just a hole in a few rocks, and he got in there and mucked around for ages with his lenses, and he took the best shot of the whole trip. Knows what he’s doin’, and that’s the secret, I reckon, for anything. Work out what ya wanta do, work out what ya can’t do, then just paddle along peacefully till ya getya chance. Whenya get it, take it. That’s the way to live.’

Tommy was feeling the need for a drink by now, but couldn’t have it when his wife and Bill were with him. He said, ‘You’re not living a routine, Bill. You can make up your own mind, every day. Running this pub, we’re at everyone’s beck and call ...’

His wife wouldn’t have it. ‘You’re no slave, unless you’ve made yourself into one. There’s nothing wrong with a routine. It gives you

a base. If you've got everything organised, you're ready for whatever happens.' Vehemently she added, 'Anything at all!'

The outside world

As expectations mounted for the fourth Skyline Tour, messages went from Briagolong to Melbourne, and vice-versa. Expectations were raised in the little town, and in Dargo, where the trip would end. Stirrings began, also, in the mountains to the north, between the mountains, in rumbles inaudible to human ears. Grasses bent to the winds, whispering. Birds cavorted in their various ways, cockatoos shrieking, parrots talking in their heads, high-pitched and feverish. Magpies patrolled the lowlands, singing their form of meeting-language. Wallabies hopped, emus strolled disdainfully, running whenever they got scared. Of what? They had no idea, surely, that the systems of the humans were collapsing and the next party through their territory would be poorer, less confident, than they'd been. The fish, frogs, ants and beetles had no idea that the war that had taken Bill away was going to start again. The cattle, and most of all the horses, closest to humans and most aware of them, may have sensed a darkening of the world, but had no words for these sensations. The mountains, which never spoke, but heard everything, knew that a time was approaching which they would have to sleep through, till it ended.

The humans were at it again.

The tour-men, when they assembled, were more apprehensive, more receptive because a little shaken by what they sensed was hanging over them.

War.

Women thought about the ages of their husbands, their fathers and their sons. Would youngsters be allowed, even encouraged, to rush off in their teens, as they'd done twenty years before? Not if their mothers could help it! Those monuments that had sprung up all over the country after the first disaster hadn't settled into being historical oddities: they were still immediate, and stern, in their reminding. If the men of one country could get excited, so might men of other countries. Makers of arms and ammunition would ensure plentiful

supplies. Aeroplanes had improved. Cities would be bombed. Yet this was madness; surely the leaders of the world – an expression common people used, as if it had some validity – wouldn't unleash the dogs of war – another popular saying – a second time?

As we know, they did. But as the Skyliners got things together for the fourth of Bill's tours, they tried to put fear behind them. They got out maps to show their families where they were going. The names, rivers and tracks on the maps meant little to the wives, nothing to the children. What did they mean to the men?

They meant that serenity still existed, and could be their comforting blanket. Some of the pilgrims had had to put off workers to hold off the financial slump crippling the country. There were also hordes of men walking, anywhere they thought there might be work. The Skyliners had done well, in their careers and businesses. A number of them were pillars of their communities, another of those clichés the use of which indicates that there is something seriously wrong. When spades can't be called spades there's sickness in the mind, and sickness, it can be guaranteed, is feeding on fear. Much of the world was afraid and the rest was bent on making trouble, a euphemism for striking back at those who'd bested them before. The pilgrims gathered a fourth time, met by reassuring faces. Bill was as bold, bluff and confident as ever, a man of certainty. deCourcey had a new batch of horses to carry supplies and packs; he was a little more whimsical, approachable, than they'd remembered him. He spoke occasionally of his mother and his sister, who'd be looked after while he was away by Jan Burke. She would drive out in her car to see they didn't lack for anything. Tiger Rowe was as blasphemous as ever, but reassuring, and Billy Dibbs was, to speak plainly, a little shrunken in stature, though what was wrong he couldn't say. 'I never made it to the last war because I was too young. I can't see me making it to the next one, even though the doctor doesn't know what's wrong.' The pilgrims made sympathetic noises but were glad that they would only see Billy occasionally. He wouldn't be walking with them because it wasn't his job. What did their leader think of the way the world was going?

'Not too good,' was all Bill would say. 'You'd reckon them buggers would've learned a bitta sense by now, but I can't see that they have.' Beyond that he wouldn't be drawn. They'd follow a ridge running

north from the town, they'd see some of the grandest trees in Gippsland, then they'd get to the Moroka Plain. They'd camp at the hut Bill and a couple of his mates had built, then they'd make day trips to Castle Hill, the Pinnacles and Mount Kent, they'd follow the stream to where it made a series of falls, and they'd accompany it on its way to join the Wonnangatta. Then they'd be within walking distance of Dargo and they might even catch up with a newspaper, if they wanted to know what was happening in the outside world. When he heard the silence that received this remark about the world beyond the one he loved, and the pilgrims were learning to understand, Bill knew they wanted to forget almost everything except their loved ones, themselves, and the bush they were going to see.

Sylvie

Sylvie took her children, school age by now, to Sorrento. They had a balcony room in its grand hotel. Another couple from Melbourne, the McInerneys, and their boy and girl, arrived the day after, unaware that only three quarters of the Casey family would be there. Where was Martin? Couldn't he have taken Sylvie and the children wherever it was that he was going?

No, Sylvie said. It was an arrangement the two of them had made. Martin loved his mountain walks, and shouldn't be asked to do without them. 'I prefer to do the opposite, and come down by the water.' Her children seemed happy where they were, so what could the McInerneys say? Nevertheless, Marion McInerney said to Allan, as they lay in bed, their children asleep in a connecting room, 'I'd put my foot down if I was Sylvie. When you have children, you've made a commitment. No exceptions!' Alan McInerney, who had no wish to be anywhere else, said, 'We can only lay down the law for ourselves. Everyone has their own reasons for the things they do. And don't.' He knew his wife was troubled, but knew, also, that she'd try very hard, the following day, to make things good for Sylvie and her children as well as her own family. Allan knew, also, that without Martin Casey there to form a partnership of males, he'd be relegated to the role of supporter and servant, something he rather liked, though he tried not to let other men see it.

As the days passed he saw how complete in herself Sylvie was, and how adventurous. He had a feeling she welcomed the absence of her partner when she led her children, and the McInerneys', over dunes and into the ocean, suitably cautioned. She kept the children about her, talking to them the while, she got them out, dressed and back to lunch at the hotel, or she took them on picnics by the sedate, inner waters of the bay. Whether wild, or quiet, the water suited her. His wife Marion, Allan noticed, took a back seat, was directed, or found herself fitting into the other woman's arrangements. Allan found himself wondering what Sylvie had been like before she'd married; her face, in early middle age, still showed signs of the young woman who'd developed into a mother, and that, Allan could see, had been a change she'd had to go through. Why, or, more importantly, how had she known? Or had it been a compulsion which she'd never examined? After dinner one evening in the hotel's fine dining room, when the children had gone back upstairs, he proposed a question for each of them to answer: 'What was I like on the day the Great War ended?'

'That's an easy one to answer,' his wife said. 'I was all mixed up. My brother, who'd been ten years older than me, went missing in action and hadn't come back. My mother was sick and my father wasn't admitting that he'd lost his son, but he knew it well enough, and I knew I'd have his burden to carry till the day he died. I wasn't looking forward to the next few years, I don't mind telling you.'

Sylvie prompted: 'And then?'

'I met Alan, we started going out ...'

'And you came out of your gloomy period as the sun began to shine.'

Marion nodded solemnly. 'Tell us your story, Allan?'

Alan said he thought it was Sylvie's turn. He'd go last. Sylvie said, with startling frankness, 'I'd started university and the year was drawing to an end. I'd been a well brought up girl and I thought it was time to break out. At least a little!' She smiled. 'I wanted to spend the summer in the cool of the mountains. I knew there were people who partied up there long after the ski season had ended. I had an aunt who ran a store in Bright, in the north-east. She was a sympathetic soul so I arranged to stay with her. Once I got myself out of my parents' ambit and I was with my aunt – Mildred by name, but not by nature:' she

smiled again – ‘I felt pretty sure I could do more or less whatever I liked. And I did.’

Marion felt sure that their friend would soon be telling them how she went back to the city minus her virginity, but Sylvie had other things to say. ‘I saw quite quickly who I had to make friends with to be invited to Hotham Heights, and I was. They were people who drank a lot and although I drank a little myself when I had the chance I pretended a purity I didn’t have, and nobody seemed to mind. They took me under their wing. They’d have taken me a good deal further than that ...’ she laughed with gusto ‘... but again I played the innocence card, and got away with it. The people I was with were careless, and I was controlled. I saw that I could manage things to suit me, if only I kept at least the appearance of innocence. I met Martin not long after and I don’t think he ever saw through me. He never saw that I wasn’t naturally virtuous at all. I might do anything. I might go off exploring all the interesting possibilities that I saw opening up around me when I was away from home. I haven’t, because I’ve centred myself on my children. I want to make good people out of them. I’m having the freedom of childhood all over again, as a mother. It’s a rich way to live on two levels. Theirs and mine. I’m only superficially controlling them; we’re adding to each other, every minute of the day.’ She looked around. ‘I’m fortunate, I think.’

Alan asked, ‘It doesn’t trouble you that Martin’s not here?’

She shook her head. ‘I’m curious about his mountains. I saw enough of them to know why he finds them attractive. But they’re dead. Inert. If there’s any life in them then it’s because they feed on the imaginations of those who look at them. Like Martin and the men who go with him on those walks. Some of them are photographers and they put these albums together. They have a dinner and pass their pictures around. There’s nothing there. They’re feeding on emptiness. In some mysterious way they forge an agreement that what they’ve been doing is marvellous.’

Marion interrupted, her patience tried. ‘And you? What about you, down here? By the water, by the sea?’

Sylvia was ready for that. ‘This is real. I’m a mother. The sea’s the mother of all life. On one side ...’ she pointed over her shoulder ‘... it’s wild, it’s the open ocean, hurling itself against the land. And on the

other ...' she pointed again '... it's one big, calm pond, all the way to the city I love. Martin may think he's having a better time than I am, but he's not.' She was decided about that, but Alan wondered how these differences of outlook must affect their marriage. 'But surely, if he's away, and you're down here on your own ... well, you've got the children, but ...' He wanted to cough, but that would give away what he was thinking about. 'I mean, is it good, er, or perhaps it's just a little risky, to ... ah ...'

He didn't need to finish. Sylvie was smiling yet again. 'He's left himself wide open. I've no wish to harm him, because he's a good man, but the fact is, he's given me my freedom by demanding his freedom, and taking it, so you see ...'

She considered them, a couple of her own age.

'... I have my freedom, I have my children, and I have my husband too, when he's around. It's not a bad arrangement.'

At a loss

Australian mountains are unlike the Himalayas, Swiss alps, or the famous scapes of China. They're eroded, worn, and they run for miles, sharing drama instead of claiming it for themselves. There are areas of flat, or so inclined; it seems to be only at the edge that a claim is made, and it's in relation to the lowlands rather than to other peaks as competitors. It doesn't matter which is high, higher or highest; none of them, by elsewhere standards, is high, but the fact of their uplift from lands they overlook gives them a right to observe, and in doing so to be superior. The human reaction is all-important. The silence of the mountains, their unwillingness (inability) to respond, forces those who take their lives out among them to look inside themselves to answer questions they would normally expect some human authority to answer. But answer there is none, therefore the search for thought, or meaning, can't be suspended. On it goes, ever so imperfect as it must be. Mountains are our interlocutors, as opposed to oceans, which are noisy, and full of dangerous, teeming life. Rightly or wrongly, wisely or foolishly, oceans and mountains have been likened to women and men, the female and male principles of animal life. Oceans procreate,

or encourage it, while mountains prefer to stand aside, to be lonely, clinging to the perfection which only those who stand apart can have. Can be. Sylvia Casey, watching her children building sand castles, then paddling in the shallows of Port Phillip Bay, was not only joining her children in, but also defining their world as, one of play, which means passionate involvement, while Bill Gillio, master bushman, found cleanliness of soul in the cleansing bush. They had, perhaps, recognised each other's oppositeness in their brief awareness of each other when they were young, and each a visitor to Hotham Heights. Now Martin Casey, Sylvia's husband, was with the master bushman's party by the Moroka hut. They'd been again to Castle Hill, led by Bill to the crevices on the eastern side where it was easy to climb, led on top by deCourcey, the birdman, in a state of perpetual readiness to become a creature of air, taking selected pilgrims to the edges of the elevated rock in order to see out, out and down, aware of humanity's ordinariness because of their removal from it. They'd been to the peak, gazed around them at other peaks which they'd visit in the days to come, and they'd returned to the hut, with its surrounding tents, its fires blazing inside and out because, as Bill said, 'It gets nippy up here at night, no matter if it's a nice warm evening down below.' They ate well, thanks to Tiger and Billy Dibbs, they chatted with Bill and the birdman, and yet they expected more of themselves. They felt their privilege, knowing it would be short-lived. They knew they'd face questioning when they got home because what were they doing – what *were* they doing – strolling around the mountains while the world they'd put behind them was readying itself for war?

'This is a very special place,' Martin Carey announced, sipping his tea and wishing he could have a beer or one of the wines available in Sylvie's hotel. Those around him agreed, knowing, also, that they couldn't have told you – us – what was special about the place where they were. The air was clean. The sky above them was pure, even as it darkened, and birds, moving according to patterns the pilgrims didn't know, settled for the night, some of them, while others, more nocturnal, adjusted their position in flocks that operated as one. The birds had an uncanny knack of knowing what each other was doing, and in doing it also, they created unity, a polity, rather than a mass of individuals. 'We can't forget who we are, even up here,' was the obser-

vation of Peter Gill, one of the men who used a camera to record the moments that mattered. ‘What did you take today?’ someone asked. Peter thought. He’d taken Bill showing the way to the top, clambering up one of the crevices on the Castle’s eastern side, legs apart, a boot on a rock on the left, a boot on the right, and his right hand adjusting the hat he’d been wearing all day, all his life for all they knew. He was breaking into upper air, and he was exhilarated. Something had told Peter to look back after taking this shot of their leader and he’d seen deCoursey fifty yards behind, staring at the Castle with a look on his face that said he was on holy ground and hoping for more.

There *had* been more. Edwin Mickle, tubbiest of the party, said, as he was shown the whereabouts of the various towns spread across the lowlands, that he’d be writing a poem about their climb the moment he got home. ‘I’d like to do it now,’ he said, ‘but I’m too tired, and besides, I’m still in it, this upper world, and I could only write about it after I got home again. That how it is for you, George?’ This was to George McGeorge, sitting on a rock to get his breath back, and wondering if he’d ever again see a view like the one on the Castle’s western side. George was good with directions, and maps, and knew where they were in relation to the city they’d come from, their starting point in Briagolong, and the end point of Dargo that they were approaching. He looked across the endless bush that covered his country like a grey-green sheet and wondered where the variety of life, so obvious as you walked through it, tramping along in the boots he’d worn on each of the Tours so far, so that he was profoundly comfortable ... where the variety of the bush had gone, because, from where he sat, high up and overlooking the world, the trees seemed indistinguishable, one from another, in their millions. The bush – there was so much of it. Trees – there were so many of them. It seemed to George that if there was a god, something he was inclined to dispute, then *he*, if he was a he, would look down on his earth and be unable to distinguish one person from another. How could it be done? It couldn’t. They must seem, from heaven, as indistinguishable as the trees he was looking at, spreading, as he well knew, from Melbourne to Briagolong, from Briagolong to the state’s extremity in the east, from the lakes which he could see to the south, right back to ominous, thunder-laden ranges beyond him in the north. Everything, everywhere, was covered with

trees, except for a few clearances where towns, or perhaps some lonely selectors, had persuaded grass to grow.

And what was grass but a tiny miniature of a tree? The foolishness of this question shamed him, but what else could you feel, out here, up high? You could feel humble, that was all. You knew you were high, but human vanity couldn't be sustained. The forests you were looking at held millions of creatures - birds, wallabies, emus, ants – and you couldn't pick out a single one of them. Not one! So if any divinity had selected a single bird, wallaby, emu or ant, and asked what they thought of the humans sitting on their proudly-gained, proudly-possessioned Castle Hill, the aforesaid bird, wallaby, emu or ant would have had to say, 'I had no idea they were there!' Why should they know? How could they? What opinion could they have? They didn't have opinions. The world wasn't made in the same way as the human brain. World and brain didn't coincide. Brain could use eyes and see world, but couldn't recreate it, melt it down and mould it into something understandable, as humans liked to do.

George became aware that he'd been in a reverie, and that people were waiting for his answer, or wondering, perhaps, if he hadn't switched off that part of his brain that accepted messages. But no, he was aware, and ready to say something. 'That how it is for you, George?'

'Sorry I didn't answer before,' George said. 'I was thinking ...'

'And what did you come up with?'

'Getting up here changes you. Changes me, anyhow, and I think it changes everybody. How could it not?' He didn't know what was coming, because he wasn't his ordinary self, his lowland or even his city self, he was something else and he didn't know what. 'The fact is, it's overwhelming. There's no human idea, no thought, or concept that we're capable of producing, which can embrace everything we see here with any sort of understanding. The world's not at a loss, but we are, and I think we all know it!'

A blessing

Word reached the pub that Shirley O'Donnell had died. Her husband had left years ago, her children had grown up and left. She'd been

alone, and hadn't coped. Her cottage was filthy, she didn't care for herself, she made up wicked stories about people better organised than she was, and she eased them into circulation at times when she wasn't drinking. Jan Burke, hearing the news, saw that she'd have to attend the funeral. She'd have to stand at the graveside because, apart from the priest, if one could be persuaded to do the job, there'd be the undertakers and no one else. 'I'll represent the friends she never had,' Jan told herself. 'There's got to be somebody there, because ...'

Because of what? She couldn't answer her own question. She talked it over with Tommy in a quiet moment of their day. 'I'll come with you,' he said. 'Someone's got to do the right thing.' They agreed that it was the right thing, but didn't know why. Getting dressed on the day of the interment, Tommy said to his wife, 'We're bloody fools, aren't we. We could stay here and pretend we didn't know. Got the days mixed up, or something like that.' He knew she wanted him to go with her and he knew he would, it was just a matter of ...

Of what? When you'd listened to as many drunks as they had, you didn't delude yourself about the sanctity of human life, because it wasn't holy. Holiness was put in children at birth but most of them got rid of it as quickly as they could. There were no saints in Briagolong and the one who came closest – the birdman living north of town – was as mad as they came. Or so said Tommy, though he was pleasant enough to deCourcey on the rare occasions when he saw him. deCourcey was hardly a drinker but Tommy's job as publican meant that he had to make everyone feel that he had a good opinion of them, even when he didn't. It was a requirement of running a pub. Just like going to funerals of people who'd drunk themselves into a state of terminal ill-health.

'You ready love?' Tommy was at Jan's door.

She was. They got in the car and drove to the service, then they drove to the cemetery a mile out of town, the priest's words ringing in Jan's ears – heaven and redemption were the ones that stuck hardest in her craw. These were the ideas that angered Jan most of all the many ideas of the church which she'd quietly abandoned, down the years. 'Heaven' solved all problems, didn't it. The world was imperfect but things got put right in heaven. Well, if god could do that, why couldn't he make the world perfect for people to live in?

Eh?

As for redemption, it seemed that humans couldn't overcome sin by improving themselves, the sins had to be washed away by the sacrifice of Jesus; the world was unimprovable except by divine miracle, which meant that mortals – pilgrims: Jan laughed to herself – couldn't save themselves, they had to pour their minds into their faith and their lives into the church. It made Jan feel worthless and she resented this bitterly. She'd improved herself lately, she'd managed Tommy with care and tenderness, she'd listened to any number of people's worries, she'd treated all kinds of people as if their problems weren't innate but would blow away soon, with any kind of luck, she'd actually been working on human goodness, one to another, and felt she was getting somewhere, but the priest pronounced these depressing dogmas from Rome, and she, as an ordinary person who belonged to the place where she lived, couldn't make a life outside the doctrines of the Holy Father. Well, bugger the Holy Father! Righteousness didn't belong to him alone, nor did it belong to his people in the palace of the Vatican. If there was any goodness on earth, and there was plenty, it was in humble people living ordinary lives. If holiness wasn't in us all, what was the good of listening to a church that thought it managed the goodness, when it appeared, in and of ordinary people. I'm a sinner some of the time, Jan admitted, but I'm a good woman a lot of the time too, and so was everyone else ...

... even if not Shirley O'Donnell. No. Ahem. Shirley had been a trial. A vile and dirty liar when she was in the mood. Every day of her life she'd tested the goodness of ordinary people and they'd performed pretty well, Jan considered. She watched the coffin going into the ground, and heard the priest's final blessing, and wondered what he'd say about Shirley when he got back home to his manse. He'd be happy, Jan decided, with an acute rush of pleasure as she accepted the dictates of her thought, to send her back to god if the gates of heaven were open to admitting her, Shirley, the drunken disgraceful O'Donnell-sinner.

The earth was good, so good that even the box containing the remains of Shirley O'Donnell couldn't impurify it, if there was such a word. Father O'Neill for all his faults wasn't a bad sort of man, there were a couple of others at the graveside for much the same reasons

that had brought Jan and Tommy, and even her husband, for all his inability to keep the alcohol he sold out of his own life and stomach, didn't try to block her when she got it in her head to do something good. He was irascible and short-tempered because he didn't have himself under control, but if you accepted him as a sinner he was well-intentioned enough. You simply had to let him be himself if you wanted any good from him, and that, Jan decided, was where the church was wrong.

It had to have you under its control, telling you when to pray, when to kneel, when to express shame about yourself even if you didn't feel that way. Oh lord I've become a protestant without noticing, she thought, and then she had feeling of considerable force: she saw the town's birdman, the butt of everybody's jokes, as clearly in her mind as if he was there before her. He was talking, as she imagined him, to a group of pilgrims, somewhere out in the mountains that the crazy man loved so much more than the town full of human souls where Jan and Tommy Burke spent their days ... he was talking to the pilgrims and they couldn't understand him, surprise, surprise. He was saying to them, with considerable fervour, 'I come to these places looking for a vanishing point, but when I get there, they are places of beginning!' He had a look of triumph in his eyes and his arms were spreading like the wings they weren't, and his fingers were quivering with excitement. She stared in amazement at this vision, and then the birdman was gone. Tommy, beside her, had noticed nothing. Father O'Neill was gathering his garments about him and stepping cautiously away from the grave. The burial was over, and Shirley O'Donovan was on her way to wherever she was going, if she was going anywhere. Jan would have bet her last quid note that Shirley was going no further whatsoever, no matter what Father O'Neill and his fellow priests might think. The journey of Shirley O'Donovan was ended and the journey, no, the transition, of deCourcey O'Donovan was making a start. 'Places of beginning,' he'd said, and she'd heard him, though they were separated by fifty or sixty miles and as many millions of trees. She looked around for the bird, the messenger, that had carried the vision from him to her, and of course there was no bird, or, if you liked, there were dozens of them, all local inhabitants with nests in the bush not far away, residents of Briagolong like herself. It was his

mind that had taken flight, she told herself, it brought him all the way from there to here, and while it's with me I should send a message back. She thought, hard and deeply. Tommy was staring at nothing in particular, unaware.

'Bless you, deCoursey,' she whispered in her mind. 'See what you can find, and bring it back to me!'

A lake of cloud

It was morning and a handful of pilgrims, up early and feeling zealous, had climbed to a vantage point to find themselves looking at a lake of cloud. It stretched over a huge, irregular area and was walled by ranges, dark for the most part but tipped by horizontal light. A sight! When they returned to the now-stirring camp, they asked Bill why it was that a whole long valley was billowing with white. Their leader grinned. 'Can't tellya much about it, even though I've had it explained! The words you want, apparently, are 'temperature inversion' ...' he grinned '...and I dunno what it means either ... I've forgotten the bloke's name, but he worked for the Weather Bureau and he came on the first tour and he hasn't been back. He said it's something to do with a mass of cold air trapping a mass of cloud beneath it, and it stays like you fellas seen it until the air on top gets warmed up and then the cloudy air can rise the normal way. Sorry I can't explain it any better but that's about all I could understand. We'll get some breakfast into us then we'll have a look.'

They ate, and those who needed a cigarette had one, then they clambered up the ridge to the spot where the early birds had seen the valley filled with cloud. It was better, now, because the sun was high enough to make the cloud a brilliant white flock, and the ranges containing it a deep, deep blue, almost black. It was as if the ranges, so sombre, so heavy, were held down by the cloud, so insubstantial. 'Getsya, doesn't it?' Bill put it to them. 'It's all wrong, except it's right.' They wanted to know what he meant. 'Clouds oughta be above us, and here they are, below. What's keepin' em there? Why don't they lift up? Well, they will a bit later, and that's when ya need to know where y'are, because when the cloud starts to lift, it gets real foggy, ya can't see very

far, and ifya dunno where y'are, y're in trouble. Fellas who aren't used to it can get bushed very easily. That right, deCoursey?'

He didn't often key the birdman in, they'd noticed, and wondered why he was doing it now. The birdman smiled as if a vision was being granted him. 'You get lost in a swirling mist. It's frightening, if you're scared of it, and marvellous if you know where you are. On a sunny day it might take an hour for the mist to rise till it's above you, and on its way to the skies where it belongs. If your spirit's in accord with it, that's the best hour you'll ever have, and when the mist gets above you, and it's cloud again – because you can call it cloud, once it's in the right place – you'll be wondering what you can do to fill the day properly, because you can't waste a day that's begun like that!'

The pilgrims were impressed, but unsure. 'What's a good thing to do when the cloud lifts, then?'

Was the birdman being impish? 'There's only one thing to do,' he said, 'and that's follow it!' The pilgrims thought he must be having them on, but were surprised to find Bill taking him seriously.

'What's the best way to do that, mate?'

deCoursey took the question seriously too. 'Rise with it if you can, but if you can't, and your feet hold you clamped to the earth ...

'That's gravity you're talking about,' said Edwin Mickle, whose build ensured he knew about not becoming airborne!

'... then you must follow it with your mind. Those who are devout don't let go of illumination.'

'To be devout,' Peter Gill said, and he was busying himself with his camera bag as he spoke, 'doesn't mean having to be religious, or does it?'

deCoursey looked both earnest, and out of his depth. 'Religion's a word, and words don't matter.' He paused. Martin Casey, who was closest to him, suddenly thought of his wife, and two children, at Sorrento while he was in the hills – the sky, almost. Martin wanted Sylvie with him, not for himself, but so she could hear what deCoursey wanted to say, and judge it, for he sensed that he was already half-converted and his wife might be able to hold the birdman at a distance. deCoursey floundered on. 'Some experiences come directly, and others come in words. People speak. One is not truer than the other. Both have their place. But when something huge is happening in the

air around you, it's better to shut down the mind, and let the thing do what it will. When it lets go of you is time to turn your mind on again, and think.' He looked at them. 'That's all I can say.'

'And well said, mate.' Bill supported him, so he was at least half-open to the birdman's thoughts, even if he didn't chase them with more words, trying to clothe them. Martin found himself admiring Bill for allowing this mystery to replace the madness of the war he'd served in. He must often be puzzled by his friend's ideas, but he thought that people should consider them. 'My wife used to come up to these mountains before we were married,' he said. 'Well, at least to Mount Hotham.' He didn't know how to go on and none of the group knew why she'd been brought into the discussion, but Bill remembered. 'I believe she did. What's ya wife's name? Sylvie? Yeah. Mount Hotham. She'd have a few ideas, I'd be sure of that.'

He'd said a little, he'd said nothing. What he was saying, in his guarded way, was that it wasn't his business to speak of party members' families, especially their wives, so he'd be vague if anybody mentioned anybody, especially from the past. This time it was his tact that they noticed, and valued. What would he have for them next? deCoursey, another master of the inconsequential, asked, 'Did you ever have to fight in mist, Bill? In France?'

Bill did his best to avoid talking about the war, but he seized on this. 'My word we did. Whole days of it sometimes, and it wouldn't lift. That's what's so good about it here. Ya know the cloud's going to lift sometime, and come to think of it, I reckon it's starting now. Have a look around the edges.' They did. The quilt of cloud was starting to rise. 'Okay,' Bill said. 'Let's see who can find his way home. Everybody point to the camp!' They did. He looked at their hands, their arms outstretched, and nodded. 'Not bad at all. Good work lads. Ya know ya way home. All the same, I think we'll get ourselves outa here. We'll move now instead o'gettin' bushed. That the idea?'

They moved where they'd been pointing a moment before. Bill started singing, 'It's a long way to Tipperary', and they joined in, those that knew the words. Those that didn't joined in too, roaring nonsense because that was what the world was made of. They were soon in the camp, where Tiger had tipped water over their fire. 'Tiger reckons it's time we moved on,' Bill roared. 'And since he's getting lunch for us,

we gotta go where he goes! The cook's in charge!'

So they moved. None of them felt he'd fully understood what had happened, but that it was a significant marker of a remarkable place there could be no doubt. There was more singing that morning, as they trekked, than there'd been before. They were bonded, and loosened by their singing, and they were eager for what might enlighten them next.

The Wonnangatta

They walked down, down, down, wondering when Bill would call a halt, knowing it would be when they reached the bottom. A river. The Wonnangatta, with its tiny settlements and its mysteriously abandoned station. Those murders! But what they wanted to know, and could hardly wait to talk about, was what it had been like when they were high, and what it meant to be low. Again. As ever. Life was lived down low, though experienced in a marvellous new way when high.

They'd been high, and they'd be low again. Approaching the river, dropping down to it, the name dominated their minds. The Wonnangatta. It started at Mount Howitt and the Crosscut Saw, which some of them remembered from the first tour. They'd been to the Pinnacles, and Moroka Gorge, and they knew that you did lots of bush-bashing before you got near a name. Names were places and places were names. The Pinnacles. Names were given to things that stood out, or couldn't escape. In the middle of the nation there was a One Tree Plain. Here the trees were endless. Bill had drummed it into them that whatever grew in a place was its expression; they'd finally understood him when, struggling to keep themselves upright on a broken, scabbly slope, they'd found themselves in the company of grass-trees. Xanthorrhoea. Sunlight was hitting the ground hard, and a breeze was making the stalks sway. 'Ancient, ancient,' they told each other, wondering why the patch wasn't bigger; they could see no difference between the grass-tree area and the slopes beside it, where scrawny stringybarks grew, which could apparently, and also, handle the roughness of the spot. Edwin Mickle, who'd elected to accompany deCoursey and his horse team down a different ridge, a slower but less

risky path, asked the birdman where he lived and how he'd chosen it. deCoursey told him that the cabin where he and his mother and sister now lived had been built by his late father, who'd died while his son was only halfway to learning the tricks of farming. 'I was never completed,' he said, 'and that is why I have been searching ever since.'

Edwin, quick to seize advantage, was amused. 'He never dreamed you'd be a tour guide?'

'There were no tours. They are the brain child of Bill, and others with more imagination than me.'

This sounded like a gift to Edwin, who liked to prise people open. 'People in the town you come from think you're the one with imagination. He'd fly like the birds if he could, that's what they say.'

deCoursey dug his heels in. 'They say, but what would they know?'

Edwin changed tack. 'Who do you think killed those people at the station up the river?'

'The police made a long investigation. They charged nobody with the crimes.'

Edwin again: 'It's a most unusual place for a couple of murders. Don't you think?'

The birdman was ready this time. 'There are no usual places. There are many places we know nothing about, so we haven't given them names.'

Edwin: 'Names! It seems to me that there must be someone round here giving out prizes for the funniest names. I never heard such a collection in my life.'

deCoursey was a patient man, even with fools. 'A place had to be obvious. Nobody knows if the black people gave names the way we do. I think they didn't. But they never got lost, you notice, which is more than we can say. We give names to places that have entered our minds, usually from a story. Or a discovery. Or we borrow the black people's names when we don't know what they meant. A place had to be obvious before we give it a name. Did you go out on the rock at The Pinnacles?'

'No. They were all jumping up and down, making fools of themselves. It didn't feel like my sort of place.' deCoursey, knowing he was referring to his corpulence, felt compassion for this man who'd attached himself to him. 'Did Bill go out on the rock?'

'No. He ...' Edwin didn't know why Bill had stayed back to watch.

‘He had no need to. He’s been there before, many times.’

‘So?’

deCoursey was unused to people talking to him like this. ‘So? I don’t know what you mean.’

‘So he’d been there many times. Why didn’t he want to climb onto the rock like the rest of them?’

‘Because that’s what you do when you first discover something. The next thing you do is give it a name.’

‘We couldn’t do that. It’s already got one.’

‘Sometimes people who believe they are very important decide to change the name of a place. It is always a mistake. The name is part of the history, and it cannot be escaped.’

That set Edwin thinking. ‘History can’t be escaped?’

deCoursey said, ‘In India there are people who believe it is possible to practise levitation. You lift yourself above the ground which should be holding you.’

‘Do you believe in that?’ Edwin’s scepticism was palpable.

‘I have never seen it done.’

Edwin laughed. ‘Neither have I. I think that means it’s impossible. That is, it’s a story I can’t believe. With all respect, of course, to our Indian friends.’ He was scoffing at the fools of the world, that is, at most of the earth’s population.

deCoursey had his own thoughts on this. ‘There are surely things that *are* impossible, but there are other things which haven’t yet been done because nobody has found the state of mind which allows them to be achieved.’

Edwin decided to take him on. ‘Like flying?’

‘We can already go into the air with aeroplanes. There is much more to be discovered, I’m sure.’

It was obviously true; Edwin was finding the birdman less silly than he’d supposed. He decided to try him out in another way. ‘If you wanted to make the world better, what would you do?’

deCoursey stopped. The horse he was leading stopped too, and nuzzled him. The birdman smiled. ‘If humans could know what horses know, the world would be better. Why? Because humans would be different, and that is the objective we need to reach.’

‘In what way?’

‘We would know more than we know now.’

‘What would be the good of that?’

‘We would have outgrown one or two of our limitations.’

‘So that’s what you’re after, finally, is it? Getting beyond your limitations?’

‘Isn’t that why we’re walking through the bush?’ For a moment he looked confiding, but Edwin had a feeling that the birdman had no more trust in him, Edwin, than he had in anyone else. It exasperated him, and yet he’d started the line of questions. ‘Shouldn’t we be getting down to the river? We wouldn’t want to be late for whatever Tiger’s putting on for lunch?’ He stepped out a little more boldly.

deCoursey, mild and polite as ever, was cursing the fat man for being an imperfect pilgrim, trying to make people captive with shallow questions when his mind could be surging ahead, soaring into new planes of thought. After all, they were surrounded by mystery, illuminated only imperfectly by names that recorded first impressions of places which had stuck out, been obvious, to travellers, explorers, and possibly early pilgrims too, the first time they’d passed through. What deCoursey would have liked was a system whereby those early names could grow as people understood the places better, that is, if names could be linked together in chains showing how the world was bound together. How would that be possible? He saw that he would have to think about it, so that his exchange with Edwin had not been useless after all.

Flowing past

The tourists and their guides were gathered near a willow tree, not very large, on a bank of the river. Bill named someone he thought might have planted the tree. The name meant nothing, and yet it did, because Bill had known the man, or heard of him at least – knowing who people *were* seemed to be as important in rural life as actually knowing them - and if Bill had known him then they, the tourists – very much pilgrims by now – had a connection too.

And they did. They knew the river, they knew it rose at Mount Howitt and the Crosscut Saw, they knew where it flowed, how you could

get down to it from Snowy Plain, and lots more they'd been told. More than that, their eyes had seen what the American civil war soldiers would have called 'the glory of the coming of the Lord'. Australians didn't think that way, but certainly they'd seen a great deal. Sometimes, if a track ran into another track, Bill would pause, point, and begin his explanation with, 'Ifya remember ...' A minute later the links would have been made. They began to see that names meant places and places had a whitefella story attached, and maybe a blackfella story too. Their land had had a life before they were born. That life was continuous with today's life, and the continuity was in the names, and of course the bush that furred the land. Those mighty trees! In the depths of valleys they strained to achieve knowledge of the sun, and on the ridges they huddled against the cold. Winds tore at the leaves in their millions, broke off branches and flung them to the ground for the next fire that came along. Their leader, they saw, took all this for granted. From the other side of the camp he called, 'How we goin there, Tige?' and was told the wait would be 'Jist a coupla minutes'. Tiger was cooking sausages. He'd three-quarters cooked them the day they got to the Moroka to preserve them, and now he was heating them up to serve; he was steaming them in fact because they'd dried out since their first cooking. 'It's only tucker,' he said to someone. 'Y'll get a real feed in Dargo. The pub'll be expectin' us.'

They drank tea, there was plenty of that. They looked into the stream. 'Any fish?' 'Can't see any.' 'You wouldn't expect any at this time of day.' Bill was looking at the sun, judging the time. They'd have a spell after lunch and then they'd start their walk to the settlement, one night's sleep away. Bill was wondering what to do to make their entry to the town impressive. His time as a soldier told him that when you marched into town you had to look your best. You were on display. People looking at you could, and would, form an opinion. If you looked beaten, degenerate, even if you'd lost half your corps in a battle, you'd be judged by the way you looked. People trusted their eyes because they had to. No allowances were made except the treacherous one of pity, and no self-respecting soldier wanted that! Soldiers weren't pilgrims and pilgrims weren't soldiers but both wanted to look good!

They ate their sausages, and they toasted their bread at the fire. They asked each other which places they remembered, and what

they'd tell their families about the walk that was almost finished. Someone thought Peter Gill had it easier than the rest of them because he could show his family photos, but he begged to differ. 'They will see the pictures, of course, but what I'll try to tell them, and it won't be easy, is the feeling that each day's connected with the one before and the one after.' What did he mean by that? He said, 'It's not easy to explain. When we're up in the high country, there's nothing to interrupt us. There's no telegrams, nobody rushing into your office to remind you that you've got to do something in ten minutes time or the whole place will break down ...' He spat! 'Nobody gives you that curious look out the corner of their eyes which tells you they don't believe you. I feel whole, up there, in a way that I never feel in ordinary life. It's worth a lot to me.'

The discussion rambled on, the river ran, Bill had another look at the sun, and Tiger announced that the canteen was about to close. Apparently he'd been a soldier too. Edwin Mickle studied the man he'd followed down from the Moroka on another ridge from the main party. He had his back against a tree, eyes closed, mouth half open. He was asleep. How could you admire a man like that? And yet he did. He was a specialist when they were only amateurs. If he said something, it was usually at the edge of their understanding, and yet they could, at least in part, understand what he was saying. To be near him was to enter a zone of contemplation. None of them ever spoke sharply to the birdman, though they could be short with each other. The birdman's presence was respected. He, Edwin, liked to walk near him, though this wasn't always possible because deCoursey, when leading horses, preferred not to have other people close. Edwin was a tricky man who liked to get the better of anyone he dealt with, but this wasn't possible with the birdman. He was too simple, perhaps too good. He knew what troubled him and he didn't choose to preach. If he saw the world as a problem then it was for him to solve it. He didn't expect salvation, or even answers, to be brought by someone else.

Edwin saw that the only thing he himself could do was change. It was either that or else ignore what he'd learned by walking through the bush. The bush, he saw, grew only where it could. The grass trees had shown them that. They grew slowly, and only in places that were suitable. Humility, something Edwin normally scorned, was an iron

law in the bush. Things grew where they belonged. They gave you surprises, too. You came across patches of some bush, some tree, that you'd have sworn wouldn't be found in the place where you found them. Bill told his men that the climate changed, over time, and there were lots of places where things grew that wouldn't start there, these days, but managed to live on, relatively undisturbed, from the period when they'd settled where they were. So that endless bush, so dull and dreary half the time, had a story to tell for whoever had eyes to see and ears to hear. Was human society the same? Edwin thought it probably was. So what was he doing with this mob of walkers? Pilgrims? What were they doing with him?

It hit him that he *was* a pilgrim too, or at the least a lost soul in search of himself. All of them were, or they'd be at home with their families, doing what wives and children wanted. But they weren't. They were on a river in the east, and in a minute they'd be marching towards a tiny town he didn't care about, to be inspected by locals – yokels – he didn't care about either. They'd form an opinion, those Dargo people, and he'd be the object of their judgement, something he probably despised. What did he care for Dargo, or it for him? Nothing. Zero. Zilch.

And yet ...

He'd put himself under judgement, and the judgement was his own. He mightn't care what others thought of what he was doing, but he cared for himself. He cared *about* himself. He was a better man for each of the journeys he'd made, and this was the fourth. So long as Bill kept running them, he'd be walking, clambering over rocks, singing when everybody sang. Suddenly he felt something inside himself bursting to get out. It did! He opened his mouth and roared:

It's a long long way to Tipperary,
But my heart's right there!

Those closest were amazed, or amused, by the outburst, but Edwin wasn't embarrassed. He called out, 'There's your song, Bill! Lead us into town! And tell us when you want us to sing! Give us a lead and we'll be right behind you!' Bill thought this was a great way to start. 'Righto boys, on your feet! Dargo next stop. We'll have the back of it broken when we camp tonight, and we'll be there for lunch tomorrow. We'd better give Tiger a hand to pack up. Tiger, when you've got all your

gear on the horses, you ride into town and tell'em we're on our way.' He looked around, pleased that things had gone as they had. 'We'll just move quietly till we've got a rhythm going, then we'll pick up speed a little. Not too fast. Off we go. We'll be feelin good when we hit the blankets tonight!' In a way the trip had ended at that point, but they were into its postlude and had to make the most of it.

They strolled downstream to the bridge, crossed it noisily, then grew quiet as they followed the road uphill.

Home

The pilgrims were pleased to be home, sad to be home. Indeed, where *was* home? What was the meaning of the word? Homes were central to family life, but was family central to the lives of men who went walking in the mountains? These men would have said that Bill Gillio and his offsidars were 'at home' in the mountains, but each of them had a base on a farming property, or in the settlement of Briagolong, central Gippsland. Where were the boundaries set, and why? In his time in France, Bill would have said Australia was his home. Asked, 'Where do you come from, Bill?' on one of his visits to the city, he would have said, 'I'm a Gippslander.' Asked by another Gippslander where he lived, he would have said that he belonged in the hills north of his town. So is 'home', therefore, a function of whom you are talking to?

We have to say yes to that, as we look for other ways to deal with the question, which has an aspirational side to it. None of the visitors could have said that they were at home in the mountains; indeed, they needed to be in a group of thirty to feel safe. Any one of them, dropped at random in the ranges, would have found, first, that they lacked survival skills and needed to get out. They would then have found themselves lost without Bill Gillio to guide them, or deCoursey to lead the horses they used as beasts of burden. Carry everything on your own back?

Too hard!

Yet something inside them yearned for those days of walking, camping, sleeping out, sleeping in huts and tents, making tea on fires burning whatever was around, groaning at the thought of having to get

out of their sleeping bags, amused at the sight of city men unshaved, in trousers, boots and shirts that looked as silly as the hats they'd chosen for the bush ... something told them that they were in touch with themselves in a way they didn't know when they were inside their routines. Routine meant habit, and habit meant restrictions they'd grown used to. Daily life was a prison without bars or walls, without, indeed, any locks or chains because the mind had learned how to limit itself and thus its owner.

The mountains, in making them aware of their usual state, challenged them, and when they got back to their city they were very aware of this challenge in that period of adjustment. Those of them who felt a resistance to coming down after days in the high country remembered Erik Burchill, in prison for killing his wife. The accounts of his trial had focussed on his jealousy, but why and how had this grown? Was it because he didn't want to be where he was, and felt sure that some other man would sense his spiritual absence and try to move in on his privilege and rights as a husband? If he couldn't be a husband any more had he determined that no other man would have access to the woman who'd been his wife? A few of them made inquiries about Erik, but none of them visited. What could you say? You couldn't tell a man in jail what a time you'd had marching a little way beneath the clouds, with the peaks they could name by now as their companions. What you'd acquired as a walker was not transferable to your own families, let alone as a gift, a solace, for someone as cast down as Erik.

So they were selfish as they tramped through the mountains. They surrounded themselves with like-minded companions in order to avoid any jarring, they were helpful and supportive because, like soldiers, they had something common to be faced. What were they looking for, and were they in the right place? If they accepted that the search was internal as much as a matter of trees, birds, clouds, sunlight and nightfall, what, then, could they do to help each other? It was a matter of learning to be alone in a group, solitary as they tramped together, singing as hard as they could, making up words sillier than the official words of their songs, lonely as Mount Blowhard as they made comforting camps where nobody felt lost, discounted, or alone. They lived in the paradoxical state of being on their own while in a congenial, supportive group: 'on their own' because each of them was

searching for something and how it related to their conventional lives in the city they got away from with Bill and his assistants. What they were like and what was it they were searching for?

Next: if they found what they were looking for, or realised what it was they were after, was their pilgrimage ended, or had it just begun?

Let's look at some of them, at home – back at *home* – in the city that was their normal place. Martin Casey first, and Sylvia, who knew, better than most of the wives, what the men gained from their time away. She listened carefully to what Martin said when he came home, and there was always a distance, based on frustration, perhaps, an inability to understand, between her husband and the places he visited because he revered them. He was like a church-goer who had no idea what god was like even though he addressed prayers to the deity, night and day. He mentioned the names of places he'd been to, or seen from afar, and the names, when they came out, were full of awe, or respect, but rarely any sense of familiarity, intimacy. They remained outside his mind, alien. Sylvia knew he wanted this barrier removed, but couldn't see how to do it. She compared this with her own feelings for the ocean, and the bay, contrasting waters both of which she loved, each in its own way. She put it to Martin that he might find it easier to think in this double-way, that is, to contrast the peaks he admired with the lowlands he liked to leave behind. 'Those people at the hotel can't get out in the mountains very often, yet they must know what's to the north of them. Can't you get them to ...'

She paused, knowing that what she was about to say would sound silly, but she could think of no other way to say it.

'... hold one end of the load, so to speak, while you pick up the other? They live at the base of the mountains your parties visit, they must know something about the places that fascinate you, even if it's only by contrast. You need somewhere to rest your telescope, that's what I mean to say.'

He admitted the usefulness of what she was saying, but it didn't reduce the trouble in his heart. He was used to a dialogue of inferiority with her and was reproducing it in his converse with the mountains. It wasn't in him to approach them on equal terms. How could she get it through to him that the problem lay in himself? Well, she could say it, tersely, letting her displeasure show. She did.

Martin crumpled. He didn't want to be brought down, doubly low: low to his ideals, lower than his wife. He had a feeling that he was a failure as a husband, father, and man. He said to her, 'You're ever so sure. Somehow you turn everything around you into a thing that you use with a sense of ownership. Every time I come to this hotel I realise that the people who run it recognise you as a co-owner when you and the children are only guests for a couple of weeks. Yet when I come here, I'm an outsider. I never have the feeling that it's mine, even though it's me that pays the bills!' He felt there was something in his path that needed to be torn down, but couldn't locate it. There was nothing to attack. The problem was, as she kept hinting, inside himself. Sylvia considered her husband, a man getting ready to break up before her eyes. The moment had to be brought under control.

'Let's get a grip on this. You're talking about a huge area. Let's put our attention onto one part of it. We'll start now. Of all the places you've been to, which is the one that matters most to you?' He had a sense of what she was up to, and accepted with relief.

'Mount Howitt.'

'Why's that?'

He pretended to think, though he knew the answer was there. 'One of the rivers starts there. It's a place of origin. But it's doubly a place of origin, because water runs off the other side as well, and that's the beginning of another river.'

'What's this second river called?'

'Sorry, I can't remember. We can look it up on a map.'

Scornfully, she said, 'Maps!'

Defending himself, he felt a little strength coming back. 'Yes, I know. You're asking me to define myself, and I've picked Mount Howitt ...'

'Go on!'

'It seems to be able to operate in two different directions. That is, it sends one river to the inland and another to the sea ...'

'So?'

'That makes it pretty remarkable, for me.'

'Why?'

'I can't do that.'

'Why not?'

The probing annoyed him. 'How can I tell you why I can't do things. I simply can't, that's all!'

But she was unrelenting, a strength many women have which is not recognised by men, who think strength means something else. 'The mountain functions as a source for a river that runs to the sea, pretty well straight down, and for another river which take a roundabout route to the ocean? An inland river?'

'Yes.'

'You say you can't do what the mountain does, yet you can, you do! You run a business, you have a marriage and that involves your children. You move in one direction knowing full well that they will, they must one day, move in another.'

'If you notice, I can't do both at once. I live my family life, and I run a business, and then, and this is sad, I have to take myself away from you and the kids, and the business too. I want to be lonely in the hills, and the only way I can do it is to lead a group of men, some of whom are just like me, and some of whom are not.'

She thought it might provide another way to let him open up. 'Describe a few of them for me.'

'That could take a week.'

'Let's start with half an hour before we get off and do some shopping. Give me some impressions to start with.'

Willingly, or unwillingly, he began. 'I suppose I divide them into two groups, but the groups keep changing. On the train down to Sale, half the men are noisy and half are very quiet. Half of them are concentrating and half are bubbling over.'

'And when they arrive?'

'Some of the noisy ones go quiet, because they're approaching the business end of the trip. Some of them like being in a country town, and some of them want to get past it quickly.'

She was terse. 'And so on. In the mountains?'

'Some of them are withdrawn and some want to talk about their feelings.'

'Then they're normal, if different. Do you think there are others with the same problem as you?'

'All of them.'

She was taken aback. 'That's pretty definite!'

Martin said, 'The problem is, the mountains don't talk back. I stand in awe of them, but I don't know what they mean, to me or to anybody else.'

'What do the people guiding you say?'

'Not much. I think the birdman understands my problem, but we all have the same problem with him, we can't understand him.'

She laughed. 'The prophet is without honour ... but never mind that. You want to keep going back? Or not?'

'Of course I do.'

'So what's the problem, then?'

'The problem's when I get home. You seem settled and I feel troubled.'

She was concentrating hard and it made him less than comfortable. 'Is it something I do? Or say? The way I look at you?'

'It's in me.'

'Can you say what it is?'

'That's what I've been doing, isn't it?'

'You've been trying. Now let's try again.'

She knew he was groaning inwardly, but was determined to go on. 'You're expecting the mountains to tell you something, but they won't. You have to tell it to yourself.'

'But what is it? That's the point.'

Firmly, in control as he was not, she said, 'You've left the settled country. Deliberately. You are out beyond the known. You're exploring, you're having a great time, but you're also getting worried.'

'Exactly. But why?'

She thought it was obvious. 'Bill the bushman, and your guides, the other men, can take you where you want to go but they can't soothe your worries because they don't know either.'

'Know what?'

'I said, you're beyond the known. You're in the unknown. You're not lost in the bush, because your guides know where they are. They'll get you home all right, but that's not the problem. You don't know what to think. All the thoughts that are normally in your mind were worked out back here in civilisation ...'

'Which you've never left!'

It was an accusation, she saw, that she wasn't adventurous, and she

resented it. 'There's problems enough down here, which you don't mind leaving with me while you're away ...'

'You said ... we've talked about this ...'

'Yes, yes, I agreed. I have no problem with you being away for a while. I've never made any difficulties about that.'

This was true.

'So what's the answer?'

'Martin, you are used to managing a business. It's yours, and you control it because you know what you want. When you come home, you have *some* control, but family life is different. It's managed by negotiation, not control.'

'I know all that.'

'What you don't know is how to manage being out there where there are no rules.'

'You have to survive!'

'Well, that sounds pretty easy with Bill and his men looking after you. They guide you, feed you, carry all your bedding on their horses ...'

'We don't want to carry it!'

She seized on this. 'Exactly. You want to be free, undisturbed, detached! That's the word. Your problem is you don't know what to do when there's nobody loading demands onto you. You've found a way to buy freedom and you don't know what to do with it once you've got it!' She knew she was right, and she was waiting for him to concede.

He did. 'It's a funny way to fail, isn't it!'

This time she was graciousness itself. 'You haven't failed, Martin. That man ...'

He knew what she was thinking. 'Eric.' He said it with shame.

'He failed, but you and the others have *not* failed, or at least not yet. You've simply realised the difficulty of what you're trying to do.'

Suddenly it was clear. She was right. He wished he had the others with him to have their difficulties made clear too. She broke in on his thoughts. 'Perhaps, the night when you all get together to hand out the photographs, have dinner at the Cathedral ... isn't it? ... that might be the time ...'

He was jubilant. 'You're right. We'll have to have a discussion about how to get the best out of what we're doing. I'm sure ... yes. There's

plenty of them would have said the same things I've said to you today. We can get it sorted out. Yes! We're beyond the edge of the world that's known to us and we haven't worked out what to do. Not yet, but we will. Thank you, Sylvie. You have a way of working things out that makes me envious. It's been good, but we've got to find ways to make it better.'

She said glumly, 'The way the world's going, you can't be sure how many more trips there will be.'

'You think there's going to be another war?'

It seemed obvious. She looked at their garden, out the window, without any hope.

Ron and Anna

The pilgrims were a varied lot. Ron Myrtle had a string of newsagencies he'd built up over years of trading. No one of them would have made him wealthy but as a group they gave him a feeling of entitlement. Though in no sense an intellectual, or even an educated man, he believed himself responsible for the ideas people held in the areas serviced by his shops. He commented on remarks made by councillors and even members of parliament when they showed an outlook different from his own. The man was undemocratic in thinking that anyone who thought differently from himself was stupid. He'd married Anna because she was, when young, beautiful in the way of people who see themselves as trophies. She thought she was conferring a privilege if she allowed anyone near her – physically; in mind she was 'distant', largely because there wasn't much there. She was, therefore, a perfect partner for Ron, though neither of them would have said so. They were united by scorn more than anything else. They'd had four children, two of each, all attending schools that purported to give cultivation and polish to the children of parents such as their own, that's to say, people who needed to buy what they hadn't got in themselves. Sophie, the fourth of these children, once suggested the family should change its name, because nobody had ever heard of anyone called 'Myrtle' doing anything that mattered.

Sophie Myrtle, needless to say, had no idea what contribution she would make to the life of her time. She felt doomed to repeat the

shallow, opinionated stance of Ron and Anna, but why this should be so and how to avoid it, was beyond her. She was, in fact, as doomed as they were, but the young have the advantage of being able to criticise what they are going to become because children can see faults in parents while scarcely discerning the same faults in themselves.

Anna was scornful of the Skyline Tours because they gave Ron something she didn't know about. It maddened her to hear him speaking of places she hadn't been to. When he came home from the annual dinners, album of the previous trip under his arm, she probed it for weaknesses, and found plenty. Men walking into emptiness. Men sprawling on the ground as if they'd done a day's work. Men patting horses, silliest of creatures. Men drinking reverently out of mugs as if they held some magical elixir: fools. Men getting about in crude clothes. Even cruder men who were their guides. Horses, again, hills. Bush that needed tidying. It was nonsense.

'So why do you do it?'

'Do what?'

'You know very well what I mean!'

Ron reflected on his wife's negativities and the controls she wished to impose. He fought her in his mind – and he lost, except that rebellious areas of his brain seceded and his mind filled with ideas of liberation. Into his mind came thoughts of fires, warmth, slang, talk, companionship, mugs of tea, boots repaired, new holes required in the belts that held up men's trousers ... and then of his many and mysterious sensations as they climbed, or drew close to places that Bill or deCoursey said were famous for one reason or another. Ron had no regard for fame, only for what things meant to him. He could recall ever so many...

'Ron?'

'What's the bug that's biting you, Anna? I haven't gone out of the room!'

'I'm shouting at you because you've switched off. I can tell when you're not listening. It's most of the time, these days!'

'Not so. You're imagining things.'

He knew she hated him saying this. She was a woman of only the most limited imagination, so to be accused of imagining was to offer a misreading of her character so blatant that she'd be furious.

She was. So he told her as little as possible about the Skyline Tours. They were his escape. He greatly admired Herb Ellison, Peter Gill and Terry McAuliffe, photographers of the group. When Terry – was it? – pointed his camera at the line moving along the horizon, Ron knew he was part of a moment that Anna would never understand, and when he left his album in the living room, knowing she'd examine it, full of scorn, he knew he had a place she couldn't get into no matter how noisome she was. He'd had the moment and she hadn't. She'd never have it, she couldn't understand it, it was a closed book, and Ron loved having things that way. It was amusing to see her struggling to break in. Everything that happened in the mountains went into his secret store; he was like a child with toys in a hidden place, which could be taken out and played with when there was nobody around. Ron was unlike those men travelling with him who gathered experiences to share with their families when they got home. He was building his secret store, his cache of treasures, for himself alone. He went on the trips, he studied the albums, to enlarge the collection he could cherish in that separate, key-locked trove he secreted in his mind. He could tease Anna about things she'd never see, he could parade his pleasure at having something she couldn't access: in a word, he could frustrate her because he wanted to. It was what he thought men needed to do with women because women, blast them – though necessary of course – wanted to control men, make them into women's men instead of what men wanted to be for themselves, and most of the time couldn't manage, or negotiate, to be. The purpose of the trips, and the dinners, was to assert something, but to do this he had to have his imagination liberated, and that was the role of the pictures he looked at in silence and for the most part in secrecy. He could, when looking at them, be alone with his imagination in a female-free zone that pleased him, and more than that, which he needed. Possession of the thoughts, the memories and the moments of exciting puzzlement which came to him when he replayed his memories, with or without his albums open in front of him, was no less and no more than the terms of his marriage.

If he could have these things to himself, he could maintain his role of married man.

Somewhere in her being, Anna understood this. She spoke scornfully of the tour men as boys, but knew it wasn't true, even if they

sometimes spoke that way. They were asserting that the world wasn't jointly operated, or if it was, then there were things that had to be done separately, men here and women over there. She dreamed of a mutual world with nothing locked against her, but knew that as long as so much was being withheld then her world couldn't be brought into being. This embittered her, she carped, said harsh things to provoke her husband, but Ron knew, when she performed in this way, that his secret world was safe.

The camera's eye

Peter Gill thought women more important than men. They brought children into the world and they carried the burden in the years of immaturity and development. Men who made mountains of themselves, men who turned their lives into fortunes, or statues full of vanity, struck him as fools. He was a modest man. He loved Bill's tours for the opportunities they gave him to bring the fringe, the remote and unseen places back to the world of his wife and family. Eileen Gill, perhaps fortunately for Peter, was modest too. She loved her children and restricted any chance they might get to do harm. Adventures were dangerous. The centre was the safest place. It was also the space allocated her by her husband, and he brought his pictures home for her to see. Eileen was not a bushwalker and the wonders of the mountains meant little to her, though Peter's happiness when he showed her where he'd been brought pleasure, because they were sharing. She felt sure that there were just as many good subjects in the city where they lived, but if he needed to go far to find what he liked then she was happy both to stay home and to receive what he brought back. Men and women were different and each had to please the other in whatever ways they could find.

Peter had his photos. Looking down from the Pinnacles. Looking up at Castle Hill. Lake Tarli Karng glimpsed through a camouflage of leaves. The spot north of Licola where the walkers had heard a lyrebird's display. 'Wondrous!' Peter said, but told his wife he couldn't possibly imitate the bird that imitated everything else. 'They can even make the noises we make,' he said, 'like the sound of someone chop-

ping wood!’ It delighted her that something so bizarre could make her husband so happy. He was a lovely man! She picked up a photo of some clumsy, half-undressed men sprawling on the ground, leaning over, or clinging to each other in weary condition. ‘That was on the first trip,’ Peter said. ‘Bill got us to run a race. Silly bugger! You can see how unfit we were.’ Looking at the picture for the first time in ages, it occurred to him that the pilgrims, of whom he was one, might be just as inept spiritually as they were shown to be physically inept by his camera. ‘A bit of an embarrassment, really,’ he said. Eileen knew what he was thinking. ‘Show me some where you’re achieving something?’

That was a challenge. He found his picture of deCoursey perched, birdlike, on a rock overlooking the alarming fall on the eastern side of the Crosscut Saw. ‘He’s a strange man,’ he told his wife, ‘but he’s into the mysteries of these places. It’s all a bit frightening when you get a long way from civilisation, but he seems to need it. In the town where he comes from they think he’s silly, but I suspect they admire him too. They’ve got a local viewpoint, those people, and outsiders never really know what they’re thinking.’

‘Do they welcome you?’ Eileen asked. ‘Visitors means money coming into their town, but apart from that, I mean?’

Peter thought. ‘There’s a woman called Jan Burke. She and her husband run the hotel. She gets an album every year, same as the walkers, and the guides. She’s interested. She never talks much, though, apart from seeing everyone’s got everything they need. Her husband’s much the same. I can tell he thinks we’d be better off at home, except that if we were at home he’d have less business, and he can’t make much money in a little place like that. So we’re needed, even if we’re silly, that’d be how he sees it. I think his wife’s more genuinely interested, but she doesn’t say enough to let you know what she’s really thinking.’

‘They have to accept you because you’re bringing income.’

‘That’s true,’ Peter said, ‘but I do feel that if we could make them see some sense in what we’re doing down there, they’d be happy to be involved. They know we don’t fit into their scheme of things, but I think they’d like us to do well in some way they can’t imagine.’

Eileen felt that she too couldn’t imagine what was good, or useful about the pilgrims’ walks, but if they needed to go ... ‘Show me some

more photos, darling.’

‘That’s Mount Buffalo from the south-east. Very wide. There’s a lake on top ...’

‘A lake?’

‘Yes, another lake. There aren’t all that many, you know. There’s only the two that I know of, and I haven’t seen the Buffalo one.’ He smiled at his wife. ‘One of these days, though!’

It occurred to her to wonder. ‘How many more years do you think ...’

Again he smiled. ‘... do I think I’ll be going? That depends on you, darling. And the kids. I can’t go unless it’s all right with you. And when the children get bigger they’re going to want me to do things with them. Walking around the mountains will be too hard for them, and besides ...’

She felt sorry for him, having realised that what he loved was, in the eyes of those who stayed at home, something of an indulgence. ‘We’ve fitted everything in pretty nicely,’ she said. ‘So far, there haven’t been any major problems ...’

So far. It meant that there’d be an end to what he was doing. It would be unviable, one of these days and before that came, he wanted to have found, in his camera and in the things he printed, evidence that the pilgrims and their guides had achieved – and that meant recorded, defined - some reality he couldn’t yet articulate. He flipped a few photos from the stack they were looking at to the pile of those they’d seen. Well, they’d seen them all many times, but he was always hoping that something would reveal itself that he hadn’t noticed before. He understood, or at least half-understood, that the search was internal as well as something that took them through the mountains, tiring themselves out as they struggled to places that gave them the grandest views, or feelings of being mysteriously enclosed by a world they only partially understood. Even their guides, he knew, were displeased by their own ignorance, though they knew the mountains better than those they led. Bill was happy to chat about the ranges, but what he knew seemed scrappy, although, Peter sensed, he put it together inside himself. And the other one, the birdman, needed, for some reason, to live outside himself, in a zone where the mind was a visitor, an explorer, not an owner of what it saw. Distrusting the self, he wanted to live

outside the self, and the mountains, with their numerous awesome, indeed numinous presences, be they winds, birds, clouds, or seasons in endless cycling movement, were sufficiently remote from poor, lost, intimidating humanity, to make him feel better placed than he was when nearer home. 'So far', his wife was saying, meaning that there would be an end to his exploring, a time when he would have to settle for the person he was within the limits he would finally have to accept.

Within the limits. There was an end to endless expansion, even in the mind, because one aged, took on responsibilities, and was reduced to guarding, minding, keeping watch over, rather than searching, exploring, finding ...

It was sad. All he had so far were a few albums of photos, for all their miles of walking. Men marching across horizons, looking down from summits, talking by fires, men digging holes for toilets, men cutting wood for fires, men helping Tiger with the cooking, men standing around Bill encouraging him to explain, or reminisce ... it was all marvellous, and it had hardly begun. They were still beginners on a pilgrimage designed by others. The mountains were not yet their spiritual home. They were outsiders hoping to belong. 'Yes,' he said to Eileen, 'it can't go on forever. None of us are getting any younger, or fitter. And I don't want to know about what's going on in Germany at the moment. I think they're getting themselves ready for another war. That'll bust up our little trips. We won't be able to go marching around the hills if that starts up again.' He was suddenly gloomy. 'Make the best of it while we can.' Eileen paled. She'd been thinking of their children, but not the world they'd be growing into. War was something she'd been avoiding. Now the unsayable had been said, and it made everything else seem too painful to think about. 'The children are all we've got,' she said. 'I'd die to keep my children safe.' He understood this perfectly. He nodded, taking her hand. 'I'll do my best with the camera next trip we make. It could well be the last.' He collected the pictures he'd been showing her. In putting them away he was accepting that a stage of his life would be ending before too long.

A visit

The arrival of spring made Jan Burke restless. The hotel had no garden, apart from a veggie patch, so things flowering for other people made her envious, and in the bush there were heath and wattle everywhere in bloom. She felt something should change but everything in her life was too settled. When she should have felt satisfied with something well done, it was only a chore. When it was time to open the doors of the hotel, something she normally left to Tommy, she stared down the street, north and south, to the mountains and to Sale. Nothing in either direction.

She took the car for a drive. She knew the area too well. People waved, she half-waved back, but only because she was bound to. Then, a mysterious surging inside her, she turned north to the tiny farm where deCoursey, his mother and sister lived. Louise greeted her warmly, an old friend by now, apparently, and asked her in. There was no one else inside, but Louise swung the kettle over the fire to bring it to the boil, and it steamed in a few moments, as if it, at least, had known she was coming. Jan had the feeling she'd sensed on her last visit, that things not possible elsewhere might be regular, and normal, in this place.

She drank tea, solemnly and politely, with a silent Louise, who was pleased to have a visitor but felt little need to talk. Holding her cup to be refilled, it occurred to Jan to ask after Maeve.

'Maeve's gone.'

This was amazing. 'Where?'

Louise pointed imprecisely at the surrounding bush. Jan stumbled: 'Do you mean she's gone away, or she's walking?'

Louise nodded sympathetically as if the problem was Jan's, since she'd been foolish enough to raise it. Then a heavy, clumsy step on the veranda told the visitor that Maeve was back, and cursing fiercely under her breath. 'Fucking bastards!' Jan looked to the door, and Maeve entered, carrying a log which she put on the fire as if she was alone in the room, as in a sense she was, for she made no acknowledgement of her mother or the visitor. 'My brother's lazy about firewood,' she said to nobody but herself. 'He expects me to cut it and bring it in. So what do I do? I'd starve and freeze if I didn't help myself.' Her mother seemed hardly aware of her daughter's entry, though it had been noisy

enough; Jan didn't know where to look. Did the three of them co-exist without communicating anything but complaint? Deciding that to rescue the situation she would need to be bold, she said to Maeve, 'Do you have any flowers in your garden? That would look nice inside?'

Maeve appeared to hear the words but made no reply. Then she raised a finger; somewhere in the distance a horse was neighing, and the sounds as it approached came to the women, beside their fire. 'My brother,' Maeve announced, 'without any news, although he's been away.'

'Where's he been?' Jan asked, not expecting to be told, and she wasn't: Louise stood to get a cup from the dresser, while Maeve considered the visitor. 'He's been away. Drinking at your hotel.' Jan shook her head, but without convincing Maeve. 'You wouldn't know. He chooses his times so as to avoid you.' Louise looked reproachful, regretful at what was almost insulting. She might have chided her daughter, but instead she let her eyes peer into the stringybark and box trees outside. 'Foothill timber,' she said. 'No distinction at all. I wish I could make handsome furniture but it's an art I don't possess. My son says I'm wasting my time. But what does he do that's better? He makes journeys into places where we can't follow him ...' She let her voice trail off. deCoursey entered, and gave a little bow to Jan, who said good morning, and then, 'I'm pleased you've arrived. We didn't seem complete without you. And that's because, I suppose, I was feeling incomplete. I get in these moods where Tommy can't rescue me ...'

deCoursey asked: 'Is it rescue you're needing?'

Looking at him, his voice light, his whole appearance disembodied, or almost, she decided to avoid his question. She wanted to know about him without talking on his terms, whatever they were. 'Why do you live out here at the end of the track?' she blurted at him.

And yet he smiled. 'If there was someone beyond us, they would tie us to the town. We are as released as it's possible to be.'

'Don't you want to be human, like everyone else?'

He was still smiling, and, she saw, it was his answer. She said, 'Why do you need to be so different? What's wrong with being as we are?'

Louise, Jan saw, was smiling too, as if conversation had reached a point where it might be thought worthwhile. 'Well?'

Louise, to Jan's surprise, put a hand on her daughter's hand,

as if to steady her, reassure her, before giving an answer. And then deCoursey, as if compelled by some understanding he shared with his mother, put his hand on Maeve's other hand, the two of them holding her down. Restraining her, as if she might be about to fly. Louise said, 'When people talk about who they are, they talk about what they've been made to be. It's better to have the freedom to choose when you *want* to be, and, the rest of the time, to be nobody at all. Nothing and nobody. Sensation is the safest existence, and the best. Meaning is a prison. It locks you in. I prefer to be without it. As you see,' she said with a queenly dignity, conferred solely by herself, for there neither was, nor ever had been, anyone willing to claim it for her, 'if you accept a meaning, you've allowed your mind to be organised by someone else. Many people take this as natural.' Her eyes were piercing as she looked at Jan. 'It may be, I suspect, that *you* take it as natural for things to be imposed. You go to church,' she said, as if anyone could see the foolishness of that, 'so you must think that somebody knows, and has written it all down. Put their meanings on paper, and into the minds of the docile. It's so pervasive. That's enough reason to live in the bush. At the end of the road,' she added sharply, rebuking Jan for having thought her mad. Then, removing her hand from the back of Maeve's hand, she said to her daughter, 'Where did you go?'

Maeve pointed. 'Out there.'

Jan didn't need to look. It was only bush, it was nowhere, it was nothing.

Louise again: 'No, where?'

Maeve looked at Jan as she answered her mother's question. 'Where is there to go? There's nowhere. Unless I was hiding myself, but I don't do that. Louise and deCoursey don't come looking.'

Jan didn't know what to think. 'They don't?'

'They can't help me.'

Jan was flabbergasted, her social sense disrupted by these people. 'Everybody helps everybody. It's the only way to live.'

deCoursey, she saw, was shaking his head. She looked at him, demanding an answer. He said, 'It's too tiring to do what everyone wants you to do, even though we have to do it some of the time. It's only bearable if you can get away.'

'Where?' she demanded.

Again he smiled. 'Into the void. With the mountains, the clouds, the birds, the bush. It's not that they say anything, but they offer an emptiness where the thoughts in our minds can hear their echoes and know themselves. The pilgrims we take into the bush expect to be told. They expect voices out there to soothe them. Not so. Silly, in fact. But the silence is worthwhile because it lets you know your own mind. You can hear it properly when nobody else is talking.'

'You go looking for silence?'

'I want what happens in the silence.'

Jan was getting annoyed at the same time as she knew that she was getting a viewpoint that nobody else in her life had offered. 'Isn't this all a bit silly?'

The smile again. Daily life *was* silly, ordinary people *were* silly, the whole wide world was not only silly, it was mad, and what people said was his madness was his attempt to inject into his life, or allow to flow into it, a little sense, some influences that weren't obviously and blatantly stupid. She slumped in her chair. She couldn't be hostile any more because she'd seen the sense in what everyone thought was the stupidity of this reclusive man. Maybe his mother had a point in her favour too, and maybe Maeve wasn't absolutely and entirely mad, although by Christ she was close. Jan had come because she was dissatisfied with herself, and what was she now? She didn't know. She needed to get home. She'd made a life out of efficiency, punctuality, a well-suppressed scorn for everybody and everything, including her beer-sipping husband, and here were people, a family of sorts, who lived by what they thought they should be doing.

Madness itself, but where was it? In which direction? In which people? Her and Tommy and their drinkers, farming people who surrounded Briagolong? The silly bloody pilgrims who let Bill and the birdman take them into the bush? The world that was getting ready for another war? Spare us lord! Spare the lot of us, spare me first, and keep me sane!

She drove home slowly, carefully.

A place of safety

As the hotel-keeper's wife drove away, deCoursey considered the answers he'd given her. Her questioning of Maeve's existence, their positioning of themselves at the beginning of endless scrub. It went on forever, it was the warm, wind-proofing fur of the Australian continent, but every part of it and everything in it was alive for its own reasons. It was the closest, most available and most accommodating of the many infinities on offer. The Burkes, deCoursey reminded himself, were Catholics. Their ways were those of Ireland, while the centre of the church that ruled them was Rome. He had a father-descended affection for the first, disregard for the second. Popes were dictators of the mind, with either their penises or their mistresses tucked away ...

He'd lived an almost celibate life. He didn't regret it. He'd lived with the family he grew up in without starting another. He knew what a mess he'd have made of marriage. How damaging were those who took it on without the emotional competence to make it a success. To marry, you needed the ego to make you believe you were worth replacing, or the blindness to procreate without caring. He'd read about creatures that devoured their own offspring, and yes, there were human crocodiles too, but he wasn't going to be one of them. To marry, to have children, was to claim a confidence, a competence, that he didn't have. He'd be happy to slip through life unobserved, to have taught nothing to anybody except a little bushcraft to those pilgrims - it was his word for them, after all - who came looking for gateways to the beyond, the only place where he felt fit to live. His mother was sitting by the fire, lost in thought; Maeve was ... wherever she was: she'd gone off again, following one of her trails of thought. Both deCoursey and his mother thought it unwise, perhaps dangerous, to let her wander, but where could she go that wasn't still within reach of their cottage? Maeve was too confused to be self-destructive, so she was still within the bounds of safety, wherever she went - so long as there were no intruders for her to deal with!

There were no intruders in the bush to the north of Briagolong. He said to his mother, deeply withdrawn, 'Jan Burke is the only one who comes here. What do you think she sees in us?'

Louise, however far away she was in her thoughts, could deal with

this. 'She sees a form of herself. It amazes her. She doesn't believe in us, so she has to look at us occasionally to make herself believe.'

deCoursey smiled. 'It must be hard for people who believe they are normal. Nothing is. I have never believed in the normal. It's like god, it doesn't exist.' His mother said nothing. deCoursey, looking at her, was in two minds about whether to develop his thoughts, or to add wood to the fire.

The latter. There was a splash of sparks. Louise O'Donovan said, simply, as if it explained everything, 'Fire.' Her son thought this amusing too. 'From the centre of the earth, for our benefit alone. It's why we need to be undiscovered. Gods chased each other, and destroyed each other, for stealing fire.' He couldn't remember the names from the Greek story, but then, he didn't need them; it was all obvious to him. He'd read things about volcanos in the western part of the state, and how their belchings and up-roarings had spilled lava over the plains to turn them into plains of a different sort, fertile and beneficent. The southern part of his land had been made 'felix' by fire ... in the days when fire had rumbled over the land. It blew about, these days, on wind, and on the rushing clouds of gas from over-heated trees, frightening as ever. deCoursey wasn't sure whether he feared fire, or welcomed it. In the hearth, wide and welcoming, where he'd tossed the log a moment before, it was under control, and therefore domesticated. His mother cooked on it; he made tea. Even Maeve was competent with fire, in the fireplace of their home. 'Are we lucky, mother?' deCoursey asked. 'I think we are,' he said, answering his own question. Louise, his mother, said thoughtfully, 'Why bother asking me? It's three years since we thought our house might get burned down, it didn't happen, and we've been safe ever since.'

Her son said, 'Safety's a momentary thing. Safe one minute, in the jaws of the lion the next.'

Louise laughed. 'No lions here! Only fears that spur us into foolishness.' She might have gone on, but was interrupted by a scream. She stood, and went to the door. 'Come inside!' she called. 'Vent your rage on us, if you must let it loose on something!' Then she sat down, waiting for her call to be obeyed.

Minutes passed. Neither spoke. Then they heard the heavy thump of Maeve's step onto the verandah. Louise glowered on her daughter

as she came in. ‘Sit down and be peaceful.’ The young woman said, ‘There’s no peace on earth.’ Her brother added, ‘And precious little goodwill. It’s why we’ve made our place of safety. You should only scream when there’s something trying to break in.’ His sister resented the caution, though she knew it was right. She had so many feelings storming inside her which didn’t correspond to what the world was doing around her. This was the lesson her brother was always trying to teach – that the inner world and the outer needed to be in harmony. But look at him! In trying to reach harmony with the outer world he ignored, or tried to, whatever sprang up within. He was forever pleading with the world to put him to rights when he couldn’t make a simple peace with himself, except when he was surrounded by the oddities who came to their town to be taken into the hills by Bill, her brother, and the others who tagged along, pretending to know what the world was like. Pilgrims! They walked somewhere, thinking the journey might do them good. Why didn’t they stay home and look for improvement there?

She knew the answer, mad as she was supposed to be. The homes they’d set up were all wrong, they’d been built on a foundation of trash which made the biblical sand seem solid by comparison. A home was a product of the mind that made it, and if the mind had faults then the home had the same faults built in. That wasn’t hard to understand! ‘Am I,’ she said to her mother and her brother, ‘the only sane one on earth?’

Louise said patiently, ‘I think you might have included us, Maeve.’

Prison

Erik Burchill had whole days and dark nights to look at himself. What had he done? He’d killed his wife, they’d had no children, the only people he knew were so respectable that it was unthinkable that they might visit him in prison. He was amazed, then, when a warder came to take him to the room where visits took place. He looked through the wire mesh to see Ron Myrtle, and couldn’t remember his name. ‘You’re the first and only one who’s come to see me.’ He knew the visitor was one of the Skyline Tour men, and hoped he’d introduce

himself. He did. 'Ron Myrtle.'

Burchill found himself starting to break down and cry. He'd heard quite a few of the long-term prisoners talk about this. No matter how 'tough' you were to the other prisoners, the outside world brought you back to the person you'd been. All he could think to do was keep the visitor talking. 'What's it like out there?'

Ron was quick on this. 'Terrible.'

"Why?"

'Depression. People out of work. Businesses going bust. The government's useless. Everybody feels powerless.'

'I've forgotten what sort of business you were in.'

'I still am. I'm one of the lucky ones. Engineering. Making things out of steel. We're still getting a few orders. But we're just hanging on, believe you me.'

Burchill found an odd question forming in his mind, wanting to be asked. 'Everything all right at home?'

Surprised, Ron moved his feelings into neutral. 'Home's four people. I'm all right. The kids know something's wrong, but since it doesn't get through the door, they're sleeping well.'

'Sleeping?'

'That's the test these days. One of them. Can you sleep, or are you too worried? The other is, have you got a good meal in your belly?'

'If you can say yes to both, you're doing well. Is that it?'

Ron said, with something close to envy in his voice, 'You'd be pretty right in here?'

Burchill wondered what the place looked like to those who could leave it. 'It's a depressing place.'

Ron nodded. It seemed discourteous to make a comment. 'They feed you all right?'

'You get something, three times a day. I gather there's plenty outside who don't.'

'There are, unfortunately. Thousands of them, tramping the country. They say they're looking for work but most of them'd settle for a feed. And the rest are looking for a way out.' He felt that he shouldn't have said that, but Burchill was amused.

'Much the same in here!'

They laughed. Something reminded Ron that he hadn't finished

accounting for his family. 'Anna, my wife, is taking things a bit hard. People knock on the door. I tell her not to answer it, but she does.'

'And?'

'She's heard more sad and sorry tales than you could poke a stick at. They're doing it hard, and they want help. Kids are starving, or so they tell her. Anna's soft.'

'Women.' Burchill, who wasn't soft at all, at least acknowledged that some people had hearts. Ron considered him. He'd never particularly liked the man, to the point of making him wonder why he'd come. Burchill sensed this.

'What caused you to visit me?'

'That's a hard question to answer.'

'Going to try?'

'I don't want to very much, but I suppose I should try. I'm a perverse sort of man, my wife tells me when she's angry with me.'

'So?'

'Anna tells me the stories people have told her when she answered the door. Most people wouldn't listen to them. They'd give the poor buggers two bob, or they'd give them nothing, but they'd be smart enough to stop them telling their tear-jerker stories, but Anna lets them go on. She listens.'

'And you don't?'

'God no. I don't want their problems in my house. Anna's prepared to listen, and I'm not! I tell her not to answer the door, but she does, and their stories get into my life through her!' He clearly didn't like this, and even Burchill, who'd killed his wife stupidly, found himself turning against his first and only visitor. 'I suppose it's better to listen than not to listen. We need to know what's going on, even if it is upsetting.'

Ron Myrtle, too, was getting annoyed. 'Why do we need to know?'

'Because,' said Burchill, 'if we don't know and don't care, we're monsters. There's quite a few of them in here and they're not very pleasant company, believe you me.'

Ron was interested. 'Yes, what are they like? Have you made any friends?'

This was amusing. Burchill said, 'There's no such thing as friendship in here. Yet everybody pretends. It's quite amusing, really.'

The only things you aren't allowed to say are things that are quite obviously true.'

'Such as?'

'None of these fellas know how to live. They say they're going to do this and that when they get out, but they aren't. They're going to do something to get themselves back in again. It's a sad story, but it's true.'

Ron said to the man who'd once walked in the mountains with him, 'And what about when you get out? How do you think you'll go?'

Burchill had his answer ready. 'By the time they're ready to let me out, I'll need prison like all the rest of them. If they let me out now I might be all right, but in twenty years time, I'll be as wrecked as the rest of them.' He said it calmly enough: resigned to the unbearable. 'So I look at these poor bastards, I pity them, and I know I'm going to turn into the things I see around me every day. It's not a very comforting thought, I can tell you.'

Ron was glad that he'd come, and much more than that, he was relieved that in a few minutes he'd be outside again, Burchill would still be inside, and he, Ron, would have the option of deciding whether or not he'd ever come back. Come back? He rather thought he wouldn't, but perhaps his mind might be persuaded to change, once the debilitating effect of the visit had worn off. He asked, with genuine interest, 'Can you give yourself relief? By mind-travelling, for instance?'

'Mind travelling? And where?'

The obvious is usually the only thing that can be said. 'Back to the mountains, for instance. You must be able to remember the places where we walked. That lake nobody knew about until it was discovered. The view from Mount Wellington, the view from the Pinnacles ... We went to some pretty wonderful places.'

They had. Burchill stared glumly through the wire. Ron, looking in the opposite direction, could see a guard with half an eye on them, but not watching properly. He could slip something through to Burchill, if he had anything to give him. Poison, a knife, bullets for a gun? What was the use of such things? He'd already slipped something more powerful through the mesh, a reminder that there was freedom outside, that they'd both known that freedom: Ron Myrtle thought of Bill.

‘We’re going on another trip in a couple of months.’

‘From Briagolong?’

Ron nodded. ‘Far as I know.’

‘Where?’

‘Martin Casey was doing a ring around last week. He mentioned Trapyard Hill, but I don’t think that was definite, just an idea Bill had in mind.’

‘Trapyard Hill? Where’s that?’

‘Search me. If Bill thinks it’s worth visiting, that’s good enough for me.’

Burchill murmured, ‘Bill’s got everyone’s attention, hasn’t he. It’s amazing how he gets everyone to follow him.’ Ron said nothing, and the prisoner went on. ‘They say faith can move mountains. It’s a wonder Bill hasn’t moved a few, because people have so much faith in him. You do, I know, and so did I, when I was ...’

They both knew what the next word should be, so Ron Myrtle supplied it for him, before coughing to the guard to indicate that he wanted to be let out.

‘... free.’

A late fall of snow

The papers were full of it. A man had died within a few paces of a hut. He’d known it was there but the blizzard was so thick he couldn’t see it, so he never reached its safety to light the fire that would have saved his life. There was firewood a-plenty in the hut, kindling, even a box of matches, but he’d collapsed in the snow. There was a photo of his face. He’d died a wretched death, twenty paces from safety.

Readers wrote letters. How could this possibly ... Why hadn’t ... Why didn’t he know ... all that sort of thing, none of it any use to the man who’d died.

He’d been part of a ‘ski-party’ that had gone to Mount Hotham weeks after there had been any falls of snow. Newspapers discreetly refrained from naming those who’d been there. Gossip had it that a number of people had absented themselves from their partners for a few days of drinking, conviviality, and bed-sharing. Cars had been

snowed in; it took time for the news to get out, and when it did, it caused a sensation. Various pilgrims, and/or their wives, partners or families, were concerned; would they be going into danger if they went on the next Skyline Tour? Martin Casey rang the Burkes at the Briagalong Hotel; what was the best time to get Bill? He rang again and Bill assured him there wouldn't be any snowfalls at the time of year he'd set down for their trip. January, for goodness' sake. Bill was more concerned about bushfires than snowfalls. Any of the walkers who were worried, or had families questioning what they intended to do, should go and take a cold shower! Did they think that he, Bill, and his off-siders couldn't tell when a bit of snow was likely to fall, and get the party back to the settlement if things got nasty? Hadn't they noticed the precautions he and Tiger took with lighting fires, and how they put them out before leaving them? Journalists mightn't know their arse from their elbows when it came to bushmanship, but the people on the Skyline Tours weren't complete dills!

So said Bill.

It was nonetheless a party more sombre than usual that got out of the bus at Briagalong, after the train from Melbourne to Sale. The mountains were not as safe, as harmless, as they'd liked to think. There'd been a lot of talk about the man who'd died. He'd been an experienced walker and skier. He'd been to Hotham on a number of occasions. Nobody mentioned the woman who'd been with him. When the party had got to Hotham Heights, the surroundings had been clear, nobody had felt like walking very far, and drinking had set in. Some had gone to bed, some had stayed up all night. Cloud had blown up unexpectedly and the all-nighters had found themselves surrounded by snow when they looked out in the morning. The now-dead man had grown excited and announced that he'd do a run or two. Nobody had felt the urge to go with him. They'd argued with him, failed to talk him out of it, and gone off to a very late bed themselves. When they woke, none of those who'd gone to bed earlier had any idea that one of their number was in the snow. Lost. Hung over, or still sleepy, they'd stared at the snow. You couldn't see a thing. Nor could you believe there was anybody silly enough to have gone out into ... that!

But when they gathered for something to eat in the dining room, there was an empty seat. They put on their warmest things, they clung

to ropes that joined them so they couldn't lose another party member, and they searched, or pretended to search, for an hour or so, until they admitted it was useless. Their man would have been frozen by now, and, as they realised when they discovered his body a couple of days later, he was. He'd died in an agony of cold, and he looked it. Recriminations started. They should have ... If only ... Why hadn't he ...

All that sort of thing. None of it was directly linked to the Skyline Tour, but it darkened their mood, preventing their usual start-of-pilgrimage cheeriness. Bill said to them on the morning they set off, 'We've had some pretty good trips in other years, we'll have just as good this time. I toldya last night where we're goin. The world's not lookin too good at the moment, I reckon we're goin to have a better time the next few days than just about anyone we know. Country's lookin great, flowers are out on the plains up there, I've cut back the walkin a little bit this year, allowed time for a few more breaks so we can get to know each other, those who haven't been here before. We got something good in front of us, let's make the most of it.'

That was what Bill said, but something had forced its way into the pilgrims' thinking about the places they were going to. You could die up there. You could get lost, enshrouded in misunderstanding. You could be within a stone's throw of safety and lose your life. Bill said fire was more dangerous than snow? Well it must be diabolically dangerous because what the snow had done at Hotham was bad enough to give their imaginations a start! The walkers found themselves wondering if what they were seeing was what they would like to see if in fact these days of walking were to be – were to *happen* to be – their last on earth. People had got lost before. Bill was always giving them lessons on bushcraft. 'Look behindya. Ya should be able to point to the place whereya started that morning. Ya should be able to tell somebody how ya got to where y'are at the moment. Ya should be able to point ahead to whereya gonna stay that night. Also, s'pose a fire started and ya couldn't get home the way you came out, ya need to have worked out a second way to get home ... just in case!'

They knew he was right, they knew they were safe, but that death in unexpected snow had frightened them. The mountains were capable of a cruelty they hadn't allowed for. Martin Casey had expressed these fears to Sylvia before setting out, and she'd told him, 'One of

Shakespeare's soldiers says we all owe God a death.' Martin had looked at her in amazement. Why had she said that? 'It's because, darling, I want you to go. You'll come back a better man. You need it.' He wanted to resist, but she went on. 'Darling, I'm going to lose you one day. Or you're going to lose me. Whichever of us is first to go. I'd like to think that the one who lives on will have the consolation of knowing that the other died happy. If you're going to die, darling, do it in the mountains.' He was still staring at her. 'You know what I mean.'

He was still thinking of Sylvia when he got out of the bus. He'd brought her to Briagolong, she'd been to Mount Hotham, years before. If she could think of him dying in the high country, and see it as affirming his life, then she must certainly be right. Could he be as generous with her? He wasn't sure. He sensed that she had the capacity for a greater passion than he'd provoked in her, yet she was happy enough, and secure in her love for him. He knew she found him sustaining, and that was enough. If I were to die on this trip, he thought ... and then he brushed the thought away. He was taking ten days in the bush with the pilgrims, Bill, deCoursey, Tiger and Andy, who'd replaced the Billy of other years, they'd go wherever Bill led them, and he'd rejoin his family in their beachside residence at the Sorrento Hotel. It was a good pattern, it was how his children would remember the holidays he and Sylvie had given them when they themselves were married with children ... The years were ringing like bells around him, clanging, booming, marking the invisible dimension of time with a grandeur matched only by the places where they were going. On the night before they set off, Martin found a moment to talk with Bill in the tiny lounge of the Burkes' hotel. 'Bill, I don't think I've ever asked you how you got the idea of these Skyline Tours. Did it come suddenly to you one morning? Or had you been thinking about it for years? Did someone else plant the idea in your head? Who was the first person you spoke to once you decided what you were going to do?' Then he added, because he saw Bill looking at his nearly empty glass, and thinking it had better be filled if he was going to deal with so many questions, 'And one more. You haven't got any plans to give them up, have you? We can look forward to plenty of tours still to come?'

No birds

They had morning tea at a spot where Tiger had lit a fire, five years before. George McGeorge looked for the bush that had sheltered the tiny wren and its nest from a hawk hovering overhead. There was no nest and he wasn't even sure which bush it had been in. 'That's a pity,' he said. 'I was sure I could find it.' Martin Casey shook his head. 'When things affect us, when they really get into our thinking, they become part of us. The external world doesn't matter any more. The thing affects us in our minds.'

George was unimpressed. 'There was a bush. With a nest. Where's the nest gone? It was made of twigs and stuff, it couldn't just disappear.' Nobody had anything to say, Bill didn't seem interested. deCoursey, always considerate, said, 'You are displeased, Mister McGeorge?'

'Too right I am. I wanted to see this place again.'

'You are seeing it, but it is not the same?'

McGeorge looked at the silly bloody birdman. Of course it wasn't the same. Nothing ever is. That was why he felt frustrated. He'd wanted to find the spot in order to confirm the change that had taken place in him, a change which had begun with his understanding being corrected at this very point. 'The change,' he said intensely, as if beginning a course of lectures to a very dull group, 'took place in my mind. But it started in the world around me. Here. A frightened bird down here ...' he moved his hands in pointless frustration '... and a dangerous one up there.' He jabbed a finger at the sky. 'I'm not expecting the birds to give a repeat performance, but I thought I'd be able to find the nest. It's gone. Well, who took it? Was it a person, or a wind that blew it away? There's no sign of a fire, it didn't get burned!'

Nobody cared. Tiger offered the angry man a cup, which he accepted. He wanted sympathy, he wanted the pilgrims to take the problem as their own, but their minds seemed to be far ahead, or far behind. Ron Myrtle was inclined to be amused. 'I once made the mistake of going back to the school where I learned to read. I found the very room. I counted the desks and found where I used to sit. And guess what, I couldn't remember anything I expected to remember. The kids who sat near me? No. The teacher's name? The name of the

reader we were using? No. I felt I ought to be able to remember, but I simply couldn't. I couldn't remember what sort of day it was, or what my voice sounded like when I was reading for the very first time. It took a bit of getting used to, but I decided that the thing I read next was more important than the thing I'd read first.' He looked scornfully at McGeorge, making a fuss over something so small it was silly to worry about it. 'It's no good hanging around in the past, our own or anybody else's. There's nothing there any more. Concentrate on what you're going to do next, not what happened five years ago!'

He could hardly have been more dismissive. George was angry. 'Well, my dear Ron, Mister Myrtle, what are you going to concentrate on? Tell me that!'

The object of his anger was grinning. 'Nothing in particular. I'm going to leave my mind open, a nice big blank. Something'll turn up to interest me. It always does. When we come out here in the bush, we're trying to take things in, not tell them when to turn up and what to say! If we could tell the bush what to do, it'd be lined up in rows like soldiers, but fortunately it takes no notice of us, it does something that suits it and we have to wonder why it's as it is. That's why we think it's beautiful; it doesn't fit in with us dictating to it.' McGeorge was getting worked up by the rebukes he was enduring, but Bill had had enough. 'Whenya finish, George, give Tiger a hand with putting out the fire, wouldya? A few billies of water, then kick through the ashes to see they're all out. Thanks, mate.' He then led deCoursey away to get the horses moving again; they'd lead, this time, instead of bringing up the rear. 'Bloody Bill,' McGeorge said, 'always changing situations by taking charge of them.' He was sullenly resentful, mostly at the calm of Bill's approach. But Ron Myrtle hadn't finished.

'We're on the brink of knowing things we didn't know. Things we'd never know if we hadn't come here. It's no good getting stuck in the past. The world's getting ready to tear itself to bits. The bloody Japs are killing Chinese by the thousands, that's something worth worrying about. It's more important than a bird's nest. They'll be down here killing us before too long, if I'm any judge. What are we going to do about that? We're not ready, you know. What sort of an army have we got to stop them? Or navy? We're so helpless it's not true. And what are *we* doing? We're tramping through the hills hoping we'll find

enlightenment ...’

‘Enlightenment?’ said a frustrated George McGeorge. ‘Fat chance of finding that up here ...’ He would have gone on but Myrtle cut in: ‘It could be just around the corner. Don’t lock yourself in to disappointment. We get in a bad mood and we see no good in the world. It’s better to be silly and think there’s good in the world, and why? Because there is!’ Tiger Rowe, moving among them collecting cups, came up to George. ‘Just one of those days, mate. Don’t let it bother you.’ It was the sort of thing that infuriated George about their guides. They took it for granted that people’s moods would rise and fall. They’d be shitty one minute and laughing the next. At the end of a day of mixed moods they’d do a balance, sum up, and say it hadn’t been too bad ...

They were so bloody prosaic, so pedestrian, they didn’t let anything get to them, he never knew where they were emotionally, or in their thinking. If they did think, the lazy bastards. They were surrounded by the most marvellous mountains, full of a philosophy that made the world their servants, their worshippers, and all they could do was say trite things like, ‘Lookin a bit hazy over that way this morning, don’t ya think?’ The mountains ought to have a language of their own, they ought to boom and rumble like the storms they attracted, but no, they were silent as the graves that would hold the pilgrims, one by one, when the time came for them to be laid in earth, or burned by fire and their ashes thrown away. Suddenly McGeorge realised that he’d been changed by the mountains he was thinking about. He was expecting them to do things to him and he was doing these things to himself. He was thinking of a world that he wasn’t in. He was inhabiting – no, visiting – a time when he wouldn’t be there. His anger, which had annoyed or amused everyone with him, had been a prelude to the calm he felt settling on his shoulders, as if a cloud had conferred it on him. He was far above whatever the Japanese soldiers were doing to the people of Nanjing or Shanghai. He was delivered. He was free, and people in those Chinese cities were hacked by swords and bayonets, riddled with bullets they didn’t deserve. The world was a ghastly place, but only in parts, and he was in a place where good still reigned. ‘I think I was wrong,’ he said to Ron Myrtle. ‘I forgot how lucky I am. The world’s going crazy but we’re in a place where you can be sane.’

He lifted his hands. Somewhere in his being he felt the great

mountains above him, left, right and centre, telling him patiently to calm down, to walk steadily, to come within reach of them as soon as he could, and they would show him, all over again, how wonderful they were. He came to the mountains for moments such as these, he realised, when he knew his own stature and knew that to increase it he had simply to keep walking, walking and wondering, sleeping deeply at nights to regain humility in the morning, he had to be an un-grumpy traveller so as not to annoy the other pilgrims, each of whom had his own path to find, his own personal message to take back to the world, the awful world they could hear about, and read about, before driving further back into the mountains, into themselves, every time they made these trips. To, first, find the useful sides of themselves, and second, that silence inside themselves where the mountains *could* rumble so that they could know, finally, could hear, what it was they thought about the world they were in. So briefly.

The ascension

Their track to the high country followed a bumpy ridge. They no sooner gained a peak than they had to go down again. Schemes were worked out whereby the horses would come back after dropping their packs ahead, and carry those who found the going tough. Bill would have none of it. 'We come up this ridge five years ago and ya never complained. What's the matter withya? Startin to feel our age are we?' They grumbled, but made their way on and up till finally they gained the flat country through which the Moroka cut its way. 'See how much better ya feel?' Bill teased. 'Ya wouldn't feel so good if y'hadn't had to work so hard!

It was true. They could puff, grumble and curse as much as they liked, but the air was purer for their effort, or so they'd been made to feel. The high country was different. 'What is it?' they said. 'It gets to you every time.' A number of them had been there on the earlier walk, but, new to the area or experienced, they stared at the tall trees, the open grassland at their feet, and tried to relate to what they saw. 'It's like ...' was the way they began. It reminded them of any number of things, but comparisons didn't reduce the heightened sensation that

had come upon them. The trees, unbroken, undamaged, had the fullness of early achievement. The grass invited them to walk. Fresh dung told them that deCourcey's horses had been through. The birdman was ahead in the magical forest they'd achieved. Each of them felt that the forest and their feelings about it were a reward granted by some undefinable power for having overcome their weariness, their feelings of dissatisfaction, rebellion even, in favour of trudging on. Up, down again. Up, down, up, up, up.

They were in the high country. Bill got them there every year, and every year, as they developed their understandings of the places he took them, they grasped a little more, had less obtrusive personal reaction to be pushed out of the way before they could open up to wonder. Bill, and deCourcey's horses, had a way of belonging which told the walkers how new they were to what they were seeing. Terry McAuliffe, conscious of the light because he was looking for photographs, and hadn't got much during the arduous climb they'd concluded, pointed his lens at the canopies of the trees dealing with light from the brightest of skies, overhead.

Yet on the earth, under the trees, the light was broken, was fragmented, was everywhere and nowhere in particular. Terry clicked his shutter a few times, hoping that he might be able to do something with what he'd recorded, millions of leaves involved with light, frustrating it, reflecting it, tossing it in every direction, resisting, lecturing their eyes, deceiving them ... Cameras were useless because they could only record when what he wanted was to have the light explained, no, *given* to him as a wholeness, an outburst, a triumphal stream reaching the earth from a faraway sun but magically meddled with at the very last moment before arrival. He began to look in the canopy above for the constituents of a photo that showed what was happening. He was looking for a dense coverage of leaves with two or three nicely-placed, contrasting, breaks in the foliage which allowed the clouds to be considered, referred to, by his camera so that the thinking viewer could see the before and after of the day.

It occurred to Terry that the light, in its power, created belief in itself. You couldn't imagine that darkness would fall upon this place. Surely night would be as bright as day, or could be averted entirely.

Endless day! It seemed possible. Was it desirable? Did they want night to stay away? If it did, they wouldn't have the pleasures of camp fires, long, leisurely talks, the detachment of voices from faces, words given an autonomy they couldn't get when you could see the moods, the intent, of those who spoke them. Words were purer by night because they transported meanings rather than the personalities of those who spoke them.

This meant that the magic of the place by day, when it was as fully lit as the leaves allowed, would turn into another magic when darkness crept in to change the things they saw, and by extension those who saw. Night would change them, as arrival in the high country had changed them. The world was changing from minute to minute and it would change them as they bowed to its currents and accepted that they were less than their situation. How mighty were the peaks surrounding them now! 'We'll camp at Gillio's hut tonight,' Bill told them, and they laughed at him referring to himself in this impersonal way. They could see that he wasn't a problem to himself, in the way that most of them were to their own selves. And then, having had this thought, they realised how free of it they were. Their identity was something they'd been able to leave behind the moment they wrote their cheques for 'Skyline Tours'. Once they paid they had no further use for money, apart from a drink or two at the Burkes' pub at the beginning and end of their trip. One or two of them had a flask in their pack which they could sip from in their sleeping bag at night, but apart from these indulgences there was no alcohol because no pubs. Water was pure, the stars at night were pure, the sunrise was pure, the ways of a war-intending world were far behind ... even impure humanity had a chance when it was as far from normal as their day's march had made them. They might have sat down to take in these thoughts, developing them, but Bill got them going again. 'Not sure where Tiger and Andy're gonna serve our tucker, so we better keep going. Near the stockyards, probably.' The pilgrims, even those who'd been through the same country in the first of these walks, didn't know where the stockyards were. 'Are they new, Bill, these stockyards? We didn't see them last time, did we?'

'We went another way that time,' Bill told them. 'We left'em on our right. We'll go past'em today, not that there's much to look at, just a

spot where you can hold a few head o' cattle overnight. Can be a bugger this country if you're trying to get a mob together before you take 'em down to sell. Bein' flat, there's nothing to stop 'em wanderin off durin the night. Gives you a nasty shock if ya can't find 'em the next morning, believe you me.' They knew that in appraising the country in this way he was separating himself and the other bush men from those they brought to the high grounds: as pilgrims, they had developed a special space for themselves.

They talked a lot about what made it special, and naturally they concentrated on the high country's features – the purity already referred to – until they saw that its most distinguishing features centred on absences – all the things that weren't there, and in being elsewhere, allowed them to concentrate. There were no engines, traffic, noises, shops, scarcely anything resembling timetables ... Bill never made a rule of it but managed to suggest by his own example that they'd be better off without any watches on their wrists or in their pockets. 'See where the sun is, judge the length of the shadows, that'll tellya allya need to know.' After a day or two of this regime they felt the same. With endless, often baffling space, who needed time? Knowing the time became about as destructive as a family argument ...

... and they'd left their families behind. They were a closely knitted group but Bill's geniality somehow instructed them that they should leave each other as much personal space as any particular pilgrim needed. Those who sat a little apart at meal times, or in choosing their place to sleep, suffered no jibes from those who preferred to be close. Jobs were handed out with such noisy jollity that personal feelings had no airing. They had nothing to do but walk, and order the thoughts that came to them. Some of the walkers were new, but most had been on earlier tours, and they'd grown to understand how to discipline their impressions.

This meant they talked more, and conversely they had longer silences. They began to read the sky as a place where things were happening. Why clouds formed, disappeared, or moved this way rather than that they had little idea, but that a world was arranging and rearranging itself above their head was obvious. Majestic as it was in its unhurried pace, it was faster by far than changes on the surface of the earth. They asked Bill about fires, the way they sped through forests,

devouring them, the way a eucalyptus forest regenerated after the worst disasters. Humans, they saw, for all their adaptability, had a lesson or two to learn from trees. Best of all, they loved the birds, tried to identify them, worked out as best they could which were male, female, and too young to have the colours, the markings of adults. They began to know them by their calls, referring their frequent disputes to the birdman who had his leader's confidence. They asked questions: why did the trees start here, stop there? How could they possibly cling, contorted as they were, to cliff faces like the Gable End? Bill grinned hugely when they were perplexed. 'Imagine if there was no right way up? Don'tya think it might be tempting to lie down and sprawl for a coupla hundred years?' The silly bugger meant it, they could see; so a life in the bush meant you didn't need all the rules and conventions of civilisation, a word they found themselves saying, out in the hills, as if it was tied, arms, legs, knees, elbows and all, with hefty ropes almost impossible to untie.

Yet, three or four days into their walk, they were untied, to some degree, each and every one. The world they'd left, the families, responsibilities, were down there, waiting, and would be returned to, but surely – surely? – they'd handle their problems a little differently because the mountains had made them a little different, even if it was only more aware of the complexities of the knots which held them together. The peace that settled on their camp each night, in tents, huts, or under the black salley trees or the white snow gums, the mess-mate as they rose to the high lands, the peppermints and mountain grey gums that accompanied them on their way down, the peace that settled early and deeply, as the fires they'd lit became no more than flickering coals, white speckled on black when the sun woke them in the mornings, the peace of the mountains found acceptance in the souls of those who'd begun to find peace inside themselves.

The lyrebird

The party was on another of those up and down ridges when they were surprised to come upon deCoursey, whom they'd thought far ahead, with his pack-laden horses. It seemed that the birdman

was in pantomime mood because he was putting his fingers to his lips, waving impatiently at anyone whose voice was loud, and so on. Bill said to him, 'Anything wrong, mate?' only to see his face light up with joy.

'Sssssshhh!' He pointed ahead. The pilgrims gathered to see whatever it was he wanted them to know about, but it was a sound, not a sight, that came to them. Someone was chopping wood. Martin Casey couldn't believe it. 'What? Out here? Who could possibly be doing that?' But Bill was smiling now, and gathering his pilgrims to listen. 'Down the gully,' he said. 'What a champ!' The sounds changed. The axe gave way to a cockatoo squawking, then a whipbird. Bill was beaming. 'Bloody good, isn't he!' while deCoursey, by way of contrast, whispered, 'The bush is conscious. The forest knows about itself!' It filtered through the minds of the walkers that what they were hearing was a lyrebird in performance, and that deCoursey had stopped them blundering into its territory. They listened. The bird gave them thirty or forty sounds, grew quiet, repeated a few of its calls, then withdrew into silence. The pilgrims were delighted. 'How good was that!' They'd heard something special, and deCoursey had earned their gratitude by stopping them. Without him they'd have blundered forward and frightened the bird away.

It was a male bird, Bill reminded them. 'Makes ya wish y' could sing!' The pilgrims had never heard him say anything like this. Bill? Sing? Themselves? Singing was a state you only entered after training the voice to be beautiful. They weren't that far developed, yet. They were as new to the bush as it was new to them; no great art had yet derived from the meeting. Nothing they knew had derived from the coming together they represented except, of course, the Skyline Tours they were on. They asked deCoursey if a whipbird, say, could recognise that a lyrebird was making its sound, or would it too be deceived? deCoursey wasn't sure. He asked Bill, who wasn't sure either, but thought the genuine whipbird would know that there was something un-genuine about the sounds made by the lyrebird. 'Good question though,' said Bill: 'I dunno how'd you'd get an answer to that one, short of askin the birds, and they mightn't know what you were talkin about!'

Suddenly they were self-conscious, talking about something as silly as humans talking to birds but deCoursey wanted to go on, having

caught them, as it were, on ground he thought about all the time. 'We think we're the top of the tree. Nothing in the animal kingdom knows as much as we do. But we may well be wrong! The lyrebird gives back to the other birds what they give to it. He makes them conscious of themselves. We say that the creatures sharing the world with us can't do such a thing, but we've just heard that they can!' Bill began to suggest that the party could go on, now, because he didn't expect the lyrebird to give a repeat performance, but deCoursey grew stubborn as a few of the pilgrims objected to what he was saying. Carl Taylor said the lyrebird was just a mimic; that is, it imitated. It couldn't explain what it was doing, it *merely* did it. deCoursey said this was insulting. If the bird knew what other birds were doing then it must know about itself. A number of the pilgrims disagreed. The fact that the bird they'd listened to could render the sounds of its fellow creatures in the forest didn't mean that it had a human understanding of them. 'No,' deCoursey said, 'of course not! They don't understand in the way we do, but they understand in another way.' And what was that, the objectors wanted to know. 'Aha!' the birdman told them, 'you are starting to realise that the problem is everywhere. Many creatures have better sight than we have. Dogs have better noses. Sense of smell,' he added for the literal-minded who wanted to jump on him. 'Better hearing is everywhere in nature. Better swimming. Impossible flying! Better caring for the young, or producing young that don't need any nurturing. Creatures are so different, one from another, that they can't be ranked. When we say we are at the top of nature's tree, we are making a claim that shows how foolish we are.'

He'd have gone on but Bill led the party forward and made a sign to the birdman that he should get his horses in front of the main party and open up the gap he'd allowed to close. So the pack-horses were set in motion but the argument was by no means stifled; walkers bunched when they could in order to keep the discussion going, and Bill knew his friend well enough to know that his mind would be seething with the ideas he'd only begun to express. When the party came on the spot where Tiger and Andy had their fire going and were ready to serve the walkers, the stopping point was again on the edge of a steep drop: there was an open plain before them, a belt of bush sheltering whatever lived in the gorge cut by the stream that sprang out of the earth,

and a belt of blue ranges separating plain from sky. In accepting their drinks, the pilgrims felt they were taking on an inheritance of sorts, or were at the very least being tolerated, even accepted, perhaps, by the blue band of ranges. They wanted to know the names of the mountains they were looking at. 'Don't think there is a name for that lot,' Bill told them. 'Nobody's claimed the naming rights as yet. Whaddya reckon? Anyone got any ideas?'

This amused the walkers. Ideas? They had plenty. Mount Tiger-Tea! Mount Andy. Mount Martin, after their organiser. Mount Bill! The bushman swept the idea aside. 'Can't have that! I didn't discover it!' The play went on. Mount Lyrebird, Mount Sing-Song? No. Bill objected again, and so did deCoursey. Lyrebirds didn't belong on peaks, they made their homes in valleys, deep down, out of sight. They built nesting mounds, they weren't birds of the soaring ranges at all. Names had to be suitable, they had to express something of the spirit of a place ... 'So,' the pilgrims wanted to know, 'what would you, deCoursey, like to call that peak, if it was up to you?'

The birdman hadn't expected this, but the moment was upon him, and could not be denied. 'I call it Mount Serenity. It is peaceful in itself and what it sees when it looks about it must be pleasing to its eyes.'

Bill surprised his walkers by commending this name to them. 'We've got enough Mounts Buggery, Despair, Seldom Seens and all the rest of those miserable names. I think it's time we had something cheerful instead. But ...' and the old soldier looked respectfully at his friend, '... Serenity's a bit high-falutin. What say we call it Mount Peaceful? Somethin oughta be peaceful in the world we live in. Whaddaya reckon?'

deCoursey bowed his head respectfully, Martin Casey said he'd talk to his local Member of Parliament when they got home, and the matter was settled, at least as far as the party was concerned. A mountain called Peaceful was looking down on them, and they were looking up to it. As they finished their tea and started to clean up the spot, put out the fire and so on, another lyrebird startled them by calling from beyond the edge of the plateau they were on. It wasn't as adventurous as the first bird, but it was enough to make them feel that their day was as blessed as the place. 'Yes, yes!' Martin said, with joy in his voice. 'Sing-Song Gully, I'll put that name to him too.'

“Ifya bloody well know where it is when he asks ya,’ Bill murmured to the birdman, and the two of them were laughing inside themselves at what they’d caused the senior of their pilgrims to undertake. ‘We’ll probably find the names on a map one of these days ... somewhere about twenty miles from here!’

All is as it was and shall be

The thing they need next, Bill thought, was a miracle. They’d had the bird singing to them, that day, out of its valley, so why not go down for a look? That was his decision and he knew he was either right, or governed by some force he only half knew. He told deCourcsey, Tiger and Andy the changed arrangements for the next day. The pilgrims would enter the gully where they’d heard the second lyrebird. He wasn’t expecting to hear it again, he just wanted to take them down. Down, down, after the heights: did he know what he was doing? Yes? No? Maybe. He wanted them to know, to recognize, the fertility of these hidden places. He gave instructions. Tiger, Andy and the supplies would stay where they were, and wouldn’t move until he’d brought the pilgrims up again.

They had to be instructed. ‘Every bit of bush has its own character,’ Bill told them. ‘It’s mostly a matter of how protected they are. I tellya, the winds can fairly howl up here. In the depth of winter y’re struggling to stand up, sometimes. Ifya leadin a horse, you keep on the sheltered side, outa the wind. But down in a gully, like this one, ya get a bit of protection. I think y’ll see that when ya look at the trees.’

He led them over the edge. It only took a minute to get down far enough to notice the gun-barrels pushing their canopies up for light. Competition made them straight. Canopies were small. The city men wondered how trees so huge could function with so few leaves. The trees also, they noticed, had little individuality. Hundreds of them belonged to each other. They thought of birds moving in flocks, changing direction in a moment of shared consciousness, and wondered if trees too, perhaps, mightn’t make contact. A branch fell, somewhere out of sight, and the breaking sound seemed to come from each and every one. There were no birds that they could see, though

Bill had told them that birds, possums and other creatures lived in broken branches or hollowed-out trunks because they offered shelter. 'Old trees are valuable,' he told them. 'If you was a koala, or a bird, anything really, you'd need a place ya could call home.' He grinned, the wiry bushman. 'Things that live in the bush don't get much comfort. If they're out in the open, they're part of the food cycle, everythin preyin on everythin else. So they like to have a little hideaway. It's about the only protection they've got.' The city men didn't like the sound of this. The bush was a ruthless world if what Bill said was right, and when was he ever wrong? They looked around them nervously and drew some faith from the water they saw everywhere. The plain they'd stepped off was dry enough, though they knew that snow accumulated there, and melted when there was enough heat in the sun, but in the gully water seemed to be oozing everywhere. It was slipping out from under rocks, splashing over the roots of ferns. It trickled to form little runnels of water, augmented by more trickles and trails materialising in the shaded gorge. 'Rivers form out of this,' Peter Gill said. 'What a pity it's so dark down here.'

And it was. The bush grew differently in the semi-dark where the open plains were forgotten. Everything that grew in the gully luxuriated, while on the plain the trees and their supportive bushes leaned as the winds directed. They kept low to keep out of the way. They clustered so as not to be broken. But the gully was different. The walkers found themselves pressed against sides of rock, dodging fern leaves as long as the body of a man, and looking up for light, always up for what their eyes were used to needing. It was harder to see in the gully than in the air above. They had a feeling that men would have evolved differently if they'd had access only to the buried sub-world Bill had led them into. Those gun barrels towered above them, reaching for the sky they'd left behind. 'Where's that lyrebird got his nest, Bill?' Herb Ellison wanted to know; he was holding his camera to capture the bird that had prompted their leader to bring them into this gloomy underworld. This prompted Herb to wonder if perhaps they were in any danger in leaving the upper world behind. 'We couldn't live down here, could we, because we couldn't light a fire. We couldn't sleep down here because we'd be wet. We'd get frightened, and we'd give up hope. It's funny what conditions do to us, don't you think?'

Martin Casey called loudly. 'A track! Bill? This is a track, isn't it? Someone's cut a way through here, or that's the way it looks to me. Am I right, Bill? What do you think?'

Bill had a look. 'Yes, that's been cut with a small hand-axe, I'd say.' Pilgrims gathered, wanting to know why this track of sorts had been cut, and who cut it. 'Search me,' Bill said. 'I was told there was a track down here somewhere but whoever it was that told me, he didn't know who cut the track, or why they cut it. I'm glad ya spotted that. It's really why I brought you down here this morning.' His followers looked at him. 'I wanted you to see something that us bushmen know very well. That is, the first explorer is never really the first person into any area. You read what the explorers said about any place they found. There was always tracks before them that they discovered. Might be a few marks of an axe-blade, or maybe a bush shelter of some sort. In other words, before the official explorer come along and made a map of the place, someone with a few cattle came in and left their tracks, so that anyone that came after knew they weren't the first. We make a lot of fuss about being first in an area, I dunno why.' He looked around his men, hanging on his every word. 'When a place first gets opened up, it's nearly always by someone who isn't supposed to be there, so they don't tell anybody. They're quiet because they've got to be.' The pilgrims took him seriously. They had no need of any excuse for being there. They'd paid their money, they had local guides. The functions for which they could be called to account all took place in the city. They weren't accountable for what they were looking at. They were no more than onlookers, whose responsibilities lay elsewhere. They were in that sense sites of pure understanding, whose perceptions were neither right nor wrong. 'Beyond good and evil,' Peter Gill said, 'that's where we are!'

Bill looked at him in surprise. deCoursey was delighted, having formed the view that none of the pilgrims would ever come to such a realisation. Other pilgrims were less than pleased. It was not possible to be beyond good and evil unless you were god himself. 'How do you know there's only one?' the birdman said slyly, surprising them again. 'There could be one in every tree. Or take it further. There could be a god in every one of us. Don't you think we could be divine?'

No. This was too silly. They were suddenly bursting with ideas.

Mankind suffered from original sin, that is to say, he belonged to the devil as much as to god. Foolishness of this sort was babbled for a minute or two, then Peter Gill asserted himself. 'What I meant was ...' Bill thought they should be getting back up again; he was hoping the plains above them might restore some common sense. Peter Gill again: 'Yes, we always do what we're told because you're our guide. Most of us wouldn't know how to get home without you to show us the way. But can we see where we are for a minute? Where does this water go, Bill?'

The bushman was amused. 'I don't think it's got a name, exactly, but it'll feed into the Macalister at some stage, and that means it'll feed into Glenmaggie Reservoir. This is one of the places where the river starts. Just one. There's lots of places, in country stretchin round us for miles. Why'd you ask?' It was what Peter Gill wanted. 'This is the beginning of a river. We all come from the city. We live on a river. We need it to get water. It's a different river but it's the same principle.'

Someone: 'Which is?'

Peter again: 'Everything has to start somewhere. We're at the start. We located it. Or Bill did. He brought us down here to see. And here it is.' He stopped. Surely they could see what he meant.

Some could, some couldn't. They wanted to argue. Some of them wanted detachment, which meant getting back to the plain above. Peter added, 'We could only get here by leaving our normal world behind. Our families, wives, children, friends, our jobs, businesses, everything that gives our lives meaning ...'

deCoursey: 'We say!'

'... so we've given up a whole range of meanings to get a new one, a bigger one, which we'll have to share when we get home. I wonder how many of us do share, and how many keep all this to ourselves?'

Bill: 'We all got our particular habits, I s'pose.' He wanted to get them moving. 'Lead the way, mate,' he told the birdman, taking the view that they were more likely to follow deCoursey at this moment than they were to follow him. deCoursey thought this an honour, and, with a huge wave of his arm, he both pointed to the sky above and urged the pilgrims to follow. He set a cracking pace. They couldn't keep up. He reached the top well ahead of the men who were following. Looking back over the edge, he called into the gully, 'Tiger's got his fire blazing. All is as it was!'

He sat on a fallen log, beaming at Tiger, and Andy who barely knew him except by reputation as a bit of a nut. A happy man, he murmured to himself, 'All is as it was and shall be! We will be together soon!' One by one the walkers came over the edge, and found somewhere to sit, or flopped on the ground. Bill was last. 'Hard to keep up withya, mate, ya set a cracking pace!' deCourcey didn't want the responsibility of leading. 'We will follow you again now, Bill. You are the leader of our party.' The pilgrims were relieved to hear this. deCourcey might be able to get them out of one, narrow, impossible position, but he wasn't the man they wanted to follow. In some way that they couldn't explain, he'd started them thinking of home; of what they'd left; of their responsibilities; their futures; the circumstances surrounding them in the lives they'd made for themselves ... back home.

Above them

In a way, their descent into the gully and re-emergence was the end of the journey. Each of the pilgrims felt sure enough of the mountain world to let himself send thoughts back home. Martin Casey, leader of the Melbourne men, found himself thinking of his family at Sorrento: Sylvia, a woman who understood him better than he understood her, Gillian, a daughter already learning to wield a little of her mother's considerable power, and Anthony, a boy who wanted to be like his father but sensed that he must absorb his mother's lessons too. They'll be paddling in the bay, Martin thought, without me. He knew how deeply involved he was with this tour, the fifth of the parties he'd put together, and yet he wanted, not so much to be rid of his responsibility as to be able to add it to his marriage, instead of enjoying it as something separate. He knew he could bring his family to Briagolong again, but what would they do when they got there? All that the family would know, if he brought them east again, was how far their father had moved away, and that wasn't what he wanted at all. 'Without me': the words haunted him. Something about his concept of himself alienated him from his wife and children. This could go on no longer. It would be his last trip, then, unless he could think of something to reconcile what appeared to be opposites. He paused in his walking,

under the guise of looking at a flower on the other side of a rock, but he knew he was counting the days till he was home again, and once home he would surely never leave?

Fifty paces behind him, Ron Myrtle was thinking of Anna, his wife who saw no sense in mountain walks, saw little sense in many things he did. They'd argued about his visit to Pentridge to see Erik Burchill. 'I won't tell any of my friends about this,' she'd said to him, 'so you mustn't whisper a word about what you're doing!' Ron had thought this stupid, senseless, and so on, and demanded of his wife why he couldn't talk about what he was doing. 'It's quite legal to visit prisoners, you know. People do it all the time. The fellows in gaol'd go mad if they weren't allowed to have visitors. Think about it! What if it was you that was locked away in there; don't you think you might like to see someone occasionally?

This maddened Anna. 'Me in gaol? That's absurd, Ronald, in fact it's insulting to suggest ...' Her husband knew how cranky she could get. 'Let's not talk about it then!' he'd roared, but now, crossing a plain wild with flowers, he thought it all rather amusing. He'd visit Erik again, not because he owed it to him – pig's arse to that – but because he felt like it. He'd tell him about the walks they'd done, the members of the party, about Bill, deCourcey, Tiger and the new bloke who'd done some of the cooking and camp preparation ... He'd talk to Erik as if he was a normal member of the human race because that was the only way Ron could imagine himself talking to anybody. They were all human somewhere, for Christ's sake! He looked around at the pilgrims: it was deCourcey's word and Ron supposed that it wasn't a bad name for a bunch of men silly enough to go walking every summer. Not a bad bunch, even if they all carried the same brushmark: they thought they could walk their way into another world.

Edwin Mickle was thinking about the weighing machine he had in his bathroom. He'd be on it the day he got home. He hoped to see that he'd left a few pounds in the mountains; certainly he felt like it, after all the sweating he'd done. It was hard work, keeping up, and he had a few tricks for doing so, but didn't deceive himself into thinking he was any sort of walker. He was in the party because his body needed it to keep healthy, and he knew how scornful the bush men would be if they ever saw his wobbling belly when he changed

at night to sleep, or put on his things in the morning. He kept out of sight in his one-man tent until he was presentable, then he made himself busy getting firewood, tidying up when they were leaving, and so on. He aligned himself with camp manners, camp hygiene, because he didn't want people looking too closely at him. He looked at the horizon, wondering which of the peaks he saw bore which names; Bill was always telling them to take their bearings off this mountain or that, but the names had never meant much to him: suddenly they did. He had a feeling he might not come again, he might make his place vacant for someone else; Martin Casey said it was getting easier every year to make up the numbers, as word spread that the trips were something special.

As they were. Edwin didn't want to deny that. He knew he'd boast in his old age about having walked when he was younger, 'fit' and able, in the vicinity of Trapyard Hill, Mount Tamboritha, the Pinnacles – he couldn't forget the Pinnacles because he was afraid to clamber out onto the rock where Bill said the forestry people were going to put a hut as a lookout for bushfires. Others had done the little climb, and then a war dance of sorts because it was such an exposed, spotlight position with valleys running away in waves from where they looked down, but he, Edwin, had been afraid. It hadn't looked safe, so he didn't do it. He picked an everlasting daisy instead, and put it in his button-hole. Everlasting? It was what they were called. Bill said people hung them upside down to dry, then collected the seed as it fell, and planted it in gardens; Edwin's wife was an expert with roses, she wouldn't have wanted the sharp, brittle everlastings if he'd grown them at home, so the flowers would be a memory of his trips ...

... after he was home. Once I stop I'll never start again, Edwin told himself, knowing that his time was near. The Pinnacles, Mount Kent. The Dargo High Plains, Dargo itself, Omeo, Benambra, Bright, on the other side of the ranges, Mount Buffalo, the Blowhard on the way to Hotham, the deep gullies full of alpine ash trees, ever so dense, so commanding, so authoritative, greedy like monarchs for the best place to live, on the deepest soil the mountains could offer ... Edwin knew there were mountain ash trees near Melbourne, and they were very fine, but these high country ones were different because the place where they grew was somewhere else, in a world where populations of

people could never grow, but trees could cling to the land as far as the eye could see. He'd be going down, soon, and he didn't suppose that he'd be coming back, except in those excursions that memory made as his body weakened.

The impossibility of living in the mountains made them more precious: the Gable End, Mount Wellington, and all the rest. Lake Tarli Karng, the various plateaux that separated one peak from another, and joined them too. These were the plains they walked across, and when the flowers were in their summer riot, they were wondrous. Humans were hardly good enough to walk with their eyes feasting on such joy. Going down again, leaving, was the only decent thing they could do. Humans weren't good enough for the places Bill and deCourcey chose to share with them. He thought of the party's leaders; could he leave them behind him too?

He supposed he could. Bill came to the annual gathering at the Cathedral Hotel, for the dinner, the talking, and the handing out of albums so they'd never forget. Herb, Peter and Terry did an amazing job with these. Some of his relatives tried to borrow them, but he wouldn't let them because he knew they'd never come back if he let them out the door. deCourcey never came to Melbourne, Tiger didn't, Billy hadn't and he could see that this new chap, Andy, would be a fish out of water if he turned up. Bill had been to France as a soldier, he'd seen the world, so he knew, in his protective way, the value, the rarity of what he was showing them. Eric thought about the bushman, then he turned his eyes to see him in his environment, leading his tour-men across a plain that he knew back to front and they didn't. All those plains! Bennison's Plain, the Moroka country, the rest of them. Near Mount Hotham the range got too high for trees to grow, and the land was strangely treeless, it was a place apart from the world where mortals lived, and it scared him even as he respected it.

Edwin had a feeling that once he turned his back on the mountains he'd be reduced as a man, but what else could he do? His business needed him in January as much as at any other time, his family couldn't see any sense in him being away, they resented his absence, in fact, wondering why he took himself apart. Well, he knew why he separated himself, but he supposed it wasn't fair on those who depended on him, so he turned his mind to incorporating what he'd gained

from the mountains into his normal life. The trouble with trying to do this was that normal life didn't seem very normal once you'd got yourself up high. Lower altitude, lower standards: it sounded corny but Edwin knew that a part of him believed it. Spirituality grew denser as the air thinned out. What wasn't there had to be made up for in some other way, and just as poor people were often richer than those that had too much, the fact was that as you climbed, and shed, you gained something from the lightness of your being. Camping out, getting a bit grubby, walking till you were exhausted and chewing on a bread roll and a piece of steak sounded crude when he answered his friends' questions back in the city, but the fact was that these crudities were a release when you were away. The soul was teaching itself to leave the body and for a fat man as Edwin was – he regarded himself sourly – this was altogether good. In a day or so they'd be down again, they'd have a night at that pub in Briagolong, and then they'd catch the bus to the train, look out the windows at what they were leaving, and feel the yearning pulling them back as they steamed away. It wasn't so very far on the train, but they were separated by all the arrangements they had to make to bring about the joining of their world with another. Trapyard Hill, Mount Tamboritha, Mount Kent, the Gable End ... and so on and so on. As a slice of the world's surface it wasn't so huge but as a region to learn about, to come face to face with, it was enormous, and it had the advantage, one that only millions of years of erosion could take from it, that it was well and truly, and in so many ways, above them.

Melbourne

As they greeted their families, or caught the trains, trams and taxis that would take them home, they knew that something had ended. They must revise, rethink, consider themselves and find a new way to look at what they'd been doing, or let new people take their places. Bill, deCoursey and above all those eroded, eloquent places had had their effect. In the lowlands again, they knew very well where they'd been. Privilege had descended on their brows, their shoulders. They were changed. Could they go further, or were they, for the time being at least, finished? That remained to be seen. They were home. Some new

balance had to be made, or otherwise a resignation they were unwilling to sign. Everything was familiar but nothing felt the same. What to do?

Martin got himself to Sorrento as quickly as he could. Sylvia had spoken to the chef to ensure that their dinner on the first night *en famille* was something impossible to cook on an open fire, a long, slow, bouillabaisse. He saw the point at once, loved her for it, yet knew he would pay in some way, probably much later, when he thought his return was behind him. She'd made friends with a fisherman and he'd taken the children and their mother into the bay, 'but not through The Rip, Martin, we weren't as bold as that.' The Rip, if they decided to chance it, would be a decision for him to make. His way back to being head of the family was so clear, so obvious, that he realised it was a ritual Sylvia had planned as the change in their family's control. He heard her tell someone she was 'only' the children's mother and he knew that his children's mother, at least, had promoted herself – no, had taken control while he was away. He suggested to her that she should become a partner in his business in her own right and she agreed, telling him she'd already discussed this with a lawyer friend whom she named.

Ron Myrtle resumed arguing with Anna. She knew he was trying to wear her down with patience, persistence, and something more ruthless than that. She knew he didn't consult her if he suspected he might meet resistance. He had a delightful vagueness which she was scarcely able to penetrate. 'I haven't thought about that yet,' he would say, or, 'Time enough for that when it's needed.' Nothing was ever needed when she thought it was needed. Or she might find that he'd done his measurements, given his orders and the new kitchen table, or cupboard she'd been planning to spring on him as her surprise was already being made, and in the way that he wanted it made. The fact was that he had much better ideas about kitchens, stoves, gardens and almost everything else than she had; Anna was a controlling person whose planning came out of a limited mind, but she certainly wasn't silly, and she knew that if Ron was 'patient' with her then he'd already decided something and was letting her talk as a way of dismissing ideas he didn't need. So why was she needed? She wasn't sure. She could never quite sort out the goods and bads of their relationship because he didn't let her see everything going on in his mind.

He left the office one afternoon and went to Pentridge to tell Erik Burchill about the latest tour. Erik hadn't realised how deeply imprisoned he was until he heard about the trip the men had made without him, their climbing, walking, their waking at dawn to relieve themselves in the bush and their return to sleeping bags until the noisy calls of their leader pulled them out for another day. Ron told him where they'd been but he hadn't brought a map and Erik had to question him – names and places – until he understood their route. Many of the places were new to Erik, others known from earlier trips: Erik reacted strongly to both. He wanted the new places described so that he could add them to those already in his mind, and he wanted the old ones recreated with new detail so that he could visit them again. Ron saw, as he expected to see, that Erik thrived on this. Liberty is best understood by those without it. 'Tell me more next time you come,' were Erik's last words to his visitor. 'Bring that map! I want to see it all laid out so I can go there in my mind.' Ron said he'd bring the map, and he certainly meant to, but Anna, had she been there to hear this conversation, would have told Erik that Ron did exactly as he pleased, he was selfish, he couldn't be counted on, and that it was in some way an amusement for him, not a kindness, to tell Erik about things he'd never do again.

Erik wouldn't be getting out of gaol until he was too frail to go walking in the mountains. Ron wasn't sure whether it was right of him to feed the prisoner's dreams, but decided that it did less harm than staying away, and if telling Erik what he wanted to hear was in a roundabout way a cruel form of punishment, what more justification did he need beyond the fact that it was what Erik called for when it was offered? That led Ron to wonder what he wanted for himself. He wanted to go back to the high country the following year, but he couldn't have told anyone why. He thought about this and realised he didn't know himself. He knew that he did it as a way of annoying Anna, a way of reserving some part of himself from a demanding wife, but was there anything further, less disreputable than that? He not only didn't know, he wouldn't know until he'd been in the mountains again with Bill, the other pilgrims and the men Bill enlisted to guide them and cook. It seemed to him that Bill and the others from Briagolong, in leading simpler lives than their guests, were not as 'limited' as the walkers liked

to think, but more certain of themselves. Once you accepted that there were lines around the areas you could occupy, you were not so much trapped within the lines as able to make the most of what you'd got. You only got your freedom after you accepted your restrictions!

This was a rich discovery for Ron. He talked about it with everyone he met, including Anna. She didn't think that way and suspected he was putting a trap in her path. 'I'm glad I was brought up a Presbyterian,' she told him. 'I'm in no danger of falling into a Jesuitical trap!' This amused Ron. 'I haven't turned my collar back to front, Anna. Sometimes we see things we couldn't see before. What I'm telling you about is a good result of going on Bill's tours. The mountains give you detachment. God knows they've got plenty! The mountains are a lesson to us. They do nothing except get eroded by abrasive winds, and yet they're there!' It was the sort of talk that annoyed his wife. Of course the mountains were there. They couldn't pick themselves up and walk somewhere else. They couldn't buy and sell, and move as humans did, so what was so admirable about them, as her husband liked to think? It was too much for Anna. She hoped Ron would grow out of this nonsense and take up something else.

It was the opposite at Edwin Mickle's house. Robin, his wife, was an opposite almost by birth. She was as skinny and tiny as he was fat. They made jokes about themselves as a couple. Their friends made jokes also, mostly of the four bare legs in bed variety. How could she put up with him on top of her? Or did they do it the other way around? Or standing up? So many imaginings of their love life were in circulation that the pair couldn't help but be aware of their status as objects of curiosity. They loved each other as perhaps only opposites can do. Robin suggested that they get pictures taken - faked - of themselves at love-play on the back of a horse, leading Edwin to suggest that elephants offered more room. If people thought their bodies were a silly combination it made them happier. Robin was a simple soul and liked the fact that Edwin was smart, and it pleased Edwin that he wasn't called on to justify his wilder flights of fantasy or, as he liked to call it, though he knew the claim was ridiculous, reason. Edwin was scornful of the powers of reason, and when he told Robin about the mountain trips he liked to tell her things that the birdman had said or done. Robin, untroubled by the stupidity of these statements, laughed with

delight. It pleased her that someone could be so wild, so bird-like, in his thinking. Rationality mattered not at all, so who cared about its opposite?

Not Robin, nor Edwin either. 'I'm going again next year,' he told her, 'so long as they'll have me. I haven't finished yet.' She looked at him, unable to estimate how anyone would know if they were 'finished' with mountains or not. 'What I have to work out is what I would like various places out there to tell me. You see, you do have a feeling that certain places have come to certain conclusions for themselves, and I'd like to work out ...' he hesitated '... what to ask them, if they could reply, or how to find out a way to hear the message they've got hidden there.'

She didn't think this silly. 'What about automatic writing?'

'What's that?'

'It's a bit like people trying to get in touch with spirits. They try to call them up. I know it's only mumbo-jumbo, but do you see what I mean?'

'Tell me, if you can. I'd like to know.'

'Imagine you're out there in a place that interests you, and you've got a pad and pencil.'

'Go on.'

'You get yourself into a trance. You ask the spirit of the place to speak.'

'Ye-es?'

'And you write down what it says!'

He started laughing, and she, not in the least embarrassed, laughed even more light-heartedly than he did. When he pulled a drawer open and there was a writing pad before their eyes, they roared with delight. 'Let's do it now,' Robin said. 'I'll be the mountain. You write down what I say!'

'Darling Robin,' he began and she demanded to know why he thought it wouldn't work. He took a grip on himself. 'We'll never know, will we, unless we give it a try.' That seemed obvious to her. 'Tell me what mountain I'm supposed to be.' He looked unsure. 'Why does one of us have to be a mountain?' 'Silly!' she said. 'How else can we know what the mountain's got in its head? One of us has to be the mountain and the other has to write it down.' He still had doubts. 'How can you

be a mountain you've never seen?' Again, it was easy for Robin. 'You tell me what sort of mountain I am, and I'll tell you what I've worked out. I've been there for thousands of years, Edwin, millions, probably. It'll work. Give it a try!'

He took up the pad and pencil, and tried to concentrate. 'Your name is ...'

'Yes?'

'Your name is ...' He began to giggle. 'Mount Buggery!'

'It bloody well is not! Take me seriously, Edwin. Just because you're cleverer than I am, it doesn't mean I'm silly.'

'Mount Deception!'

She began to cry. 'I've never deceived you, Edwin. Never. Not once! We've lived together for ...'

He knew he had to stop her before she plunged into despair. That couldn't be allowed. Pushing the pad and pencil into her hands, he said, 'You take these. You write down what I say. This is worth a try and we're going to try it. Are you ready, Robin? Really, truly, ready? Here's what I've got to say!'

Solemnly, simply, she took up the pencil. 'Speak, mountain,' she said, as if it wasn't silly to talk this way. Edwin, loving his wife because her silliness made her vulnerable, wide open, to the cruelties inside him, called on the goodness he knew was also there, and, slowly, because she had to get the words down, and she wasn't a natural with paper and pen, or pencil for that matter, he spoke.

'I'm old and cold and I don't blame you for calling me Buggery. You can call me Deception if you like, because I don't care. I never deceived anybody and I never will.'

'This is good darling. But slowly, if you don't mind. I've got to get this down.'

'The better name would be Complete Indifference – capital C, darling, capital I – Complete Indifference, but you mustn't suppose I don't know. Knowledge accumulates. It doesn't need a brain, just a place that stays the same.'

'Beautiful darling, I like what this mountain's got to say!'

'When you see things happen for the twenty-thousandth time, you give up speaking. There's no point in repeating yourself. So what do you do? You become more certain. Sure.' Edwin paused, needing to

think. It was both easier and harder than he'd expected. And he was enjoying it because he felt possessed. People with faith must feel the same, no matter how stupid they looked to those who hadn't the same, sustaining faith.

'Darling? Go on ... or can't you hear what the mountain's trying to say?'

'I can hear, Robin. I'm just gathering myself to make sure I get it right.' In her childish, lovely way, she showed him the pad, where the words thus far had been written down. He continued. 'I'm curious about people because I can't possibly be one. Nor can a person become a mountain, even though we're curious about each other. Mountains are curious about people because they're mobile. They can get around, sleep in many places, night after night ...'

Robin giggled. 'Sleep with different people, night after night, if they're ... er...'. She wanted to say 'lucky' but it didn't seem appropriate for a wife to say this to a husband. Edwin went on as if she hadn't broken in. '... while mountains are doomed – or are we lucky? – to live our lives in one permanent place. That means a mountain can't be inconsistent. It knows who it is. If it's a high mountain, it can see for miles, to the furthest horizon! That's why humans envy us, because they think we must be wise. And we are! But we can't do a thing! We know everything and we can't act. This makes us the opposite of people, who know buggerall, are bloody stupid most of the time, but ...'

The excitement was catching up with Robin: 'But?'

'... can do things with their stupidity. Can act! Can make mistakes and sometimes make fortunes too! Wisdom, humans know, is useless when it can't act, and mountains, which can't act, are jealous of people, who can. But human beings, travellers, voyagers ... pilgrims! ... are jealous, in their turn, because they know how stupid they can be. Like attracts like, it's said, but like attracts its unlike, or so it seems to this mountain ...'

She interrupted again. 'What's your name, mountain? You'd better tell us that!'

He thought. He found an answer but not the courage to say it. She put down her pencil and took his hand, rubbing it tenderly. 'Your name, darling? You must have a name? Or do you want me to give you one?'

He felt his desire for her rising, and his courage too. ‘Mount Hope, that’s who I am. That’s what I’m called.’

‘Who gave you that name, darling? Was it someone who knows you well?’

‘It was you, my love. You gave me hope, and you give it to me still. Every minute of every day. Life wouldn’t be worth living without the hope you give me, because it equates with love.’ She was amazed that their foolery and passion had so entwined with each other that they’d produced this moment. ‘Then my name,’ she said, ‘is clear, too. I’m Mount Uncertainty, I’m Mount Unsure, and when I’m gazing through the ethereal sky at you on the opposite horizon, I know who I am, and I also know where I am. I’d be lost if I didn’t have you, darling, truly I’d be lost, I wouldn’t have a clue what to do. Go on another trip if you must, darling, but don’t fall in love with another mountain out there, one of those ones I’ve never seen. Find your way back home, darling, and you’ll find me waiting for you.’ She felt her chest heaving as she tried to take in more air than she needed. ‘It’s just a chance, darling, but somehow the cards have fallen our way. We need another mountain for that, and I’ll call it Mount Give Thanks. You understand why I say that, don’t you darling?’

She looked at him with a passion that belied the gossip of their friends suggesting that they were a shallow, amusing couple: four bare legs in bed! Their souls had a spaciousness which allowed the universe to wander in, wander about, and wander away when it wanted to. ‘When you go back, darling,’ she said, ‘next year, if that’s when it is, you’ll have to find a humble little hill that nobody wants to take from you, and name it after me!’

Bill’s bush

Bill knew he’d be leading another tour the following year because he couldn’t imagine life without them. Yet he recognised the signs from Europe and knew just as surely that war was coming. ‘I’ll be too old for this one,’ he told himself, ‘and a bloody good thing!’ Skyline Tours could go on as long as there were people with enthusiasm and pounds, shillings and pence, but a second war was more than madness:

humanity had seen what the first big blow-up had been like, with its gas attacks, aeroplanes, heavy artillery, bayonet charges and endless mud. Men had been forced to fight where fighting was impossible. Men had been told to survive where there was no choice but to die. Men had managed to live without the slightest glimmer of hope. Despair had replaced the jewels of civilisation as mankind's ruling principle. What a shambles! 'If anyone tries to drag me back to that,' Bill decided, 'I'll take to the bush.' He had no doubt that people would support him if he came to the boundaries of the town. deCoursey was a pacifist who could be relied on, he could get to deCoursey's without anyone knowing, and in the bush, he'd be as free as ever because nobody knew it like he did. There were huts all over the place for the cold weather and he didn't mind camping out when it was warm. It occurred to him that he might be asked to do something stupid, if harmless, like guarding trains, bridges, or the like. Jobs like that struck him as comical after what he'd been through, but would he do them, or would he head for the hills?

He'd decide when he had to. And until then, they could shove their wars up their arse; he'd done what he was supposed to do the first time and if there was a second they could count him out.

With that settled, Bill was as affable as ever. He decided to call on the birdman and get his views on the next tour to be offered. As he rode up to the cottage he saw fresh droppings on the track, or rather just off the track, and he knew that the rider had been Maeve; she was sporting herself in the autumn sunshine, and he felt tenderly for her. She was responding to the day as if public opinion didn't exist, and that was as it should be. Smoke was rising from the chimney and he could hear Louise singing in French. It sounded operatic, making it a closed book for Bill, and yet any music, any phrase from any opera, would have been a pleasurable sound that morning: the bush welcomed anything melodious. There was also a tiny plough under a clump of trees. It hadn't been used for years. deCoursey's father had bought it at a clearing sale because he liked the look of it, but when it broke down he had no idea how to fix it, so it crawled under the trees like an ailing dog, and lay down, most probably forever. It always made Bill want to laugh, but he never did. Then he saw his friend emerging from the orchard, nibbling an apple. 'Morning, mate,' Bill called. 'How's that

apple? Good?’

The birdman smiled to see his friend. ‘Made in heaven. I never know whether the apple or the orange is the best tree to have.’ Bill thought this easy. ‘Don’t decide, have both. You can you know.’

They were off to a good start. Soon they were sitting on a log. deCoursey said he’d get his mother to make them tea, but he didn’t move. Bill didn’t expect him to go inside; Mrs O’D would have noticed him arriving, and would have swung the kettle over the fire. She might even have a scone or two for her visitor. Bill, who lived on his own, was fond of the rituals of the households where he was welcome. He’d become almost a specialist in visiting since his reputation as a bushman made him the test of a good welcome. Nobody ever failed him and he failed none of those who received him. They were all bush battlers ...

‘I got my invite to the next presentation night. The photos. I don’t suppose y’re gonna go this year?’

deCoursey shook his head. ‘I don’t belong down there. I’m too proud to have them make a fuss of me when I’m nothing to them but a silly old man.’

‘Don’t be too hard on’em, mate. They’d look after you. It’s something they’d like to do. They have to do what we tell’em, down here, I suppose they think a dinner at the Cathedral is their chance to do something in return.’ deCoursey showed no enthusiasm. ‘We’ve got all the advantages, down here. They’d like to treat us in their special places too.’

‘Do you enjoy their dinners, Bill?’

‘Not much. But you can see they’re trying, and that means something. It has to.’

‘It does. But I don’t think I belong down there. I don’t think they could make me feel I was actually present, though I know they’d try. That’s what I would feel displeasing – that effort to make me belong. I don’t belong anywhere Bill, as you know.’

Bill understood this very well. ‘No more than I do. But if I make the effort, I get something worthwhile out of it.’

Each considered the other. They depended on each other and the pilgrims depended on them. Each of them was lacking much that their pilgrims possessed. Bill said, ‘Mum died when I was only a little tacker. My dad wasn’t up to the job of raising me and he left.’

‘You never followed him, Bill, to find out what he made of himself.’ deCoursey knew this was so; the things they were talking about could only be treated as a ritual, being too painful to be investigated.

‘He wouldn’t have made anything of himself. It was up to me what I made out of myself, and I’ve done it well enough.’

He had. He was known for miles, welcome in homes, mentioned in talk. ‘I never married, because I found security in being on my own. I could always retreat into the bush.’

‘It’s never frightened you, Bill. It sometimes frightens me.’

‘It sounds a funny thing to say, but I made an agreement with it. It wouldn’t hurt me and I wouldn’t hurt it.’

‘You’ve honoured that agreement. It’s treated you well.’

‘People do a lot of silly things in the bush. Like some of the blokes on our tours. They can’t leave things alone. They see a peak and they want to get their boots on top of it, and sing out how good they are because they climbed it. Silly bastards think because they can get themselves to the top of something they’re conquerors. Jesus!’

deCoursey smiled. ‘Such men must have a trail of failures behind them.’

‘Hunhh. Then they should leave them there. Behind them, that is. If you’ve found out that you’re nothing you shouldn’t make a song and dance about it.’

‘That’s what failures do. They hide their failings inside the trappings of success.’

‘There are no trappings of success. I saw that in the war. Bloody blowhards getting round with badges and brisk little moustaches, they gave me the shits.’

‘Wearing other people’s deaths as honour to themselves.’

Bill was surprised; deCoursey, the pacifist, rarely said anything of war. ‘Ya got yaself a great little place out here. Ya mum’s happy, far as I can see.’

deCoursey looked up, almost smiling. ‘I was never brave enough to marry, Bill. I wouldn’t have been a success.’

‘Then ya succeeded in a funny way all yer own. At least you had the courage to do it.’

‘My path is a pathway of escape. I don’t think that’s good.’

‘It’s your path, and ya found it. And that is good.’ He was reas-

suringly definite. His friend said, 'My mother is slow this morning. Shall we go in?' But he'd hardly spoken when Louise was in the door, tapping something with a spoon to make a dinging noise. 'Tea, my friends, by all that's holy. I've already poured. Come in.'

The two men went into the kitchen, a crazy building separate from the rest of their home. A modest fire blazed in a huge fireplace and an iron rod allowed the cook, Louise in this case, to swivel things over the fire, close to it, or away. She'd refilled the kettle after making tea so it was quiet, not steaming: the kettle had left that to the cups which sat on a low bench near the blaze. Louise also had a bowl of biscuits, shop-bought ones which she offered Bill with pride.

'From the last time I went into town.'

'Thanks, Mrs O'D. Very welcome I wanta to know.'

'You're always polite Bill. It's something I've given up expecting.'

'You've got your standards, Mrs O'D, you stick to'em.'

The old lady smiled. 'Shall I go to war for them, Bill?'

The bushman laughed. 'No!' he said loudly, something he managed to throw off as a joke. 'Don't do that.' He considered the world. 'It's not easy to do something good. Lots of people try too hard. I think if you want to make the world a better place, the way to do it is to live a simple life, and occasionally, just occasionally, if you can see something's lacking, then you have a go at that as well. And then you stop and go back to what's within your powers. And ya stay there, simple as can be, till ya see something else ya might possibly get away with.'

Louise O'Donovan considered what he'd had to say. 'No more than that?'

deCoursey answered for his friend. 'No more. Most people think they can be judged by what they do. I think we should be judged by what we make possible.'

His mother said, 'This is a new morality.'

Bill said, 'It's what we do when we take those blokes into the mountains.'

'What do you give them, do you think?'

Bill again: 'Give'em a chance. Let'em see what they are. Make'em work out what's important.'

deCoursey said, 'In those photos, or the ones I like best, they're

tiny against the country we are taking them through. It must be good for them to know.'

His mother: 'Those photos make them look beautiful. They may come to think they are beautiful.' She evidently saw this as a danger, a temptation to their egos, perhaps. But her son thought differently.

'Being beautiful is the only redemption most of us will ever have. It's not often we get a chance to be beautiful, let alone in a place that's beautiful itself. They have a right to that, I think.'

Bill: 'So long as they don't abuse it. That's what we have to take care of because we can't expect them to know their limits.'

Mrs O'D: 'It must be possible to gain wisdom in that city they live in, but I can't see how.'

Her son nodded: Bill: 'Ya can have wisdom anywhere, so long as ya got yourself under control.'

Mrs O'D: 'How did you learn to do that, Bill?'

'I got two things to say to that. The first was, the war. If ya didn't keep control of yaself ya wouldn't last long. Ya'd do somethin silly and get a bullet in the head. There was plenty flyin around, let me tellya.' Mrs O'Donovan was looking at him, waiting for him to go on.

'And the second, which I learned first, was the bush.'

'What did you learn from the bush?'

deCoursey had never heard this question put to his friend. 'First of all,' Bill said, 'I had to come to terms with it. It was everywhere, and it was changing all the time. Things that belong in one place don't fit in somewhere else. So ya gotta be watchful to see what it is that's around you. The bush is adapting all the time so you gotta be ready to adapt yaself too. Then ya gotta make it friendly, as friendly as ya can. Get it on your side, if you can.'

deCoursey smiled a huge smile. 'Keep going, Bill. I've always wanted to hear what you had to say about this.'

'Next thing, ya mustn't do anything against it. Ya gotta work with it, never against. If ya feel something's not quite right, make camp. Settle. Listen. Look around. See what feels right. If nothing's clear, then don't do anything. On the other hand, if ya got a job in hand – say y're movin cattle – then work out how y're going to do it, and do it without a stop. Push on regardless. If ya weaken, ya won't get through.'

deCoursey recognised the man he knew in these thoughts. 'Is

there anything else?’

Bill scratched his head. ‘Could ya pour a drop of hot water in me cup, Mrs O’D? I like it hot. deCoursey’d know that from the tours. Some of those fellas got real weak habits. Let their tea sit till it’s cold. Not me.’ He paused, watching the water into his cup. ‘I think ya haveta decide if the bush is ya friend or not. Y’r enemy. It can be either. Ya gotta make it y’r friend. That means ya gotta be friendly to it. Don’t forget that it doesn’t stop with what you can see. It goes on forever. It stops at the beach where the water’s coming in in waves. There’s so much of it that it’s got the advantage over any jumped up little fella tryin to boss it around. Ya can’t beat it. Ya can build a fence and rip out everythin that’s growin inside the fence, and what does it do to ya? It starts pushing up little suckers of things you ripped out, near the fence so ya don’t notice at first, then they’re everywhere. The bush’ll come back if ya take y’eye off it for a day or two. It’s not easy to beat, probly impossible. Once ya get that inside y’head ...’

deCoursey had been waiting. ‘What then, my friend? What then?’

Bill looked puzzled. ‘I was going to say ya can’t win so ya better do something to make life as easy as you can. But that’s not right. People do win, but ya hafta be lucky, or a bastard. Ya needn’t think because you’re a good fella that you’re going to end up with a pocket full of notes. No. It doesn’t work that way ...’

He’d run out. He’d said as much as he could find it in him to say. He looked at his friend. deCoursey was quiet. Louise seemed abstracted, as if her involvement had ended when she’d poured their tea. deCoursey looked out the open door, aware of the walls that sheltered them – bark, timber, some corrugated iron. The roof was bark, several layers of it, because deCoursey, an inexpert builder, had added layers whenever a leak occurred. Bill had told him, often enough, how to keep the rain out, but had kept his hands off the building because he was sure that if he worked on it alongside his friend they’d argue, perhaps quarrel: that simply had to be avoided. He looked at his friend.

‘Whaddaya reckon, mate? Let’s hear how you see things.’

deCoursey rubbed his hands, wondering where to start. Bill’s thoughts had brought him some of the way to where he stood, but if he went further he’d be on his own, and this was something he felt too keenly to welcome it. The challenge was there, however. How did he

see things?

‘I have no trust in anybody who says how things should be. Ministers of the church are always telling us what ought to happen. But it does not happen, so they are wrong. Imagine if someone offered to sell us a set of clothes and told us that our bodies couldn’t be seen when we wore them. But the clothes were transparent so you could see the body through the cloth. People wouldn’t wear those clothes – unless they wanted to be seen in their shame ...’

‘Shame?’ Louise his mother put in.

‘If you have a system of morality, and we do, then we are endlessly at the mercy of shame. Those who break the rules of good behaviour must feel ashamed unless they are hypocritical, or cruel enough not to care. So we must ask ourselves what is the world like, not what should it be like. We have only to look around us to see how frightening is the answer. What is the world like? It’s too awful to think about.’

‘Wars,’ Bill rumbled.

‘Greed, brutality, indifference to suffering. We are a horrible species, sufficiently aware of good and evil to look down on other creatures, not yet able to put ourselves on any higher level.’

‘Yet?’

Bill could see that his mother’s objections to deCoursey’s thoughts were well-rehearsed. They must have had these arguments often, and where had it left them? Only going over old ground, as far as he could see. Louise’s son went on, ‘People have high hopes of evolution, but I am not one of them. If we are to believe Mr Darwin, we evolve when some development gives us an advantage over other species. How will this take us higher? The development we need will have to come about in some way different from that.’

Bill felt out of his depth, but had to say, ‘I wouldn’t be holding out any hopes of that. What I reckon is, ya just do the best you can, do the right thing, keep out of the way if there’s any strife.’ Then he went silent, and his friend, remembering all he knew about the war that Bill had been to, understood how strongly Bill rejected what he’d seen. He, deCoursey, hadn’t been to war, so his hopes of getting to a higher plane of existence hadn’t been destroyed.

And yet they were wafer-thin, those hopes. ‘I can see qualities, I can see characteristics, that might make us better than we are.’ Bill looked

at him, his mother had lapsed into that absence of a minute before. Was she tired of her son, or fearful of where his thinking might lead? Or did she see in him characteristics of herself which she had no wish to acknowledge?

‘Silly as it may seem, we are better when we are out of our bodies, not doing harm, but contemplating. The world is a mixture of the violent, cruel and brutal, on the one hand, and the marvellous and mysterious on the other. We can’t sort ourselves out in relation to these things when we let our bodies pull us forward. We need to be clear in our minds. This means detachment. We must put ourselves aside ...’

Bill remembered something that had happened on the first day of the first trip. ‘Birds can be cruel too. If you remember ...’

He did. ‘The hawk was hovering. It wanted to destroy the wren and its young in their nest. This is a problem for us. We admire lions, we call them the king of the beasts. King! They are the cruellest, most destructive of all. There is no virtue to be found in them, unless someone can tame them.’

‘Looks like you’d better get a job in a circus, mate! Risky, though. Howdya feel like taking that on? Eh?’

deCoursey laughed. ‘I am a coward, as you know. Where the lion is first, I am a very bad last!’ He laughed again. ‘I want another world, a different one.’

Bill shook his head. ‘There’s no other world but this one. Heaven’s only a story made up by silly buggers who can’t find a good way to live. You can do better, mate, better by far.’

‘You truly think so, Bill? The bushman, friend of all that knew him, wondered why he’d been questioned by that word ‘truly’. His sincerity was known to all. ‘Truly’? Why? Something of his thought must have been within deCoursey’s range of perception, because he went on. ‘I have flashes, Bill, no more. I have them here, in the little paddocks I’m trying to clear; I have them more often in the mountains, sometimes with you, sometimes on my own. In the huge indifference of endless blue, sky and ranges, I have moments of release. Everything in my mind aligns itself with what is before my eyes, and I think the world is good. I cannot sustain these moments, and I ask myself why. The answer that comes to me is beauty, and this surprises me. I suspect there are many forms, many levels, of beauty and I push them all into one bag, one

word, when they vary as much as horses, cows, sheep, and trees.'

Bill felt like a bit of teasing. 'Don't forget to say birds.'

'I add birds on your recommendation,' said the birdman, teasing him in return. 'I have a feeling that my mind is in a trap which I cannot get out of because I don't know how the trap is put together. I think of foxes, and wild dogs, unable to get out of a trap unless they gnaw off a leg and live the rest of their days with the three that remain.'

'Not a pretty sight.'

'No more are they pretty in the trap when they are dead. But that is not what I wanted to say. The fox scents danger if the trap is laid badly, but he doesn't understand the trap. What he smells, what he thinks about is us. Man. His sense of us is accurate. He knows we are to be avoided like the plague.'

Bill conceded this. 'True.'

'There are traps in the mind. We say we are civilised, but our thinking is primitive. We say that we are moral beings, or we ought to be, but the trap that leads us into is a war where the people we want to fight are told by us that they are moral failures, not up to our standards ...'

Bill scoffed, as his friend expected.

'... so we need a way of thinking, an aspiration that takes us away from the trap ...'

'Live quietly,' said Bill.

'And I say soar like a bird on the wing!'

They looked at each other, tied together by friendship, locked in disagreement. Louise returned from wherever her mind had taken her, and with a device resembling a human fist on an iron rod, she pulled closer to her the bar from which the kettle was suspended. 'I think this is boiling now. I'll add it to the pot.' She did, with movements practised down the years of living with her late husband, and then with her son and daughter. Maeve's horse could be heard somewhere in the distance. Louise stood up and called through the door, 'Tea, my darling. Tea!'

She sat down. 'If she heard me. I never know. Anyhow, why do I bother? If she wants it she can come and make it even if I'm not here. Isn't that so?'

Bill nodded. 'It's hard to think of any of us not being here. We're

all going to move on one day, aren't we, but while we're here ...'

He couldn't finish. Even deCoursey, who loved to take his thoughts to their furthest horizons and see if they would change their nature there, returning as something the world had never seen before, nodded too. It was hard to think of a world that didn't, that wouldn't, contain himself, his mother, Bill. Or Maeve, who'd be inside in a minute or two, needing a drink after her ride. She'd ask them what they'd been talking about, and they wouldn't feel like going through it all again, so they'd remember some scrap of local gossip and tell her that was what they'd been talking about, and Maeve, knowing little about the doings of the district, would take it seriously, and eventually she'd become so involved, so heated, that they would wish they'd told her something else.