for Olive
How do people imagine the landscapes they find themselves in? How does the land shape the imaginations of the people who dwell in it?

Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*
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I saw my father draw comfort from the Bible two nights before his death. He lived his last few weeks in a Catholic hospice for the terminally ill. I knew he was close to death when he stopped giving me cash to buy him packets of cigarettes. He’d been diagnosed with lung cancer two years earlier, but had not cut back on his heavy smoking. About a week before he died, I saw him for the first time without cigarettes. ‘Do you want me to get some?’ I asked him as I was ending my visit. ‘No’, he said. A simple answer that filled me with dread.

The next weekend I went to a wedding. After the wedding I visited him again. He’d been moved from a room where he was the sole occupant to a shared one. The man next to him was calling out incoherently. My father was distracted and disoriented by the move, suspicious as to why it had been done. In his former room he’d had a window and an enclosed balcony. The new room had no windows, as if his world was shrinking. We didn’t have much to say to each other. One of the nuns came past. ‘Read to me’, he called to her, ‘Psalm 23’. The nun drew up a chair to the bedside, and pulled the curtain. I’d never heard my father refer to psalms. ‘The Lord is my shepherd’, the nun began, and it was a familiar enough refrain, even for me. ‘He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.1 And I knew then that he truly felt himself in the shadow of death, and that he was having the psalm read as much for me as for himself. So that I would be sure to know. Words that run the risk of lapsing into cliché came powerfully to life – the valley of the shadow of death, a liminal landscape, desert-like in my mind’s eye. He then asked for Psalm 24, with its refrain, ‘Lift up your heads, O ye gates’, and at the time I interpreted this as a plea to me, to not hold on, to release him into death.

Witnessing him at the edge like this, I sensed how few of our literatures, the texts of our daily lives, have good places well tended for death. And how few of our stories. Not just abstract references, but safe havens for encountering the dead. Places that hold comfort and give orientation in grief when we’re pushed up close to our own mortality. I did not see him conscious again, and so that evening visit, made after a long and social day of celebration, of food, music, dancing, wedding rites, took on a prophetic air. He could feel his death coming.

I had felt his death coming too, sitting aside from the wedding celebrations, watching people on the dance floor, especially one beautiful woman who’d flown across from New Zealand. She wore a full glossy bronze-gold skirt of heavy satin, and a halter-neck top. On the dance floor beneath a white marquee in a front garden that looked across a deeply green lawn to Westernport Bay with Philip Island edged across the far horizon, this woman, who I’d never met before, with her enjoyment of dancing, her bare-skinned back, seemed some kind of unattainable counterpoint to my own state. I was wearing black, a new dress I’d bought for the wedding, and which I ended up wearing as my funeral garb soon
after, as if I’d chosen it for that purpose. The bride had hand-made
the garlands strung beneath the roof and around the pillars of the
marquee, lengths of ivy twisted with gardenia. And they framed
a view I knew intimately from childhood. My grandmother’s
holiday house, which she took us to each summer, looked across
the same stretch of water. I’d grown up on this view. It was part
of me somehow.

I am not even sure whether it was my father who said, after
the wedding, ‘It is ok to let go’. Memory so quickly becomes fickle.
If he did, these were some of the kindest and most attentive words
he managed. He was too close to his own unhappiness to nurture
his family much. The family bent around him, solicitous and in
fear. It’s easy to see that’s why I turn to him in writing, as an
enigma of displacement, and because of his capacious unhappiness,
which I’ve been told it is common for those close to alcoholics
to feel somehow responsible for. His final passage into death was
assisted by large doses of morphine. We will never know how
conscious he was of his own passing, my brother, mother and I
assembled around his bed as his breathing became more laboured.

I was working at a university at the time, and had gone across
to the library. Over the library PA my name was called, asking
me to return to the office immediately. I knew what it would be.
A good friend had organised the announcement and was waiting.
My mother had called to say come quickly. My friend called me
a taxi, and I sat next to a taxi driver who was in no mood to chat.
I said to him, ‘My father is dying’. I told him the address. I’m not
sure what I expected, some flicker of sympathy, but his face, heavy
and rectangular, was impassive. He didn’t even glance at me. As
we drove in silence I thought, so this is how it feels to be going
to meet your dying father. His prognosis had been two months
to two years. He lived two years to the month from his date of
prognosis, and occasionally I wonder whether, if he’d been given longer, he would have lived longer. It had been a long two years of waiting for the decline, which was mainly gradual then rapid in the last few months.

My mother and brother said they watched me from an upstairs window as I stepped out of the taxi. I almost walked in front of a passing car, they said, but I only remember thinking I needed to throw away my chewing gum before I went in. I didn’t usually chew gum, but my friend had given me some. Upstairs my father lay unconscious on the bed, head propped on pillows, his mouth open, each breath audible and rough. My mother and brother had been there a while. I pulled up a chair, and we sat around him. It sounded as though he was drowning, a sea rising in his esophagus, edging up his throat. As time passed, each inhalation grew longer and yet more fragile. Then after one exhalation he failed to inhale. I watched. Then it came, sudden, tremulous. A pause. Then the rattling exhalation. Then things evened out again. A nurse came in and checked his morphine drip, adjusted something. My brother went downstairs to make a work call. I stayed up close to my father’s head, seated on his left side, unable to lift my eyes from his face. His dentures had been removed, so his mouth was sunken. I couldn’t work out what was going on in there, where all the fluid was coming from. I kept thinking I should say something, but there was nothing to say. I was self-conscious before my mother and brother. More time passed. My brother returned from his phone call. My mother went to stand at my father’s head, on the other side of the bed. She bent to him, laying a hand on his hand, this woman whose marriage had been broken for many years. She spoke to him, believing that he might still be hearing. His face showed no response. The breathing continued. The pauses increased, each followed by a precipitous drawing in.
of air. Until one breath was not followed by another. The pause grew longer and longer. I waited for the last-minute rattle, the resumption. But it did not come. And then very clearly and all of a sudden I saw life drain from my father’s face. Colour left, like a tide ebbing. His skin became yellow and waxen. We waited, not knowing what to do, with no good place to go.
A
fter a period of loss, and much change, I began walking. Of course begin is hardly the right word. Most of us start walking from early infancy and never stop. I began walking in a way I had always longed to – extended overnight walks in the bush, carrying packs, tents, sleeping bags, food, cooking equipment, water. Within eighteen months I had walked in the Snowy Mountains, twice along the South Coast of Tasmania, the MacDonnell Ranges west of Alice Springs, the Arnhem Land plateau in Kakadu, the Wollemi National Park in New South Wales, and more recently in Ladakh in the Himalayas.

Most of these walks were of ten days’ duration. Ten days become a marker. There is a limit to how much weight you can carry. Ten days’ worth of food, equipment, water is about as much as most people can manage, at least without supplementing along the way. Walking carrying close to half your own body weight is a very different mode of being a pedestrian – no longer can you be oblivious to the simple act of placing one foot in front of the other, weight poised in balance, in the motion in-between. At the end of a long day, especially early in a walk, knees, hip joints, shoulders, back are in acute pain. Each step costs immense effort and concentration. But, during the course of these days, there are passages of reverie, of forgetfulness, of absorption in surroundings,
of an immense but simple pleasure and of rhythm. Rhythm integrates into thought, into words, into language.

Walking was also the way in which I could form a new relationship, a relationship that had incorporated within it an ex-wife, two primary school age children, an ex-fiancé, and ensuing complications. Walking was a neutral place and a neutral activity during which we had relative freedom from the demands of all these other presences. I was nostalgic for a former, far simpler life that seemed to have slipped beyond my grasp. I was also mourning the recent deaths of my father and my maternal grandmother. My grandmother, with whom I had been close, had died just two weeks after my father. I was not adjusting well to having moved interstate to live with my new partner, who felt he could not move because of his commitment to his children. I had left behind family, friends and employment. The walks that we undertook were some of the least complicated experiences in our new life together.

We did one of those walks north west of the western MacDonnell Ranges, outside of Alice Springs in central Australia. The MacDonnell Ranges are known for a 223-kilometre walk called the Larapinta Trail. We planned to use a short section of the marked trail to start our walk, then to head toward Mt Zeil, using topographic maps and a compass to create our own route. We traversed spinifex country, passages of corkwood, ghost gums and mulga, followed dry riverbeds and small rocky gullies where cycad palms and ferns grew in shady rock clefts. Once our food was running low we began our return. On the last day we decided to take a shortcut to where we’d left the car. Rather than climb the steep ridge we’d descended to begin the walk, we made a last-minute decision to pass through a narrow gorge that cut through the same terrain.
We climbed down a steep but easily negotiated hillside covered in rocks and rubble. Down to the entrance, which was narrow with smooth expanses of rock stretching upward. Cool underfoot where it was in shade. Hot where the sun touched. The rock surface was polished smooth, as if in some distant time the gorge had once channelled huge forces of water. We changed into our bathers. There was a puddle of water, slimy with algae. Then the gorge turned a corner into shadows. Alan went ahead. I thought it would be a couple of swims, cold but refreshing, and then we would be in sight of the car. We stood on the edge of a deep pool with a kink in it, enclosed by rock. Here, the walls were a muted purple-grey, while outside the same rock had been multihued, a range of reds, oranges, burnt sienna. We put our packs in first, laying them across the inflatable but thin thermarests we used to sleep on. I pushed mine out ahead of me, then launched quietly into the water. It was so cold I couldn’t really speak. From the sun-filled day outside, where we’d walked in hats and sunshirts, moving slowly in the heat among spinifex, to this rocky dimness, and freezing water. At the other end I managed to scramble up onto the slimy rock ledge, pushing and dragging my pack at the same time. ‘How was it?’ Alan called.

‘Ok’, I said.

Once he was across he said, ‘I can see why you didn’t say anything. It’s very cold.’

We put our packs back on, walked through puddles and shallow pools, scrambled over slippery rocks, until we reached the next pool. The next pool was just as cold, but easy enough to get across. I kicked with my heavy walking boots on, creating enough momentum to keep them up near the surface. I could feel them dragging at me, weighing down my legs, and tugging them under. At the other end, the pool ended at a steep ledge, the
A Country in Mind

water too deep to stand. I managed to half push my pack onto the ledge, then had to haul my body weight up, getting onto my knees. I could feel the beginnings of a bruise imprinted onto my shin bone. We traversed the next portion of rocky corridor, cold and covered in goose bumps. I was expecting to turn a corner into daylight. Instead, it was getting darker and colder.

We reached a steep descent, with a length of chain screwed at the top, dangling down toward the water below. I felt my shivering increase not just from cold, but fear as well. Heights are not my thing. But I knew Alan had experience as both a rock-climber and a canyoner. I now felt that he was pretty much in charge – this was a realm known to him, rocky and subterranean, but completely unfamiliar to me. I felt myself slip beyond the orbit of the familiar, beyond my realm of expertise. He climbed down first, then I passed him the packs. I told him that climbing was not my favourite activity. He knew that I’d done a little bit in the French Alps with an ex-boyfriend’s brother whose whole existence was devoted to climbing and skiing, and who later died in a mountaineering accident. My father used to get nervous just climbing a ladder to clean out the gutters, or even to change a light bulb. My mother or brother or I would be ordered to hold the ladder in place, the rest of us assembled as onlookers. He would give terse instructions, as if his anxiety were somehow our fault. I once asked him if he’d ever been nervous at sea, when he worked on ocean-going tugs, salvaging shipwrecks, towing oil rigs. Never, he replied, even in the heaviest weather. You learn to move with the boat. It’s a funny thing, he said, as if somewhat bemused, but I’ve never had fear of the sea.

In the gorge, on the edge of the drop of rock, I said I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go any further. We discussed it a bit. Alan said that he didn’t think it was far through, he’d read an article on the
Larapinta Trail, and it said that going through the gorge was an option; we could always turn back if need be. He said that with some canyons, once you’re down, there’s absolutely no way back up, but this portion looked negotiable. He pointed out foot and hand-holds, instructed me to wedge my back against a column of rock and my feet against the wall opposite, then pointed to a foothold below that. At the steepest section, he placed his hand just below the foothold, a crack, and held my foot in place. I reached the bottom. ‘That was good’, he said. ‘You were fine.’

At the entrance to the gorge, we’d discussed whether to leave our hiking boots on. Both of us still wore thick hiking socks and boots. Our decision was based on the fact that the water was so cold that without shoes our feet would go numb, and would be unable to find the necessary toeholds to climb in and out of the pools. Any such benefit, we soon discovered, was counteracted by the heaviness of the increasingly waterlogged leather boots.

The next pool opened out into a vaulted water-filled cavern and disappeared around a bend. Around the corner the other side was still not in sight, and the rock ceiling became much lower. It was dark, the water deep, and even colder. I was now shaking. I kicked, trying to concentrate on keeping my boots up close to the surface, at the same time intermittently shoving at the pack balanced on its thin thermarest mat. By now the pack was half submerged, and the fabric looked as though water had soaked through. This pool was much deeper than the last. The weight and downward pull of my boots was starting to concern me, but it was far too cold to take them off. I could hear my breath starting to labour, drawing in and out from fear and cold. Frog-kicking was a much more effective way to keep my feet afloat than kicking up and down, so I concentrated on that, but could feel my chest compress in the cold, and my head start to become slightly numb.
even though I’d kept my hair dry. I focused on Alan up ahead, figuring that he had experience, so that as long as I kept my actions in accord with his, we should be ok.

We rounded another bend and the end was still not in sight. The pool had turned into a narrow channel flanked by sheer walls. Now I was really cold. Finally, the channel opened out into another broader pool, and we made our way to the other end of it, clambering and scrambling onto the ledge. I wasn’t taking care with my actions anymore, just heaving the pack and myself. I didn’t care any more about hurting myself. I could see cuts and bruises forming along my shins in pinkish lumps. I stood on the rock shaking and panting. I felt out of my depth. We were a long way into the gorge, and it seemed too far to go back. I kept thinking that it wouldn’t be far to the other end, that soon we’d round a bend into daylight. Instead we had to descend another steep drop of rock with a slimy log at the bottom and dark deep water. Another cavern that disappeared around a corner, no far side in sight. Now I was seriously cold. Alan was too. At first he’d stayed much warmer than I, but now he was shaking. ‘We have to keep moving’, he said. ‘The trick with canyoning is to move, and move fast. As soon as you stop, you freeze up.’

But I needed coaching down the rock. I don’t have enough climbing skills to be fast. We spent whole minutes with him talking me down cracks and ledges, and passing the packs that were getting heavier with the amount of water they absorbed. There was nowhere for Alan to rest the packs, so I let them scrape down the rock face, and he perched them mostly in the water. I was shivering hard, not just a shiver, but my whole body shaking and beginning to double over, teeth chattering. The panting had intensified into a rough, hauling, rhythmic breath. The water seemed somehow thicker and stiller, of a quality untouched by
daylight, as if only the simplest life-forms could exist here, or fish adapted to darkness. Alan still went ahead. Every now and then came the sound of a single, inexplicable splash beyond the sounds of our own movements. We rounded the cavern and entered an even narrower chamber, the ceiling low, just above our heads: for the first time I was alarmed by how confined the space was becoming. The rock was olive-grey, and still had the smooth water-worn appearance that it had had at the entrance. But back there it had a gloss to it, while here it was covered with fine sediment which, close to the water, looked slippery as engine grease.

The water was much deeper, even colder, and clouded, perhaps from Alan’s movements ahead stirring up the sediment, or perhaps it was becoming more opaque the deeper inside the rock we travelled. The span of the channel was so tight that every time I frog-kicked, my boots hit the sides. I tried looking around me as I went, keeping an eye out for somewhere to hold onto, but the rock was too sheer, there were no ledges, or even cracks small enough to grip with my fingertips. But I couldn’t look closely. It was imperative I keep my legs moving. Again, my feet kept hitting the sides and I was losing co-ordination. I tried to kick up and down for a moment but my boots sank, dragging my whole body under. I felt myself panic. I knew at that moment, with clarity, that if I gave in to panic I could drown. It would be that simple – a loss of control, and I would drown in this tight dim rocky chamber. I made myself frog-kick again, tightening the span of the kick to avoid the stony walls, and continuing to push the pack at the same time.

A wave of anger surged through me, I thought to myself, ‘I’m fucked if I’m going to let myself drown in here. I’m fucked if this is going to be my death. This is not going to be how I die’. I saw Alan’s head go under up ahead of me. That’s when I knew
that we were really in trouble, and that I had to do everything in my power to stay alive. It was no longer a matter of relying on his former experience. I now had to do everything within my capability and common sense to survive. Alan yelled back, ‘Push your pack off the mat, and lie on it’. He’d had a scare. He was using his wits. I pushed my pack off, and, to my surprise, the pack stayed afloat. I lay my chest across the mat. Instant relief at this new buoyancy, things felt manageable again. The narrow channel kept on and on, but at least now we had something to stay afloat on. It wasn’t until a couple of years later that I thought to ask Alan whether he knew the packs would float. It wasn’t until it occurred to me to write about the incident that I realised that he would’ve have been willing to let the packs and all their contents sink for the sake of the buoyancy of the mats.

I can’t quite remember the exit out of that channel. Oh yes. It opened out into a cave, with a little sandy beach at the end. Above was a slit of light. On the sand was a dead snake. Earlier there had been a huge frog, or a toad, just lolling in the water, as if half-asleep. And something else dead. A dead fish. Just at the entry to that last narrow chamber, I brushed by a dead fish floating on the surface. I definitely remember the snake. It had been there a long time, its spine and ribcage exposed beneath tatters of thin skin. By now I was stumbling. Exhausted, disoriented, scared, and still no end in sight. At the end of the sand was a stand of rocks, and below that yet another steep but shorter descent into the next pool. It was just as narrow as the last. I was now shaking uncontrollably with cold, my breath like an animal’s panting. I couldn’t stop. I could hear myself pant, as if from a distance – a rasping short breath, in and out. The muscles in my thighs were shaking as if they’d detached themselves from their usual setting, and were moving up and down independently, not just the skin shaking but whole
slabs of muscle, my whole body bowed over and shaking beyond my control. I looked at the next section of water, deep and cloudy, and narrowly surrounded by sheer walls of rock, and knew that I wouldn’t make it. My body was too out of control to negotiate another narrow chamber, especially with the waterlogged boots on. I also recalled what little I knew about hypothermia – we had prepared for a desert walk, not for cold – and understood that loss of sound judgement was one of the symptoms. I didn’t trust my judgement anymore and knew I had to stop. ‘Is there some kind of problem with stopping?’ I said. ‘I’m too cold to go on. I need to stop and get warm.’

‘Ok. Yes, I think you’re right. I think we need to stop. We need to get some clothes on and get warm. We need to have a warm drink. We need to find our sleeping bags and lie down. First. That’s what we need to do first.’ We fumbled at our packs. I found my sleeping bag and pulled it out of its bag. It had one wet spot on it, but apart from that was still dry. Inside my pack all my clothes were saturated except for one long-sleeved top. I managed to get my wet bathers off, but was shaking too much to put on the top. I climbed into my sleeping bag and lay on the sand, unable to do up the zip. Alan found his sleeping bag and it was sodden, dripping. Every item in his bag was wet. All his clothes, the remainder of our food, the stove, the lighter, everything. He fiddled around, setting up the stove, shaking with cold. I remember thinking how raw his body looked. Vulnerable, and fallible, and thin. I told him to take my one dry top and he draped it over his shoulders, and went to look more closely at the next section of water. As he climbed a tilted slab of rock, the top slipped from his shoulders into the water. He grabbed it, but it was now wet too. ‘We need to drink something warm’, he said. He’d done a first aid course years ago. He squatted, shaking, and flicking the lighter again and
again. ‘We should have put everything in dry bags’, he said. I was shaking uncontrollably, and still panting uncontrollably, my whole body moving against the sand, throbbing and vibrating. An ache went through my hip joints and my thighs, some kind of cramp. The ache was so intense the only thing I could do was draw my knees to my chest, but this action happened beyond my control, as if my body was performing it of its own accord. It was impossible to straighten my legs. I entered a cocoon of a world. I had the hood of the sleeping bag over my head, and became lulled by the sound of my own breath, and the movements of my shivering. It suddenly felt like the safest place in the world. I felt a wave of peace flow through me, a sense of absolute and pure contentment. My whole body relaxed, and stopped shaking, went completely still – a lull, or pause. It only lasted for a few moments, and then the shaking began again. I had become used to the rhythm of the shake, as if it was quite soothing, a space that I wanted to re-enter.

‘Are you ok?’ Alan said, still flicking the lighter. I didn’t answer. I felt ok, but somehow didn’t have the energy to answer, as if I was just about to fall asleep and didn’t want the ordeal or the rupture of being woken. ‘Are you still ok?’ he said again. ‘Mm’, I said. ‘I’m ok.’ Suddenly I felt annoyed with him, annoyed that he was out there on the sand flicking at the lighter. ‘Just get in’, I said. ‘Get in and lie next to me. You can do that later.’ I needed his body heat, and I needed him to be close to me, not playing around with a wet lighter. He climbed into the sleeping bag, skin cold and clammy. He lay with his back to me, so that we could fit around one another. We lay shaking together. Initially I still couldn’t unfold my legs, so somehow he half zipped himself in, with me curled in a ball. After a while, I could gradually straighten my legs, but my thighs and hips still felt gripped and cramped and ached with an intense pain.
Some time later the shaking began to ease off. Alan picked up the lighter again, flicking at it continually, waiting for it to dry. I’d become dubious about his actions. I didn’t know if he was pointlessly and obsessively flicking the lighter, or whether there was a rationale behind it. I felt that we’d come into the gorge on the wave of his excitement and enthusiasm, and yet I wasn’t really up to the experience. I felt that he didn’t really know what he was doing. And yet I’d trusted him enough to follow him. In an instant, I felt that I suddenly didn’t know him well enough to know whether I could trust him. It was mid-afternoon. It took about forty-five minutes for my shaking to ease off to a normal shake, not the body-wracking movements. ‘There’, he said, at some stage. There was a spark. ‘It’s starting to dry off.’ We were still lying in the sleeping bag. Not far off was the dead snake.

Once again I became aware of the sound: a throb, cavernous, subterranean, rhythmic.

We had been hearing it for days while we were walking. An inexplicable sound that never ceased. I’d noticed it first, so persistent as to seem almost subliminal. I thought it came from a generator on some nearby pastoral station. But then we’d walked about twenty kilometres on and the sound was still at exactly the same pitch. It hadn’t faded, nor had it become stronger. I mentioned it to Alan one night as we lay under the clear night sky. Once I’d pointed it out he could hear it too. More days passed. During the day, if the wind blew or there were other distracting noises I’d forget it, but then it would reassert itself as
this simple background rhythm that, as the days passed, became deeply internalised. My mind had come to expect it, and could play the rhythm along with the sound itself. Playing itself over and over. I wondered whether we were near some mining site that we didn’t know about, and whether it was coming from some kind of huge machinery. But none of the maps referred to mining sites.

Deep inside the gorge the sound had become stronger and clearer. It had also become more foreboding and even less explicable, as if it were some kind of fate stalking us, an imminence.

It wasn’t until more than two years later that I stumbled across a reference to what could have been a similar kind of noise, or music while reading Michael Taussig’s *My Cocaine Museum* in my hotel room in Pune, India. I had been in India a couple of weeks. The monsoon was meant to have begun, but hadn’t. Every day the newspapers mentioned the absence of the monsoon, referring to it as a ‘wayward child’. In the cool of the room with its tiled floor and overhead fan, I was reading of torrential rain and the effects of weather on the history of colonisation, and mining for gold in Columbia, and there it was:

like when you hear music coming from a deep pond in the river where gold naturally collects as in a giant sluice box. It was Gustavo Díaz Guzbén, a resident of Santa María, who first told me about this music, later confirmed by women who dive for gold. Because he called it music, I imagined it to be melodic, perhaps like the music of the marimba that hangs in the church during Easter. But what he meant by music was a noise like a machine or like a wild wind he heard swimming underwater with a stone tied to his back at San Vicente. He surfaced and asked if an airplane had passed by. He
later figured out the music was the caretaker...of the gold, with whom you have to strike some sort of deal so as to get at his hoard. What sort of deal? That’s the problem. Other times the caretaker appears in the darkness of a subterranean mine as a hen followed by its chicks. First thing you notice is the ‘pio, pio...’ of its clucking. Or it comes as a toad. Or as a dog...Strange things, said Lilia Zuniga, who also lives in Santa María, ugly things...Moving shadows. Accidents. You put down a crowbar, come back, and it has moved.¹

This was the music I had heard. Not melodic, but still, somehow, music, and at the same time like the thump of machinery. Subterranean – at first it had come from beneath the earth (heard most clearly when lying down to sleep, ear pressed close to the ground) and now it was passing through the rock walls into the chamber of water.

Finally, the lighter flared, and Alan lit the MSR fuel stove, and the cave filled with its familiar loud roar. These stoves run on anything from petrol to shellite, or kerosene, and are always so loud that they’re difficult to talk above, even though this one was ironically named Whisperlite. Alan placed a pan on the stove, filled with water from the pool we’d just swum through. I thought of the dead fish, and the lolling toad. Once it came to the boil, he unwrapped two stock cubes, dissolved them in the water, and poured us a mug of stock each. This is what he had been trying so hard to organise – a warm drink. It’s difficult to avoid the cliché about the goodness of simple foods consumed in extreme situations – the mug of diluted stock cube was one of the best things I’ve ever tasted, its warmth spreading. I remember thinking that I would never go bush again without spare stock cubes. Late in her
life my grandmother had used the same brand of stock cubes that we were drinking, a French brand. She was a good cook. Before that, she used to make her own stock. Vegetable, chicken, beef. As a child, I had a horror of the small earthenware jar of chicken stock that seemed to exist permanently in her fridge. Its top layer was composed of fat globules and jelly.

We were now sitting upright in the sleeping bag, and began to check the only remaining food: a lump of dough that Alan had mixed earlier in the day to make flat bread (we had run out of bread days earlier), more of the French stock cubes, tea-bags kept dry in a clip-seal bag, a small plastic bottle of honey, another of olive oil, a handful of dried apricots. We began formulating a half-sound, half-nonsensical plan to get out of the gorge. Alan would go ahead because he could move faster than I could, and because he didn't feel the cold as much. He would go and see how far it was to the other end. He would take his pack, and I'd keep mine. He would leave me the stove. I made him take his cup and stock cubes and half the dried apricots. It wasn't until afterwards that he said he only took them to make me happy. He knew it made no sense to take a cup without a stove, and that if he fell into trouble a few dried apricots weren't going to be much help. Take the whistle, I said. We need a code. Three blasts: it's ok, follow. Two blasts: I'm ok, but don't follow, it's too difficult. One blast: I'm in trouble. There were too many holes. What would it mean if I heard one blast? We had an EPIRB with us, a device to be used in emergencies to transmit a signal to any overhead satellite and trigger an emergency rescue. They were originally used for sea rescues. If I heard one blast of the whistle, or nothing at all, then I would trigger the EPIRB. But could it emit its signal here, surrounded by rock? There was a narrow crack of daylight far above us. The cave wasn't entirely enclosed, but the EPIRB had only a
Gorge

narrow chink of space between all the rock to bounce its signal off a randomly passing satellite. What were the chances of that? How long could an EPIRB keep going – presumably it was battery operated, so how long would its batteries last? How long does it take the mechanisms of a search and rescue to grind into motion? If Alan were in trouble, hypothermic or injured, he wouldn’t have long. What would no whistle blast at all mean? What would two blasts mean? How long should I wait? What means of getting me out were there? We only had one whistle between us. So I had no code of reply. Would he be away overnight, a day, more than a day? What would it be like to spend the night alone next to the dead snake? It was now about 4 pm, how long would it take to get dark? I was booked on a flight first thing the next morning, as I had to get back to Melbourne to begin a semester of teaching. It was common wisdom to stay together rather than to separate, but that’s if you’re lost in the bush, not stuck in a gorge. We agreed that it wasn’t much use us both staying put, not doing anything, just waiting. I didn’t feel ready to get back into the water, and I knew Alan had a better chance of getting to the other end on his own.

After finishing his drink, Alan started to get ready. We had two five-litre inflatable water bottles with us. During the walk we’d filled them at various waterholes we’d come across, but they were now empty. He unfolded one, opened the small red plastic tap at its base and blew into it. Once it was inflated, he stuffed it in his pack to make it more buoyant. He blew up the second bottle and told me that if I followed I should use it in my pack. He topped up his thermarest with air. He began sorting through his camping equipment, some of it worth hundreds of dollars, deciding what to keep and what to leave behind. He left behind all his clothes, his sodden sleeping bag, a Gore-tex raincoat, an
expensive lightweight hiking tent. He took a lighter which he sealed into a clip-seal bag. He found his dry bag – a cylindrical synthetic bag designed to keep dry partly through its waterproof material and partly through the design of its opening which folds together, then over and over itself, and is clasped with a plastic buckle. In the dry bag he put his head-torch, the lighter, a metal cup, two stockcubes, half the dried apricots, half the dough, a Leatherman, a pocket knife, a beanie...

I had the stove and the EPIRB. These were two items essential to survival. And I had the only dry sleeping bag. His was useless.

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He climbed down onto a half-submerged log at the base of the rock descent, and I passed his pack down to him. He was now wearing a long-sleeved polypropylene top to try to retain some body heat. Polypropylene is lightweight and dries quickly, and it wouldn’t become too heavy in the water. He crouched for a minute or two on the log. There must have been a flood not so long ago for such a large log – the trunk of a tree – to be lodged so far inside the gorge’s depths. It was as though we barely knew what to say to one another. I could guess at what was going through his mind, as he crouched getting ready to re-enter the water, but couldn’t know. I imagined him thinking of his kids. Contemplating the likelihood, or at least the possibility, of his own death. We ran through the whistle code again. My shivering resumed. Once in the water, he kept talking as he disappeared down the narrow cleft of rock, and then once he was out of sight he kept calling back. ‘It’s opened out into a wider pool’, he said. ‘So far it’s ok.’ A short silence, sounds of splashing. ‘I’m entering a second pool’, he called, his voice growing fainter. ‘It still seems
ok.’ And that, or something like it, was the last I heard. I stood for whole minutes waiting for more. There was nothing. I checked my watch. He had said that I should hear something within half an hour. I don’t know what his rationale was for that particular timeframe. I had no surety at all, but this was a guideline in which to frame possible events. First I stood against the tilted slab of rock above the descent into the water. Then I sat down on the sleeping bag spread on the sand. I didn’t want to move about too much for fear of missing the whistle call. Here I was, alone, surrounded by wet camping gear, waiting for the sound of a whistle. The more I strained to hear it, the more the other persistent rhythm – the music – exerted itself. At intervals I imagined the faint sound of the whistle, but so faint it could have been hallucinated, invented. My ears were humming with straining for sound. Half an hour passed. I waited another five minutes, another ten minutes.

And then I decided to get busy. I had no way to interpret the silence, it had not really been part of the code, and I now realised that we hadn’t discussed this adequately. I opened my bag of wet clothes and spread some of them on the tilted rock slab to dry. Others I hung from little knobs and protuberances on the rock walls. I arranged the stove and remnants of food to one side of the small beach, not far from the snake. There was still light coming down through the crack far above me, a slit of clear blue sky and an angle of sunlight that touched the upper reaches of one wall.

I gathered firewood for the coming night – there was a surprising amount of wood down there, mainly kindling, stuck between rocks, and washed up at one edge of the water on the sand. I decided to do as many practical things as possible while it was still light. I should find my head torch and check that it was working. Check whether the spare battery was dry. I re-read the instructions on the EPIRB, how to set it off. I would have to
make a decision about setting it off. Alan had suggested waiting until morning, but I couldn’t see much sense in this. Almost an hour had passed. At intervals I would stand completely still just listening, straining to hear. The vast amount of rock surrounding me seemed to press its own particular sound into the air, a faint ringing, which was probably the ringing in one’s ears that only becomes evident when all else is silent.

Yet, the setting seemed somewhat familiar to me. Not long ago I’d finished Haruki Murakami’s *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, and had been struck by passages of the narrative that recounted two of the characters’ experiences of being trapped at the bottom of a dry well shaft. They are each trapped alone, not together, and one of the experiences occurs at a much later date, but is an uncanny repetition of the first. What I was struck by was the minimalism of the materials that the characters found themselves surrounded by: earth, a few fine dry bones of a small unidentifiable creature, a small circle of changing light or dark overhead (blue, clouds, stars, dimness). The minutes – literally only a very few – during which the sun passed directly overhead and a blast of light struck down the shaft. The sensation of sunlight on skin. The sensation of a brief and dazzling illumination that was soon gone. This, at least, was how I remembered the passages in the novel. After being trapped the first character is never quite the same again – it is a formative moment in his life. He recounts this to the second character on whom the narrative has such a powerful effect that he chooses, at least initially, to spend a night alone at the bottom of a well shaft.

I found my exercise book in my pack. It was a slender one chosen because it wouldn’t add too much weight to the pack, bought at the supermarket, and stored in a clip-seal plastic bag along with three pens and a pencil. It had remained mostly dry, only its outer edges were damp and wrinkled. I recalled that as
I’d packed the pens and paper I’d wondered how durable or useful words on paper would be as a message left in an emergency. I had thought to bring the pencil along because graphite would be more permanent than ink when out in the weather. Now, stuck in the cave, I was overwhelmed with an urgency to write letters to people I loved, to make sure that their importance to me was made clear. There was one letter in particular that I could barely wait to begin. It was to Evan, my former fiancé. I had ended our relationship, our betrothal, but it was to him more than anyone else I wanted to write. There was much to explain and to make up for. And I still felt closer to him than anyone. I would begin while there was still light. I didn’t know whether I would spend precious torchlight on writing. I would address the letters, and leave directions for them to be delivered. I remember thinking that I would leave them somewhere obvious so that whoever found me couldn’t miss them. Perhaps complete strangers would read the letters first, before their intended recipients, but I couldn’t let this hold me back.

When I finished, I decided to give myself ten minutes until I set off the EPIRB, to allow for an unforeseen development. I was filling in pieces of time. Setting off the EPIRB had a finality to it that I wasn’t quite ready for. People who needlessly set off these devices are condemned for an immense waste of resources – other people’s efforts and money. Now that I was alone, the puzzling subterranean rhythmic sound that had been with us for the whole walk – an aural background sometimes noticeable, sometimes not – had become inescapable. The sound, and its inexplicability, was ok for now, but I wasn’t sure how I’d endure it for the long hours of darkness.
Before we set out on our walk we had dropped in at the lodge at Glen Helen to use the public phone, and to buy lunch. Alan asked the woman behind the bar whether she knew how far it was to Mt Zeil. There weren’t any established tracks out there, and the topographic maps we were carrying reached almost to Mt Zeil, but not quite. It was the sort of country that seems simple to navigate when standing above it and looking out, but is full of hidden complexities and subtlety once you’re down in it. ‘You shouldn’t be walking out there’, the woman had said. She had dyed blonde hair piled on her head, stiffened with hairspray. ‘Some of that land is private property. And the owners don’t like people going out there.’ The more general maps showed clearly that it was well within the National Park, not on private property. ‘But do you happen to know how far it is?’ he asked again. ‘You shouldn’t be going out there’, she repeated. We had already told the park ranger about our proposed route. His main concern had been about fire. He had said nothing about keeping out. Now, in the gorge, I wondered at her warning. I also wondered whether we had transgressed an Aboriginal protocol that we were ignorant of. At what point does walking become trespass, and according to what kinds of conventions: a fence? Or something less visible, less tangible. A cultural border that one doesn’t even recognise?.

Inside the cave I began to wonder whether we should ever have been walking on that land in the first place. A few nights earlier we almost had been attacked by a wild dog which circled our camp. I’d been woken by the sound of its paws in the dry leaf litter, as it paced around us. We were lying in the open in a dry river bed, on the thick granular sand, in sleeping bags. A short way away it stopped and began growling. In the distance were howls – they could have been wild dogs or dingoes, or a mixture of the two, interbred. I woke Alan, and explained what was going on.
He shouted at the dog, half-amused. The dog growled in earnest, a throaty snarl. Alan flung a handful of sand and grit toward it. I lay propped on one elbow, watching its dark shape not far off on the edge of the low sandy river bank as it continued to snarl. It was larger than a dingo, and seemed to have a dark coat, but it was difficult to be sure. Alan dropped off to sleep again, while I was frozen by the threat in the dog’s presence. It was growing increasingly aggressive, and I woke Alan again to suggest that we should get ready to escape if necessary. He threw another handful of sand. The dog raced in to the camp to the remains of the campfire at our feet, and grabbed a sturdy branch that we’d half burned, and dragged it away. I thought afterwards that perhaps it could smell us but couldn’t quite see us. We were just dark shapes on the ground, and it may have mistaken the branch for one of us. I began formulating a plan to run to the nearest tree, a small river red gum, which had some easily accessible branches. ‘If it attacks’, I said to Alan, ‘we should climb that tree’. Farther off, the dog shook the branch back and forth, its head and neck awkwardly arched because of the branch’s weight and length, dropped it, and faced back towards us, growling anew. Alan moved onto his hands and knees and found a stone in among the river gravel. He threw the stone. Then another. ‘Keep low’, he said, ‘so it can’t see us’. I found a stone as well and held it ready. After a while, the dog disappeared. I lay awake for a long time, listening for its return. The howls in the distance continued. In the morning I found its tracks worn into a rut in the river gravel, forming a circle around where we had lain.

Now, in the cave, it seemed that our whole walk had been strung with warnings: the inexplicable sound, the near-attack by the wild dog, the blonde woman who had told us not to go toward Mt Zeil. And yet, I began to wonder, would this be such a
bad place to die – a place that forcefully exerted its own presence, full of beauty. As I sat on the sleeping bag, the cold damp sand beneath, the skeleton of the snake within touching distance, I had the strong sense that many forces over many years – some of them my own actions, my own choices, some of them beyond my control – had been directing me towards this moment, this place. When I first left home, at seventeen, I travelled from Broome through the Kimberley and worked for a while in Kununurra on the border of Western Australia and the Northern Territory, picking pumpkins, rock melons and watermelons watered by the failed Ord River irrigation scheme. The country up north was a revelation, and once I’d gone home to the city a couple of years later, on what I thought was to be just a short visit, I vowed to return as soon as I could. Many years passed, though, before I did, and at first the decision not to return caused me great conflict and restlessness. Now, for the first time in years, I felt reconnected to the landscape that had so drawn me years earlier. At the same time I had never before been so acutely aware of what it means to be unlocatable. If we failed to get out, for those close to us our whereabouts would be difficult to imagine. We had left details of our route with friends, but, against the usual walking protocol, had altered our proposed route to enter the gorge instead. We would have been engulfed by this location, so in place as to have become invisible.

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Just as I was preparing to write in my exercise book, I heard a cooee. Cooeies were not part of the code. My first thought was that maybe it was walkers, or kids, at the top of the gorge, cooeeing down into its depths for fun. Or could this be Alan,
but what had happened to his whistle? Were there other people out there trying to help? I cooed back. Another cooee came in what seemed to be a reply. I cooed again. Again, the seeming reply. Either it was someone trying to communicate, or else it was a blind communication – someone had stumbled on my cooee and was replying but without a clue of my predicament. I cooed again. A pause, and then, once again, the reply. I had to make a decision – to risk entering the water again on the basis of a call that I couldn’t fully interpret. I had a hunch that it was directed at me, to call me forth. But, it could’ve been directed at me to say that help was coming. I decided to take the risk. I began preparing to leave.

I packed my belongings into the backpack, rolled up the sleeping bag, put it inside its cover, and then inside a dry bag. This was how it had been spared saturation in the first place. I laced my boots, left a lightweight long-sleeved top on. There was a whole lot of other gear Alan had left behind that I didn’t want to put in my pack because it would weigh me down, so I left it lying on the sandy floor of the cave.

I climbed the tilted slab of rock, then down its vertical face on the opposite side. At its base lay the log of wood, jammed into a cleft. I squatted on the log, my pack and thermarest beside me, preparing to launch back into cold. Just the thought of it, plus fear, had me shivering almost as much as when we’d stopped on the tiny patch of sand. I floated the pack out ahead of me into the pool, positioned the thermarest, and launched onto it, trying to stay as close as possible to the surface. The body heat I’d so carefully regained seeped away. It occurs to me now that, in making the decision to re-enter the water, I used some newly discovered sense, an intuition I still can’t fully explain.

Back in the water, the cooeees seemed a deliberate exchange, and also, possibly, a reassurance that it was ok to come out, even
a summons to come out. Behind the cooees lay the question of, if the voice was not Alan’s as I was almost sure it wasn’t, then where was he and what had befallen him? If it wasn’t Alan calling, then who was it, and why was Alan not capable of calling himself. I reached a more open pool, shallow and half-filled with light. Then another with a high vaulted ceiling. Just beyond was the mouth of the gorge, and leaning down from the rock wall above was a man calling. Behind him stretched the last pool of water in full daylight. Alan was still nowhere in sight. At the far side of the pool stood a woman and the man was instructing me to swim towards her. The last pool, beyond the gorge, in the outdoors, seemed improbably large, and I began to lose strength, slipping under just when I imagined things would become easier. I reached the woman, and she helped pull me from the water where I stood bowed over, hands to knees, shivering uncontrollably once again. And then Alan arrived, bearing clothes.

I later learned that he had met the couple coming up the dry riverbed, after he’d made his own exit and blown his whistle from the far side of the pool at the gorge’s mouth then decided on impulse to run back to the car to get warm clothes. But because he’d blown his whistle from the far side of an open stretch of water, the sound had not carried into the chamber of rock. The man he bumped into was a park ranger on holidays from his job down south, and who, quite coincidentally, lived just round the corner from Alan, though they barely knew each other. Alan asked him to wait at the mouth of gorge, explaining that it would not be long before I emerged, and that he would be back shortly with the clothes. After waiting a little, the man climbed to the very mouth of the gorge, along a wall of notched rock, to cooee where it would reverberate most. And so it had been him who’d summoned me. And as I made my way through the final couple

I was booked the following morning onto a flight from Alice Springs to Melbourne. So after we’d gone shakily up the dry riverbed to find the car, warmed ourselves with Milo and miso soup, and lit a fire, I went to bed early, still in shock, my body aching deep to the bone. We rose before dawn the next day, packed the tent and raced to Alice Springs so I’d make my flight.

A couple of days later Alan told me over the phone he’d been back into the gorge to retrieve the gear we’d left behind. He said when he reached the cave he’d found damp clothes hanging from rock walls, and his sleeping bag spread on the sand. ‘The place looked like a tomb’, he said.