The Colour of Dissonance

Ethics, aesthetics, alterity and form in the cross-cultural novel

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

[Signature]
Abstract

The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory (Gramsci 1971/1980, trans. Hoare and Smith: 324)

This thesis, which consists of a creative component (a novel) and a dissertation, engages with creative arts practice understood as hermeneutical process, that is, as ‘fluid, repetitive and continuous … a kaleidoscope of everchanging reflections, revisions, false starts and backtracking’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 46). It brings into intimate proximity Australia and Australians, Indonesia and Indonesians, and considers the transformative process of writing the cross-cultural novel as an act of interpretation, where the embodied writer engages in a process of understanding with the self, and with the text as it is being written.

The context for ‘The Colour of Dissonance’ – both the novel and the dissertation – is the web of affiliations that informs the relationship between Australia and Indonesia. In the novel the central character, Iwan, is an Indonesian young man who travels from Central Java to Sydney in 1997 to study art. After graduating from art school he marries an Australian and begins a career as a visual artist. Themes explored in the novel include migration and cross-cultural encounter, creative arts practice as a way of life, the giving and receiving of hospitality, situated knowledges, and the impacts of social, cultural and political change (local and geopolitical).

The dissertation draws on Adrian Snodgrass and David Coyne’s (2006) application of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical theory to the architectural design studio to argue that to write across cultures is to engage in a process of understanding with difference and an unfamiliar other. By adding shame, terror and fear of failure to this process of interpretation I illuminate their potential for sustaining cross-cultural writing that remains ethically and responsibly engaged even as it crosses borders – where the horizon of the writer ‘fuses with the horizon of the text’ and the text “unhinges” our prejudices and suggests its own’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 43). It is in this spirit, I argue, that the novelist is able to understand her or his character ‘from within, as it were, but must also perceive it as other, as apart from its creator in its distinct alterity’ (Ashcroft et al. 2007: 9). Tzetvan Todorov (1984) writes that ‘[a]rtistic creation cannot be analysed outside a theory of alterity’ (107), and he cites Mikhail Bakhtin:

Creative understanding does not renounce its self, its place in time, its culture; it does not forget anything. The chief matter of understanding is the exotopy of the one who does the understanding – in time, space, and culture – in relation to that which he wants to
understand creatively. … It is only to the eyes of an other culture that the alien reveals itself more completely and more deeply (but never exhaustively, because there will come other cultures, that will see and understand even more) (36: 334, cited in Todorov 1984: 110, italics in original).

Drawing on Johnson and Smith (1990), Ashcroft et al. (2007) note that ‘[t]he term “alterity” shifts the focus away from … the “epistemic other”, the other that is only important to the extent to which it can be known – to the more concrete “moral other” – the other who is actually located in a political, cultural, linguistic or religious context’ (xix, cited in Ashcroft et al. 2007: 9). They argue that Bakhtin’s use of terms such as ‘alterity’ and ‘exotopy’ or ‘outsidedness’, emphasises that: ‘dialogue is only possible with an “other”, so alterity, in Bakhtin’s formulation, is not simply “exclusion”, but an apartness that stands as a precondition of dialogue, where dialogue implies a transference across and between differences of culture, gender, class and other social categories’ (9-10). In this understanding, exotopy ‘is not simply alienness, but a precondition for the author’s ability to understand and formulate a character, a precondition for dialogue itself” (9-10).

As a way of situating the author, each chapter in the dissertation is framed by paintings from an exhibition by Ida Lawrence, (n)desa/bloody woop woop, stories from Kliwonan, Barmedman and between (kisah dari Kliwonan, Barmedman dan kisah di antaranya) (2012). Following the above epigram, both the dissertation and novel are an experimental first step in developing ‘an inventory’ of the ‘infinity of traces’ deposited in ‘I/we/Australia’ in relation to Indonesia in the Australian imaginary. For Edward W Said (1978/2003, 1998) the compilation of such an inventory – including the deposits of family, collective and national histories that make up the self – is essential to the task of interpretation and ‘critical consciousness’ (26). Not only does it enable one ‘to understand one’s own history in terms of other peoples’ history, the relationship between ourselves and another, it also allows one ‘to transform from a unitary identity to an identity that includes the other without suppressing difference’ (Said 1998).

Can fiction play a role in advancing alterity and ethical ways of engaging across cultural boundaries? In the case of Australia and Indonesia, for example, could it expand those boundaries and go beyond demonisation and exoticisation? And could it offer understanding ‘for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons’ rather than for ‘self-affirmation, belligerency’ (Said 1978, 1995, 2003: xiv)? Gabriele Schwab (2012) argues for the idea of reading literary texts as ‘imaginary ethnographies’ in order to draw attention to the way they ‘write culture’ through ‘thick descriptions’ of the desires, fears, and fantasies that shape the imaginary lives and cultural encounters of invented protagonists’ (2, original emphasis). Such texts, she argues, ‘rewrite cultural narratives’ and ‘can also be seen … as discourses and practices of cultural resistance’ (2). Schwab draws on Hans-Jorg Rheinberger’s notion of ‘experimental systems’ to argue literature’s capacity to use ‘language to explore, shape, and generate emergent forms of subjectivity, culture, and life’ (2). In Rheinberger’s theory, ‘research is a search that moves along the boundary between knowledge and the unknown’ and, because it sets out to grasp ‘what cannot yet be thought’, it is like ‘playing in the dark’ (Schwab 2012: 3). For readers, therefore, such ‘knowledge’ may be both a ‘memorable and transformational experience of something that at this point escapes a full understanding or conceptual grasp’ (4).

Drawing on these theories, and Terry Smith’s (2011) theory of contemporary art, this thesis ‘plays’ with the idea that some recent Australian texts – Michelle de Kretser’s (2012) novel Questions of Travel, Chi Vu’s (2012) novella Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale, and Jennifer Mackenzie’s (2009) long poem Borobodur – draw readers into otherness, foreignness and unfamiliar forms of knowing. Such texts, it is argued, exemplify the possibility of imagining an entity of nation that is distinctively and, at the same time, regionally and globally entangled, one able to move towards an identity which, through literature and creative arts practice, is better able to understand its own history alongside the histories of others.

In the novel, ‘The Colour of Dissonance’, the author aims to shed light on the potential for Australian literature to open up multiplicitous ways of seeing and thinking about Indonesia and Indonesians that go beyond essentialising stereotypes and fixed knowledges of the other, and beyond the erasure of difference. The novel’s imagined readers include Indonesians and Australians. For Australians, it is hoped that as well as illuminating fluid and changing perceptions of Indonesia, and of themselves in Asia, this novel might even contribute to shaping new literary entanglement across the region.

Literary scholar, Shameem Black (2010), asserts that in the twenty-first century, when writers are only too aware of the pitfalls of exoticisation, stereotyping and sexism, novelists may have a ‘diminished confidence’ in their ability to imagine another. While Black argues for the possibility of imagining ‘another without doing violence to one’s object of description’, she acknowledges that the stakes are high, particularly when authors write across ‘borders
informed by histories of oppression’ (23). For Black, ‘ethics’ signals the ‘workings of an ethos of responsibility to one’s object of inquiry, a responsibility opposed to hegemonic domination and representational violence’ (3). While fear of failure dogs all writers, in the realm of contemporary art the idea of failure has been theorised distinct to the concept of judgement. For example, Lisa Le Feuvre, John Baldessari and others want to reframe failure as having a productive role that avoids the dogmatic, raises challenging questions, and encourages artists to sidestep old assumptions and certainties. In this ‘uncertain and beguiling space’, Le Feuvre argues, failure offers possibilities for artistic practices that take writers and readers beyond the known, the usual, and the commonplace. I draw on these perspectives in the practice-led research / research-led practice that informs this dissertation on ethics, aesthetics, alterity and form in the cross-cultural novel, and the writing of the novel ‘The Colour of Dissonance’.
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You say I am repeating
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.
Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,

You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not

You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.

T S Eliot, ‘East Croker’ The Four Quartets

Australia’s annual Lowy Institute polls (2005–2011) reveal that despite Indonesia being one of its closest neighbours, a lucrative trading partner and popular holiday destination (notably Bali), the majority of Australians remain ill-informed about Indonesia.¹ In his address to the Australian Parliament in March 2010 Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono used the phrase ‘preposterous mental caricatures’ to describe the popular and negative attitudes of Indonesians and Australians towards each other (Lindsey 2010: 31). He also praised Australia: ‘I know of no other Western country where Bahasa Indonesia is widely taught in the school curriculum. I know of no other Western country with more Indonesianists in your governments, universities and think tanks’. Yet, as David T Hill (2011) recognises, this assessment related more to last century than 2009, because by then the twenty-eight universities teaching Indonesian in 2001 had shrunk to fifteen (2). Not only does the decline threaten a unique national asset (Indonesian scholarship) developed over sixty years by

dedicated scholars across a wide range of disciplines, it also highlights a problem of broad based indifference, prejudice and hostility that exists on both sides of the Arafura Sea. What is of particular concern, Lindsey (2010) argues, is that while these ‘attitudes towards Indonesia are often invisible to Australians, usually because they are deeply buried, unconscious’, they are very obvious to people in Southeast Asia looking south (38).

In the introduction to his book, Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson (1983) reminds us that ‘nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind’ with particular changing histories that still command ‘profound emotional legitimacy’ (48). Anderson defines a ‘nation’ as ‘an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign’ (49). That is, it has finite boundaries (borders) and may be characterised as a sovereign state. A third aspect is that ‘it is imagined as a community’. Anderson links the nation’s popularity to the primacy of capitalism, specifically print-capitalism and book publishing which gave rise to print languages and, thereby, to a nationally imagined community of readers in the past 300 years (52–3). This powerful convergence of capitalism, technology and human linguistic diversity gave rise to unconscious processes that made the imagined community of the nation a possibility. His analysis of the comparatively recent emergence of the nation, speeded up by the use of print technology and capitalism, suggests interesting parallels with the role of current interconnections between globalisation (global capital), the internet and other technologies that enable co-presence and synchronous communication around the world, as well as the migration and rapid criss-cross of people across borders for work, business and leisure.

Is all this activity, the movement of bodies and capital, and real time communication on the internet, changing our idea of what ‘a nation’ is? For art historian, Terry Smith (2011), all nations now are subjected to global currents and the picture of the world that is emerging is one that pays greater attention to regionality, ‘and the interaction between peoples in each region’ (10).3

In the twenty-first century, nation states no longer align themselves according to the four-tier system of First, Second, Third, and Fourth Worlds. Multinational corporations based in the EuroAmerican centers no longer control the world’s economy, just significant parts of it. New global corporations are located in South, East, and North Asia. Manufacturing, distribution, and services are themselves dispersed around the globe, and linked to

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2 In addition to the study of Indonesian society, politics, beliefs, languages and culture, many Australian Indonesians have contributed to the translation and critical study of Indonesian literature, for example, Harry Aveling, Pamela Allen, Ian Lingard, Paul Tickell, David Hill, Christine Campbell, Barbara Hatley, Marshall Clark, Andy Fuller, Ian Campbell, George Quinn, Virginia Matheson Hooker, and Keith Foulcher and Tony Day (Aveling 2009: 42).

3 Smith (2011) acknowledges Lewis and Wigen’s critique of the world regional system ‘as contaminated by the myth of the nation-state and by geographical determinism … [which] although less Eurocentric than the standard continental scheme, … still bears the traces of its origins within a self-centred European geographical tradition … [and which] continues to grossly flatten out the complexities of global geography’ (Lewis and Wigen 1997: 186, cited in Smith 2011: 10).
delivery points by new technologies and old-fashioned labor . . . The institutions that drove modernity seem, to date, incapable of dealing with the most important unexpected outcome of their efforts: the massive disruptions to natural ecosystems that now seem to threaten the survival of the Earth itself (Smith 2011: 13).

Through an examination of art making in all parts of the world, Smith argues that there is an evolving current of contemporary transnational visual cultures that is diverse, global, particular and connected. Its emergent artists have, he argues, ‘more concern for the affective and interactive potentialities of various material media, virtual communicative networks, and open-ended modes of tangible connectivity’ and, more than artists in any other communicative medium, they are showing us the complexity and ‘conflicted diversity of contemporary life’ (256):

Working collectively, in small groups or loose associations, or individually, these artists present works that seem to arrest the immediate, to grasp the changing nature of time, place, media, and mood today. They make visible our sense that these fundamental, familiar constituents of being are becoming, each day, steadily stranger. They raise questions as to the nature of temporality these days, the possibilities of place-making vis-à-vis dislocation, about what it is to be immersed in mediated interactivity, and about the fraught exchanges between affect and effect. Within the world’s turning and life’s frictions, they seek sustainable flows of survival, cooperation, and growth (Smith 2011: 256-7).

In the face of global and technological change, ‘each artist’s relationship to nationality, and to the affiliations open within emergent international networks, becomes an important aspect of his or her sense of identity and his or her art’s purpose’ (258). They are aware of the changes that are taking place, the ongoing effects of colonisation, the way their countries are striving to reinvent themselves, and they deal with a constantly changing global situation. Some ‘draw attention to the realities of these processes, which are often disguised by official and commercial media. Others explore alternative models of community. Glimpses of utopia, however, are rare’ (258).

The nature of this constantly changing global situation was highlighted for me on a field trip to Yogyakarta, Indonesia in April–May 2012 to carry out research for the novel, ‘The Colour of Dissonance’. At the time I was midway through my doctoral research and the field trip had a profound effect on the nature and focus of the research which had, up until then, covered postcolonial theory, with a strong focus on the late twentieth century, and then shifted to new cosmopolitanism, theory of everyday life practice and non-representational theory. As a result of the fieldwork I was led to scholars with a strong visual creative arts focus (O’Connor 1995, Snodgrass 1992, Snodgrass and Coyne 2006), and later to Smith (2011). This should probably not be surprising given that my primary character was an Indonesian artist and the setting for the novel was the Sydney art scene. A further catalyst for a breakthrough in my thinking about
The questions that have tugged at me throughout this project have been: How might I find a way to ethically and aesthetically write an Indonesian character that is believable to both Indonesian and Australian readers? Is it possible? How could I approach such a task? As indicated above, a breakthrough came about through the theoretical work of Adrian Snodgrass and David Coyne in which they reflect on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical theory and its relevance to the architecture design studio and to the study of Asian art and architecture (Snodgrass 1992, Snodgrass and Coyne 2006). Through a detailed study of their approach I came to a different understanding of Edward W Said’s *Orientalism* as arguing for the possibility of encounter with an alien other that involves, as art historian Stanley O’Connor (1995) describes it, ‘risking the self so that it may be broadened and deepened, so that it will be rooted fully in its time and place in a way that is effective, responsible, and imaginatively rich’ (153). O’Connor, too, is inspired by Snodgrass’s argument for a pedagogy that invites the study of:

> …people remote from us in space, time or intellectual habit – in this case Southeast Asia – not because we necessarily wish to take up residence in their fields, villages or cities, or so that we may become friends, but in order that we may live in a more wakeful, mindful and composed way in the adventive present of a world we are actually making (O’Connor 1995: 153).

While for O’Connor, as for Snodgrass and Coyne, the ‘most daunting task is to make this creative action happen once again in the classroom’ (153), for myself, the purpose of bringing the Australian–Indonesian relationship into focus is to deepen my understanding of the ongoing eruptions of hostility between the two countries. It is also forged from a desire to envisage a different and more productive kind of engagement between Australia and its Asia Pacific neighbours.

Why is it that only a small minority of Australians have any kind of deep understanding of the heterogeneous realities – the multiplicity of countries, languages, cultures and religions that make up ‘Asia’ or, even closer to home, Indonesia? What drives this lack of curiosity? What drives the fear and suspicion? And what prevents Australia as a nation and the majority of Australians from creatively and positively engaging with the region within which it and they are geographically located? In an essay, ‘Writing Asia’, Brian Castro (1996) begins: ‘Fear and loathing. It’s a pretty sensitive topic. It is a subject that few so called “Asians” fail to bring up when I mention I’m from Australia. I am always asked about my reaction to fear and loathing in Australia’ (1).
While it is just short of two decades since Castro penned these words, there is little evidence that the rhetoric has changed or that regional perceptions of Australians are more positive. Nor does there seem to be any urgency, at least at the political level, to change this. For example, the 2014 federal budget cancelled funding for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) Australia Network in China, and Australian Indonesian relations plunged to new lows.\(^4\) Despite the press of recurring economic and regional security rationales for making inter-regional relationships a priority, it might even be argued that the relationship has diminished in intercultural terms, particularly since the coming to power of the present federal government in 2013.

Both postcolonial theory in the late twentieth century, and new cosmopolitanism in the first decade of the twenty-first century, emerged in a structurally different world in which the EuroAmerican centres of power remained dominant. In the second decade of this century, however, the plates of economic power in the world are shifting, and so-called Asian economies are growing and changing fast. Returning to Indonesia in 2012, only three years after I was last in Yogyakarta, I observed a rising energy in the country; things were happening – in literature, the visual arts, the media and creative arts generally. Talking with artists and writers, it seemed that this change was rapid and, unlike in Australia, it was occurring without reference to the old EuroAmerican centres of power.

Where does this leave Australia in relation to those old centres to which it once directed its gaze? Can Australia change, and if so why hasn’t it done so? What is at stake here? And, what is the relevance of these changes to me as a writer in 2014?

The peculiarity of Australia’s position that makes it different to other Western countries is its geographical location within the Asia Pacific region. In Yogyakarta I was able to observe a diversity of cultural arts practices on the ground and participate in conversations with artists, writers and other locals. As well as my research and writing, I attended exhibitions and performances, visited family and friends, and had two brief stays in the village where my daughter’s father was born, and where her extended family still lives. In wanting to make sense of Australia’s place in ‘Asia’ and, in particular, of the shifting sands of its relationship with Indonesia, and in writing a novel that brings the two places into intimate proximity, it shouldn’t be surprising that I turned to two Australian theorists. Yet, the ‘discovery’ of this fact only occurs to me as I am writing now. Both Adrian Snodgrass and Terry Smith are Australians with a global focus, and with a particular on-the-ground interest and knowledge of the architectures of ‘Asia’ and artmaking respectively.

In Central Java in 2012 the signs everywhere were of an economy that was growing. It was evident in cities and villages: televisions in most houses, mobile phones in the hands of old and young alike, a massive mall selling every kind of electronic device. There was extensive building in the villages and vigorous debate in the media over human rights and free speech. Since the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, the country has had a democratically elected government and freedom of the press. It has always made a place for the performance arts but now there is a burgeoning literary output of novels, poetry, plays and short stories, with Indonesian authors making a splash on the international stage as guests at the 2014 Frankfurt Book Fair. Yet, while many countries, from Europe and Asia have set up centres for cultural exchange in Jakarta, Australia is not among them, and Asialink’s Alison Carrol (2009) warns that ‘things are happening in Asia, a regional arts community is being built, and Australia risks being left out and left behind, or perhaps this has already happened’ (9).

Drawing on Gadamer’s theory of the ‘fusion of horizons’, in the following chapters I argue that genuine cross-cultural encounter, like the practice of creative writing itself, is a profoundly intense and awkward journey, a process of understanding that can be infused with shame, danger and risk – joyful, but oftentimes excruciating. Some challenging new research directions, which are not dealt with in this dissertation but are informing a redraft of the novel, draw on Alphonso Lingis’s (1996) philosophy and travel writing, and the philosophy of physicist, feminist and philosopher, Karen Barad, to explore the co-presence of materiality and the sensuous power of things, objects, colours and their affects. Lingis has also brought me to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s (1962/2008) *Phenomenology of Perception* and Johnson and Smith’s (1990) *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*. These works will inform my post-doctoral work (and creative writing) which will continue to explore the idea of the novel as a form of cultural resistance and means ‘to write culture’ (Schwab 2012: 2, original italics).

At the end of this thesis I have no confident solutions or answers except what I take from Eliot’s ‘EastCroker’ in *Four Quartets* in the epigram at the beginning of this Preface: ‘In order to arrive at what you are not/You must go through the way in which you are not’. The world has changed, the blocs of world power are shifting, artists and writers must connect at regional level. In the dissertation I argue that it is through the imagination that Australia might arrive at another place in its relationship with Indonesia and its other near neighbours, but first, in order to do so, Australian writers must embrace the challenge posed by Brian Castro (1996): ‘to write Asia: to write within it and of it, rather than just about it’ (2).
PART 1: DISSERTATION
'I didn't think it would turn out this way' is the secret epitaph of intimacy. To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way (Berlant 1998: 281).

'To intimate' means '1. to make known indirectly; hint; suggest' and '2. to make known, especially formally; announce'. It is from the Late Latin past participle intimatus ‘put or pressed into, announced’ (Macquarie Dictionary 1997: 1117). ‘Intimate (adj.)’ is ‘associated with close personal relations’, ‘characterised by or involving personally close or familiar association’, ‘private; closely personal’, ‘maintaining sexual relations’, ‘detailed; deep’, ‘relating to the inmost or essential nature; intrinsic’, ‘relating to or existing in the inmost mind’. An ‘intimate’ (noun) is ‘an intimate friend or associate’. It is derived from the same past participle of intimare ‘to make known, announce, impress’, ‘but with the sense of the [Latin] intimus “inmost”’.

This dissertation and the novel, ‘The Colour of Dissonance’, began with curiosity about the often fractious relationship between Indonesia and Australia⁵ – about what propels negative perceptions and anxieties in Australia towards Indonesia and about the role literature, and the arts more generally, might play in generating or resisting mistrust and suspicion on both sides.⁶ This led to the observation of a glaring absence of alterity in Indonesian characters in Australian novels set in Indonesia, as well as the lack of cross-cultural relationships depicted in them.⁷ Why are there so few Australian novels, or English language novels more broadly, that explore relationships across the borders of race and colour? Do non-fiction texts currently offer more complex and nuanced understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between

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⁶ See for example, Tim Lindsey (2010), “‘Preposterous caricatures’: Fear, tokenism, denial and the Australia-Indonesia relationship’, Dialogue 29(2), 31-43.

⁷ As noted above, although the terms ‘alterity’ and ‘otherness’ are often used interchangeably in post-colonial theory, Ashcroft et al. (2007) draw on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to argue for a productive distinction between them (9-10). They argue that the ‘possibility for potential dialogue between racial and cultural others has also remained an important aspect of the use of the word, which distinguishes it from its synonyms’ (10).
Could fiction play a role in advancing ethical ways of engaging across cultural boundaries? These questions are at the heart of the search for understanding, the to and fro conversation, that underpins the writing of the novel, in which the main character, Iwan, travels from Central Java in 1997 to study art in Sydney. He meets an Australian woman whom he marries and becomes a resident. When he returns to Indonesia in 2011 there have been many changes at all levels of society.

Since the late 1980s I have made many trips to Indonesia and have become increasingly interested in understanding the ingredients of successful or failed intimate Indonesian-Australian (also European, Canadian and American) relationships. My own partnership with an Indonesian man did not last but he subsequently married an Australian woman and that was a success. Over the years, by good luck or good management (perhaps a bit of both), my daughter and I, her father and his partner and their two children, have come to regard ourselves as part of a close, loving, albeit unusual, family. They live in Indonesia and we live in Australia but there have been regular visits back and forth and a constant stream of emails and phone calls between us. I wasn’t surprised therefore when, after finishing art school in 2010, my daughter took up an Indonesian Dharmasiswa scholarship and headed off to the Institute of the Arts (ISI) in Yogyakarta to study traditional Indonesian dance. As well as continuing her practice as a visual artist and performer, during her two-year stay she was able to polish her Indonesian and become better acquainted with her large extended family in Central Java.

In this dissertation I take an art work from her solo exhibition, (n)desa/bloody woop woop, stories from Kliwonan, Barmedman and between (kisah dari Kliwonan, Barmedman dan kisah di antaranya), to frame each chapter and the issues it explores in relation to ethics, aesthetics, alterity and dissonance when writing across borders. Each chapter takes its title from the painting which frames it and the paintings themselves perform an introduction as well as a kind of translation, a point of commerce between the birthplaces of the artist’s parents – one a village in rural New South Wales and the other a batik making village in the regency of Sragen in Central Java. Two villages, two cultures, two countries, and two families. Using humour and a certain playful poetics, the artist, Ida Lawrence, brings into intimate proximity and productive focus two ostensibly irreconciliable viewpoints and ways of life. And she does so in a way that I call ‘non-exoticisation’.

My decision to use the artworks is based on an argument I will make more explicit in Chapter 4: that theoretical developments in the visual arts are a productive site for interpreting Australian literature’s ‘imaginary futures’. It is also linked to themes explored in the novel relating to the role of the artist and visual arts practices in contemporary society.
Writing imaginary lives in an age of migration

From the mid-20th century, migration, border crossing and global movement have accelerated and become the norm. This combined mass movement of peoples on a world scale – due to wars, decolonisation, totalitarian regimes, the globalising effects of labour markets and demand, and technological advances in transport and communications – has profoundly and paradoxically affected communities worldwide. Edward W Said (1994) describes its impact as a shift ‘from the settled, established and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentred and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages’ (Said 1994: 403).

This global movement has given rise to an emerging field of study of the novel – contemporary migration literature – which Søren Frank (2008) characterises as ‘a move away from authorial biography as the decisive parameter, emphasizing instead intratextual features such as content and form as well as extratextual forces such as social processes’ (Frank 2008: 3). Frank argues that the 20th century was the start of an age in which the writing of literature was transformed by the influence on non-migrant authors of writers ‘belonging to two or more countries’, as well as the world’s ‘intensified mobility and extraterritoriality’ (2). As a result, any ‘distinction between migrant and nonmigrant writers becomes increasingly difficult to uphold’ (2).

Frank applies the term ‘migration literature’ to all literary works that ‘reflect on migration’ regardless of whether they do so in terms of ‘social context or literary content/form’ (2). He draws on Lukac’s idea of the novelistic form as ‘something in the process of becoming’ to argue that ‘the questions posed by [this] new social and cultural condition’ are being matched aesthetically by the novel’s ‘restless and migratory form’ (6). Thus, migration also ‘signals oscillatory and inconclusive processes that manifest themselves on different levels in the literary work – for example, in relation to personal, national, and cultural identity, language, narrative form and enunciation’ (8, emphasis in the original).

The consequences are there for everyone to see: the world is accelerating and contracting at one and the same time: material and immaterial borders are blurring and becoming permeable; the old nation-states are imploding while new ones are emerging; the global permeates the local, while the local dissipates into the global; and the production of human identity is informed by new coordinates. It is a time of the redrawing of maps, of intense deterritorializations and reterritorializations: people are passing borders, but borders are also passing people (Frank 2008: 2).
Frank draws on Lukacs and Moretti (2005) to further argue that in the migration novel ‘the concept of migration functions as a bridge linking aesthetics and sociology’ (5). Through its form the migration novel specifically sets out to express the content of our experiences of interculturalism and globalization (i.e., ‘shaped from without’) and to resolve the problems posed by these same experiences (i.e., ‘shaped from within’). So its form ‘reveals the direct almost tangible relationship between social conflict and literary form. Reveals form as a diagram of forces; or perhaps, even, as nothing but force (Frank 2008: 7, emphasis in original).

In Frank’s definition of the migration novel, the ‘nuances of writing’ between histories, geographies, and cultural practices embrace thematic and stylistic elements beyond authorial biography and background. This relates to Said’s ‘particular sort of nomadic, migratory, and anti-narrative energy’ and is also inherent in the etymology of migration (from the Latin migrare, meaning to ‘wander’ or ‘to move’) (8). It assumes a dual role for the migrant writer who is able to ‘offer a foreign voice to a local material just as he or she makes a foreign material more familiar to his or her new local environment’ (11). This concept of migration literature is located beyond the postcolonial. It refers not only to ‘the author, but also to the lives of the fictional characters and to the overall thematic framework and the discursive strategies [used]’ (15). Crucially, Frank draws on Chambers (1994) to make a distinction between travel literature and migration literature:

Travel involves a movement between a stable position, a point of departure and a point of arrival; furthermore it implies the knowledge of an itinerary and operates with an idea of a potential homecoming, whereas migrancy ‘involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are subject to constant mutation. Always in transit, the promise of a homecoming – completing the story, domesticating the detour – becomes an impossibility’ (Frank 2008: 16).
Just as a migrant novel’s characters may be connected to more than one locality and culture, so too there is potential for greater ‘translocal mobility’ of migration literature (Frank 2008: 14). For Sommer, the migration and transnational experience remains an inconclusive process, an ‘oscillation between two opposite cultural poles’ that ‘relates to different levels and forms of the literary staging of cultural alterity’ (Sommer 2001: 6; trans. and cited in Frank 2008: 16). And, because it involves families, transnational processes, and complex ‘question[s] of belonging’, emotions are integral to it (Skrbisˇ 2008: 233-41).

**Literature’s transforming power**

In the cross-cultural novel the characters inhabit particular contexts where they engage with one another and with everyday life in space, place and time. In *Imaginary Ethnographies: Literature, Culture, and Subjectivity*, Gabriele Schwab (2012) argues that literature is a ‘medium that writes culture within the particular space and mode of aesthetic production’ (2, emphasis in original). For Schwab, appeals to ‘the psyche, the emotions, and the unconscious are distinctive aspects of this writing of culture’. By reading literary texts as ‘imaginary ethnographies’, she wants to draw attention to the way they ‘write culture by inventing a language that redraws the boundaries of imaginable worlds and by providing thick descriptions of the desires, fears, and fantasies that shape the imaginary lives and cultural encounters of invented protagonists’ (2, emphasis in original). As well as writing stories, she argues, such texts ‘rewrite cultural narratives’ and, ‘can also be seen, as Jacqueline Rose insists, as discourses and practices of cultural resistance’ (2). Schwab emphasises ‘that, more than simply “writing culture,” literature is also “making culture.”’ (2). She draws on Hans-Jorg Rheinberger’s (2008) notion of ‘experimental systems’ to argue literature’s capacity to use language to explore, shape, and generate emergent forms of subjectivity, culture, and life in processes of dialogical exchange with its readers’ (2, my emphasis). In Rheinberger’s theory, ‘research is a search that moves along the boundary between knowledge and the unknown’; and because it sets out to grasp ‘what cannot yet be thought’, it is like ‘playing in the dark’ (cited in Schwab 2012: 3). What makes literature so distinct as a ‘form of life’, an experimental system, an object, however, is its relationship and interaction with readers.

Literature as an experimental system comes to life only in concrete writing and reading experiences and therefore necessarily includes the reader. Emergence is then facilitated

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12 Skrbisˇ (2008) theorises that the emotions are integral to the migration experience and constitutive of the transnational family experience because migration cuts people off from networks of family and friends as well as from ‘other socially significant referents that have strong emotional connotations’ (236). He also points to family centredness as a characteristic of diasporic communities or where transmigrant communities are refigured as imaginary family (241).

13 Schwab (2012) draws on Juan Jose Saer’s (1997) definition of literature as ‘speculative anthropology’ in which he ‘locates literature in a transitional space between anthropology and cultural philosophy (Kulturphilosophie)’ to highlight ‘literature’s imaginary ways of remaking language and the world, shaping not only culture but also, and more directly, the cultural imaginary’ (1).
not only by the anticipatory potential of writing but also by a reader’s intuitive grasp of something that is experienced before it is understood (Schwab 2012: 3).

For readers, an unfamiliar or strange text insists that they ‘deal with their otherness and foreignness’ (3). According to Rheinberger’s (1997) definition of ‘epistemic things’, knowledges produced by experimental systems are embodiments of ‘what one does not yet know’ (28, cited in Schwab 2012: 3). When reading a literary text, such ‘knowledge’ may be both a ‘memorable and transformational experience of something that at this point escapes a full understanding or conceptual grasp’ (4). It is ‘less “about” something than it is an embodied experience of something’ which, Schwab further argues, ‘relies on intangible forms of knowing … and unconscious forms of knowing’ (4). This transforming power of literature takes place over time, even after the actual reading experience, and unfolds ‘in close relation to other experiences, including aesthetic ones’ (5). As for a text’s epistemic dimension, it enters the ‘transformational frame in different ways: as virtual textual knowledge, as knowledge activated in the reader, and as knowledge generated by and left as a trace of the reading experience’ (5). It is this knowledge that finally gives rise to ‘new forms of subjectivity, culture, and life’ (5).

A culture’s literature and arts generate a certain cultural idiom, providing abstract shapes that resonate with particular culturally sanctioned emotions, moods, tastes, values and mental structures. It is in this sense too that literary texts operate as imaginary ethnographies. Providing continually changing forms for emotions, moods, tastes, and values, literature does cultural work that crosses the boundaries between politics and psychology and takes part in the continual reshaping of the historically changing notions of the human and of emergent forms of psychic life (15).

Schwab emphasises ‘generativity and emergence as particular effects of the ways in which literature writes and makes culture’ (15). This transforming and generative power derives, she argues, from a complex process that arises from the transference between reader and text. In this dissertation I want to suggest that these transforming and generative processes are integral to the ethical writing process and its effects on the writer herself. In doing so, my particular focus is on writing’s affects and effects when writing across the time-space dissonance produced when cultures and places like Indonesia and Australia are brought into intimate proximity.

14 Schwab (2012) offers New Zealand writer, Patricia Grace’s (1998) Baby No-Eyes as an example of a form of ‘writing culture’ whereby the reader acquires ‘literary knowledge’ through ‘encounter with and processing of a polyvocal composition that includes the voice of a ghost and the mosaic of a transgenerational memory that disrupts the linearity of time and narrative, creating a polytemporality that includes past, present and future’ (4). In the process, the reader is ‘made to feel the impact of traumatic silencing … and the displacement of the mother’s grief’ (4). This literary knowledge is imparted even while it is not the ‘object of conscious reflection’ (5).
Each of the four chapters in this dissertation begins by examining a work of art in the exhibition (n)desa/bloody woop woop, stories from Kliwonan, Barmedman and between (kisah dari Kliwonan, Barmedman dan kisah di antaranya). In Chapter 1, ‘Map for Pakdhe Daliman and Uncle John: On Indonesia/Australia, Indonesians/Australians’, I reflect on aspects of the cross-cultural experience as a process of bringing oneself into uncertainty and introduce Adrian Snodgrass and David Coyne’s (2006) theory of Interpretation in Architecture: Design as a Way of Thinking in which they argue that hermeneutical process and Gadamer’s hermeneutical circle offer a way of understanding the creative design process. I discuss the risks involved in writing cross-culturally and the role of the hermeneutical circle as the basis for an ethical writing practice that makes a space for the imagination and highlights what Edward W Said describes as a need for a ‘slow working together of cultures’ (Said, 1993, xxii).

In Chapter 2, ‘Wish you were here: On shame and understanding in writing cross-cultural agency’, I describe the challenges of researching and writing a cross-cultural novel set in Yogyakarta, Sydney and a rural village in Central Java, and consider hermeneutical theory of interpretation as offering a way of understanding other cultures that involves careful study, analysis, generosity and hospitality. I argue that the embodied experience of entering another culture for the first time – the uncertainty, hesitancy, disempowerment, and shame of not measuring up or not being understood, as well as the feelings of being out of place – are very similar to those encountered when writing a novel. Drawing on Snodgrass and Coyne (2006) I argue that Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics and the ‘fusion of horizons’ can be used to guide an ethical interpretation and understanding of Asian cultures that is based on encounters of ‘genuine human relationship’. I suggest that the act of writing is itself an embodied process of hermeneutical understanding, one that engages the writer in a two-way conversation with her text, and one that may be productively (even painfully) infused with shame, risk and fear of failure.

In Chapter 4, ‘Like Madonna: On Australian literatures’ imaginable futures’, I bring together Giorgio Agamben’s definition of the contemporary and Terry Smith’s (2011) theory of the world currents in contemporary art in order to examine whether, like contemporary art, Australian literature’s imaginable futures are being signposted by literature that is distinct, regional and localised, but which ‘frequently tries to imagine the world as a differentiated yet inevitably connected whole’ (8, original emphasis). Informed by Smith’s definitive work, I argue that three recent texts by Australian writers – Michelle de Kretser’s (2012) novel Questions of Travel, Chi Vu’s (2012) novella Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale, and Jennifer Mackenzie’s (2009) long poem Borobodur – shed light on aspects of an Australian literature that is in transition: becoming, by definition, in, of, and with the world as well as in, of, and with present time. And, situated within it. I also draw on Adrian Snodgrass and David Coyne’s (2006) metaphor of travel – excursion and return – to consider the three texts in relation to the vectors that crisscross between them as well as the possibility of imagining an entity of nation that is distinctively and, at the same time, regionally and globally connected, and deeply ‘entangled’ with the world.
I am in Yogyakarta for two months to do fieldwork for the creative component of my doctorate, a novel titled ‘The Colour of Dissonance’. It is set in Sydney, Australia and Central
Java, Indonesia and is, at the most simple level, a novel about migration and its effects, identities, acts of translation, Indonesian and Australian cross-cultural relationships, the role of the artist and the nature of creative arts practice. I have timed my arrival to attend the opening of the above exhibition by my daughter, Ida Lawrence. It is the culmination of a three-month emerging artist’s residency at Tembi Rumah Budaya, a not-for-profit cultural arts centre in Yogyakarta. For two years Ida, along with up to a thousand other graduates from around the world, has had an Indonesian Dharmasiswa scholarship to study in Indonesia. This year the largest national group on Dharmasiswa scholarships is from Poland which has over ninety students studying at different universities across the archipelago. Ida’s Polish housemate, Monika Proba (2012), who has a Masters in Cultural Studies from the Sorbonne, is one of them.16

It is Ida’s first solo exhibition and as Monika Proba (2012) describes in the exhibition catalogue:

(n)desa / bloody woop woop is a story about two villages and a girl. Ida Lawrence didn’t grow up in Barmedman (Australia) nor did she grow up in Kliwonan (Indonesia) but her parents and family did, and that’s how she got inseparably tied to two spots on the map that barely anyone has ever heard of. This exhibition is a window into the ongoing process of the artist’s efforts to locate and identify herself in the uncertain space between a Javanese ‘desa’ and an Australian village in ‘bloody woop woop’. With a nudge and a wink, Ida invites us to play a game in which her identities, memories and stories serve as pawns (Proba 2012: 6).

As a way of situating myself I use two of Ida’s paintings, one from this exhibition and one from the exhibition held at Mils Gallery in Sydney in early 2013, to foreground my interest in Indonesian and Australian connects and disconnects, and to introduce ideas about cross-cultural issues, translation and the writing process which I will explore in greater detail in the following chapters.

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This is the sign at the entrance to Barmedman, the small country town where I grew up on a sheep-wheat farm. Population 214, it is just 80 miles north of Wagga Wagga. My mother and members of my extended family still live there and my brother John runs the farm. I left at the age of eighteen to go to university in Sydney. In *Welcome to Barmedman* (2013), the text in the right hand bottom corner says, ‘I told Budhe that every time someone drives in or out of Barmedman they have to stop and change the population count accordingly. I thought she realised I was kidding.’ Ida has made a joke to her Javanese aunt and it has backfired, probably because culturally it’s not polite or expected for younger people to joke with people who are older than them. Or possibly because her aunt just isn’t surprised by the strange traditions and practices of this ‘other’ place.

In the catalogue notes Ida describes the inspiration for the exhibition. It is written in the third person, probably because it’s impolite to speak about oneself in the first person in Indonesian culture:
desa (Javanese, pronounced deh-saw) n. rural village
ndesa (Javanese, pronounced ndeh-saw) adj. a place or people who are village-like, not modern
bloody woop woop (Australian idiom) n. a derogatory expression used to describe somewhere far away

Ida Lawrence grew up in Sydney, Australia, the city where she was also born. Her father is from Kliwonan, a small village near Sragen in Central Java and her mother is from ‘exotic’ Barmedman, a small town near Wagga Wagga in NSW, Australia. In Indonesia Ida responds to Eeda and Ayidha and in Australia, to Oida. Over the drought years, Barmedman and its farms are reduced to dry grass and brown dust. It’s a town that boasts a truckstop, several churches and two pubs full of sunburnt and hairy raging alcoholics (relatives mostly). On a visit to Kliwonan in early 2008 – while driving past lush green rice fields, skinny children riding bicycles, and several mosques – Ida’s father exclaimed without irony, ‘Yes, just like Barmedman’. She is still puzzled by this comment.

The works in this exhibition are attempts to draw and examine the links between these two worlds in poetic, narrated, imagined and humorous ways.

The name of the exhibition takes inspiration from a conversation with members of Ida’s Javanese family who live in the city of Yogyakarta – after learning about the meaning of ‘bloody woop woop’, Ida’s family rejoiced in describing Kliwonan as ‘bloody woop woop’. In that case, Barmedman could be described in Javanese as ‘ndesa’.
In *Map for Pakdhe Daliman and Uncle John* (2012) the artist uses maps and imaginary letters to her two uncles, one inviting her Australian Uncle John to come and meet her family in Central Java and one to her Javanese uncle, Pakdhe Daliman, inviting him to travel to Uncle John’s place in Barmedman. It’s interesting to note the difference in tone and forms of address in the letters which give directions on how to get from their respective villages to the airport and onto the plane, how to get to the other’s village at the other end and what to expect along the way. The letter to Uncle John is colloquial and cheeky.

To dear Uncle John, how are ya? I hear you’ve had lots of rain recently. Is it making the crops or the weeds grow? I’m just at home here at the moment and it’s raining lightly. I thought the rainy season had ended – but apparently not. In the middle of the rainy season though here in Jogja I think my definition of ‘pouring’ with rain has gained new meaning. It really pissed down!

Anyway the reason I’m writing is because I wanted to give you this map to get from your farm to my uncle, Pakdhe Daliman’s house in a village called Kliwonan. Yep, so I hope the directions are correct … otherwise errr yeah you’ll be up shit creek.

You’ll be right! Say hi to Nanny for me. Love from Ida April 2012
So yeah get the Countrylink bus from town into Cootamundra and then onto the train to Sydney as per usual. From Central Station find the city trains and I think for trains to the airport the platform is the furthest one from Country trains. If you’re in a hurry to catch your plane you could catch a cab but actually I’m not sure that it’s much faster ... Just be on time ok! They’re really thingy about what you bring onto the plane these days so yeah leave your rifle and bombs at home.

Ask for a window seat when you’re at Sydney Airport.

Uncle John, when you arrive in Denpasar will you go straight to Java or have you got some time to kill before the flight? If you’re already missing Australians you could go to Kuta (oh god please don’t) or visit Frank and co in Ubud. When you do get on the flight to Jogja, you must ask for a window seat so that you can see all the volcanoes from above! Not something you see everyday!

Take some tissues with you on the flight – when I flew from Denpasar to Jogja in July 2010 I cried the whole way for some reason. It was sort of embarrassing.

After you collect your luggage and go outside, just look like you know where you are going so a trail of taxi drivers don’t harass you. Follow this map to find your way to get the bus.

Get bus here. Say you want to go to Sragen. It’ll cost something between Rp 10,000-Rp 25,000 depending on whether the bus has aircon or not. If it doesn’t have AC then prepare coins Rp 500 – for buskers who get on the bus, play a few tunes, collect money in chip packets and then get off. There’s usually a constant stream of people of varying degrees of tonality/tone deafness. Sometimes really good! Once one busker’s entire repertoire was made up of songs about smoking pot. But who knows, maybe he used the money to buy his mother a nice new kebaya [traditional blouse] or something.

LEGEND [Legeda is the Indonesian, as in legend on a map as well as the mythical kind of legend]

Hey John (ha ha my Indonesian relatives would be horrified if I called my uncle or aunty just by their name, let alone if I addressed them hey ya bastard or hey dickhead). So here in Java there are lots of mystic beliefs and rituals.

The letter to Pakdhe Daliman is in Indonesian and begins with enquiries about her uncle’s health, her aunt, the rice crops, mentions other family members using the appropriate title, for example, she addresses her uncle as Pakdhe because he is older than her father, and so his daughter and son, her cousins, are addressed as Mbak Hari and Mas Tono respectively. The

letter to Uncle John is in Australian idiom, the letter to Pakdhe Daliman is in Indonesian. Unless a viewer is able to read both English and Indonesian, they will be unable to understand the letters of one or the other unless someone ‘translates’ for them, as I have done here. If they read neither language they will need to rely on the visual elements to understand what is being communicated, just as one does when travelling in another country and cannot speak the language. It is part of the experience that one is never quite certain whether what one ‘sees’ or ‘understands’ is what is actually going on.

Pakdhe Daliman, How are you? Healthy? How’s your family there in Kliwonan? Is Budhe [Auntie] well? Has Mas Jaya already come home? Sorry it’s so long since I came to visit you in Kliwonan. What’s being harvested there at the moment? I’m sure you’ve [been] harvesting a lot from the crop. Hopefully the next crop will reap even more. I remember a conversation I had with Mbak Hari, she said you wanted to visit my family in Australia. Actually, my family there wish to meet you too Pakdhe. I’m sorry that I won’t be able to accompany you there Pakdhe, maybe Mas Tono can. I’ve already drawn a map to help you on your journey there Pakdhe. There is however a possibility that the map is wrong and as a result you might end up in New Zealand. So you should probably bring a compass and other camping equipment. I’m joking Pakdhe, sorry.

My grandmother’s town is called ‘Barmedman’. Maybe you think this is a strange name, but actually many people in Australia think it’s a strange name too. But how can that be Pakdhe? The name of the district is called ‘Bland’. Which means ‘bland’! It’s April at the moment Pakdhe, and it’s nearly winter there, so maybe you should bring warm clothes. If you’re planning on bringing souvenirs from the village such as fruit or food that you’ve grown, maybe it’s better you don’t bring it because the people at Sydney Airport are very weird and think they know everything.

Don’t worry Pakdhe, if you want to eat rice there, we can provide it. There’s rice in Australia Pakdhe. Here’s some information:

From Kliwonan ... get the bus from Gronong to Solo, at the bus terminal at Solo change buses, get the bus to Jogja. Pakdhe if you see Prambanan, it means you’re already close to the airport. Once you’ve gotten off at the airport gate, just walk inside Pakdhe. There’s no need to go via this island [Christmas Island] Pakdhe!


Tenang aja, kalau Pakdhe pengin makan nasi kami sediakan. Ada beras di sana Pakdhe. Ini sedikit informasi Pakdhe:

Ke India tapi agak jauh Pakdhe. Lebih cepat lewat sana.


Tidak usah lewat pulau ini Pakdhe!

Ke India tapi agak jauh Pakdhe. Lebih cepat lewat sana.
There are two other paintings in this series, *Map for Pakdhe Daliman and Uncle John continued* (2013) and *Map for Pakdhe Daliman and Uncle John continued again* (2013), and the letters continue in them, with cross-cultural tips and other information such as why the taxi driver might be angry when Pakdhe asks to go from Sydney Airport to Central Station and how Pakdhe is to respond to this. A story of cross-cultural engagement in the bottom right hand corner of the painting appears to have nothing to do with the letters but, like them, speaks of hospitality, encounter, engagement, and openness:

In 1921, the 5 Barmedman members of Temora CWA – Country Women’s Association – travelled by campervan to Broome where they met 5 women from an arisan [women’s community group] in Kliwonan. Coincidently Pakdhe Daliman’s maternal grandmother and Uncle John’s paternal grandmother were both on these expeditions and met in Broome around 3pm. At 3:30pm the 10 women sat down for afternoon tea and swapped homemade cakes. The Javanese women didn’t much like the way the Barmedman women made the tea (with milk and no sugar!) and the Barmedmans didn’t really like the super sweet tea that the Kliwonan women had prepared for them ... But everyone pretended they did and finished their tea with a smile. At this meeting the women swapped recipes and handicrafts from their respective village or actually made by the women themselves.

The Kliwonan women took home sheepskin mats, knitted woolen [sic] jumpers (which to this day have not been worn by anyone in as hot a climate as their village but remain kept by offspring of offspring of offspring in the case of someone moving abroad sometime), woolen [sic] ‘beanies’, homemade plum jam and tea towels of ‘Barmedman, the centre of the Bland Shire’. Barmedman women took home batik each, some wearing them home around their waist and legs like the Javanese women had worn them and showed them how to wrap and tie them. They also took rambutan which they ate in the campervan and finished in 20 minutes and peyek (crispy peanut thingy which got a bit crushed but still tasted good.)

Here we are asked to imagine that the two groups of women, each including the artist’s grandmother on her father’s and mother’s side, travel a vast distance to meet half way, so to speak, in Broome – the humour derives from the detail, the ordinary mundane gifts the women share, gifts that are valued for the generosity of spirit inscribed in them rather than any practical purpose they will have when they are taken home. This account of the meeting between the women shifts the focus of the painting from the two individual uncles in the present time to a different encounter, set in the past, between the groups of women who are travelling as members of their respective traditional women’s community group – the arisan in Indonesia and the Country Women’s Association (CWA) in Australia. It imagines an enduring connectedness between Indonesians and Australians, now and in earlier generations and at a

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people to people level, unsung and away from the public gaze like so much that happens in small communities.

In one frame the painting brings together the two families, villages, regions, countries. Central Java is abstracted with a map showing the places mentioned in the letters to the left of the map of Australia. It appears as half the size of Australia. Sragen is the regency in which the village of Kliwonan is located, while Barmedman is located in the Bland Shire. For the uncles, their first journey is from their rural village to the airport, a journey which, in Uncle John’s case at least, may take longer than the actual country to country trip by plane. For both men, Bali’s Denpasar international airport becomes a liminal space for arrival in, or departure from, Indonesia.

The narratives present stories of anticipated hospitality and engagement, while also performing a cross-cultural translation, albeit improbably and humorously. The artist makes a case for crossing boundaries and making connections across borders that are fluid (as they arguably are not), but which open a way for cross-cultural curiosity and understanding. As Proba (2012) explains, ‘Through a montage of different media … the artist opens up an experimental space in which heterogeneous times and spaces coexist, contradictions are abolished and documentation and fiction are juxtaposed’ (7).

For the letter writer, there is a sense of freedom in elastically bending to the ‘ways’ of her uncles in order to bring them to connection, but also in crossing the rural-city divide. In performing the role of interpreter and translator, she also acts as the playful cross-cultural guide, anticipating problems they may encounter (with food, where to go, what to pay, what their concerns might be) and lacunas in their experience (navigating the public transport system, what they might see), while at the same time acknowledging different ways of being in the world and the importance of community. The markedly different communication styles in the artist’s fictional communications with the two uncles reflect an intimacy with them as well as confidence in her ability to get ‘away with’ being cheeky. There is brashness, which is linked with her insider/outsider status, but also a sense of belonging – she is the bridge between.

I have dwelt at some length on these two paintings in order to explore the issues they highlight about entering and being in a different culture and place, about learning the cultural ropes, and about some of the intricacies of cross-cultural relationship and understanding. The paintings illustrate the ‘places of illegibility’ and the places the viewer cannot go when ‘reading’ the texts that are the canvases (Ravenscroft 2012: 2). In highlighting the seemingly mundane, the everyday and the ordinary, the artist counters exoticisation or demonisation for, as Alison Ravenscroft (2012) argues, ‘it is a mistake to think that exoticism and demonisation are propelled by a logic of radical difference: it is the logic of the self-same that drives them’ (2).
For Ravenscroft, with exoticisation ‘an other is not so other after all’ because by ‘acts of exclusion that at the same time capture the other within the logic of the self … this other is not allowed a radical, at times unrepresentable, difference from the “I”’ (Ravenscroft 2012: 20).

As Ravenscroft shows, it is in the practice of reading, and I would also argue, writing, that ‘we bring ourselves into uncertainty, through which we cause doubt to fall on our perceptions … [and put] our knowledge under pressure until we can say: “I do not – cannot – know the other”’ (20).

The paintings’ paint drips, mis-spellings and crossings out mark transparent traces of the artist, her own wondering as she fills in the stories and texts. There’s a rushed aspect – a crazy energy – and a vibrancy of movement, humour, mischief and purpose. There is also a quality of improvisation to the artwork, a riffing on themes of imaginative displacement and art’s potential to mediate and be a bridge between peoples and places. By magnifying a map of Central Java and bringing it into alignment with the map of Australia, the artist breaks up situated knowledges and assumptions. For the Australian viewer, Central Java is brought into focus, magnified, and foregrounded. It is no longer tiny, unplaced, almost invisible, a long way away, a place to be flown over en route to some other (more desirable?) destination (Europe perhaps?), or a place never to be reached (somewhere near Bali?). The artist gives Central Java a front row seat at the performance she wishes to enact by bringing into proximity these two places. She does this through what I term ‘non-exoticisation’.

By definition, ‘bloody woop woop’ is always the place where you are not – the place beyond, on the edge, the margin, that moves away as you move towards it. Bloody woop woop is always somewhere else, somewhere strange, somewhere not yet known, in the general direction of where you are heading but once arrived at, no longer strange and no longer that place because then it is home. Kliwonan and Barmedman are locatable places. They exist on a map, they can be located on Google Earth. In the painting the artist brings them into a dialectical relationship. They are the birthplaces and sites of growing up of her parents and the place where her grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins still live. They are situated in particular economies, histories and geographies – one grows wheat and the other rice. Their proximity, therefore, arises from the artist’s expression of what the scholar Caren Kaplan (1990) refers to as ‘a poetics of displacement’ (26).

The situation of being between cultures, countries, languages, and identities produces its own mode of expression: a poetics of displacement. Such a poetics mediates the oppositions of time and space, history and geography, and stories and maps when read against a politics of location; an attention to the local production of strategic identities based on historical analysis rather than essential universal. … If maps trace routes between designated locations, linking places in space, narratives link events in time (Kaplan 1990: 27).
Kaplan goes on to describe the autobiographical writings of Jamaica Kincaid (1988) in *A Small Place* about her birthplace, Antigua, and Bessie Head’s (1981) *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* about her adopted home in Botswana, as constructing a ‘poetics of displacement through a politics of location’ (Kaplan 1990: 29). She argues that they do this by constructing a counter-narrative that favours ‘a historical and geographical investigation of location in the expanded global sense’ (29).

There is a hint of this connectedness of the local and the global in this painting, and it seems to be suggesting that if we can engage in such encounters person to person, village to village, shire to regency, country to country, why not with the rest of the world. While the focus is ostensibly on kinship and family ties, there is also a suggestion that these relationships between individuals exist, have existed, and will go on existing, albeit beneath the radar of the nation state. The work seems to be suggesting that what is needed is both genuine encounter and the creation of a new imaginary in Australia in relation to Indonesia or anywhere.

**Hermeneutical understanding and the hermeneutical circle**

In this dissertation I focus on the writing process and the embodied and ethical aspects of researching and writing the cross-cultural novel within the historical, social and political context of the often testy Indonesian-Australian relationship. In doing so, I perform a process of hermeneutical understanding while outlining the risks and challenges of writing across borders. I argue for the value of writing cross-culturally, despite the risks involved, while also recognising what Edward W Said (1983) describes as a ‘web of affiliations’ with the material world – political, social, historical, economic and cultural – that surrounds all literary texts (Said 1983: 35).19

The chapters that follow are part of an ongoing conversation with Adrian Snodgrass and David Coyne’s (2006) *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as a Way of Thinking*, in which they place interpretation at ‘the core’ of architectural practice and understanding, and where the studio asserts ‘its position as a site of creation, learning and understanding’ (xi). Their hermeneutical approach to design offers a ‘way’ of reflecting on the process of practice-led research and research-led practice in the creative writing process where the ethical nature of creative arts practice is allowed to ‘disclose itself in its creation’ (257). In the act of creating, they argue, the interpreter – be it the writer, designer, visual artist, musician – ‘is not so much an agent as a subject played by circumstance and language. … Effective interpretation draws

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19 I detail these affiliations in regard to the relationship between Indonesia and Australia and the novel in the ‘Coda’.

27
on encounters with the other and the unfamiliar, particularly as … [they] … examine history, unfamiliar traditions and alien architectures [literatures?]’ (Snodgrass and Coyne: xi).20

Interpretation is ‘not pre-thought and then made, but made in the making’, where the designer/writer ‘becomes one with the materials and the movements involved … and the making continues even after it has left the hands of the [writer?]’. From the perspective of hermeneutics, therefore, writing – like design – offers insights that, if the writer allows, contribute to ‘an unfolding of self-understanding’ by uncovering the writers’ preconceptions about the writing outcomes, that is, ‘the prejudices that make up what we are’ (257). By this argument, creative writing (like the design process) edifies the writer by revising her expectations and horizons. In the process of writing she is transformed in much the same way that encountering other traditions and cultures provokes new thoughts or surprises us into confronting the unfamiliar (258). The act of writing, I will argue, is an encounter with the unknown, ‘an engagement with aporias’ (258).21

The creative practice that Snodgrass and Coyne propose puts ethics at the centre by encouraging dialogue, openness, vulnerability, and a willingness to engage hermeneutically. It draws on a sense of responsibility, in that the writer is asked to make choices based on ‘a response, an answering, to what is owing to others, and an acceptance that actions impact on one’s own life and future, the life and future of other humans, and the life and future of the whole globe’ (113). In their insightful exploration of otherness in relation to the art and architectures of India, China and Japan, Snodgrass and Coyne (2006) argue that, in contrast to professional orthodoxies, design ‘is ostensibly aimless, lacks principles and subverts commitment. Far from being reprehensible, however, these traits yield a model for other disciplines’ (150). In particular, they make the case that ‘encounters with alien traditions contribute to a circle of understanding by exposing and bringing to presence the designer’s preconceptions, which in turn influence how we regard the other’ (150).

In any process of interpretation there is a circular relationship of the parts to the whole. Gadamer (1975) calls this the hermeneutical circle, so for example, in a sentence this occurs as a reciprocal process whereby the meaning of the sentence as a whole modifies the meanings of its component words, and vice versa. There is a circular interplay between part and whole and Gadamer (1975) uses the term ‘horizon’ to describe the limits of the interpreter’s ‘range of vision’: ‘We define the concept of “situation” by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence an essential part of the concept of situation is the

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20 These are similar to the issues I explore in the novel where the central character, Iwan, is an emerging artist whose world and emotions are infused with colour and whose arts practice is shaped by his experience of straddling two localities, two communities and two countries.

concept of “horizon”. The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point’ (Gadamer 1975: 269).

This process of interpretation or understanding in which the parts and the whole simultaneously derive their meaning from the other is paradoxical for, as Snodgrass and Coyne (2006) observe, in order for understanding to occur, ‘there must be some leap that enables us to understand the whole and the parts at the same time, however contrary to the rule of logic this may seem’ (36). In this process, if listening to an utterance or reading a large text, we project our expectations of what we are hearing or reading, then as we pick up more clues we make adjustments so that we gradually move from disjointed knowledge and insights – in an incremental back and forth dialectical process of illumination – until our prior understanding is corrected or confirmed, and our understanding of the whole emerges. Gadamer terms these projected meanings, or perspectives and contexts which surround all interpretive events, ‘prejudices’. They are involved in all understanding and can be either ‘enabling or disabling, depending on the way in which they are opened up to hermeneutical understanding’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 38). All interpretation involves these prejudices which derive from prior experience, histories, the past – all the ‘network of understandings of practices, institutions, conventions, aims, tools, expectations and a multitude of other factors that make us what we are’ (39). In our normal everyday lives, thinking and actions, therefore, we are caught up in a continual process of interpretation which makes ‘meaning’ always contingent, always changing.

Meaning is not fixed and firm, but is historical; it changes with time and as the situation changes. Understanding is in perpetual flux. … It is not an object, but neither is it subjective. It is not something we think first and then throw over onto an external object. It is known from within … Meaning exists prior to any separation of subject and object. In the interpretive act the Cartesian subject-object dichotomy dissolves (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 40).

For Gadamer, authentic or genuine conversation or dialogue is characteristic of the hermeneutical event. It is a dialectical process of question and answer in which two people understand one another, where ‘each opens himself to the other person, truly accepts his point of view as worthy of consideration and gets inside the other to such an extent that he understands not a particular individual, but what he says’ (Gadamer 1975: 347).

A fundamental conversation is never one that we want to conduct. Rather it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way in which one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own turnings and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the people conversing are far less leaders of it than the led. Understanding or its failure is like a process which happens to us (Gadamer 1975: 345, emphasis added).
Such authentic dialogue is the opposite of argument. It is where both sides are immersed in a discussion that ‘involves a recognition and assimilation of the unfamiliar’ and ‘where the positions of both partners are transformed. A genuine dialogue is a give and take whereby the participants arrive at a new understanding’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 41-2). We remain open to the questioning of the other while asking questions that are ‘directed by our preunderstandings’ (43). The participants are ‘caught up in the give and take’ which becomes wholly absorbing as in a game (Gadamer 1976: 66, cited in Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 42).

While a text, painting, sculpture, building or culture does not literally ask questions, or speak, ‘the concept of the text asking questions has validity in that in the act of its interpretation there is a communication, a fusion of horizons’ (43). This is similar to ‘a creative discourse [that] is not originated or imagined by the interpreter but has its own impetus, takes its own course and leads the participants … [T]he interpreter does not guide the conversation with a text but is rather guided through the subject matter’ (Hogan 1976: 3-12, cited in Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 43).

In this situation I do not chose my words with care; I do not plan what I am about to say, but speak spontaneously. I hear my own words as I utter them and at the same time as my listener hears them, and they can be as disclosive to me as they are to the other. The conversation transcends the separation of subject and object. I interpret the other speaker’s questions and objections in ways unintended when uttered. The conversation has a life of its own, leading the speakers into areas that are new to them, and going beyond their initial intentions and interests (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 44).

This hermeneutical process applies in every act of understanding, operates in all learning and is ‘embedded in all thought or in all action’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 45). It ‘modifies our perception of the past and our anticipations of the future’, which in turn ‘forms the context in which we interpret experiences’ (44). This process of reflection or reflexivity is employed by the creative artist and captures the spirit of alterity. In Donald Schön’s (1983) concept of ‘reflection-in-action’ creative artists begin with a discipline, which is a ‘projection of preunderstanding’, a ‘what if’, and then proceed to shape ‘the situation in accordance with an initial appreciation’. The ‘situation then “talks back” [to the artist who] responds to the situation’s back talk by reflecting-in-action on the construction of the problem, the strategies of action, or the model of the phenomena’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 45). This back and forth ‘reflective conversation with the situation’ is an account of the hermeneutical circle which Bernstein (1983) summarises as ‘a continuous dialectical tacking between local detail and global structures … a sort of intellectual perpetual motion’ (95, cited in Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 45). A process of constant revisions follows until the goal is reached even while, paradoxically, ‘we often do not know what the goal is until we have reached it’ (46).

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Far from blocking one’s creative practice, this state of ‘not knowing’ is integral to it. It is, arguably, integral to all creative arts practice in which the practitioner begins with a vague idea of a project and the project offers up clues as they proceed. As with the hermeneutical process, there is a projection of a first image, then a back and forth process of the parts and the whole. Interpretations lead to modifications, and so on. It is ‘fluid, repetitive and continuous … a kaleidoscope of ever-changing reflections, revisions, false starts and back tracking, leading eventually to a clarification of the projection’ (46). This evolving cycle and its efficacy ‘depends on keeping it moving’ (46). The project is not predetermined, nor is it the answer to a ‘problem’ because ‘the explication of what is already understood only unfolds when the process is fluid and retroactive’ (46). The creative artist opens her/himself to a dialogical cycle of question and answer which ‘questions all the prejudgements, pre-understandings, values and attitudes that [s/he] brings to the [project]’ (47). In allowing her prejudgements to be probed, she lays herself open to continual questioning, vulnerability, risk (47). This approach is neither ‘logical’ nor ‘linear’.23

The hermeneutical anticipation, by contrast, feeds back into the particularities of the situation, and is either ‘fulfilled’ or ‘disappointed’; if fulfilled it enriches the particularities, which then play back to enrich the anticipation; and if disappointed it likewise places the particularities in a new light, opening up new expectations and triggering further projections. In either case, there is the discovery of something that had existed hidden in the situation all along and was implied, but unnoticed, in the old, discredited expectation (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 51).

The process is the opposite of knowing because knowing excludes questioning and those ‘who know need not listen’ (54). As the artist ‘proceeds by way of question and answer … [t]here is no “correct” answer’ because any answer to a question ‘opens up further questions for those who are open and receptive’ (52: emphasis added). In the ‘uncovering of tacit understanding’ – of what is silent or hidden, ‘there is always the possibility of new understandings’ (52–3).24

By remaining fluid, open and porous, it ‘plays back to elicit new responses from the past; and plays forward to elicit new responses from the future’ (53). It ends only when an external constraint is forced upon it.25

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23 See Snodgrass and Coyne (2006), p. 50. ‘Designing, being a hermeneutical enterprise does not employ inductive logic. It does not build generalisations from particulars in a linear and incremental manner, but predicts a generalisation, the whole, and then works back and forth between that projected generalisation and the particulars’.

24 See also Barbara Bolt (2007), in which she draws on Heidegger’s concept that ‘we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling’ (30). Bolt argues that creative practice gives rise to a ‘very specific sort of knowing, a knowing that arises through handling materials in practice’ (29, cited in Smith and Dean 2009: 6).

25 Smith and Dean (2009) aim to capture this cyclical structure of creative and research processes – including practice-led research, research-led practice, creative arts practice and research – in a model ‘The iterative cyclic web’ (19). They adopt the concept of iteration ‘which is fundamental to both creative and research processes. To iterate a process is to repeat it several times (though probably with some variation) before proceeding, setting up a cycle: start-end-start’ (19). From the different results generated, the creator makes a selection based on, say, ‘empirical data or an analytical/theoretical fit’ in the research phase or ‘aesthetic, technical or ideological’ choices in the practice phase (19).
Following Aristotle, who argued that moral judgement is not governed by known rules, and cannot be learned in advance, ethical knowledge ‘involves choice; and […] is never mere knowledge, but is knowledge revealing itself in action and in involvement, so the idea of what is ethically right “cannot be fully determined independently of the situation that demands what is right from me”’ (Gadamer 1975: 283; cited in Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 62). Application, therefore, ‘codetermines’ understanding and is inseparable from it (Gadamer 1975: 285). This means that we bring the rules of conduct and experience to every situation we live through, including our creative arts practice.

For the novelist, therefore, it could be argued that writing occurs in the lived everyday world and the writer must interpret the rules within the writing environment while exercising judgement in her or his own choices, decisions and actions (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 64). The writer takes these rules, which are ‘fluid expedients’ rather than systematic procedures, and subjects them to application and interpretation (65, 68). This requires decisions and practical choices within ‘an ethical and social context’, that is, ‘behaviour that is conducive to the well-being of oneself and others’ (112). The writer draws on a ‘sense of responsibility’ while engaged in making choices ‘in the context of what is due to him or herself, to others, and – with particular reference to sustainability – what is due to the total environment in which we live’ (113).

**Creative writing as hermeneutical process and the cross-cultural novel**

By this reading of Gadamer (1975, 1976), Snodgrass (1992) and Snodgrass and Coyne (2006), the writing process begins with a question, or an answer that poses a question. In this case the question is, why write a novel set in Indonesia and Australia, why write a novel about a cross-cultural relationship? This leads to other questions: what is at stake here? What is the context? Is it possible to ethically write about an Indonesian character without resorting to essentialism? How can I ensure characters in such border crossing fiction – their actions, responses, development – and the narrative, are believable to Australian and Indonesian readers?


> The construction of identity … involves establishing opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us’. … Far from being a static thing then, identity of self or of ‘other’ is a much worked-over historical, social, intellectual, and political process that takes place as a contest involving individuals and institutions in all societies (332).

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26 See also Snodgrass and Coyne (2006), n. 19, p. 271 where they note that Heidegger, for example, distinguishes between interpretation and understanding (Dreyfus 1991: 184 ff).

27 Snodgrass and Coyne (2006) argue that the Greek concepts of *prohairesis* (‘decision making according to one’s own responsibility’) and *phronesis* (‘understanding of what to do when placed in a particular, concrete situation’) are integral to good design practice (114). Both concepts are inseparable from ethics and our involvement with society, as well as an awareness of the consequences of our actions on the ‘welfare, the well-being, the good life of ourselves and others’ (112).
These processes, he argues, far from being intellectual exercises, are governed by ‘urgent social contexts’ which take the form of legal processes and institutions: for example, ‘immigration laws, the legislation of personal conduct, the constitution of orthodoxy, the legitimization of violence and/or insurrection, the character and content of education, and the direction of foreign policy, which very often has to do with the designation of official enemies’. This means that identity is, necessarily, also ‘bound up with the disposition of power and powerlessness in each society’ (Said 1978/1995/2003: 332).

The knowledge that every society, self, culture, and national identity is a fluid and changing social construction disrupts any idea of it possessing an innate essence. It also means that ‘human reality is constantly being made and unmade’ and, because this is not easy to live with, Said argues, common responses to this fear include ‘[p]atriotism, extreme xenophobic nationalism, and downright unpleasant chauvinism’ (333). Said’s objection to Orientalism, therefore, is ‘that as a system of thought it approaches a heterogenous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an enduring Oriental reality and an opposing but no less enduring Western essence, which observes the Orient from afar and, so to speak, from above’ (333). He draws attention to the ‘strong affiliations between Orientalism and the literary imagination and imperialism’ particularly in relation to Islam: ‘What is striking about many periods of European history is the traffic between what scholars and specialists wrote and what poets, novelists, politicians, and journalists then said about Islam’ (344). Orientalist knowledge and scholarship often depicted Islam, for example, in stereotypical, monolithic and unchanging terms and this was productively used by colonialist governments to demonise and dominate (347). He denounces this ‘denial of the interrelatedness and interdependence of cultures and civilizations’ as ‘preposterous’ (348):

How can one today speak of ‘Western civilization’ except as in large measure an ideological fiction, implying a sort of detached superiority of a handful of values and ideas, none of which has much meaning outside the history of conquest, immigration, travel and the mingling of peoples that gave the Western nations their present mixed identities? (349).

For Said, ‘the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism and constitutes one of the main connections between them’ (Said 1993: xiii). The role of the mass media and politicians in demonising an unknown enemy and bandying labels such as ‘terrorist’ contributes to ‘the general purpose of keeping people stirred up and angry’. In turn, this contributes to the loss of ‘a sense of the density and interdependence of human life, which can neither be reduced to a formula nor be brushed aside

28 As Said (1978/1995/2003) notes, this Orientalist notion was popularised by Samuel Huntington’s thesis that ‘cold War bi-polarism has been superseded by what he called the “clash of civilisations” … based on the premise that Western, Confucian and Islamic civilizations, among several others, were rather like water-tight compartments whose adherents were at bottom mainly interested in feeding off all the others’ (348).

Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow. But for that kind of wider perception we need time and patient and skeptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction (xxii).

By bringing into focus two families, two villages, two countries, the paintings Welcome to Barmedman 2013 and Map for Pakdhe Daliman and Uncle John 2012 playfully imagine cross-cultural Indonesian-Australian journeys, encounters and (mis)representations, and make a case for the co-existence of heterogeneous times and spaces. They suggest a world in which Indonesian and Australian ties are known and recognised, and authentic conversations can and do occur.

In the practice of creative writing, as in the ‘text of our lives’, there is no map, formula, how-to-guide. Rather, it is a step into the unknown whereby we allow ourselves to be drawn into uncertainty, accept that understanding is incomplete, fluid and always subject to revision, and hold a space for the imagination. This means that I create characters and place them in situations within the world of the novel. There is a dialogical back and forth, a distancing of the self, and I must remain open to the voices of the characters and the nuances of their responses within those contexts. As the work progresses I relinquish fixed ideas of who the characters are and how they will respond. I remain open to new information and, like the characters, I am engaged in a constant process of encounter in which I make choices based on a sense of responsibility, that is, a ‘response, an answering, to what is owing to others, and an acceptance that actions impact on one’s own life and the future of the whole globe’ (Snodgrass and Coyle 2006: 113). In doing so I have only my own practical, ethical and political experience to guide me.29

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29 See also Hunt and Sampson (2006), who point out that the writer’s role in this dialogic process (in which the characters engage in dialogue with one another and the writer joins in the conversation with them) is what Bakhtin characterises as the essential ingredients of the ‘polyphonic novel’ – ‘a relationship of equals where both parties enter into or, as he puts it, “live into” each other’ (Hunt and Sampson 2006: 97). In the process, the ‘new artistic position of the author with regard to the hero [i.e. the narrator or character] in Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novel is a fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position, one that affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminancy of the hero. For the author the hero is not ‘he’ and not ‘I’ but a fully valid ‘thou’, that is, another and other autonomous ‘I’ (‘thou art’) … [T]his dialogue [between author and hero] takes place … in the real present of the creative process’ (Bakhtin 1984: 63, cited in Hunt and Sampson 2006: 97).
Chapter 2

Wish you were here: On writing cross-cultural agency in the novel

Wish you were here 1972/2012 (Berharap ada di sini)
7 postcard set pair: found and made

Ida Lawrence 2012, 2013. An exhibition: (n)desa/bloody woop woop – kisah dari Kliwonan, Barmedman dan kisah di antaranya Stories from Kliwonan, Barmedman and between
Emotions are integral to the transnational family or individual migrant experience. They are fuelled by environments (landscape, buildings, sacred spaces), everyday routines, practices and language and their sources include ‘adjustment, settlement, nostalgia, a shattered sense of belonging, renewal, loss, discrimination, abrupt endings, new beginnings and new opportunities’ (Skrbisˇ, 2008: 236).  

Wish you were here consists of two sets of seven detachable postcards, with one set depicting images of Barmedman in south western New South Wales and the other depicting images of Kliwonan in Central Java. Again, the contexts for the artwork are the villages where the artist’s mother and father were born and grew up. By presenting the two places as tourist destinations the artist also references the way tourism and travel engage a superficial relation to place.

The original found object is the seven-postcard set of photographs of Barmedman for which the (unknown) photographer has selected images s/he believes capture the spirit of the town and show it in its best light. The first postcard is of the main street, Queen Street. It is obvious from the models of the parked motor vehicles that decades have passed since the images were taken. The second is of the Post Office with the original hitching rail for horses in prominent position. The third is of the Barmedman Hotel, the fourth is the Mineral Swimming Pool. The Queensland Hotel comes next, then the wheat terminal with the silos in the background, and finally, an aerial shot of the town titled, ‘Panoramic View Barmedman’, with a steepled church at its centre. There is a trace of low hills on the horizon but the land between is flat, flattened, the foliage of the trees grey-blue rather than green. Despite being drained of colour, perhaps by intense summer sunlight, the images have a parched beauty. It must be summer because the pool is full, the grass near the silos is brown and dry, and the lack of activity at the silos suggests the harvest is over. Perhaps it is January or February. We see the houses, pubs, shops, church, vehicles – signs of life and community – but there are no people in any of the images. At the pool a row of poplar trees is mirrored in the water and a red painted structure and its reflection frame the foreground. Its sole purpose appears to be aesthetic, the remains of a diving board perhaps. Its presence reminds of Japanese gardens. Altogether, the postcards focus on what is constructed, the places where people meet, relax, do business, work, and otherwise carry on the practices of everyday life. The paddocks, wheat crops and mobs of sheep that sustain the town’s economy are all missing.

In the matching set of postcards of Kliwonan, the captions are in Indonesian and the artist presents an equivalence that highlights difference. This is non-exoticisation. Trees line the road leading out of the village, a woman’s bike leans against a post, and there is a sign to a

31 Skrbisˇ (2008) draws on five fields of study to illustrate the ways in which emotions have been integrated into the transnational family or individual experience: emotional labour, co-presence (the reconfiguration of family relationships or friendships, those who leave and those who are left behind, often captured in the return visit and/or reunion), longing, ‘emotionalising the national family’ where family and nation are ‘conflated’ (240), and emotional expression in migrant writing (236). This latter category ‘relates to narrations of journeys, arrivals, departures, homecomings and the paradoxes of the migration existence itself – both real and imaginary, written by migrants and about them’ (241).
batik factory and studio – perhaps for tourism buses and other customers. Matching the Batmedman Post Office is the entrance to the primary school, the plants clipped and tidy. In contrast to the grand scale of the hotel, a bakso food stall; beside the Mineral Pool is the Solo River, looking full and muddy, as if after recent heavy rain; then there is the little makeshift shop with the Pong Cell sign at the front, and a blue cupboard that stocks petrol in bottles for motorbikes. Alongside the iconic Australian wheat silos there is a vast pile of rice just harvested and spread out to dry. Finally, against the aerial view of Batmedman, there are the ripening rice fields of Kliwonan.

While the two villages are very different in appearance, the viewer ‘finds’ similarities. There’s a quiet emptiness in the scenes and, in both places, the lives and livelihoods of the inhabitants revolve around the land and the calendar of the crops. As Monika Proba (2012) says,

*Wish you were here* takes inspiration from a family trip to Kliwonan during which Ida’s father stated ‘Yes, just like Batmedman’. This comparison, far from being obvious, was a starting point for visual and cultural comparative research of both villages. To get started, the artist chose to use postcards from her mother’s hometown which are sold in Batmedman’s post office to this day. Postcards are a series of images that are supposed to promote the wonders and cultural heritage of a place, but in the case of Batmedman – the main ‘attractions’ are a swimming pool and two bars. Thousands of kilometres away, in Kliwonan, Ida has tried to look for the visual and cultural equivalents of Batmedman’s ‘representative’ pictures. Surprisingly it wasn’t very difficult. Ida’s postcards from Kliwonan present a similarly vague and melancholic space where there are no monuments, no spectacular views; nothing that makes it explicitly different from any other Javanese village. By inserting pictures of Kliwonan into a similar set of postcards, she frames the undefined character of these two spaces and places them together in the one discourse. With this work Ida introduces us to the poetics of the exhibition where big words such as nationality and identity are approached from their flipside; with curiosity, a sense of humour, distance and irony, putting an equals sign between facts and phantasmagoric auto-creation (6).

In interpreting the artwork, we move back and forth between the parts and the whole of each individual set, from one set to another. A type of in- and out-of-focus occurs. The ‘familiar’ sights of the two rural villages, which appear unfamiliar to the city viewer, and so unalike, begin to seem linked. The villages disclose themselves through the agency of the artist and there is nothing to do but ‘listen’. They exist in the world but might be seen as also separate to it in terms of time and space. They are important to the artist because, as well as being where family resides, they are a source of nourishment for her arts practice. In reading the texts/paintings, the viewer brings their own impressions, memories, histories, insights, prejudices to the conversation that the artist initiates by bringing the two villages into intimate proximity. In the interaction, things ‘simply happen; truth simply appears’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 213).
The artist is inviting us to deal with what is, to really look and see and wonder. She seems to be saying, here we are in ‘bloody woop-woop’ so what do you see and what do you imagine? History pervades the images, particularly in the Barmedman postcards which are dated by the age of the cars in the street. How does it look now? What might have changed since the postcards were made? Are the poplars still reflected in the still empty waters of the Mineral Swimming Pool? Have the cars in the street been restored as collectors’ items or recycled as scrap metal? Perhaps they lie rusting in a paddock somewhere? Is it the glimpse of the past that is most distant and alien, or the distance between the two places? Again we see how the artwork is an exercise in interpretation; it requires translation and this goes back to the dialogue engaged in by the artist who asks the questions that ‘impinge on present understandings’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 145).

If the dialogue is to be fruitful, these questions are to be at the same time deep and thick: ‘deep’ in the sense of asking how or why the host text (building or whatever) has the form it has … and ‘thick’ in the sense given the term by Clifford Geertz, indicating tracing the ramifications of the text into a wider social context (how, for example, it relates to the community, its place in social, political, religious, ritual and other practices) (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 145).

For Snodgrass and Coyne, ‘[h]istory, as memory, is the ever-present secret sharer’ (144). It is ubiquitous and present in the design studio and also, arguably, in the act of writing. In their view, ‘the past, however distant and alien, is seen as a store of possibilities awaiting disclosure and translation into the language of today, with a new vocabulary emerging from changes in technology, historical research, social conditions, ecology, heritage conservation, and so on’ (144). The basic rule of interpretation is, therefore, the ‘principle of unfamiliarity’ (145). The more provocatively unfamiliar something is, the more we need interpretation and the ‘greater the chances of disclosing new and enhanced understandings’ (145).

In *Wish you were here* the viewer is brought into proximity with multiple sites and sights, both the unfamiliar and possibly the familiar (made strange), and we are asked to bring our own pre-understandings into the picture. And who is the ‘you’ that the artist is addressing? She seems to be suggesting the viewer join her imaginatively in being in these two places. But for any willing viewer, can the understanding of the two places be the same as that of the artist, or indeed any other viewer? The answer is no, of course, but as Snodgrass and Coyne (2006) argue, ‘this divergence of understanding is not something to be deplored, since it is precisely the differences in our understanding that make conversation with you possible, and the greater the differences the greater the likelihood that the conversation will be animated’ (178).32

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32 Snodgrass and Coyne (2006) also note that ‘in order to translate, the translator must understand the language of the text being translated. The process of acquiring another language is itself a fusion of horizons in which the unfamiliar become familiar and understandable. Translation itself thus becomes a metaphor for all interpretative, which is to say hermeneutical, processes’ (178).
Authentic dialogue can take place only where there is openness to the differences and willingness to engage in understanding. Like the artist/designer, the writer engages in a process of authentic dialogue with the text she is writing, in which she brings her own prejudices into conversation with the writing as it is being written.

In the remainder of this chapter I argue that language and its affects – where the embodied writing self (author) draws on memory, feelings, experiences and cultural habits to shape the text – are at the centre of the dialogic relationship of the writer to the text she is writing, and at the centre of her relationship to the imagined reader (Hunt and Sampson 2008: 146). The writing ‘happens’ as the text is being written and the text ‘comes to life’ when it is read. Derek Attridge (2004) describes this as the ‘double life of the text’: ‘In so far as it is an act, reading responds to the written, performing interpretative procedures upon it [...]; in so far as it is an event, reading is performed by the writing’ (Attridge 2004: 105).

In 2000 I submitted a scene to be workshopped by a group of writers and actors in Sydney at the Australian National Playwrights Centre. In it the male Indonesian character is seduced by and has sex with a young woman and his Anglo Australian wife arrives and catches them at it. When the actors had finished, there was a burst of outrage from some of the other writers. One man was particularly angry.

‘That’s it, you’ve lost the audience now,’ he said vehemently, and then asked. ‘Is that what they do in their culture?’

‘What do you mean “in their culture”?’ I asked. ‘Australian men aren’t unfaithful to their wives?’

From this encounter I learned, first and foremost, that my knowledge and understanding of Indonesia and Indonesians is not necessarily shared, and that even well-educated Australians may hold superior attitudes or negative stereotypes and prejudices about Indonesians. It highlighted that, as an Australian woman writing an Indonesian male character, I needed to be aware that the reader might read that character as representing ‘his culture’, whatever that means to him or herself. It also suggested any ideal I held of initiating a cross-cultural conversation might have been naïve and my attempt to write a film script with a sympathetic Indonesian character could easily backfire. At worst, it could contribute to stereotyping on one side or the other. A further issue was that, despite being one of Australia’s nearest neighbours and a popular holiday destination, there appeared to be little real curiosity about Indonesia or its peoples, its remarkable history, or its cultures and languages.

If researching and writing about cross-cultural relationships can pose important ethical and aesthetic challenges, there is the further issue of whether literary representations can play a role in sparking interest or curiosity, fear or suspicion about other cultures. Can they help
perpetuate stereotypes or, conversely, contribute to greater cross-cultural understanding? And what role have they played in shaping the Australian imaginary regarding Indonesians and Indonesia? In the next section I describe some past Australian literary perceptions of Indonesians and Indonesia and consider Gadamer’s fusion of horizons as a guide to writing across cultures. I discuss the role of shame (and fear of failure) as components of reflexivity in researching and writing fiction that crosses borders, and briefly revisit aspects of ‘understanding other cultures’ in Said’s (1978/1995/2003) *Orientalism*.

**Australian literary representations of Indonesia and Indonesians**

At the 1996 Winter Lecture series at Monash University, three Australian Indonesianists – Adrian Vickers, David Reeve and Paul Tickell – explored Australian literary representations of Indonesia and Indonesians in depth. The mood of the papers was hardly favourable. Vickers (1998) examined the motif of danger in Australian writing prior to publication of C J Koch’s (1978/1987) *The Year of Living Dangerously* and, as well as finding the selected novels ‘almost unreadable’, found they presented ‘themes which more recent films, novels, travel writing and journalism have perpetuated’. He concluded that their discourse did ‘not fit at all into the language and modes of representation of late-20th century Australian popular or mass culture’ (Vickers 1998: 28).

In a fifteen-year period until 1996, there were less than ten novels or short story collections with Indonesian themes (Tickell 1998: 32), of which the most highly regarded novels were Koch’s (1978/1987) *The Year of Living Dangerously* and Blanche d’Alpuget’s (1980) *Monkeys in the Dark*. Both were set around the time of the 1965 coup. Apart from that, of three more recent novels presented, ‘the setting of Indonesia, though rarely Indonesians themselves as major characters, constitutes an indispensable and central core of the novels’ (Tickell 1998: 32, emphasis added). In Lee’s (1990) *Troppo Man* and Baranay’s (1992) *The Edge of Bali* the Australian tourist experience is a starting point while in Barnes’ and Birrell’s (1989) *Water From the Moon*, it is ‘the world of foreign consultants, the Indonesian bureaucracy and corruption’ (33). While finding the dialogue and situations of the Bali novels ‘uncannily accurate’, and agreeing that Barnes and Birrell ‘capture something of the expatriate ambiance’ in *Water From the Moon*, Tickell also found that ‘by and large the novel depicts a

33 Natalie Mobini-Kesheh’s (ed) (1998) *Representations of Indonesia in Australia* included three papers on representations of Indonesia and Indonesians in Australian literature as well as three papers dealing with film, law and popular media. Australian-based Indonesian novelist and journalist, Dewi Anggraeni, also contributed a paper.

34 Examples included: Beatrice Grimshaw’s *Red Bob of the Bismarks* (1915) and *Kris-Girl* (1917); Ernest Favenc’s *The Moccasins of Silence* (1895); E. Hardingham Quinn’s *That Woman from Java* (1916); Elinor Mordaunt’s *Dark Fire* (1927) and *Father and Daughter* (1928); and Ambrose Pratt’s invasion novel, *The Big Five* (1911).

35 In 1965, elements in the Indonesian military murdered five generals. This was followed by a coup against the Sukarno government and the massacre of up to 500,000 alleged members of the Indonesian Communist Party, and the imprisonment of 1,500,000 more political prisoners. General Suharto became president and military rule lasted 32 years until 1998. Since then Indonesia has been a democracy.

36 Inez Baranay’s *The Edge of Bali* (1992); Rory Barnes and James Birrell’s *Water from the Moon* (1989); Gerard Lee’s *Troppo Man* (1990).
world of social apartheid – and an apartheid built, it seems, on the inability of Australian characters to understand Indonesians in anything but stereotypical and predictable ways’ (33).

Indonesians come across in the novel as variously inscrutable, impenetrable, dishonest, duplicitous, corrupt or opportunistic. Indonesians display no emotions, no inner life and no depth of character, but rarely do any of the Australian characters either. All of the actions of Indonesians appear to be motivated by corrupt and dishonest motives. The Australians are straight forward blokes trying to do a straight forward job, being constantly frustrated by those members of the human race who by virtue of gender or race cannot be blokes – i.e. women and Indonesians … Introspection and reflection are not its strong points (Tickell 1998: 33).

In Lee’s* Troppo Man* and Baranay’s* The Edge of Bali*, on the other hand, Tickell finds that ‘while they still deal with popular stereotypes …they begin to interrogate and take [them] apart’ (34). In* Troppo Man*, Matt engages in ‘exotic fantaising’ about Bali and the Balinese in which ‘the Balinese themselves barely participate’ (34). Tickell finds greater aesthetic complexity in Baranay’s* Edge of Bali*, particularly in the parts where ‘Indonesian characters cease to be mere adjuncts to Western fantasies and are depicted as independent and autonomous human beings with their own values and agendas’ (35). He concludes that to some extent all three novels ‘inherit conventional Western preconceptions and fantasies relating to Indonesia’ and their authors bring a ‘fair amount of post-colonial baggage to their work, some conscious of this baggage, others not’ (37):

While many of the preconceptions may be accurate – corruption is a reality in Indonesia, tourism is frequently ugly, insensitive and downright damaging – and many of the fantasies may be relatively harmless, it is important that both authors and readers consider the naturalised and unquestioned assumptions that underlie the way Westerners relate to Indonesians. The power and at times, arrogance of Western knowledge … always seem to dehumanise and negate Indonesian and, more broadly, non-Western agency, even where stated aims are material improvement or cultural sensitivity (Tickell 1998: 37).

Only in Baranay’s* Edge of Bali* does Tickell find ‘the complex contemporary and historical interaction between Australians and Indonesians becomes more apparent and fully realized – and the distance we still have to travel becomes apparent’ (37).

In Stephen Rankin’s (1999) doctoral thesis, ‘From Dichotomy to Difference: The Australian Literary Construction of Indonesia’, he examines Australian novels set in Indonesia in order to reveal how they reflect changes in Australia’s relationship with Indonesia over a twenty-year

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37 Tickell (1998) finds much of interest in* Edge of Bali*, particularly in an open ended conversation that takes place between the two characters, Marla and Ratu Aji, her Balinese aristocratic landlord, in which they discuss Walter Spies (1895–1942), the German artist who came to Ubud in Bali in 1927, and Western and Balinese notions of sexuality. ‘Marla and Ratu Aji ask each others’ opinions and in their thoughtful exchange we observe their growing mutual awareness of the differences between each others’ cultures. At no stage, however, is either culture advanced as superior to the other’ (37). Instead, what is shown here, Tickell argues, is ‘another and different Western encounter with Bali’ (37).
period (3). Rankin argues that shifts in Australian perceptions and constructions of Indonesian identity, as well as ‘the moments of historical disruption which contributed to their emergence’, are reflected in Australian literary texts (11). In doing so he wants to identify the discursive strategies that enable Australia to ‘resist dialogue with its Asian neighbours while at the same time fostering the impression that such a dialogue exists as an important part of its cross-cultural relations’ (11). For Rankin, ‘Australian assertions of human equality and shared global destiny conceal ongoing attitudes and practices of hegemony and an underlying will to power over the “other”’ (11). This contradictory split in the Australian psyche is described by Hodge and Mishra (1990):

The Australian psyche is not a unitary phenomenon, which has an Orientalist piece of ideological baggage attached somehow to it. On the contrary, it is organised around this fissure, it is this contradiction, and typically it projects an inarticulate, egalitarian Orientalist, a racist republican (xiii).

This fissure which surfaces periodically is evident in the so-called Australian race debates, both prior to 1999 but also, it might be argued, up until the present. It was most apparent in the more publicly pronounced Islamophobia that occurred following the 9/11 attacks on New York in 2001, and climaxed with race related riots at a Sydney Beach in December 2005.38

Based on a reading of Australian literary texts set in Indonesia, Rankin (1999) argues that the Australian ‘postcolonial/liberal voice of equality and justice has not engaged with cultural difference for the purpose of negotiating it, but rather to fix “difference” within the gaze of its “tolerance” in order to conceal its ongoing will to rule over it’ (13). In the Australian novels, Rankin finds that while they chide ‘direct racism or neo-colonial paternalism’ and uphold the ‘ideals of freedom, justice, democracy and individual endeavour … in defense [sic] of a … down-trodden peasantry in the Third World context’, there is another side to these ‘enlightened’ attitudes to Asian alterity. And that is ‘the shadow of a more complex hegemony, a discursive will to power woven into, and disguised by, the vocabulary of cross-cultural concern and the assertions of an enlightened universality’ (17). Referencing the ‘stark colonial representations of otherness’ espoused, for example, by politician Pauline Hanson’s demonising of ‘yellow races’, Rankin argues that even the ‘humane voice of liberalism’ fails to circumvent a form of discursive domination (18).39

Has Australia really grown more tolerant in this era of postcolonial / postmodern discourse? Has Australia attempted to genuinely negotiate cultural difference during the emergence of the discourse of global equality? Or has it merely developed a postmodern strain of containment and control that enables it to perpetuate racism and cultural

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monologism while appearing, at least to itself, not to be doing so? In a period in which diversity and multiculturalism are celebrated, is anglo-celtic Australia really capable of engaging with multi-ethnic realities? Is there any sense in which Australia (and the West as a whole) has changed in its attitude to cultural alterity since decolonisation and the emergence of the discourse of a global humanity? (Rankin 1999: 21).

These questions, asked fifteen years ago, remain relevant, and Rankin attempts to answer them through a close reading of Australian and Indonesian novels. He observes some change in literary constructions from Koch’s (1978/1987) The Year of Living Dangerously (colonial) to Blanche d’Alpuget’s Monkeys in the Dark (postcolonial) to the Bali tourism novels of the 1990s – Troppo Man and The Edge of Bali – which he describes as postmodern and dialogical. He counterposes the latter with a Balinese perspective on the tourism experience in Gerson Poyk’s Kuta, di Sini Cintaku Kerlip Kemerlap: ‘His [Poyk’s] description of the personal humiliation and familial stress that the Western dollar brings with it, represents a critical challenge to the stereotypical production of the Balinese playboy as scheming and greedy, through its portrayal of a reversal of exploitational practice’ (370). While only one view, Rankin sees it as opening ‘the possibility of dialogue’ by suggesting ‘misunderstanding on both sides’ (370). In contrast to Tickell’s more favourable review, he finds The Edge of Bali ‘less dialogic than the more politically and culturally contentious Matt in Lee’s novel [Troppo Man]’ (377).

Rankin draws attention to an ‘absence of an Indonesian influence on the development of Australia’s literary identity’ to date. Rather, Australia’s conception of otherness has not ‘considered the Asian other [including Indonesia] … as an equal partner in a global dialectic, or a contributor to social development, but rather as a frequently misguided and belated alterity still requiring Western leadership in order to fully enter the modern world’ (21). To counter this, he argues for the ‘necessity of active proximity, the entering of the space between cultures, as a pre-requisite for the development of a true dialogic relationship’ (24). For a genuine cross-cultural dialogue to take place, therefore, three things are required: first, the recognition and acceptance of the ‘constructed nature of cultural value and meaning’; second, a ‘shift away from theorisation of otherness, towards a stress on the value of proximity to, or social engagement with, the other’; and third, ‘altered material circumstances that necessitate either a willingness to negotiate with alterity or a determination to withdraw from it’ (403-4).

He concludes with a prediction that increasing pressure by global economic and strategic realities will require Australia to recognise that it is part of Asia and that prose fiction has a ‘unique capacity to explore the social/dialogic space … [and will be] particularly useful in the examination of cross-cultural threat and negotiation’ (404).

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40 Rankin (1999) notes that because of its geographical proximity to Indonesia and its growing economic engagement with the increasing prosperity of the region, this will to dominate and ongoing strategies of control make Australia ‘peculiarly vulnerable to exposure’ (24). Perhaps the recent incursions of Australian naval ships into Indonesian waters when towing back boats carrying refugees are an example of this.
**Writing the cross-cultural novel at this time**

In the case of my novel, ‘The Colour of Dissonance’, the plan to write a young male Indonesian Muslim character from a rural village in Central Java poses significant challenges. A key question is whether it is possible to imaginatively create a believable character – to Indonesian and Australian readers. And if I were to try, how could I equip myself to do that? What of the ethical issues inherent in such a project? Is it possible to write this character without, even with the best of intentions, succumbing to stereotyping and essentialism? Might I just get it plain wrong? Was the project one that is doomed to fail? And, most importantly, if I gave up, what would be the cost of not trying?

In his 2003 Preface to *Orientalism* Edward Said (1978/2003) describes the possibility of ways of understanding other cultures distinct from Orientalism which, he argued, set out to self-affirm, dominate and control for its own purposes, ‘There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanist enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion’ (Said 1978/1995/2003: xiv). For Said, the main characteristics of such understanding are sympathy, generosity and even hospitality where the mission is to ‘apprehend, criticize, influence and judge’, which it does by concentrating ‘on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow’ (xxii). Adrian Snodgrass (1992) similarly enlists Gadamer’s three types of I-Thou relationships to articulate how, when encountering an Asian culture, it is only in the third type of encounter that ‘real understanding’ takes place.

In the first type, where the ‘Thou’ represents the Asian culture, the Asian culture is treated as wholly separate and as an object to be manipulated and controlled. In this approach, the other is treated as an object which ‘the interpreter prevents […] from speaking for itself’ (Snodgrass 1992: 84). No dialogue takes place and the conversation is one-sided. For Gadamer (citing Kant), this type of encounter, which ‘involves the explicit or implicit domination of the other’, lacks morality because ‘it is morally irresponsible to use others as a means to an end’ (Gadamer 1975: 322, cited in Snodgrass 1992: 84).

In Gadamer’s second form of interpretation the I ‘acknowledges that the Thou is a person, but nevertheless remains self-related. The conversation lacks reciprocity; the relation is reflective, in that for every claim of the Thou, the I makes a counter-claim’ (84). The I dominates the Thou, silencing or not recognising his or her utterances. Here, Gadamer says, ‘The claim to understand the other person in advance performs the function of keeping the claim of the other person at a distance’ (Gadamer 1975: 323, cited in Snodgrass 1992: 84). In Asian studies, this is where the interpreter neither sees ‘his or her own culture in a new way in the light of the unfamiliar one, nor accepts the unfamiliar as a challenge to his or her own beliefs and
attitudes. It possibly best captures the points both Tickell (1998) and Rankin (1999) make about the Bali tourism novels.

In the third approach, the I truly listens to and is open to what the Thou has to say, and ‘recognises it as his or her claim to truth’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 158). It is only in this form of encounter that ‘genuine human relationship’ takes place. Such ‘true’ listening recognises the Thou as a person: the I questions the Thou and remains open to the questions of the Thou. There is a conversation that proceeds by question and answer, a dialogue and an exchange. The interpreter brings to the encounter ‘anticipations, a body of beliefs, concepts, attitudes, norms and practices which are instilled by our historical experience and constitute our life-world’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 157). At the same time, the text/culture/person, the Thou, belongs to a different life-world, one that is ‘removed in space and time’ from that of the I. As Gadamer shows, this openness hinges on ‘the acknowledgement that the I must accept some things that are against myself, even though there is no one else who asks this of me’ (Gadamer, p. 324, cited in Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 156). It involves appreciation of the differences that make another culture unique without denying that ‘it has anything new to offer’ (Snodgrass 1992: 85).

In seeking understanding, therefore, the interpreter can only assimilate the text of the other by structuring it in a different framework than its own. ‘That is, the interpreter relates it to his or her own familiar conceptual framework while, at the same time, respecting and preserving its otherness and not simply appropriating it for his or her own purposes. This is what Gadamer refers to as a “fusion of horizons”’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 157). In such a process of understanding, in becoming aware of the individuality of the other, we become aware of our own horizon which necessarily remains limited, ‘but at the same time open and porous’ (Snodgrass 1992: 86). For Gadamer, this is not a process of empathy whereby we approach another culture as a self-contained entity to be studied objectively, or where we ‘seek to develop a sympathetic fellow-feeling for the other on the basis of the traits and attitudes we have in common and which are therefore familiar’ (Snodgrass 1992: 94):


[Q]uite the contrary, [we] seek out what is radically different and unfamiliar in the other, using these dissimilarities and disparities to prompt a dialogical questioning of our own prejudices and to open up possibilities of changing and expanding our horizon. … Understanding is not a matter of some supposedly unprejudiced objectivity but of hermeneutical judgement, involving an interaction and mutual melding of our own and the other’s horizons (Snodgrass 1992: 94, emphasis added).

41 ‘The interpreter claims to speak for the other in a free, unprejudiced and objective manner, and it is precisely this “objectivity” which prevents the Thou from contributing to or participating in the dialogue … The I rejects a mutual and living relationship with the Thou and thus destroys the moral bond of the relationship and the true meaning of what the other has to say’ (Snodgrass 1992: 84-5, emphasis added).
Gadamer uses the term ‘horizon’ in both a temporal and spatial sense to define our ‘range of vision’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 158). It includes the expectations and prejudices we bring to every event of interpretation (our ‘system of prejudices’), and which are in continual change. While horizons ‘define the limits of our vision’, they are also ‘open and porous’. Thus, every event of real understanding or interpretation of the other involves a ‘fusion of horizons’ (158). This merging of horizons ‘does not mean leaving our own horizon behind and entering the alien horizon so as to incorporate or appropriate something contained there, … [it is rather] a merging of horizons in which our own horizon is transformed’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 158-9 emphasis added).

The embodied writer, shame, the imagined world of the text, and the reader

In the remainder of this chapter I argue that the affects of shame and awkwardness are also markers of the transforming process that the fusion of horizons entails, and that this also relates to the dialogic relationship of a writer to her text. Not only are shame and awkwardness characteristic of the degree of reflexivity required when writing a novel but, I would argue, they are also integral to shaping alterity, diversity, and inclusiveness in the novel’s imagined world. Polyvocality, that is, the act of listening to many voices and perspectives, is a further characteristic of this reflexivity (Saukko 2003: 73).

In 2012, I was in Yogyakarta for two months to do fieldwork for my novel. Despite many trips to Indonesia in the past, including spending five months there in 1997–98, I found it a very unsettling experience. While this was not new to me, it did not make the experience any less excruciating. Usually I go for three months because I know that these strongly embodied feelings of being out of place will subside at the end of the second month, leaving me free in the third month to feel more ‘at home’. These affects are often captured by phrases such as ‘feeling out of place’, ‘not knowing what to do with myself’ ‘don’t know how to do things’ ‘don’t understand’ ‘feel overwhelmed by the heat and humidity’ ‘incompetent’ ‘pestered’ ‘stupid’.

On this trip I didn’t have a third month to ‘settle in’, and the most striking experience of these feelings was when my friend took me to the village and ‘left me’ there for two days. I’d never stayed in the village before, my Indonesian skills were rusty, my Javanese non-existent, I was highly visible. I also had to choose which family house I would stay in and I elected to stay with my niece which meant my sister-in-law was offended (or at least so I imagined). My niece cooked special meals, she waited on me and wouldn’t allow me to help, yet I was beset by worries such as whether I should wear thongs into the bathroom or leave them at the door, or having no souvenirs for the family. I knew everyone was concerned about me, I was concerned about me. Part of my embarrassment was that I was being so well cared for. And part was that I didn’t know ‘how to be there’, and was concerned about putting everyone out.
Here I am speaking of an integrated world. In the village, or walking around Yogyakarta or eating my lunch in the padang restaurant, I am Bule (a white person). And I am also other to myself, in a state of painful becoming, raw, newborn – the experience is never the same – it has to be gotten through. I am diminished in my own eyes, hopelessly little, but gradually there is a shift, a kind of progress. I become recognised, and bit by bit, a process of intercultural understanding – unspeakable, indescribable – is taking place. My body language changes, I am so visible but, paradoxically, feel invisible too. I feel like I am blending in. I look in the mirror and am surprised at what I look like.

I get through my two days in the village. And as a writer it was invaluable in reminding me of the ‘shame’ that dogs us when we leave ‘home’, as we do when we enter another culture, travel, migrate, learn a new language, write a novel. So I would argue that shame, discomfort, dis-ease are integral to Gadamer’s fusion of horizons, and that this relates to opening ourselves up to our own prejudices or horizons. It is, perhaps necessarily, an uncomfortable process. In a paper titled ‘Shame’, the anthropologist Jennifer Biddle (1997) writes about her experience of shame while doing fieldwork with the Warlpiri in Central Australia:

Shame is powerful stuff, contagious and self propagating. To discuss it is likely to invoke it, for so ashamed are we in Eurocentric cultures – so shame bound am I – that it is shameful, shame-making, even to speak of shame. Which explains why in part there is comparatively little material available on the subject (227).

For Biddle, shame ‘arises from a failure to be recognised’, and it ‘judges, ridicules, terrorizes whatever pretence we might hold of being autonomous, successful, self-determining … reminds us of the state of dependency in which our lives began, and how vulnerable we remain to an approving, an allowing other’ (227). Shame also goes with being in a foreign space, away from home, being an outsider, needing help, feeling a loss of autonomy, privileged and/or that we have somehow not matched up – been too mean, too Australian, too loud, too angry, underdressed, overdressed, impolite. It is in these feelings of self doubt and vulnerability that we are most confronted by the self as other:

Identity is most manifest when it fails – either to meet the approval of the other or to fulfill self-pleasure in the activity interrupted. And shame ensures the failure of both simultaneously. Indeed, it is failure to meet either the demands of the self or the other that seems to me to make shame so potent, so productive and so painful an emotion (Biddle 1997: 231).

Shame also works through silence and, as Biddle describes, anthropological fieldwork essentially involves being ‘out of place, in the wrong place, and thus, the place occupied by shame’ because, ‘like shame, [the fieldwork] exalts self-difference’. And further, it is through awareness of this very difference that understanding or interpretation occurs:
[U]nderstanding, that demarcation of cultural difference, can only come into being through self-delineation, self-differentiation …[ethnographers’] very bodies, their own selves stand representatively, but also literally for, and as their culture in the field … it is not the other who is the foreigner in field work – it is the self … Being a foreigner – that is, being self conscious of one’s difference – is the terrain of shame (Biddle 1997: 233).

Just as Biddle describes ‘a taboo on looking’ which anthropologists break all the time, so as a writer in Australia at the present time there may be a ‘taboo on writing’ characters from another culture and, arguably, perhaps even more so on writing a cross-cultural relationship. While shame ‘floods’ Biddle, she also attests to its productivity if it can be removed from the duality of good and bad. This is shame as a learning curve and Biddle literally takes her cue from ‘shaming interactions’ that teach her how not to behave, how to differentiate her behaviour and her expectations of other Europeans. And, through failing continuously, how not to shame Uapa. In the process ‘the register was always – is – my own self, that is, the difference I know through shame’ (Biddle 1997: 236).

Shame can make us want to draw back from looking, reading, writing, understanding. There is the shame associated with risk, failure, dangerous ideas, political incorrectness. In literary fiction and creative non-fiction, Anna Gibbs (2006) argues that for writers and readers, a ‘visceral form of involvement … the kind of involvement that may go so far as to challenge the fixity of our own bodily limits’ can be experienced (157-68). Thus, while we may accept that all ‘writing entails risk’, and some kinds of writing may seem more risky than others, perhaps even dangerous, writing is in and of itself shameful (Gibbs 2006:163).

Terror and inhibition are just some of the feelings that drive me to get up from the desk and pace about, muttering, ‘This is too hard, I can’t do this. What was I thinking?’ Or to wake up feeling that there is a tight elastic band stretched across my belly. In writing about cross-cultural relationships I inevitably draw attention to an aspect of contemporary life in the 21st century.

Cross-cultural marriages are not unusual in Australian society yet they are seldom portrayed in its literature. When they are, they are subjected to ‘pressure’, as in Christopher Tsiolkas’s (2008) The Slap, or they end badly as in Brian Castro’s (2005) The Garden Book, in which the female character is second generation Australian-Chinese. It is a topic I would like to research further. In The Cultural Politics of Emotion, Sara Ahmed (2004) describes a discourse put forward by racist groups that ties femininity and reproduction with the reproduction of race. She argues that ‘[s]uch a narrative not only confirms heterosexual love as an obligation to the nation, but also constitutes mixed-race relationships as a sign of hate, as a sign of a willingness to contaminate the blood of the race. Making the nation is tied to making love in the choice of an ideal other (different sex/same race), who can allow the reproduction of the future generation (the white Aryan child)’ (124). In the UK where ‘the nation is imagined as an ideal through the discourse of multiculturalism’, that is, of “‘being” plural, open and diverse’ and ‘loving and welcoming to others’, Ahmed argues that the mixed race young woman’s beauty becomes an ideal in her ‘hybrid whiteness’ (136-70). She appears as a ‘fetish object’ while remaining ‘cut-off from any visible signs of inter-racial intimacy’ (137). Ahmed cites Robyn Weigman’s (2002) article, ‘Intimate publics: Race, property and personhood’ (n.12, 143) and the film, Made in America, which describes how reproductive technologies are made possible by the removal of the enactment of ‘literal interracial sex’ (Wiegman 2002: 873, cited in Ahmed 2004: 143). A further example of the way publishing conforms to certain forms of discursive domination is Terry Smith’s (2011) Contemporary Art: World Currents. In the Australian publication there is a photograph of a performance at the South African National Gallery, Cape Town, of Tracey Rose’s (2001) The Kiss. It depicts a muscular black man and a seemingly white woman enacting Rodin’s The Kiss. The cover was regarded as unacceptable for the United States edition and was replaced with an image of a Richard Serra sculpture. See at http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/artworks/terry-smith-on-the-contemporary/3607022 (Accessed 9 March 2014).

42 Cross-cultural marriages are not unusual in Australian society yet they are seldom portrayed in its literature.
century (just as hybridity was a focus of transnational writing in the late twentieth century). In writing about an Indonesian-Australian relationship I write in a liminal space that is between and across borders. And needless to say I am drawn to this subject by my own experience of a (failed) marriage to an Indonesian, perhaps a need to take responsibility for that failure, but also by my curiosity about what can make cross-cultural relationships successful or unsuccessful.43

This brings me again to the questions asked earlier in relation to this project. Is it possible to imaginatively write this character, Iwan, without succumbing to stereotype? What is at risk if I fail? Behind these doubts is the consensus that novelists in the twenty-first century ‘cannot plausibly claim ignorance of exoticism, stereotyping idealization, sexism or other forms of discursive domination that late twentieth-century anti-imperialism, feminism and identity politics made visible’ (Black 2010: 7). While such understanding may have contributed to a present ‘diminished confidence that an individual can easily put himself or herself in the place of another’, Shameem Black (2010) argues for the necessity of asking, ‘At the turn of the new millennium, might it be possible to imagine another without doing violence to one’s object of description?’ (Black 2010: 1). She adds, ‘Why do we so often act as if it is easier, or better, to represent ones’ own world than to imagine the world of another? Why do we assume that we can necessarily tell the two apart?’ (19).

Black borrows Donna Haraway’s concept of ‘significant otherness’ to descriptively ‘indicate many kinds of possible alterity’ and to envision encounters that ‘are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures’ (3). In such literary works ‘ethics connotes not behavioural codes, dogma or a singular idea of the good but instead illuminates how literary works grapple with problems that pervade a world of competing values’ (3). By ethics, Black wants to ‘signal the workings of an ethos of responsibility to one’s object of inquiry, a responsibility opposed to hegemonic domination and representational violence’ (3), and she explores how ‘a body of “border-crossing fiction” published after 1980 ‘speaks to this challenge’ while offering a better understanding of the ethics of ‘an open field of possible emancipatory alternatives whose contours are continually being imagined’ (2). In this ‘utopian ideal’, she argues, such fiction is defined by two criteria:

[F]irst it foregrounds a dramatic dissonance between the subject and object of representation; second, it seeks to surmount these productions of social difference. Border-crossing fiction therefore embraces the challenge of representation with an intensity that surpasses the general concern with alterity that preoccupies fiction at large (Black 2010: 2-3).

The principles Black proposes as underlying an ethics of representing others and allowing the emergence of ‘emancipatory practices’ are ‘crowded selves’ and ‘crowded styles’. Crowded selves are where an ‘expansive concept of selfhood helps visualize a subject that is always already multiple, flexible, and open to future metamorphosis … [one who] expands to include diverse, sometimes contradictory, and occasionally even threatening points of view’ (47). In invoking the crowd with all its associations of danger, utopian visions, the pleasure of social action, social capital, power, energy and aspiration, Black highlights their role in compelling ‘their members to recognise the palpable presence of strangers’ (48). For her, ‘What makes literary forms “crowded” … is their ability to embody an openness toward difference and a sensitivity toward the specter of hegemonic representation and ideological constraint’ (52).

One way scholars, and, I would argue, novelists also, can open themselves to what they study ‘is by reflexively [submitting] their method to critical scrutiny’ (Said 1978/1995/2003: 327). As Said argues, this requires them to have ‘a direct sensitivity to the material before them, and then a continual self-examination of their methodology and practice, a constant attempt to keep their work responsive to the material and not to a doctrinal preconception’ (327, emphasis added). A further way of achieving this is by maintaining an awareness of other disciplines and recognising the powerful political and ideological realities informing all scholarship today.

In my earliest ‘conversations’ with Said I had a strong feeling he was saying ‘Don’t do it. Don’t even try and write this character unless you want to be just another Orientalist!’ But I think there has been a fusion of horizons because in my latest readings I note that at the conclusion to Orientalism he states: ‘Positively, I do believe […] that enough is being done today in the human sciences to provide the contemporary scholar with insights, methods, and ideas that could dispense with racial, ideological, and imperialist stereotypes’ (Said 1987, 2003: 328). And so, as part of challenging my own preconceptions and enlarging my own understanding, I have been reading across many disciplines.

Fear of failure

Failure is the issue that haunts me as I write; the fear that the novel I am writing will not match up to my vision of it or meet my imagined reader’s expectations. That it might be found to be ethically and aesthetically wanting. Shameful, embarrassing. That the whole thing will be an excruciating disaster that should never have been undertaken in the first place. But what is failure? And is it such a bad thing? For art theorist, Lisa Le Feuvre (2010), failure can be a form of resistance. It is ‘part of all our lives’, ‘endemic to the creative act’, ‘a wormhole through which one can travel to the past’, ‘a process predicated on engagement’. It is, she argues, ‘in the gap between intention and realisation’ that failure in artistic practice has the potential to ‘embrace possibility’. Although an enduring theme explored in literature as well,
Le Feuvre argues that in art there is a history of failure that makes it integral and central to ‘the complexities of artistic practice and its resonance with the surrounding world’ (12). While holding a special place as a ‘source of productive and generative drive’ at the edge of play, experiment, and creation, ‘[t]he paradox … is that one cannot set out to fail, because the evaluation process of success – as measured by failure – becomes relevant’ (12). In art, failure’s ‘special currency’, therefore, is linked to its potential to challenge prejui
dgments and assumptions:

Artists have long turned their attention to the unrealizability of the quest for perfection, or the open-endedness of experiment, using both dissatisfaction and error as means to rethink how we understand our place in the world. The inevitable gap between the intention and realization of an artwork makes failure impossible to avoid. This very condition of art-making makes failure central to the complexities of artistic practice and its resonance with the surrounding world. Through failure one has the potential to stumble on the unexpected … To strive to fail is to go against the socially normalized drive towards ever increasing success. In Samuel Beckett’s words: ‘To be an artist is to fail as no other dare fail’ (Le Feuvre 2010: 12).

Failure encourages the artist to break through assumptions and old certainties, to step outside the bounds of the known and the recognisable, and to welcome the unexpected. It is, Le Feuvre acknowledges, ‘an uncertain and beguiling space’, but one that refuses ‘dogma and surety’ (19). As the artist John Baldessari teaches, ‘Art comes out of failure. You have to try things out. You can’t sit around, terrified of being incorrect, saying “I won’t do anything until I do a masterpiece”’ (cited in Le Feuvre 2010: 14). If failure is shifted away from ‘merely being a category of judgement’, it can propel the artist to raise ‘searching questions’ and create ‘open systems’ because ‘without the doubt that failure invites, any situation becomes closed and in danger of becoming dogmatic’ (17).

This kind of thinking encourages me to consider whether, in writing the cross-cultural novel, shame and the fear of failure might be embraced as productive aspects of my relationship to the text I am writing. That is, that they become part of the conversation in which I listen, make judgements, and be prepared to have my prejudgements (horizons) challenged. This also suggests, in the ongoing process of reflexive and critical scrutiny and questioning that goes into the writing, the necessity of harnessing not just the fear of failure, but also the shame that arises in relation to it.

Embarrassment is a natural response to failure: you want to disappear when it happens, when the world looks at you and judges you for failing. What, though, if being embarrassed is not so bad after all? We all embarrass ourselves frequently.

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yet it is *fear* of the judgement of our failures that endures (Le Feuvre 2010: 17, emphasis added).

Le Feuvre focuses on ‘failure’s potential for experimentation’, beyond assumptions of what is known, its relationship to creative and critical thinking, and its links to ‘artists’ roles as active agents, seeking new forms of rupture, new delineations of space within contemporary experience’ (19). Paraphrasing Wittgenstein, she concludes: ‘often it is worth considering that the deepest failures are in fact not failures at all’ (19). Or, as Gertrude Stein put it, ‘A real failure does not need an excuse. It is an end in itself.’
Chapter 3

Eye Sea: On Indonesian-Australian cross-cultural encounters and engagement

Eye Sea: Mbah Ahmat Raji and Nanny
Acrylic, pastel and chalk on canvas, 150 cm x 180 cm

From a distance the marine grey beauty and shades of Eye Sea: Mbah Ahmat Raji and Nanny (2012) draw the attention. There is simultaneous movement and calm stillness. You move forward, read the label, stand back – and that’s when you see ‘the eyes’. As Monika Proba (2012) states in the exhibition catalogue:

In *Eye Sea*, by drawing her Indonesian grandfather’s eyes on one side of the canvas and her Australian grandmother’s eyes on the other, and then fusing them in the middle, Ida

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attempts to create her own genealogical portrait. In this piece metaphor meets representation on one level. By a subtle game with the viewer the artist inserts a personal and temporal complexity within the image. *Eye Sea* is the multiple character of cultural heritage in which the artist constantly tries to learn to locate herself in a portrait yet to be accomplished. *Eye Sea* when read ‘I See’ is a self-portrait of Ida Lawrence here and now, a portrait of an artist who is to some extent already formed by two countries, two languages and two families (Proba 2012: 7).

The painting draws the eye in a swirl of seeing. Eyes, it is said, are the ‘window to the soul’, a bridge between the internal and the external, the link to just one of the senses we use to respond to and interpret the world. The eyes, their shape and colour, can also shape identity by becoming a mark of inclusion, difference, or a target like the colour of skin for ‘othering’ or exclusion. While the eyes are seen, they are also seeing. The viewer looks at the painting that is the eyes, and the eyes look back at the viewer, as in a mirror. What do they see? The viewer is turned back on herself, seeing herself through the eyes of the painting. If eye contact is important to communicating in a culture, it can also register disrespect or forwardness in others, especially where two people are in an unequal relationship. The ‘all-seeing eye’ – could be god(s), goddess(es), or ancestors – seeing, judging. The shape of the eyes marks what is strange, exotic, different or familiar. The artist sees, and is seen. In the self-portrait, the artist seems to be accepting emotionally, what is genetic, but also what may be strange and different or even exotic to the seeing eye of these two ancestors when they view the other. By bringing them together the artist introduces them to each other and to the viewer. Here is hospitality and welcome. By inviting the viewer to ‘see’ them individually, and to see their presence in her, she is simultaneously embodying her own sense of identity and performing not just her own loving acceptance of their presence, but proclaiming it.

The sea is a source of food, trade and life. A constantly moving fluid thing whose tides and currents are affected by the moon’s gravitational pull. Water is associated with the emotions and the unconscious, and the sea is a familiar trope when describing emotions: ‘all at sea’ (bewildered, confused), ‘going overseas’ (leaving home and what is familiar), ‘at sea in a leaky boat’. The painting resonates with emotion which in turn resonates in the viewer.

In sum, the sea is a symbol of the dynamism of life. Everything comes from the sea and everything returns to it. It is a place of birth, transformation and rebirth. With its tides, the sea symbolizes a transitory condition between shapeless potentiality and formal reality, an ambivalent situation of uncertainty, doubt and indecision which can end well or ill. Hence the sea is an image simultaneously of death and of life (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1994/1996: 838).

For many centuries the sea has been the conduit for cosmopolitan encounter and trade around the Indonesian archipelago and beyond (to China, India and Arabia), bringing its seafarers and traders into contact with foreign lands and visitors, goods and produce, religions, ideas and
technologies. Long before the arrival of Europeans, the islands of the archipelago and the large island called Australia were linked by seafaring, fishing and trading visits to Australia’s northern coastline by Indonesian fishermen from Macassar (present day Sulawesi) and the southernmost Indonesian island of Rote.47

The two countries have markedly different geographies and social and cultural histories. One is a large landmass with a population of 22 million and a vast desert at its heart, and the other is an archipelago of more than 18,000 islands, more than 922 of which are permanently inhabited.48 Indonesia has a population of 237.6 million people that includes over 300 cultural and language groups and one island alone, Java, supports more than 110 million people on rich volcanic soils. Australia was inhabited for tens of thousands of years before the arrival in the late 18th century of convicts from Britain’s overflowing prisons and their guards. It was colonised by the British and its Indigenous population was overpowered and almost completely decimated in some places. In Indonesia Dutch colonisers brutally exploited its peoples, resources and wealth for 300 years.

Both achieved nation status in the 20th century: Australia in 1901, Indonesia in 1945 (declared by the UN in 1949) after half a century of nationalist struggle. Australia retained a British Queen as its head of state, Indonesia is a republic; the one is now a democracy after 32 years of dictatorship, the other a parliamentary democracy. Australia’s population is largely monolingual and the lingua franca is English; Indonesia’s is multilingual with some 737 living languages used alongside Indonesian, its national language. While both promote religious choice, civil society in Australia is underpinned by Judeo-Christian culture (e.g. only Christian public holidays are recognised) and in Indonesia, which is the largest Muslim-majority nation in the world, affiliation to one of six official state religions – Islam, Hindu, Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist and Confucian – is obligatory.

Ma – ‘cut-continuance’ and the space-time between

In this chapter I explore little-known interactions between Indonesians and Australians with a view to Indonesian agency and to opening up a ‘space between’ – that is, different ways of seeing and thinking about the other. In a chapter titled ‘Thinking through the gap’ Snodgrass and Coyne (2006) draw on the concept of the first Chinese character ma in the compound mado (madōri ‘grasping space’ is the Japanese word for design) which ‘depicts the sun, hi, between the leaves of a two-leaved gate, mon’ (223). The ma is the ‘space between two objects in space or two events in time’ (233). It is ‘space-time’, a gap or pause that ‘divides and yet provides continuation’ (233).

47 Also spelled ‘Roti’. I follow Balint (2005) in using the spelling ‘Rote’ for this small island which is located south west of the south western tip of Timor, and ‘Rotenese’ for its inhabitants.

Ma has other nuances, brought out in compounds such as ningen […] meaning ‘human, humanity’ (in which gen is another reading of ma), combining the characters for ‘man’ or ‘human’ (hito) and ‘betweenness, among’ (ma). The implication conveyed by the compound is that to be human is to be among other people, in a space-time relationship of betweenness with others, in a space in which human interrelationships are acted out in time (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 224–5).

Ma is also conveyed in the term ‘cut-continuance’ (kire-tsuzuki) which is used in aesthetics to describe an element that simultaneously interrupts events in space or time, but also acts as a bridge’ (233). It is ‘the stop or pause in a sequence of actions or events’, for example, an interval, an interruption in the flow of a narrative, a rest in a melody, an actor’s pause for effect, or before delivery of a punch line (224). Take the Basho frog poem (224):

Furuike ya Old pond ya
Kawazu toblidomu frog jumps in
Mizue no oto. sound of water.

Here the ‘cut-syllable ya provides a pause that establishes the mood (quietness, tranquillity) of the first line of the poem, and at the same time leads into the contrasting part that follows’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 233). Like the fusion of horizons, it is a bridge across, similar to the function performed by the artist in Eye Sea.

The point of introducing the ma is for the insights it might offer when considering the relationship between Australia and Indonesia. So, if we were to imagine Indonesia and Australia standing against one another as the leaves of the gate of ma, then the ‘gap between them is a place of rupture, but it is precisely in the rift between oppositions that the light of understanding may glimmer’ (239). It is in that space-between that the sun shines, and that ‘[s]pace is said to shine brilliantly’ (230). In the same way the following texts offer a space-time gap in our view of Australia looking at Indonesia and vice versa: Ratih Hardjono’s (1993) White Tribe of Asia: An Indonesian View of Australia, Jan Lingard’s (2008) Refugees and Rebels: Indonesian Exiles in Wartime Australia, Ruth Balint’s (2005) Troubled Waters: Borders, Boundaries and Possession in the Timor Sea. The texts play out what has gone before and, by re-covering and preserving memory, illuminate present and future possibilities of engagement.49

49 Snodgrass and Coyne (2006) note that the metaphor of ‘the sun shining between the leaves of the gate of ma is the light of ākāsha, metaphorically identified with the light of emptiness (kûkô …)’ (230). They cite Coomaraswamy in R Lipsey (ed.) (1977), Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers: 1: Traditional Art and Symbolism, (Bolingen Series, Princeton: Princeton University Press). Coomaraswamy reveals the use of ma as a Sun Door in many myths where the ‘leaves of the door stand for the “pairs of opposites” or “contraries” of whatever sort, between which those who seek Awakening must pass, thus surpassing antinomies and attaining the light of Wisdom’ (Snodgrass and Coyne, 2006: 230). It is also seen in the gunungan – the Indonesian Tree of Life shadow play puppet.

But before discussing these texts, I want to return to the Monash Annual Lecture Series No. 21 on *Representations of Indonesia in Australia* (Mobini-Kesheh 1998), in which Dewi Anggraeni (1998) draws attention to texts that have portrayed Indonesia in negative terms. Anggraeni argues that negative perceptions of ‘Asians’ as enemies stem from a ‘collective [Australian] inability … to perceive Asians as different nations’. One example of this is where they group Indonesians, Japanese and other Asians in one basket and Australians and Europeans in another (Anggraeni 1998: 51). She then identifies some events that have compounded negative views of Indonesia, for example, the Indonesian invasion of East Timor and the deaths of the journalists known as the Balibo Five in 1975.

Of Glenda Adams’ (1982) *Games of the Strong* and Blanche d’Alpuget’s (1980) *Monkeys in the Dark*, she concludes that the latter stands out because of its ‘humanness and honesty. Ugliness and beauty unselfconsciously intermingle in the movement of the story. … everyone, Indonesian or Australian characters, falls between the continuum of utter selfishness and extreme altruism’ (53). She concludes:

> It is not my place to exhort more representation of Indonesia in Australian literature. In works of fiction, representation of anything has to come from within the author’s subconscious, brought to the surface in his or her creation. Neither is it my place to judge whether the representation is accurate or not. A story is formed in the author’s consciousness from his or her subliminal perception. What is red for one author might be green for another. I can only hope that more authors are sufficiently impressed by Indonesia to incorporate it in their creation (Anggraeni 1998: 53).

At the same event Adrian Vickers (1998) asked whether Indonesianist scholars have a case to answer in terms of their own fields of study and in dealing with their own preconceptions:

> What in our own conscious and unconscious desires may be realised in studying Indonesia? Where do we draw the line between the ‘academic’ and the ‘popular’? It is easy enough for us to comment on good or bad views of Indonesia in the ill-defined popular Australian imagination, and to see elements of racism, sexism or glorification of war in writers such as C. J. Koch (McKernan 1985). But Koch, d’Alpuget, and a host of other writers and cultural producers are dealing with the same problems that face us (Vickers 1998: 28-9).

For Vickers and others at that conference, the election of the Howard Government in 1996, and the discourse that followed around race, as well as revisions of Australia’s relationship within the Asia Pacific, dispelled any hopes that Australian views towards Indonesia were

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52 The Balibo Five was a group of five television journalists who were in Balibo, East Timor, during incursions by the Indonesian Army prior to its full-scale invasion in 1975. The men were killed on 16 October. The Indonesian government alleged they were caught in the crossfire but in 2007 an Australian coroner found they had been killed by Indonesian special troops.
changing. He argued that it was time for scholars to address this issue as a responsibility and to ‘examine the way hierarchies of knowledge are created’.  

In this chapter I bring into focus narratives about the Indonesian–Australian relationship that have fallen from view, but which present aspects of their shared histories that have not been captured in Australian novels or short stories set in Indonesia. My aim is to draw attention to aporias in our vision of the relationship. These non-fiction texts bring into focus scenes that are not widely known or imagined, but which have the capacity to enlarge our horizons and inform the present with new understandings.

**Australia through Indonesian eyes**

Ratih Hardjono (1993) is the daughter of an Indonesian father and an Australian mother and was born and received her early education in Bandung in West Java. A graduate of Sydney University, she worked as Australian correspondent for Indonesia’s largest circulation newspaper, the Jakarta daily *Kompas*, from 1986 until 1992. In *White Tribe of Asia: An Indonesian View of Australia* Hardjono attempts to explain to Indonesian readers why Australians ‘still feel apprehensive about Asians’.

Asian migrants remind Australians of the fact that they are themselves newcomers, if their arrival on this continent is seen in the context of the past several thousand years of Asian history. Thus in reality it is the Australians who are ‘out of place’ in this ‘brown and black’ part of the globe. … [and] this gives rise to a certain psychological anxiety that is reflected in their whole way of thinking (Hardjono 1993: 89).

To justify beginning her book prior to 1788 and with the Aborigines, Hardjono added this note to the English edition.

Most Australians probably believe that their history began in 1788, when the country was founded as a British colony. However, my Indonesian readers have a much longer sense of history: two centuries is not long when viewed from their perspective. … While some Australians may not understand this approach, I feel that it provides an important path toward understanding Australia and Indonesia and so toward better relations between our two countries (viii–ix).

Hardjono acknowledges the ‘strong awareness of the land’ for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians and attributes this to both the influence of the Indigenous people, their land-related legends and myths, and the country’s reliance on grazing and mining (142). She argues that

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53 ‘Now that we have bumbled back to the 1950s language of security from the dubious certainties of the Hawke-Keating view of Asia … [w]e could begin by distrusting our own motives as well as those of other Australians who write about Asia. Such a hermeneutics of suspicion would lead us to examine the way hierarchies of knowledge are created … We have not even started examining our modes of knowledge as social knowledge… Moving the academy into the world of popular culture is one way to start doing so’ (Vickers 1998: 29).

54 I include here texts published before 2000, which have been referenced in this and earlier chapters, as well as more recent texts, for example, Ruby Murray’s (2012) *Running Dogs*. In the latter, the main character is an Australian development worker who moves to Jakarta in 1997.
this connection with the land rather than the sea influences how Australians think and makes them inward-looking in their views and understanding of life. The land is imperative for survival, ‘for without it there is only the sea, whose management is impossible for survival purposes’ (142). While such internalisation may have been essential in order to survive the uncertainties of nature (crop failure and stock loss, erratic rainfall and periodic drought), it is something that is common to many cultures. However, in Javanese culture, this introspection represents a spiritual process that ultimately seeks a ‘balance between the inner and outer worlds’ (143), and this, she argues, brings Aboriginal communities and beliefs closer to the Javanese because they occur within a ‘group or community, and [include] strong relations with the earth and the spirit world’ (144).

For Hardjono, Australia’s geographical location distinguishes it from other Western nations in two ways. Firstly because it is surrounded by sea and secondly because its location contributes to a sense of being out of place in the world:

Its geography, which makes it Eastern, and its cultural roots, which make it Western, have given rise to a sense of ‘otherness’ in Australia’s perception of itself. Development of the Australian national identity is closely related to this concept of otherness, and the country has been trying to find a place in the Asia-Pacific region acceptable both to the Australian nation and the other nations of the region (177).

The challenge for Australia therefore involves a shift in perception because in the past its ‘perception of neighbouring Asian countries has been that of a colonial country that lacked colonial power’ (145).

In a concluding chapter titled ‘Where to Now, Australia?’ Hardjono argues that Australian culture – in 1992 – was becoming more open and was ‘abandoning an attitude of fear and uncertainty about neighbouring Asian countries in favour of a desire to be part of that region’ (223). As evidence she cites an increased emphasis on the teaching of Asian languages like Indonesian, Chinese and Japanese in schools so that ‘[d]uring the next ten years Australian school pupils will have learned at least one Asian language by the time they leave school and Asian languages will be regarded as the normal thing everywhere in the country’ (224). As for its future in the region, she predicts an emerging Australia that will be ‘capable of relating to both the western and the eastern worlds without any uncertainty and will become a place that can accommodate both, permitting the flexibility of Asia to replace the stiffness of England’ (226).55

55 Unfortunately, as Vickers (1998) notes above, in 1996 the incoming Howard Government brought a resurgence of racist commentary largely articulated by Pauline Hanson and the One Nation Party. Such attitudes persist in relation to Indonesia, as the annual Lowy Institute polls (2005-2011) reveal, with the majority of Australians still uninformed about the country. See http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=1617 (Accessed January 2012). This is despite sixty years of Australian scholarship on Indonesia, and ABS figures that show Indonesia (notably Bali) is the second most popular holiday destination for Australians (after New Zealand).
Looking back twenty years to when Hardjono was writing this, one wonders at her optimism regarding Australia’s future capacity to engage with Indonesia in a meaningful, informed and more equitable way. In fact, over the two decades Indonesian and Asian language studies have declined to such an extent that in schools at least, there may be no students studying Indonesian in Year 12 by the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{56} In the past decade alone, perceptions of Indonesia as a dangerous place have been fuelled by uninformed media and government travel advisory warnings put in place in 2002 after the Bali bombings and not lifted until 2012.\textsuperscript{57} While fears, distrust and ignorance about Indonesia persist, relations between the two countries have been further strained by ongoing Australian political rhetoric over border security and the ‘turn back’ of boats bearing asylum seekers.

But Australians haven’t always been so unwelcoming of refugees. And despite fears of ‘Asian invasion’ apparently being confirmed in the 1940s – with the Japanese bombing of Darwin and the discovery of Japanese midget submarines in Sydney Harbour in 1942 – the decade also bore witness to the offer of hospitality to more than 5000 Indonesian refugees. Their accommodation involved many encounters at all levels of Australian society between the refugees and ordinary Australians, politicians, political activists, civil libertarians, and trade unionists. It exemplified a cosmopolitan ‘reaching out across cultural differences through dialogue, aesthetic enjoyment, and respect; of living together with difference. … the cosmopolitan right to abode and hospitality in strange lands and alongside that, the urgent need to devise ways of living together in peace in the international community’ (Werbner 2008: 2).\textsuperscript{58}

**Indonesian exiles in wartime Australia**

Between 1942 and 1947 the Curtin Labor Government gave temporary refuge to some 10,000 Dutch, Eurasian and Indonesian men, women and children from the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) after the archipelago was captured by the Japanese.\textsuperscript{59} The refugees included 5416

\textsuperscript{56} Fewer Year 12 Australian students (1100) now study Indonesian than in 1972 (1190). This is despite a nine million increase in population (from 13 million in 1972) and the availability of cheaper travel that would make in-country studies a worthwhile option.

\textsuperscript{57} On 25 May 2010, 130 specialists and stakeholders from business, the arts, government, academia and the health and development areas gathered in Parliament House, Canberra at the Asialink Asia Society National Forum, *Mapping Our Future in the Asian Century*, ‘to focus on what the “Asian Century” means in geo-strategic, economic and cultural terms and what this means for Australia’. In its Final Report, Dr Malcolm Cook, Lowy Institute Program Director for East Asia, told the group, ‘When we asked Australians a couple of years ago how they viewed Indonesia, it was as though they had been under a rock for ten years. So many still thought it was controlled by the military and was a threat to Australia’ (Asialink Asia Society, 2010: 26). While Cook acknowledged that in ‘our relationship with Indonesia in particular, popular misconceptions – an unwarranted anxiety and hostility – were a great concern’ (10), he attributed this situation somewhat to the collapse of Asian Studies in Australian schools, and the decline of Indonesian language studies in particular.


\textsuperscript{59} After relocating to Australia, the NEI administration and governing council established the Netherlands East Indies Commission for Australia and New Zealand whose role was to coordinate the Dutch war effort in the Pacific, manage NEI property, collaborate on NEI reconstruction, shipping and civil aviation, and establish an information service (NIGIS) to disseminate publicity and propaganda within Australia and in the NEI.
Indonesians who were merchant seamen, sailors in the Royal Netherlands Navy, members of the Royal Netherlands Indies Army and its military aviation division, air force cadets, clerical workers, domestic servants and civilian refugees, and a group of political prisoners and their families (Lingard 2009: 10). Over five years, Australians welcomed the Indonesians into their homes, offered practical assistance, shared cultural experiences, and some even learned Indonesian.

Jan Lingard’s (2009) Refugees and Rebels: Indonesian Exiles in Wartime Australia documents the relationships formed, the impressions, the emerging strength and organisation of the Indonesian independence movement in Australia, as well as the often fractious relationship between the Australian Government and the NEI’s government-in-exile. Lingard’s polyphonic text draws on newspaper accounts, official documents, photographs, and includes interviews with political activists and trade unionists, women who married Indonesians and accompanied them back to Indonesia, and families who were actively involved with the refugees in country towns and cities.

Dutch colonial rule in the NEI involved widespread and sustained exploitation of land and labour, especially in Java, and produced enormous profits and wealth for The Netherlands and poverty for the Javanese. By the early twentieth century some key independence movements had begun to emerge. Their ‘initial aims were principally to influence the colonial government to address the grievances of the people and improve their material welfare’ (62), but during the 1930s the Dutch response to calls for a free Indonesia were harsh and ringleaders were imprisoned or sent into exile. Many were shipped to a mass internment camp at Tanah Merah, an isolated spot 450 km upriver from the mouth of the crocodile infested Digul River at Merauke in Dutch New Guinea. Internees’ families were encouraged to accompany them and by 1930 the camp had 2000 occupants including 1308 internees (67). Conditions in the camp were grim but as Lingard comments, ‘The inmates represented a virtual “Who’s Who” of the nationalist movement. A notable absentee was Sukarno, who was incarcerated elsewhere, but Sjahrir and Hatta were both sent there in 1935, along with other prominent nationalists from a variety of parties’ (69).

After Japanese bombing raids on the area in January 1943 the Dutch evacuated 523 political prisoners and their families to Australia. While civilians were disembarked in Mackay, where they settled in well with the local community, the so-called ‘dangerous criminals’, including men women and children, were sent to Cowra prisoner-of-war camp where they suffered

60 Including, for example, the SI (The Islamic Union) and the PKI (The Communist Party of Indonesia). In 1926 and 1927 Indonesian Communist Party (PKI)-inspired rebellions were violently repressed by the Dutch and by 1928 secular nationalist parties such as the PNI (Indonesian Nationalist Party), as well as other nationalist parties, began to emerge.

61 Sukarno served a year in prison in 1931 and was exiled to Ende in Flores in 1933. Hatta and Sjahrir were moved from Boven Digul to Bandaneira in Maluku in 1936 and from there to Sukamuni in West Java in 1942.
terribly from the cold conditions and unfamiliar diet before being released. The effect of the evacuation was that a significant group of experienced Indonesian political activists were free to pursue the nationalist agenda and form strong links with trade unions, and civil liberties and social justice groups including the Communist Party of Australia.

The story of the Indonesians in Australia and those who worked with them unfolds like a thriller in Lingard’s account. As the NEI positioned itself to regain control of its colony, the nationalists’ revolutionary spirit began to ignite a common cause of independence with Indonesians living in Melbourne, Casino, Mackay, Sydney, Brisbane, Toowoomba and Helidon. After the Japanese surrender, the Indonesian nationalist leaders made a declaration of independence from the Dutch on 17 August 1945 and so began Indonesian plans in Australia to ‘defend’ the proclamation. From that point, ‘[a] foreign revolution was about to be fought in part on Australian soil’ (122). While NEI soldiers began responding to calls to defy the Dutch and disobey orders, Indonesian leaders sought the assistance of Australian individuals and organisations to run a national and international propaganda campaign in support of the Republican cause.

[T]he contacts and relationships between some individuals and groups of Australians and Indonesians began to take on a more political character. These Australians found themselves involved and allied with Asians in their struggle for Independence against a European colonial power. Before the war, such an alliance and such mateship would have been unimaginable. The slogan and rally cry of the Indonesian nationalist movement everywhere was Merdeka – freedom … It was a word that now became familiar to and frequently used by many of the Australians who supported the Indonesians (143).

A large number of Australians became directly involved in this extraordinary period of engagement in the Indonesian struggle for independence. For example, on 21 September 1945 in Brisbane, eighty-five merchant sailors walked off the Bontekoe, a ship belonging to Dutch company KPM, and set off a four-year Waterside Workers’ ban against all Dutch shipping of administrators, personnel and equipment as well as relief supplies and medicines to Indonesia. As the Waterside Workers Federation and the Seamen’s Union pledged to prevent interference in the new Indonesian government and support just pay and conditions on ships, the Chifley Government found itself under intense pressure from The Netherlands, the media and the Opposition to back away from its commitment to ensuring the safe repatriation of Indonesians, including striking seamen, to nationalist held ports in Indonesia.

62 Of the 500 Indonesian prisoners at Cowra, at one stage 130 were hospitalised due to measles and flu epidemics, and nine (4 children, 2 women and 3 men) died before the Red Cross made representations for them to be released.

63 Indonesian Independence Committees (KIM) were established in Sydney, Mackay and Melbourne with ex-Digulists as leaders, and the Central Committee known as CENKIM was based in Brisbane (Lingard 2008: 121)

64 This history has been explored in documentaries by the Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens (Indonesia Calling, 1946) and Australian John Hughes (Indonesia Calling: Joris Ivens in Australia, 2009), and in texts and articles by, among others, Rupert Lockwood (1982) and Heather Goodall (2008, 2012).
By involving Australians with the wider world – and with its near neighbours as hosts, trade unionists, political activists, politicians, partners and friends – these events challenged the basis of the White Australia Policy. Due to the efforts and commitment of the Australian Labor Party which was in power under Prime Ministers Curtin and Chifley, all Indonesians were safely repatriated to nationalist controlled areas. By the time sovereignty was transferred to the Republic of the United States of Indonesia on 27 December 1949, the conservative Menzies Government had inherited a friendly relationship with Indonesia (276).

While elements of the Australian media and some politicians were sometimes overtly racist in their opinions of Indonesians, significant person-to-person relationships were forged that have been sustained to the present day (278): ‘At the grassroots level many Australians and Indonesians enjoyed friendships which widened the intellectual and cultural horizons of both. For the majority of them it would have been the first time they had mixed as equals with people of different skin colour, instead of in the master/servant, superior/subordinate roles that had been the norm for whites and non-whites in each of their societies’ (278).

At the personal level, Indonesian and Australians tend to get on well together, despite the ethnic, cultural, religious, social, political, linguistic and all the other differences between them. They visit each other’s countries, study each other’s languages, marry each other, enjoy cultural, educational and sporting exchanges and engage in business, trade, tourism … On the other hand the extreme and irrational reactions of some Australians after the guilty verdict in the Schapelle Corby Case in May 2005 are an example of how fragile those links can be in a situation where Australians’ opinions of Indonesia are based on ignorance and emotions whipped up by irresponsible media (278).

What comes across most strongly in Lingard’s book is the superior political nous of the refugees and their astute capacity to organise themselves in a situation where the NEI was constrained by Australian law from acting against them. From the time of the first seamen strikes, the Indonesians proved adept at gaining support. At the international level their wartime presence also contributed to Australian support for Indonesian independence at the United Nations. Perhaps forty Australian women married Indonesians and returned with their husbands to Indonesia. Many were condemned by their families and some marriages lasted while others didn’t. As Lingard concludes, while the extent of Australian support for the Republic may have been ‘exaggerated ever since by both countries’, the coming of the Indonesians to Australia ‘had an important impact on Australia’s own process of maturing in the post-war world’ (Lingard 2009: 282).

This was the first time many Australians involved themselves directly in wider issues, shaking off their previous xenophobic mentality, looking outwards to their own region of

65 For example, from Australian unions, newspaper editors, non-government organisations, civil liberties groups, the Communist Party of Australia, Labor Prime Ministers and members of parliament on both sides, bureaucrats and police.
the world with something different from the usual fear of the ‘yellow peril’ and invasion theories, and actually engaging with Asian people, with the ‘other’, and challenging the racialism embodied by the White Australia Policy. When the dust settled, Australians and Indonesians had irrevocably become part of each others’ histories (Lingard 2009: 282).66

Trouble in Australian-Indonesian encounters at sea

Within the Asia Pacific region, anthropologist Robert Werbner (2007) argues for recognition of the ‘global age’ in which we live while at the same time maintaining a ‘deeply considered regard for what has been the historicity, the longue durée in the fluid Asia Pacific, of cosmopolitanism itself’ (xi). As far as Australia’s relationship with Indonesia goes, this notion of the longue durée is particularly relevant for shifting the gaze beyond the time frame of European colonisation in the region. It is what Ruth Balint (2005) achieves in Troubled Waters: Borders, Boundaries and Possession in the Timor Sea.67

Contacts between Indonesians and Indigenous Australians date back centuries. For about 200 years until 1910, Makassarese from present day South Sulawesi and the Australian Yolngu people from Northeast Arnhem Land came together each year when the former arrived to fish for trepang (sea cucumber). They sailed their prahu on the trade winds to the Arnhem Land coast and north-west coast of the Kimberly to fish for some months before making the return journey home on the trade winds. Javanese were also recruited as indentured labourers in the nineteenth century to work in the sugar cane industry in Northern Queensland with 900 employed by CSR in 1886, although numbers declined in the early 1900s (Lingard 2009: 2). Others worked in the pearling industry and remained in the country until they were repatriated to Indonesia after World War II.

Balint interviewed Rote Island fishermen (largely from the fishing village of Papela) who, as their ancestors have for centuries, earn a living by fishing the waters, reefs and islands of the Timor Sea for trepang, shark fin and other fish to trade in Asia. The fishermen’s ‘troubles’ are directly related to Australia’s maritime border expansions over the past century, but particularly after 1979 when, assuming the principle of mare nullius, Australia pressed a claim for a 200 nautical mile fishing zone that took its borders to within 80 nautical kilometres of this small southernmost island of Indonesia.

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66 As well as the Indonesian political organisations formed during 1944 and 1945, young Australians began forming organisations as a means of learning about and becoming more involved with Indonesians. Molly Warner (Bondan) was a key instigator of the Australia-Indonesia Association (AIA) on 3 July 1945. As well as declaring support for Indonesian self-determination, its aims were to promote ‘an interest in Asia through culture and education’ and ‘to offer opportunities for Australians to meet Indonesians and cultivate friendly, cultural, social and trading relations’. AIA activities included lectures, publications, cultural performances and academic, technical, student, sporting, and cultural exchange (Lingard 2008: 114). These activities led to Molly Warner (Bondan) being placed under Australian security surveillance.

67 Balint’s (2005) book is based on her documentary, Troubled Waters, as well as a history PhD thesis. It made a lasting impression when I first saw it at the Sydney Film Festival where it won Best Documentary 2002. In 2003 the manuscript was the first non-fiction work to win the prestigious Australian Vogel Literary Award.
As a result, with the stroke of lines on a map, Rote fishermen became ‘invaders’ to be evicted and ‘criminals’ to be gaed and fined for straying into ‘Australian’ waters. Hundreds have been picked up and imprisoned for weeks and even years in Australian gaols and, in Troubled Waters, Balint interviews them about the often tragic effects this has had on them and their families. She also interviews Australians who bear witness to their claims of injustice.

Australia’s first legislated border was the quarantine line, ‘a boundary three nautical miles out to sea that stretched around the entire periphery of the continent. Three nautical miles was based on the European “cannon-shot rule” … the artillery range at which states could enforce their sovereignty at the time of its creation in 1908’ (33). The legislation was ‘a political but also a profoundly symbolic act’ which reflected fears of invasion as well as an obsession with whiteness, cleanliness, purity, control and order. A little over a half a century later, however, the possibilities of fossil fuel riches under the continental shelf contributed to Australia’s declaration of an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extending 200 nautical miles from its coastline. As Balint puts it, while Australia’s claim of the continental shelf as an extension of its land mass gave it an extra 4.6 million square kilometres of sea mass and claim to billions of dollars in oil and gas reserves, it had devastating effects on both the Indonesian fishermen and the people of East Timor.68

For the East Timorese, it led to more than three decades of war and impoverishment because, in effect, ‘Jakarta gave up on its demands for a median line boundary to be drawn between the two nations. In return, it got concrete approval by Canberra for Indonesia’s annexation of East Timor [while] … Australia got the lion’s share of the [Timor] Gap’s resources’ (43, 47).69 For the Rotenese, it put their very survival at stake and many lost everything (boats, money, family, livelihood) after being picked up and held in Australian gaols. Yet, as Balint observes, ‘the fishermen know the contours and flows of these waters in ways to which the mapmakers, politicians and oil company executives are oblivious’ (48).

Balint examines the fishermens’ struggle with Australian laws and authorities and it is clear that it is an unequal one. The stories of the individual fishermen are heard alongside the views of their gaolers in the Northern Territory and Western Australia, fisheries departmental staff, newspaper reports, wider political debates. We learn of their early deaths, the trauma of incarceration, the denial of payment for work carried out in prison, and the risk to lives due to Australian laws that insist they use ‘traditional’ methods of fishing, and prevent them using


69 For example, Adrian Vickers (2006) notes that following the 1975 invasion of East Timor, the Indonesian military used that country to induct its officers in the tactics of repression: ‘This was where young officers were ‘blooded’ into a culture of torture and murder, where they learned to dispose of bodies and to eliminate potential opponents. ... By the mid-1970s, Suharto had become the national puppet master, using loyal military officers to crush his enemies, and distributing largesse to his family and supporters ... [the regime] made use of a modern form of domination ... where fear and aggrandisement made sure the regime held control of the nation’ (Vickers 2006: 167, 169-71).
motors or other forms of modern technology on their boats. Added to that are the debts they incur after being picked up in ‘Australian waters’. As the fisherman, Gani, says, ‘As far as the border between Australia and Indonesia is concerned, I can’t draw it. Because the sea has no borders’ (5); and another fisherman, Sadli Hudari Ardani, says ‘For fishermen like us, this map is nothing but a picture … Because there are no signs, no signs at sea’ (6). All the fishermen seem to be asking is that Australians be made aware of their plight.

Balint unmasks Australian responses and actions in the Timor Sea over the past 100 years, the consequent unfolding tragedy and threat to the livelihood of the Rotenese, and the realities of their seemingly futile, struggle for justice. In this unequal contest over borders and the sea’s riches she reveals a history that needs to be continuously ‘unhidden’.

One of the great myths of Australia’s maritime expansion [is] that the sea was empty and no one suffered from the loss of it. These are troubled waters. They have a bloody history. Sadli has a message for the Australian government and the Australian people: ‘Even though we differ by the colour of skin, our ethnicity and our economic levels, we are still all human beings. Please don’t make laws that hurt us fishermen. Because the only reason we go there [Ashmore Reef and the surrounding waters] is to go fishing. No other reason.’ His request is simple. He asks for ‘better understanding’ (152).

Borders, border protection and security remain central preoccupations in Australian political debate in the second decade of the twenty-first century and they are an ongoing primary obsession with Australia’s political leaders. Despite its obligations under international agreements to offer safe haven to asylum seekers, and despite polls that show a majority of Australians would like to see refugees processed onshore, both sides of politics have continued the refrain, ‘We will stop the boats’ and ‘We will decide who comes to this country’.

Interpersonal relationships and collaborations

Ratih Hardjono, Ruth Balint and Jan Lingard reveal stories, realities, testimonies, viewpoints, connections and attachments – close up and at a distance – that dissolve stereotypes and illustrate multiple and enduring encounters. They suggest instances of cultural, aesthetic and generous engagement, tolerance, respect, a healthy acceptance of heterogeneity and a blurring of borders and difference. At the same time, there have been instances of unbridled self interest on Australia’s part, particularly with regard to the demarcation of the border between the two countries and in the subsequent mistreatment of Rote Island fishermen deemed to have strayed into ‘Australian waters’.

Since Indonesia won independence in the mid-twentieth century, a steady stream of Australian scholars, activists, artists, musicians, film makers, journalists, travellers and students have
visited, lived in, and engaged with Indonesians and Indonesia. They sustain personal and professional relationships and some of these are described in *gang re:Publik – Indonesia-Australia Creative Adventures* (Crosby et al. 2008), a self-published anthology of the second community cultural development initiative and artist-led Gang Festival which was held in Pine Street Chippendale and other places in Sydney from November 2007 to May 2008.

The Gang Festival’s purpose was to celebrate the deep links between Indonesian and Australian community arts and its theme was taken from the Indonesian word *gang* (an alleyway or lane). Contributors – who included journalists, arts administrators, curators, visual artists, academics and researchers, performance artists and musicians, filmmakers, hiphop artists, and other Australians and Indonesians with longstanding relationships with each other – speak openly and personally about the challenges and joys of cross-cultural intersections. As well as the everyday practices and insights gained from collaborating with people with different styles of working, the participants document their openness to those differences, their willingness to work with and learn from one another, and the importance of having a shared sense of humour, having fun, making and improvising, loving.

As well as essays, memoirs, short stories, and impressionistic prose pieces, the anthology contains ‘the two of us’ (*dua-duanya*) type pieces in which couples describe how they manage cross-cultural personal or creative relationships. They do not shy away from naming the problems that arise and they discuss how they deal with them. In most instances the glue that binds them is a sense of shared values and vision for the relationship as well as generosity and willingness to listen and accommodate the other. Their commitment to finding new ways of making art with a social purpose means they often see themselves as ambassadors across cultures. For example, Indonesian musician Jabo says of his Australian partner, Sue:

> To me Sue is half Indonesian, half Australian. She is a cultural fighter. She has always supported my career. We set up Wot Cross-cultural Synergy in 1995 (promoting, producing cross cultural arts) to create a bridge between Australia and Indonesia. We are cultural ambassadors in each other’s countries (Crosby et al. 2008: 84).

In speaking about the relationship Sue says:

> Family is very important to Jabo and me … Our house in south Jakarta was a rehearsal space and a drop-in centre for artists, journalists and student activists. … It was also a fertile breeding ground for ideas, collaboration and grass roots response to repressive developments in the ’80s-’90s New Order era (85).

When Jabo’s attempts to continue his career as a musician in Australia languished, the couple was forced to compromise and this meant accepting that Jabo would live in Indonesia and

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70 For example, see Sobocinska’s (2012) account of the Volunteer Graduate Scheme (VGS) with Herb Feith as its first volunteer in Jakarta in 1951 (186 ff). Feith’s career as an Indonesianist is also described in Jemma Purdey’s (2011) biography.
follow his career in the band *Swami* while Sue and the children (now grown up) remained in Australia. Jabo says:

Right now I am here and they are there. I’m busy with my projects, going around villages, while Sue and I are dreaming up new ideas for Wot. I’m planting seeds in the hard soil. I’m hoping what I have done in the past will be useful for the future. I always say that giving is more important than receiving. Not everyone can pick the fruit and that’s OK (84).

In some cases, as with Andrew (a cofounder of EngageMedia) and Andan (ruangrupa), their collaboration raised issues to do with language and communication style. Ruangrupa was founded in 2000 by a group of artists in Jakarta to ‘challenge and inspire the relationships between art and politics’ (129). The two men collaborated in 2008 on Transmission Asia-Pacific, ‘a five-day camp where fifty-five tech and video activists from sixteen different countries gathered at Sukabumi, West Java, to share code and discuss ways to most effectively use online video as a social change tool’ (135). In the anthology they speak frankly about the issues that arose, for example, Andrew says:

Resolution [of the cultural tensions and problems that arose] is not necessarily the aim. There are issues that can’t be boiled down to a resolution. Culture is constantly conflicted and there is always friction between people. Power is continually being exchanged. That’s the cultural, political and social process that we’re part of and it doesn’t end. … Part of challenging the colonial relationship, that is made and re-made everyday, is to build different social relations in the here and now. That implies working together and finding ways to challenge that logic with the realisation that things will never be smooth. That smooth space just doesn’t exist (136).

For Andan it was still ‘hard to determine if the conference was a success or not. The format was good, but … it made it a bit difficult [for participants] … that the whole thing was run in English’. A further issue was that the two organisations were quite different in their focus and approach: ‘[ruangrupa is] an artist-run initiative that engages with our society through a wide range of contemporary visual arts practices. EngageMedia works directly for media democracy with video and free software as their tools. We both employ video technology to counter injustice, but our approach is not the same’ (138). Despite these challenges, Andan does not discount the possibility of future joint projects:

The relationship got a lot better through that collaboration. Sometimes we had different points of view about the things that happened, but we tried to understand each other afterwards. In the future, I hope I can still collaborate with him, as we already know each other and have developed a style of working together (138).

As well as documenting some remarkable art making collaborations, *gang re:Publik* does not shy away from the difficulties that can be encountered when working across cultures and artistic boundaries, and its participants speak openly about what they bring to the relationship
from their own cultural backgrounds and how that meshes or conflicts with what their partner/collaborator brings from theirs. Added to this are the individual personal choices to be made along the way. Of interest for arts practitioners are the essays about change and development in visual arts in Indonesia and the rise of the curator. In a perceptive article, ‘Towards an Intercultural Art Practice’, Angie Bexley (2008) interviews the Indonesian artist, Jon Priadi, an art and cultural worker, who travelled to Timor Leste one and a half years after the Timorese voted for independence from Indonesia. He stayed four years: ‘I learnt to speak their languages. I learnt about organising. In fact, the Timorese are much more organised than young Indonesians. From their time in the clandestine resistance, they had already organised cells of people, right down to village level for all sorts of matters. But to actually get access to these organisations is still difficult … We couldn’t just walk in there’ (114). When Bexley asks what he was aiming for, Jon Priadi describes an approach based on genuine dialogue:

Well, Timor is a postcolonial nation. It is trying to reconcile the cultural and social colonisation by the New Order [under the Suharto] regime – in much the same way Indonesia is – so together, we just try to make something new based on our foundations of where we are both coming from in terms of ethnicity, language, that sort of thing. We try to understand each other through our art production. We talk about the past but we spend a lot of time talking about the future. We try to make our futures together (Bexley 2008: 114).

Bexley is critical of the ‘celebratory pluralism implied within multiculturalism’ which ‘invokes a view of stagnant, packaged and separate “cultures”, each interacting with the other haplessly, effortlessly and then returning to our own bounded “culture”’ (112). She argues that the term ‘multiculturalism’, by suggesting that ‘cultures are distinct and remain unchanging over time’, ignores the fact that ‘cultures along with art systems, are dynamic entities’ (112).

Cultural purity is a myth. Culture survives because of reproductions and redeployment of practices from another time and place. Cultural systems in general exist and have meaning only as far as humans invoke and/or use them. … Cultures are what people make of them. The arts are often active forces in shaping ideals and social life. They do not always merely reflect, but can help make patterns of society and culture (Bexley 2008: 112).

Bexley argues that there is a need to think about the ‘deeper implications of multiculturalism and art production in Australia and abroad’ and suggests consideration of the possibilities of ‘interculturalism’ which she defines as ‘openness to the (ultimate) “Other”’ (114). While acknowledging that not everyone has the opportunity to work for four years in another

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71 Bexley (2008) defines the work of ‘interculturality’ as indicating ‘a context that … suggests movement between one culture and another, thus implying diacrony and the possibility of transformation. … At the heart of interculturality is a view of culture that is dynamic and the product of processes of interaction, not isolation’ (114-15). For a nuanced discussion of the term in the Canadian context see, for example, Taylor (2012), and also Nasar Meer and Tariq Modood (2012). In an Australian context Mansouri and Lobo (eds) (2011) prefer a framework of social inclusion that aims to move beyond ‘multiculturalism in one country’ in order to ‘recognise the multiplicity of local and global connections that situate us socially and spatially as ethnic minorities/majorities’ (2).
country, Bexley argues that Jon Priadi’s example demonstrates some key points about *intercultural* arts practice. Her first point is about difference: ‘multiculturalism suggests a neat pigeonhole approach to cultures; cultures fit side by side and if they must interact, they do so on an individual basis and return to their own cultures relatively untouched’. But, she asks, ‘What happens when we go beyond our comfort zones?’ (114).

Fear is an emotion linked to the unknown, to be outside of our comfort zone. It is common to feel scared of the things we do not know. But getting to know the ‘Other’ mitigates feelings of fear. But it does not end there. As Jon suggests, not all Timorese were welcoming to Indonesians coming into their country, particularly after the exit of the Indonesian military in 1999 that destroyed much of the country’s infrastructure and left much of the population without homes… (Bexley 2008: 114).

The main prerequisite for interculturality, she argues, is demonstrated by the Timorese youth whom Jon Priadi met and engaged with, that is, their ‘openness to an “Other”’. This is where one puts ‘at stake the prejudices of belonging to a certain cultural identity or group’ by ‘stepping into the unknown, without having a definite frame of reference for the work at hand. It means that we are forced to go outside of our own comfort zone and go without things we are used to’ (114). The work of interculturality ‘suggests movement between one culture and another, thus implying diachrony and the possibility of transformation’ and ‘places a strong emphasis on interaction, an exchange of ideas, and a quest for understanding’ (114-5). This view of culture is dynamic. It suggests interaction, but it is not about hybridity: ‘As Jon explains, the young Timorese are fluent in Indonesian subcultures and music genres, but they do not see themselves as hybrids. If you asked, they would tell you they are 100% Timorese’ (115).

There is much to commend in Bexley’s argument but it loses traction when she claims that interculturality ‘goes beyond seeing pluralist cultures and difference and begins to look at a future of sharing similarities’ and that it ‘is not so much about coming together to share “different” cultures but the making of a new one’ (Bexley 2008: 114). My concern about such an approach is that it could, as Snodgrass and Coyne (2006) argue, ‘occlude the deeper differences that might question our customary ways of thinking and enlarge our understanding’ of what cultural practice is and does (239).

As we have seen in this and earlier chapters, it is through genuine dialogue with an other – whether a person, text or culture – that we open ourselves to new understandings that unsettle pre-existing prejudices, make strange the familiar, and expand our horizons. Unlike Australian novels set in Indonesia, it is an important aspect of the above non-fiction texts that they call into question settled assumptions and unhide shared histories that provide a glimpse of truths
that lie beyond popular discourse. They open a window on aspects of the Australian-Indonesian relationship that are often missing from our day-to-day vision and discourse.

The *longue durée* of Australian-Indonesian relationship pre-exists European colonialism and settlement in the region. The non-fiction books reviewed here reveal rich and lasting cross-cultural relationships between Australians and Indonesians since the mid-twentieth century, including extraordinary instances of connection and offers of hospitality and exchange. Over time, however, literature, media, politics and regional self-interest have generated often unhelpful perceptions, stereotypes and caricatures. While this century has been dubbed the ‘Asian Century’, Ratih Hardjono’s (1993) optimistic vision of Australians mastering at least one Asian language and being able to relate to the region without uncertainty has not been realised. In the *AsiaLink Essay 2011*, Tim Lindsey, the Director of the Asian Law Centre at the University of Melbourne, highlighted the threats to the Australian economy and, potentially, its future security, of disengaging from Indonesia. Yet, as Snodgrass and Coyne (2006) argue, it is understanding rather than knowledge that is required if Australians and Indonesians are to improve their skills in engaging with the other (154). And this calls for genuine openness and curiosity for, as Gadamer (1975) reminds us: ‘The closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. … The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves into us. Horizons change for a person who is moving’ (Gadamer 1975: 271).

Even when forgotten or hidden, Australian and Indonesian individual and shared histories – and the emotions they evoke – exist and remain alive in the present. As Sara Ahmed puts it,

> The time of emotions is not always about the past, and how it sticks. Emotions also open up futures, in the ways they involve different orientations to others. Of course, we are not just talking about emotions when we talk about emotions. The objects of emotions slide and stick and they join the intimate histories of bodies, with the public domain of justice and injustice (Ahmed 2004: 202).

The objects of emotions also adhere in the embodied self of the writer and in the traces of her relationship to the text as it is being written.
Chapter 4

*Like Madonna: on Australian literature’s imaginable futures*

Like Madonna (Kaya Madonna)  
Oil on canvas, three panels, 38 cm x 32 cm

There are three panels in *Like Madonna*. The left panel is a painting of Madonna singing in a highly sexualised pose, the middle panel is a painting of a young teenage Indonesian boy looking directly at the viewer, and on the right panel there is writing in Indonesian and English. An arrow and the word *lukisan* (painter) points to the portrait of the young man and the text reads:

> The picture of the boy in the picture is my father in high school. When my Australian cousins were about the same age, they asked me about my father’s name. ‘Pranoto’, I answered. ‘He only has one name.’ Although this is very unusual in Australia, my cousins perfectly understood this concept: ‘Oh, like Madonna’.

There is humour in this portrayal but it also reveals a fusion of horizons, a moment of cross-cultural understanding, and a form of generosity as the cousins find a response that both validates and is inclusive of their cousin. As Proba (2012) observes, the cousins draw on American popular culture to understand a foreign concept: ‘The incongruous way in which Ida’s cousins came to “understand”, as narrated in this work, highlights the idea, meaning, need and implications of multiple perspectives. It also brings into discussion the process of learning, as on a personal and cultural scale’ (7).

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In this chapter I bring together Georgio Agamben’s (2009) definition of the contemporary and Terry Smith’s (2011) theory of the world currents in contemporary art in order to examine whether, as arguably is the case in contemporary art, there is an emerging stream in contemporary Australian literature that is distinct, regional and localised, but which ‘frequently tries to imagine the world as a differentiated yet inevitably connected whole’ (Smith 2011: 8). While it is impossible to fully do justice to Smith’s work in this paper, I will briefly describe the three key currents (or streams) he identifies as comprising contemporary art today, with a particular focus on the third current’s contemporary concerns.

Informed by Smith’s definitive work, I argue that three recent Australian texts – Michelle de Kretser’s (2012) novel *Questions of Travel*, Chi Vu’s (2012) novella *Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale*, and Jennifer Mackenzie’s (2009) long poem *Borobodur* – shed light on an aspect of Australian literature that is in transition: becoming, by definition, in, of, and for the world as well as in, of, and with present time. And, situated within it. I also draw on Adrian Snodgrass and David Coyne’s (2006) metaphor of travel – excursion and return – to consider the three texts in relation to the vectors that crisscross between them, and the ways in which they illuminate questions about Australian literature’s ‘imagined futures in the world’.

Firstly, however, I’d like to situate myself in relation to this chapter. From the mid-1980s I worked closely with immigrants and immigrant communities in South Western Sydney where I was privileged, often, to be in a room with people from up to seventeen different language backgrounds. Over the decades I listened while their stories linked me by a thousand threads to other times and places. This caused me to want to read literature that reflected the murmur of languages in a Sydney train carriage, or my joking conversations with the Iraqi barista at Bankstown station who surprised me by confiding he would vote Green in the coming elections. In short, I wanted to read books that reflected not the exotic but the everyday, that everyday, in all its contemporaneity and diversity. Not memoirs, but imaginative and daring works that bonded with present day life, and cracked open my Australian understandings of multiplicitous ways of dealing with and being in the world.

**Defining the contemporary**

In his essay ‘What Is the Contemporary?’, Giorgio Agamben (2009) argues that ‘the poet – the contemporary – … firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness’ (44). It is the darkness of her time that both concerns and ‘never ceases to

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74 Andrew McNamara (2012) finds much to admire in Smith’s work but resists his thesis of a paradigm break from modernism (257).

75 I am alluding here to Smith’s (2011) assertion that ‘since the 1980s contemporary art has shifted … to awareness that new kinds of art were coming from the world, connecting cultures all over the globe, thus creating, genuinely, an art of the world. Perhaps, ten years hence, we will be able to look back at the present and say that, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, contemporary art began to be an art for the world’ (325).
engage’ her (45). It takes place in, and works within, chronological time and is something that ‘urges, presses and transforms it’ (47). For Agamben, ‘the entry point to the present’ equates to a kind of archaeology ‘that returns to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living’. It is the ‘unlived element in everything that is lived’, that is, the ‘mass of what for some reason (its traumatic character, its excessive nearness) we have not yet managed to live. The attention to this “unlived” is the life of the contemporary. And to return to the contemporary means in this sense to return to a present where we have never been’ (51-2, emphasis added).\(^{76}\)

This sense of the contemporary as responding to and being in the present, its shadows and concerns, while at the same time bringing into present day focus the texts of the past, also shapes Smith’s (2011) theory of contemporary art, particularly in relation to what he describes as the concerns of its third world current. For Smith, in the world today the ‘very idea of what a “nation” is is changing’ and it is changing ‘too fast for us to imagine what forms it will take in the years to come’ (258).

In the deepest sense, art today is the product of a distinctively contemporary mix of cultural, technological, social, and geopolitical forces. By absorbing imaginable futures, and by contemporizing various competing visions of the past, this mix of forces has ‘thickened’ the present, and created a state of permanent transition, of perpetual contemporaneity (Smith 2011: 316).

In *Contemporary Art: World Currents* Smith (2011) categorises the three world currents in contemporary art today as: 1. Contemporary Art (styles/practices); 2. The postcolonial turn (ideologies/issues); 3. The arts of contemporaneity (concerns/strategies). The first current, *Contemporary Art (styles/practices)*, can be regarded as an art historical period style or art movement which Smith labels ‘late modern’.\(^{77}\) It is readily recognised by the brand name ‘Contemporary Art’ and represents ‘the most celebrated, and controversial, forms of art’ in contemporary art museums today (11).\(^{78}\)

The second current, *The postcolonial turn (ideologies/issues)*, originated within the many countries that have undergone decolonisation and its postcolonial after-effects since the mid-
The third current, *The arts of contemporaneity (concerns/strategies)*, is even more diverse and global. The concerns of these artists are with the living conditions of the present as well as the questions arising from it ‘as to the shapes of time, place, media and mood in the world today’ (11). They aim to reveal time’s multiplicities while at the same time questioning its changing nature and the impact that has on the self.81, 82 For these younger artists, self-making is a central concern: ‘It leads them to ask: What is it to live, to exist, to be in contemporary conditions? The descriptive question “How do we live now?,” … quickly becomes an ethical one: “How might we live better?”’ (296).

The work of the third current, which is ‘markedly different’ from art found in galleries and museums today,83 is marked by freshness, surprise, affect and diversity – in its production, dissemination, and range of materials, and also in the ‘scope, specificity, and unpredictability of the questions’ it raises (325). Its creators – who are from all over the world – are more aware, and more quickly aware, of what their contemporaries are doing; and they ‘seem much more interested in and open to it, than ever before’ (Smith 2011: 256, emphasis added). By asking questions that drive below accepted narratives, these artists are interrogating the possible beneficial and detrimental effects of technological change on human and non-human alike and are challenging beliefs about human progress that accept the inevitability of continuous exploitation of the earth’s resources.84 They are defining *art’s imaginable futures*, and the way they are achieving this is through ‘their search for a sense of locality within

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79 This current’s most outstanding exponents include: Ilya Kabakov, Tani Bruguera, Xu Bing, the Raqs Media Collective, John Mawurndjul, Yinka Shonibare, William Kentridge, Shirin Neshat, Steve McQueen and Isaac Julien. It includes artists working ‘within centres of geopolitical power who are critical of their government’s exercise’ of it (Smith 2011: 11).

80 Smith argues that one of its outcomes has been ‘a poetic approach to politics’ which, he warns, presents a challenge to its artists ‘to resist the temptation of slipping into a new kind of distracted exoticism, one that would permit viewers gently guided tours through signs of the Other rather than obliging them to undergo genuine encounters with its intractable difference’ (Smith 2011: 322).

81 One example is video artist, Fiona Tan, who traces the diaspora of her family through Indonesia, Hong Kong, Australia and Europe: ‘Her understanding of her own personality as dispersed back through time and across space, as shaped by broad historical forces and specific family memories – along with her ironic characterization of her artistic persona as that of “a professional foreigner” – is precisely what enables her to picture the multiplicities flowing through the present’ (Smith 2011: 322).

82 They also seek out ‘the multiplicity of ways of being in time exhibited by the world’s peoples (itself nowhere more evident than in what is shown by the new technologies), and the variety of temporalities experienced by each of us every day (not least in our use of these new technologies)’ (Smith 2011: 296).

83 Not all art being produced today is contemporary, as for example, with artists who are exploring and refining older traditions as a ‘deliberate response to the present’, while others explore ‘the more subtle nuances of the once shockingly new styles of the twentieth-century Modernist avant-gardes’ (Smith 2011: 8).

84 Smith argues that artists are finding new ways of being political, and they make a distinction between how they do this and the way artists did this in the modern era. In their case there is a ‘fertile intertwining’ of the ‘supposed dichotomy between activism and aesthetic value’ (275), including the overlap of worlds where ‘changes in natural environments (‘first nature’) and in the human settings embedded in them (‘second nature’) are becoming increasingly intertwined with information that is accumulated and exchanged within virtual domains (‘third nature’)’ (McKenzie Wark 2004. *A Hacker Manifesto*, cited in Smith 2011: 153-6).
situations of constant disruption, dispersal, and displacement, their resistant awareness to the pervasive power of mass and official media, their acute sensitivity as to how these pressures affect everyone’s sense of selfhood, and, finally, their interest in acting in ways that will improve the situation’ (Smith 2011: 11).

In this chapter I propose that there is a thread, comparable to the third current in contemporary art, that is emerging in Australian literature. It has the same characteristics of asking what it means to be living in, of and for the world at the present time, and it is bringing Australian readers to a new kind of proximity, or intimacy, with ‘Asia’. The three texts I discuss are in different genres but all deal with travel, excursion and return, and time’s multiplicities. They speak of stories that cross borders, step into different terrains, and invite hermeneutical understanding on the part of the reader, who brings her own prejudices and experiences to the text, just as the artist’s cousins do in Just like Madonna. The kinds of ‘institutions of intimacy’ that are being managed in these texts relate to migratory experiences, alienation and inclusion, family, friendship, emotions, communities, workplaces and life journeys.

**Questions of Travel, Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale, Borobodur**

Michelle de Kretser’s (2012) *Questions of Travel* primarily follows the lives of two characters – Laura Fraser and Ravi Mendis – from the 1960s until 2004. Laura grows up in Sydney, Ravi in a village on the west coast of Sri Lanka. Over decades, their life stories, and those of the people around them, are told through chronologically spliced scenes and episodes of childhood and adolescence, education and careers, travel, marriage (Ravi) and affairs (Laura). As the new millennium looms, the world is on the move, in reality and virtually, and the novel is populated with characters who make voluntary or involuntary journeys, suffer trauma and displacement, or are linked in some way with those who have. Over the decades technology is rapidly transforming lives, global communication and the nature of work; and while computers, the internet, email, mobile phones, and digital cameras appear exotic on first encounter, they quickly become commonplace to Ravi and Laura:

> The web had grown from usefulness into beauty. It was as complex and various as a world … a city of strangers and connections: people with different needs were drawn to it from far and wide. It thrilled with potential, magic, risk. Ravi’s mouse clicked and clicked as if keeping time – but that was an illusion. Time spent online disappeared with the smooth efficiency of Ctrl-A + Delete (De Kretser 2012: 285-6).

De Kretser dwells on the everyday – Laura and Ravi go to work, socialise with friends and family, know their neighbours, grow older, deal with pain and loss. The driving chronological form of the novel is an insistent reminder of time passing, and its loops, backtracks and fast forwards press down on Laura and Ravi. They are propelled through life events; encounters with technological, social and political change; towards and away from catastrophe. In layer upon layer of the various subplots and backstories, people connect and disconnect and,
whether they like it or not, their lives are being unavoidably shaped by intercultural encounters.

Chi Vu’s (2012) novella, *Anguli Ma: a Gothic Tale*, is set in Melbourne in 1980, just three years after Đào, an older Vietnamese refugee, arrives in Australia. When Đào lets her garage to Anguli Ma, an abattoir worker, strange things begin to happen and her relations with the man become more and more strained. The novella opens with a description of ‘The Monk’ who is meditating by a very Australian river: ‘He lowers his eyelids and returns to the breath … The she-oaks and river red gums have within them light from the sun and nutrients from the soil.’ (1). When he is threatened by the Brown Man, the Monk remains unmoved and urges him to sit and observe the breath: “Everything is changing, changing, changing,” the monk [tells him]. “As soon as you sit down your mind has already begun to wander. Bring the mind back to the breath” (25).

Powerfully and imaginatively wrought, the book is a mysterious and haunting account of the difficulties of making a new home in an alien place. Having survived the terrors of war and the boat journey, Đào faces new dangers and, as events unfold, her dream of belonging to her nascent expatriate community is threatened. Grief, loss, fear and uncertainty about the future and a surreal strangeness infuse the novella – the news that a baby has been killed by either a dingo or its parents in the Northern Territory seems a vicious portent and grim reminder of how alien is the place where Đào and her tenants are trying to rebuild shattered lives.

The third text is Jennifer Mackenzie’s (2009) imaginative and exquisite long poem, *Borobodur*, which follows the life and travels of Gunavarman, the Kashmir-born priest architect of Borobodur, the Buddhist monument, which was built in Central Java in the ninth century CE. It took seventy-five years to construct, was abandoned in the fourteenth century, and its existence only became known to the world in 1814. Mackenzie’s first visit to Borobodur was in 1975 when it was being restored. In writing the poem she drew on the Old Javanese *Kakawin*, or epics, which flourished from around 800–1500 CE, and which inspired her with ‘[t]heir astounding beauty … fine imagery, their exquisite attention to detail and delicate positioning of the voice within nature and within culture’ (Mackenzie 2012). Other influences acknowledged by Mackenzie are the poetry of the Japanese ninth century monk, scholar and poet, Kukai (774-835 CE), and the fourteenth century Javanese classic, *Negarakertagama*, by the poet Mpu Prapanca. She describes working with an ‘almost Daoist habit of mind [that] could connect across time’ to these artists and to the priest architect, Gunavarman (Mackenzie 2012).

**Five Way Stations – the metaphor of travel, excursion and return**

For Adrian Snodgrass and David Coyne (2006), the metaphor of travel – excursion and return – serves as a ‘master metaphor in philosophical hermeneutics, where it is seen as the
movement at work in all processes of interpretation and understanding’ (243). In an essay titled ‘Random thoughts on the Way’, they suggest five variations of the metaphor which they describe as ‘way stations or temporary stops on the Way’ and, while their focus is on its relevance for architecture and architectural design, I want to suggest that these five variations also open up understanding of the above texts, the writing and reading process, and the projection of Australian literature’s imaginary futures. The five Way Stations are: bildung, the aimless wanderer, history, alien traditions, and metaphor.

The first Way Station – bildung – denotes education in the sense of ‘properly developing one’s natural talents and capacities’.Snodgrass and Coyne argue that in order to achieve this one must leave ‘home’, that is, leave ‘the locus of what one already understands and is at home with’ to go to a ‘new place that is strange and unfamiliar. As one comes to understand this other place, as it becomes familiar, it comes to be a new home’ (244). In the process of acquiring ‘this new homeliness’, however, one is changed so that when one returns to the starting point, which is changed also, ‘You see it in a new way, and understand it differently’ (244). In this account, that which seems strange, alien, foreign is so because we do not yet ‘recognise ourselves in it … [or] realise it as a possibility we already possessed’ (244). It is a circular movement in which ‘every step of the way, right back to the home whence one started, is a movement into and through the strange and otherwise. Having returned, enriched, the intrepid traveller starts out again … thus inscribing circles within circles’ (245).

This also describes the act of reading, of entering the unfamiliar ‘world’ of a text we have not encountered before. In all three of the texts I discuss here, the reader accompanies the characters on journeys that bring hardships, insights, understandings. In Borobodur, the fourteen-year-old Gunavarman travels from Kashmir to Central Java to become a companion to the young prince Balaputra in the Sailendra court of the regent Saratunga. At the age of twenty he joins the household of his first stone carving master, and in 780 CE he is dispatched on a twenty-year pilgrimage to China and India to prepare him for the task of realising Saratunga’s vision for the building of ‘a mighty stupa’.

Go to Nalanda, stay at least ten years
Go to Sanchi and follow the carving of the great monks
Go to Ellora thrive among the artisans of the Mahayana
Come back with your hands trembling with wonder and expertise. (27-8)

87 See also T S Eliot’s (1935) ‘Little Gidding’, The Four Quartets: ‘We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time.’ http://www.coldbacon.com/poems/fq.html (Accessed 9 August 2014)
Gunavarman’s journeys are of cosmopolitan discovery and learning in preparation for the design and construction of Borobodur. They encircle the poem, taking him by sea and land from Java to China and India, and back to Java.

The second Way Station – the aimless wanderer – refers to the traveller whose mind and feet simply follow the path of ‘training for living one’s life’. It recognises that ‘One’s craft or profession is a way, a way of gaining understanding of the Way. One goes out to, gives oneself over to one’s work, and thereby grows in being. All who work are journeymen and women, who perform a ‘journey’, that is, literally, ‘a day’s work’ (247). This equates to the writer who wanders with no sense of where she is going until the words ‘appear’ as writing on the page. Like Snodgrass and Coyne’s ‘designer’, her role is to willingly trust and ‘accept what reveals itself, not casting it aside as irrational or valueless because it does not seem to have a reason or use’ (250). For author Jane Goodall (2009) this equates with the writer’s relationship to the ‘spooky art of fiction writing’ and its ‘uncanny autonomy’, where the ‘unwritten novel is a determining entity that takes possession of the writer’ and demands ‘ever deep resignation to the work as daemon’ (205).

No matter how acute your theoretical knowledge of what makes a plot work, you cannot activate the mainspring of dramatic tension through a sequence of decided processes. …

There are just too many variables, the most significant of which is the immediacy of live human interaction: between writer and reader, between the characters who generate the action and, in some bizarre way, between the author and the novel (Goodall 2009: 205).

Goodall further argues that writing requires a calibrated balance between practice and research to ‘keep the work alive and manage its energies’ (207):

[This] involves a commitment to improvisation and randomness, a submission to the erasure of authorial design, a readiness to be mesmerised by place and possessed by psychological energies from competing directions…[and also] [i]n the practice of any art form, there’s a need to know about the work of others and to build up a density of such knowledge. … [which] may assist in finding the alchemical point at which consciousness needs to resign its controls, and the equally vital point at which it must resume them again (207).

In Stephen Atkinson’s (2007) review of Mackenzie’s Borobodur, he notes that ‘[j]ourneys, actual and metaphorical, geographical and spiritual, and the cultural exchanges they facilitate’ are central to the poem, and that ‘[f]or Mackenzie, wandering and poetry are in many regards the one thing, both conducted along similar trajectories and according to the same states of mind. With regard to the creative process of writing Borobudur [Mackenzie] has said, “texts, my own travels and experiences pointed in a certain direction and I followed”’. This echoes
Gunavarman’s journey from Java to China and then to the Buddhist University of Nalanda in India to continue his studies and equip himself to design the monument.\(^{88}\)

I used my cell for storage in ten years at Nalanda
barely spent a night in it
wandering the streets
journeys to the interior
my wrists my palms my fingertips
in those days burned with passion
I followed the itinerary
near the stupa at Sanchi
I stayed with a large family of dancers
I learned a little from them
that stone and dance could be
equivalent
that in the weathering of stone
I anticipated my own weathering (65)

As time passes, Gunavarman’s vision of the stupa he will build takes shape.

when I visited the stupa at Sanchi
I could not see it as it was
but as at some other place
in the jungle south of Merapi (65)

In *Questions of Travel*, too, Laura sets out to see the world. With a travel guidebook in hand she makes it to London where she finds herself unsettled: alien, out of place, and always facing the question, ‘What are you doing here?’ While Sydney beckons, and the romance of travel dissolves to homesickness, she discovers the joyfulness of looking at ‘everything’, like a child, and ‘marvelling at the wonders of the world’ (71–2). In a year spent in Naples, a place of uncompromising difference and mystery to her, Laura becomes most alive and open – the travel books are put aside, she teaches English, practices Italian, and allows the city to reveal its secrets and work its magic. She sells her travel writing pieces, and her profession as a travel writer takes off.

Coyne and Snodgrass (2011) note that in the Chinese for *Tao*, the noun and verb are both contained in the ideogram, so that it is ‘at once “the Way” and “going on the Way”’. ‘In

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\(^{88}\) The University of Nalanda, in Bihar, India, was one of the earliest residential universities in the world from the 5th Century CE until 1197 when it was destroyed. Scholars from Tibet, Greece, Persia and China attended the centre of learning, with its extensive library, and at its height it reputedly had as many as 10,000 students and 2000 teachers.
Chinese, a thing has an implicit quality of unfolding in time. The thing does not merely stand as an object in space, but continues in time. Space and time merge in the thing … the path and the person going on the path move forward together’ (247). So, as we travel, ‘it is not so much we who “see” or experience things … , but that they are revealed, or unfolded, before us. They present themselves and are themselves presents, dis-covered not by but to us, and thus given as gifts. Our part is to accept these presents in a spirit of acceptance’ (247).\(^89\) This corresponds to the writing or reading of a text where Bakhtin argues that dialogue is the key to being: ‘Life is dialogical by its very nature. To live means to engage in dialogue, to question, to listen, to answer, to agree etc.’ (31: 318, cited in Todorov 1984: 97). To understand a text, therefore, ‘it is no longer enough to understand a text as its author did. … The author is always partially unconscious with respect to his work, and the subject of understanding is obligated to enrich the meaning of the text; he is equally creative’ (Todorov 1984: 109). For Bakhtin, therefore, understanding is both an interpersonal process and, also, ‘a relation between two cultures’ (109):

There is an enduring image, that is partial, and therefore false, according to which to better understand a foreign culture one should live in it, and, forgetting one’s own, look at the world through the eyes of this culture. As I have said, such an image is partial. To be sure, to enter in some measure into an alien culture and look at the world through its eyes, is a necessary moment in the process of its understanding; but if understanding were exhausted at this moment, it would have been no more than a single duplication, and would have brought nothing new or enriching. Creative understanding does not renounce itself, its place in time, its culture; it does not forget anything. The chief matter of understanding is the exotopy of the one who does the understanding – in time, space and culture – in relation to that which he wants to understand creatively. Even his own external aspect is not really accessible to man, and he cannot interpret it as a whole … a man’s real external aspect can be seen and understood only by other persons, thanks to their spatial exotopy, and thanks to the fact that they are other.

In the realm of culture, exotopy is the most powerful lever of understanding. It is only to the eyes of an other culture that the alien culture reveals itself more completely and more deeply (but never exhaustively, because there will come other cultures, that will see and understand even more) (36:334, cited in Todorov 1984: 109-10, emphasis in original).

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\(^89\) See also Smith and Dean (2009) for discussion of the creative arts and research processes. Their model, The Interactive Cyclic Web, consists of cycles and webs as a process of engagement with ideas or play with materials to generate ideas. (18-21). In Goodall’s chapter in the same volume, ‘Nightmares in the engine room’, she describes the ‘process of discovering and laying out the parameters of a fictional world’ – a difficult task: ‘How many times did I literally write myself into a corner? Sometimes by putting a character into a situation I couldn’t see the way out of, sometimes by setting off tension lines that refused to merge as I had originally envisaged, sometimes by trapping the action line into a logical impossibility’ (202). What Goodall describes is a form of question and answer, as with the hermeneutical process, but also a process that often literally involves physical travel – ‘location research’ – in other places, for example, on a drive around Avebury Stone Circle in England she stops the car in a thick mist: ‘The place seemed fearsomely potent and strange, and I balked at walking on that occasion. They have their own weathers and moods, those places, and a stronger psychic presence than any normal human being. I was learning how practice-led research can dig deep into the imaginative process’ (204).
This suggests, therefore, that for the writer too, there is an imagined other, dreamed by the author, who will read and respond to her or his work in a ‘mutuality of embodiment’ that seems ‘both paradoxical and necessary, and which exerts pressure on [her/him] at the moment of composition’ (Hunt and Sampson 2006: 148).

In other words, […] what contains this plurality of meanings and versions, like the waist on the hourglass of a text, is the mutual embodiment of reader and writer: what they can cope with and enjoy as a result of the way they are embodied. Textuality draws these embodiments together (Hunt and Sampson 2006: 149).

In the novella Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale, Đào has been in the country for three years and her relationship with her son Trung and granddaughter Tuyê´t seems troubled and emotionally distant. She rents a room in her house to two single women. Nineteen-year-old Sinh escaped from Vietnam by herself three years earlier and cleans houses and motel rooms for a living. She shares the room with Bác, an older woman. When Anguli Ma enquires about the room that has been let to the two women, Đào is impressed by what she deduces about him, that ‘his people were either wealthy, intellectuals or Catholics and had chosen to uproot from their quê göc rather than live under the Communists’ (2). Her ‘stomach’ decides to let her garage to him for the extra cash it will bring in.

In Đào’s house, there is a spare room which is crammed with boxes and bags of found things, ‘In this room, she had several hiding places for valuables: at the bottom of a box of tissues; inside a ceramic vase bought at the Trash & Treasures; in amongst the clean rags from the factory’ (27). She keeps the room locked and changes the hiding places regularly, but when her hui group comes for the monthly meeting where they bid to decide who is to use the group’s pooled funds for a month, Đào is forced to write an IOU for her contribution. It is unclear why she is short of the pooled money. She feels desperate and she has no one to turn to for help. Her fear and anxiety mounts as events unfold and this underscores her sense of loss of homeland and family. Anguli Ma is late paying his rent and her reputation is on the line in her community. The crisis comes to a head when all her money is stolen, including that of the hui group.

When Anguli Ma and his friends go for a drive in the suburbs and run over a dog, they put the animal in the boot of their car and remain indifferent to its suffering. The surreal texture of the text highlights their feelings of alienation and lack of agency.

Their car drove through the western suburbs, with neat gardens and milky, overfed children. A land so sparse and peaceful that the newcomers believed that it was empty space, unmarked and un-storied, a barely populated land uninhabited by wandering demons and limbless men from wars that drifted on for millennia.

Still the dog in the boot had not died (49).
For the men, their realisation that something has been left behind in coming to Australia brings a profound sense of loss, shame and pain, ‘In that stillness, they avoided each other’s eyes, for losing a homeland was like losing someone who knew you intimately, and whom you knew intimately. In this abyss Anguli Ma and the workmate realised that their old life, and youth were both gone forever’ (52).

Đào’s meetings with Anguli Ma become ever more menacing. She finds rancid rotting meat in his room that he appears not to notice. Tension mounts against the background of her lack of communication with her son and granddaughter, anxieties about the money owing to hui group, the sense of desolation and emptiness she tries to fill with the boxes of stuff she collects. Finally, the robbery severs her connection to her community and puts her life and the lives of the women she lives with at risk. The older woman Bác departs, the young woman Sinh disappears and there are real concerns she has been killed. Menace and loneliness infuse the novella, there is little warmth or kindness (except from Sinh), and the sacrifices made for a better life seem futile. In the end, the only people she can rely on, Trưng and Tuyệt, collect her and, once again, they are on the run, escaping the threat of revenge and violence.

Only the Brown Man seems to find any kind of peace as he obeys the Monk’s admonition to observe the breath, and ‘his mind drops between the churning waves of anguish into something underneath, as though submerged momentarily in another world. Resting beneath his wondering, agitated mind is the clear and still truth. He has his first taste of not grasping at the future’ (25). But then he dreams of killing again. As Nicholas Jose (2012) points out, the novella transposes ‘the Gothic into a horrifying imaginative narrative of the experience of Vietnamese refugees in suburban Melbourne as they deal with their demons in the years after arriving as “boat people”’ (5). As well as playing out a ‘most severe psychodrama’, the ‘trauma it narrates is stitched into domestic suburban ordinariness with dark, sharp brilliance, to produce “a jewel of terror”’ (7).

The third Way Station – history – is where travellers are ‘always already further along the path than they are “in fact”’. Where they are on the way at any moment is a projection from where they were before; and where they will be is already thrown ahead of them. They are, in a sense, always already at a destination, but the destination is never reached, because it changes at each step they take’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 251).

The juxtaposition of past, present and future occurs frequently in Questions of Travel, for example, at Ravi’s workplace at the university in Sri Lanka in the 1990s, Ravi and his colleague, Nimal Corea, ‘take on’ the Math Department’s sole dial-up computer and discover a magical experience: ‘surfing the net’ (137). ‘Space had come undone, said Ravi. He spoke of flight and speed’ (137), but …

Five or six years later, when dial-up and Mosaic were dim monuments to digital prehistory, he would recall how slow it had really been. He was waiting to cross a road in
Bondi, and the woman jogging on the spot next to him kept hitting the pedestrian button. Her request had been electronically registered the first time, but the heel of her hand continued to punch. Ravi remembered waiting for the upload all those years ago, jiggling his mouse, circling it on its mat, humanly reluctant to relinquish control to mere technology (137).

In Sri Lanka, the times are ‘unnatural, out of joint’:90 ‘War and peace, anarchy and government were no longer discrete colours but had run together and changed hue’ (64). Lawlessness prevails, cruel acts of abuse flourish with impunity, and brutalising violence and deadly conflict coldly surface and resurface, such as when Ravi’s cousins speak ‘with satisfaction of a lane where each driveway contained a body with a dark circle in the forehead’ (63). Malini, Ravi’s wife, resists such ‘normalisation’ in her job with an NGO, working for the rights of women and children, and publicly calls on all sides to cease the terror and suffering. Although her growing activism is not shared by Ravi, Ravi feels it is bringing her a step closer to fulfilling her schoolgirl ‘capital-letter promise’ to herself to ‘not live her life in vain’ (181).

In the fourth Way Station – alien traditions – the value of what the traveller brings home ‘is proportional to the difficulty of the terrain and the remoteness of the country in which she travelled and, in particular, the unfamiliarity and foreignness of the culture she encountered’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 252). The purpose of venturing ‘beyond the home horizon’, therefore, is not to increase knowledge, ‘but to keep alive an awareness that there are other types of […] understanding’ (253).

In Questions of Travel, Ravi travels to Australia in 2000 to escape the violent threats to his life in Sri Lanka. In Sydney he discovers that, ‘Walking is a porous activity: the outside seeps in. By the end of that summer, Australia had entered Ravi. Now it would keep him company no matter where in the world he went’ (264). Some of the strongest (and most comedic) scenes in the novel are related to its exposure of the absurdities of the globalised workplace. At the travel publisher, Ramseys, where Ravi and Laura work, De Kretser parodies with relish the inconsequential emails, performance appraisals, motivational slogans, inter-office rivalry and affairs, restructures and repetition. What seems exciting and glamorous when Ravi first starts work there – the ‘energy and confidence and postindustrial track lighting’ that ‘left nowhere to hide’ – soon loses its gloss (373). Behind his back, his boss, Tyler, emails his superior about Ravi’s ‘performance’: ‘I can’t figure out how many of HR’s forty seven core competencies Ravi ticks’ (471). For his young female colleague, Crystal Bowles, he is just not cool, ‘Have

90 Intertextual references such as these to Hamlet, Act 1, Sc 5, lines 27–8 and 188 appear often in the novel. The Sri Lankan Civil War lasted from July 1983 until May 2009 and was waged between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The LTTE’s aim was to create an independent Tamil state in the north and east of Sri Lanka. As well as causing widespread hardship, human rights abuses, displacement, emigration, ecological and economic damage, an estimated 80,000–100,000 people were killed (UN estimate).
you noticed his jeans? Kmart! (471). ‘He was a nice guy but not the right kind of person; could it be that he wasn’t the right kind of refugee?’ (473, italics in original).

Haunting memories, feelings of loss and loneliness, and acts of kindness or cruelty provide layers of affect that are stabbed to intensity by De Kretser’s incisive use of humour or ironic juxtaposition. Characters’ insights often belatedly follow actions, as do flashes of remorse, relief, guilt or shame. They raise questions about how individuals and societies choose to live (and work) with others, in communities, and in the world. Ravi’s colleagues do not suspect the unspeakability of his suffering and the novel confronts the choices people make about what they ‘know’ or choose ‘not to know’ about what drives people to make desperate journeys in leaky boats, or suffer in other extreme ways in order to go on living. De Kretser highlights what we choose to know of the lives of those we encounter, and our willingness or resistance to bear witness to their experiences of severe cruelty and suffering. What is curiosity? empathy? compassion? What power do words such as ‘race’ still hold? In what ways do small acts of kindness make cities (and countries) kinder places, and vice versa? What does it mean to give refuge and hospitality? The text stimulates questions about globalisation’s effects – mass migration and diaspora, global movement, rapid changes in technology and modern communication, the movement of peoples, products, capital, information, and cultural objects (including literary texts) – on day-to-day lives as well as imagined ideas of nation and nationality.

The fifth Way Station – metaphor – ‘opens a way of going out to the [literature] of the other. This is to see our [literature], the [literature] with which we are familiar, the [literature] coming out of the Western tradition, as the [literature] of some other culture’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 253). It suggests that metaphor offers a translation of the present situation that goes beyond simply citing similarities. It is ‘not a transformation of the thought of the other so as to make it an imitation or reflection of one’s own, nor is it a taking possession. It is, rather, a fusion, in which the understanding of the foreign comes home’ (254).

Time slips and slides in all three texts. In Chi Vu’s Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale, events occur, and then there are rewinds. Time zones overlap and myth inserts itself – the Buddhist story of Angulimala is of a vicious killer who murdered his victims and kept a necklace of a finger from each one around his neck. When he meets the Buddha he has already killed 999 victims but finds he is unable ‘to kill’ the Buddha. Faced with the Buddha’s compassion Angulimala renounces his life as a killer and becomes a disciple. What can the interpretation of the myth Angulimala in the novella tell us about the present? Snodgrass and Coyne (2006) argue that ‘if a myth is to be understood today it must be interpreted in ways that relate to our present existential condition’ (185). In this reading, myth is metaphor that ‘open[s] up possibilities of

91 Here I have substituted ‘architecture’ Snodgrass and Coyne’s text with the word ‘literature’.
interpretation and action, …[and plays] a social function in bringing to light meanings that provide a basis for … a sense of social community’ (187)

When she sees Đào cleaning up the blood from the butchered dog which Anguli Ma and his friend cooked and ate, the old woman Bàc says, ‘We think we left this behind when we escaped’ and Đào knows she is referring to ‘[w]andering hungry ghosts. Unable to be reborn as a human or animal, unable to enter heaven or hell because of their gruesome, untimely deaths’ (54). Bàc says, ‘We think we have a new beginning because we escaped the terror, and came to a new land. But we haven’t left them behind, they came with us! Can’t you see it?’ (57).

A trope in Questions of Travel which also appears in Anguli Ma: A Gothic Tale is that of collecting and hoarding, and the investment of meaning in objects, particularly around loss, trauma, grief and emptiness. Her aunt Hester’s little suitcase of souvenirs has a special magic for the child Laura (113). Laura’s friend Theo writes about nostalgia, collects junk from the streets, retro items, fashionable at another time when his mother was alive. He has also absorbed and kept alive her childhood stories from before her escape from Nazi Germany as an unaccompanied refugee child. Laura collects and sells stories of travel. Malini collects witness statements of atrocities. Hazel, Ravi’s Hurlstone Park landlady, finds old chairs and creatively restores them; she also provides free board for refugees like Ravi. A memorial website for a mother and child collects affecting messages of condolence long after their death. And, observing the rubbish people put out on the streets of Sydney, Ravi thinks, ‘in Sri Lanka, there were many who would take these pavements for a showroom’ (308).

In Smith’s (2011) terms, the three texts perform original leaps of the imagination that cannot be simply grasped but which ask how we could live better, with greater curiosity, compassion, understanding. They are contemporary, locally grounded, but also regionally and globally connected. There are common threads but their value lies in their diversity, freshness, and ability to surprise and invite questions about how literature can stir up prejudices (prior understandings), expand understanding of others, and lay a basis for fresh understandings of

92 In 2012 Beijing artist, Song Dong, toured an exhibition, Waste Not, of 10,000 items collected by his mother over five decades, including pieces of soap she collected and kept during the Cultural Revolution for her children when they grew up. See Andrew Taylor (2012), for a review of this moving exhibition at Carriageworks, Sydney, ‘Household collection shows soap opera of a lifetime’, SMH, 31 December 2012.

Researchers since the mid-1990s have investigated the etiology of compulsive hoarding, for example, see Steketee et al. (2003), Frost and Hartl (1996) and Tolin et al. (2010). It’s not surprising that such research suggests that hoarding may be related to beliefs about control and responsibility, issues with decision-making, procrastination, emotional comfort obtained from possessions, identification with them, and beliefs about memory, as well as family attachment problems in childhood, and physical and sexual abuse in either child or adulthood (Grisham et al. 2006, cited in Tolin et al., 2010: 830).
the present. Like the art making of Smith’s contemporary artists, the texts conjure multiple ways of relating to the temporal and the atemporal. They exemplify what Smith argues has been a major shift in contemporary art – away from ‘presumptions about art’s universality to awareness that new kinds of art [are] coming from the world, connecting cultures all over the globe, thus creating, genuinely, an art of the world’ (325). They also imaginatively posit a blurring of national borders and boundaries that asserts contemporary literature’s potential to become ‘an art for the world’ (316).

Individually and collectively, the three texts suggest a becoming Australian literature that is like nothing we have seen before or, to paraphrase Agamben (2009), show us a plurality and transcultural connectedness we have yet to learn to recognise and fully live (52). At the very least they open a possibility of imagining an entity of nation that is distinctively and, at the same time, regionally and globally connected, and deeply and differently ‘entangled’ with the world.
The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory (Gramsci 1975, cited in Said 1978/2003: 25).

Edward W Said (1978/2003) notes that in the Italian text of *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci then adds, ‘therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory’ (25). This dissertation attempt s to set out such an inventory of traces of the histories of Indonesian and Australian proximity, my own encounters with Indonesia and Indonesians, and the traces they have left on me. Books and films have the power to shape the way we imagine people and places, as does the popular media. Like many people with close ties to Indonesia, and as someone who has studied Indonesian language, history and culture, and travelled there many times to visit friends and family, I wanted to read books that brought me the Indonesia I know or have yet to know.

While Australia has a demonstrably rich history of engagement with ‘Asia’, including Indonesia, at both a scholarly and interpersonal level, it can be argued that cultural exchange remains a low priority for Australians. Even the concept of ‘Asia’ is rarely recognised in all its diversity of countries, languages, religions and cultures. For the author Brian Castro (1996), the question that needs to be asked is when and how Australia will overcome its own mythmaking and recognise that this vast geographical area is ‘not the East but the North’ (1).

Well, Australia has written off Asia for almost 200 years; written off the countries of Asia, with cultural traditions of thousands of years. Perhaps it is time to write Asia; to write within it and of it, rather than just about it. The word Asia is found, after all, in the word Australia. If Australia wants to refigure itself in its relationship to the countries of Asia, to become part of Asia, as it were, then Asia must also be part of Australia (Castro 1996: 2, emphasis in original).

Castro’s challenge, delivered almost two decades ago, calls for a refiguring in the literary imaginary as well a refiguring of Australia’s place in the world. This is yet to be achieved (despite the regular calls of politicians for Australia to prioritise its engagement with Asia). It also finds support in Martha Nussbaum’s (1996) call for children’s education that would

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93 See, for example, Harry Aveling’s (2009) survey of Australian teaching and research on Indonesian literature from the establishment of the first Indonesian and Malayan studies programs from the mid-1950s and his review of the literary critical and translation work of some key individuals. He follows this study of modern Indonesian literature to its current state of decline in universities to conclude: ‘The larger landscape of the geographical region is where we are situated; the larger region of the mind is the one to which our vocation as scholars of classical and modern Indonesian literatures calls us’ (44).
nurture a cosmopolitan ‘capacity to recognize and respond to the human, above and beyond the claims of nation, religion, and even family’ and help create societies that encourage us to make an ‘imaginative leap into the life of the other’ (Nussbaum 1996: 132, cited in Brittan 2012: 573). Despite much criticism of Nussbaum at the time, Brittan (2012) notes that by the mid-2000s various literary scholars were calling for the restoration of ‘intellectual dignity and real-world political energy to the act of imagining other lives and minds … or in Said’s words, engaging in “the practice of identities other than those given by the flag or the national war of the moment”’ (Said 2004: 80, cited in Brittan 2012: 574). John Su (2011) similarly argues for ‘reconsideration of the imaginative functions of the novel’ and for its centrality (to use Arjun Appadurai’s words) ‘to all forms of agency’ (viii).

Su credits the imagination’s ‘epistemological task’ of situating individual experiences within ‘broader economic, political, and social conditions’ and focuses on novels that ‘struggle to portray what it might mean to imagine together; characterizing imagining not as an individual pursuit that withdraws people from the world around them but as a social practice that engages people with the experiences and worldviews of others’ (Su 2011: 153). His aim is to challenge postmodernism and postcoloniality’s ‘nearly unanimous dismissal of the imagination as elitist, Eurocentric, preoccupied with formalism to the exclusion of political concerns, and reproducing the very ideologies that enabled the rise of capitalism’ (ix). Su cites Dorothy J Hale (2009) who similarly makes a case for literature’s value in its ‘felt encounter with alterity’. While Hale argues that ‘[i]ncomprehension of the other yields knowledge of the self [and leads us] … to recognise … our own “regime of the norm”’ (899, cited in Su 2011: 155), Su proposes a more risky project. That is, one that involves novels that ‘press readers to undertake the task of understanding the often obscured interdependence between the self and others – to interpret personal experiences in relation to unfamiliar sets of social, economic, and political conditions’ (156). Such novels, he contends, prioritise imagining as a social practice that enables ‘individuals and groups to engage critically with the environments in which they live’ (156).

Brittan (2012) welcomes Su’s identification of imagination as ‘social and epistemological practice that works to change the way people understand themselves, each other, and the nation they live in’, and argues that he ‘breathes new life’ into terms such as ‘hybridity, the postmodern, the pastoral, essentialism, and racial memory’ (579). She is critical, however, in the light of the disappearance of postmodernism, of his failure to ‘craft new concepts with which to understand how contemporary novelists link imagination and social life’ (579). For this, Brittan turns to Shameem Black’s (2010) Fiction Across Borders in which Black argues for the possibility of imagining an other without violence. I have discussed Black’s concepts of

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crowded styles, crowded selves earlier in this dissertation and I agree with Brittan’s assessment of Black’s essay on Coetzee’s *Disgrace* in which she finds ‘the greatest danger is not to the object of imagination but to its subject’ (Black 2010: 218, also cited in Brittan 2012: 583).

In answer to the question – ‘Can imagination cure the deep social and political harms that it helped to cause?’ – Brittan believes that scholars like Coetzee, Su, Black and those of the new cosmopolitanism would offer a ‘carefully qualified “yes”’ (584), but as Coetzee, more than any, may insist, that ‘process will be painful and require forms of personal and political surrender that cannot be forecasted or controlled’ (584). This means, Brittan argues, that not only do we need to think more about what the imagination ‘can do but about what it demands’ (584).

Does greater alterity for Indonesian characters in Australian literature have the potential to change Australians’ perceptions of Indonesia and of themselves in Asia? Does it have the potential to open up new understandings across and between cultures? In an essay, ‘Ignorance is not bliss’, Asialink’s Alison Carrol (2009) argues that cultural exchange between Australia and Asia is both necessary and crucial for Australia’s ‘successful engagement’ in the Asia Pacific region (2).

One of the great benefits of seeing other cultures is seeing one’s own culture with fresh eyes, and that is one of the possible outcomes, if the viewer is from the West, of looking at Asian art. It means putting aside accepted hierarchies, understanding differences, and acknowledging the influences in understanding of the last millennium that have flowed from East to West and back again (Carroll 2009: 5).

While almost 600 leading arts practitioners have been supported by Asialink to spend up to four months working in eighteen Asian countries over two decades, Carroll regrets that cultural engagement between Australia and Asia remains both ‘marginal and fleeting’. As an example, she notes the shelving of plans for Australia to set up a centre for Australian culture in Indonesia as the British, French, Italians, Spanish, Germans, Dutch, Russians, Japanese, Koreans and Indians have done (8). She warns that ‘things are happening in Asia’ and Australia risks being left out of the regional arts community: ‘In the arts in Asia it is being built already, by people there. The issue for us is us – Australia is increasingly not included in that community. First, we have to be proactive about us’ (Carroll 2009: 9).

A year later, in an Asialink Essay, Dennis Haskell (2010) goes a step further: ‘If we are to understand Asian cultures and if we are to have Asians understand Australian culture in any depth we must attend to their literature and ours’ (1). For Haskell, ‘The arts can provide the deepest and most durable expression of a culture because the artist draws on his or her unconscious and conscious minds together, combines imagination and analytical intelligence,
and places the present in relation to past values’ (2). Literature’s value and power, in particular, come from ‘its active negotiations between the surfaces of our lives and their depths – between ‘culture’ and ‘culture’ as it were. … [and the way it] seeks to explore the deepest reaches of language … It is a way of taking a culture’s temperature, and of possessing the world we live in most fully’ (2).

In this dissertation I have drawn on Adrian Snodgrass and David Coyne’s (2006) application of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics to the architectural design studio to consider the idea that the hermeneutic process and fusion of horizons offer a useful lens to inform a dialogical process of ethical cross-cultural encounter. I suggest that in the ongoing process of interpretation between the writer and her text as it is being written, the affects of shame and fear of failure are integrative to the process of understanding the ‘self’ in relation to difference. Despite the shame, terror and fear of failure the writer faces in writing across two or more cultures, the writer has to keep moving, back and forth and in-between, as in a process of translation – between place, time, language and culture. This to-and-fro movement compares with Ricouer’s concept of the ‘work’ of the translator as that of working between ‘two masters’ – between an author and a reader, a self and the other that is being written (Kearney 2007: 150).

This emphasis on the work-like character of translation refers to the common experience of tension and suffering that the translator undergoes as he/she checks the basic impulse to reduce the otherness of the other, thereby subsuming alien meaning into one’s own scheme of things. The work of translation might thus be said to carry a double duty: to expropriate oneself from oneself as one appropriates the other to oneself. In other words, we are called to make our language put on the stranger’s clothes at the same time as we invite the stranger to step into the fabric of our own speech. The result of a good translation is when one language rediscovers itself in and as another (soi-même come un autre) (Kearney 2007: 151).

Here the role of the translator echoes that of the designer, as described by Snodgrass and Coyne (2006) and, arguably, the role or work of the creative writer. In On Translation, Ricouer states:

Just as in a narration it is always possible to tell the story in a different way, likewise in translation it is always possible to translate otherwise, without ever hoping to bridge the gap between equivalence and perfect adhesion. Linguistic hospitality, therefore is the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the world of the other into one’s own home, one’s own dwelling (Ricouer 2006: 19–20, cited in Kearney 2007: 151).

For Ricouer, translation as a model of hermeneutics ‘entails an exposure to strangeness. We are dealing with both an alterity residing outside the home language and an alterity residing
within it’ (Kearney 2007: 152, emphasis in original). Human beings, in Ricouer’s terms, are tapestries of ‘stories heard and told … [and] each one of us has a narrative identity, operating as both authors and readers of our own lives … translators of our own lives. Life stories and life histories are always parts of larger stories and histories in which we find ourselves entwined’ (154). He suggests, therefore, a future ethos ‘based upon an exchange of memories and narratives between different nations, for it is only when we translate our wounds into the language of strangers and retranslate the wounds of strangers into our own language that healing and reconciliation can take place’ (Ricouer 1996: 4-5, cited in Kearney 2007: 154). This ethos is guided by five ethical functions. Firstly, an ethic of hospitality which, Ricouer says, involves ‘taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other through the life narratives which concern the other’ (7). Secondly, an ethic of narrative flexibility which allows for ‘a plurality of narrative perspectives’ and a fusion of horizons that ‘resists arrogant conceptions of cultural identity that prevent us from perceiving the radical implications’ of allowing ‘a place for several stories directed towards the same past’ (7). Such ‘attentiveness to stories other than our own – fostered by intercultural translatability’ goes hand in hand with ‘the virtue of detachment vis-à-vis one’s own obsessive attachment to what is “mine” and “ours”’ (156). Thirdly, narrative plurality – which includes ‘the ability to recount the founding events of our history in different ways [that] is reinforced by the exchange of cultural memories’ (9). Fourth, transfiguring the past – ‘the task of reinterpreting traditions is the task of discerning past promises that have not yet been honored’ (157) – for ‘the past is not only what is bygone – that which has taken place and can no longer be changed – it also lives in the memory thanks to arrows of futurity which have not been fired or whose trajectory has been interrupted’ (Ricouer 1996: 8). The fifth ethical function, pardon – is where ‘an ethics of justice is touched by a poetics of pardon. The one does not and cannot replace the other. Justice and pardon are crucially important in our response to suffering’ (Kearney 2007: 158, emphasis in original).

These five ethical functions of translation are also applicable to the writing of the cross-cultural novel. They intertwine with Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics and its application to creative writing and have the potential to open up new fields of enquiry.

‘The Colour of Dissonance’

The novel, ‘The Colour of Dissonance’, is set in Sydney, Yogyakarta and Central Java between 1997 and 2012. The central character Iwan, a young Indonesian Muslim man, travels from his village in Central Java to study at an art school in the artistic heart of Sydney in 1997, a year before the country became embroiled in demonstrations that brought the thirty-two-year authoritarian Suharto regime to an end in May 1998. The first part of the novel deals with Iwan’s life as a migrant and student in Sydney. In the second part, he has his first solo exhibition, the success of which gives him the courage to start a relationship with Maddie, an
Australian woman. They marry, study, work, live and follow their careers in Australia – Iwan as a visual artist, Maddie as an art historian. The third part of the novel concerns the directions their lives take after the marriage breaks down and Iwan returns, in a state of emotional and physical collapse, to Indonesia to be cared for by his family. Six months later, Maddie has her own experience of entering another culture when she travels to and lives in Yogyakarta for three months. The fourth part, a farewell, takes place in Sydney in 2012.

At the heart of ‘The Colour of Dissonance’ is the migration experience, the experience of entering another culture, one very different from one’s own, and navigating cross-cultural relationships. At the same time, it is about a sense of place, situated knowledges, hauntings, and the impacts on individuals of social, cultural and political change (local and global) and globalisation. The themes within the novel draw on Edward W Said’s concept of the worldliness of texts which insists they cannot be separated from a web of affiliations with the material world: political, social, economic and cultural (Said 1983: 35). Such texts are enmeshed in the circumstances in which they have been created and present rich, varied and multiple viewpoints (Durix 1998: 162, Hussain 2005, Kershen 2005). Their existence represents ‘something more than the marks on the page’ (Ashcroft 1995: 298).

The web of affiliations that informs ‘The Colour of Dissonance’ includes:

- Changes in the relationship between Indonesia and Australia from 1997 until 2012, its highs and lows
- The evolving relationship between the two countries against the backdrop of ‘western’ imperialism during the 20th century and the varying, often hostile, ways in which they see the other
- The expression of this ‘dissonance’ through scholarly, literary and artistic exchanges and creative works
- The political, cultural, linguistic, economic, geographical and historical processes that continue to shape the two countries
- Tectonic changes in the shape of world power in the first decade of the 21st century and the growing strength and power of the economies of China, India and Indonesia
- The ‘Asian century’ and Australia’s ongoing disengagement with Indonesia (Lindsey 2011).

Iwan was born in 1977, three years after growing unrest among students was ruthlessly manipulated and then crushed on university campuses in 1974, along with the New Art Movement that was ‘proclaimed in Jakarta with a series of paintings and sculptures satirising

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93  For example, see Simpson (2010) on the willingness of mainly Western nations to actively abet, applaud and incite the killing of 500,000 Indonesian citizens who were alleged to be communists or left sympathisers from the mid-1960s onwards, as well as the imprisonment of 1,500,000 others.
the New Order [Suharto regime] vision’ (Vickers 2006: 174). By the time he attends school, students are required to watch the gruesome propaganda film about ‘the coup’ of 1965, *The Treachery of Gestapu-PKI*, each 30 September. In 1997, Suharto’s New Order regime is still in control and no one, least of all Iwan, can imagine a post-Suharto future. When he travels to Australia, Iwan is leaving a state marked by trauma, silence and terror and, without question, it has carved his notions of what it is to be a man and a citizen. The influences that shape his Javanese identity include: the Muslim teachings that were part of his high school education; the Hindu legends of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to which he was exposed in the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet play); and other traditional entertainments. They also include comics, the Javanese cultural requirement to behave in a refined way (*halus*), which means having the ability/power to control the emotions in public, and an acceptance of *bapakism* which emphasises man’s unquestioning role and authority as head of the family and, by implication, the state.

In Sydney Iwan comes into contact for the first time with people from different cultural backgrounds including his best friend and confidant, Akira, an emerging jazz musician. He is absorbed into the world of art and music where his embodied responses to relationships and situations are strongly shaped by his ‘eye’, and his experience of thinking in colours, particularly in times of emotional distress. Even listening to music is a visual experience and his responses to the social and political changes around him are imbricated in his development as a painter. In his initial years as an art student Iwan comes to know himself in another culture – exploring the tensions of a life lived in two places at once and through his developing arts practice and discovery of jazz. The novel explores his responses to Australian masculinities which he encounters in his friend Akira who was born in Japan but grew up largely in Australia, the two older men in the boarding house where he lives when he first arrives, the lecturers and students at the art school, the social worker Pak Bambang at the Islamic Council of Churches, his father-in-law (Ian), and the gallerist (Gerardo) who takes him on when he graduates from art school.

While living in Australia and focusing on his studies, Iwan’s understanding of the social and political changes occurring in Indonesia are blurred. Only on his return, fifteen years later, does he become more fully aware of their effects. His absence has been marked by economic collapse from late 1997, the rise of the protest movement that ended Suharto’s New Order

96 Its opposite is *kasar* behaviour which is uncontrolled, loud, emotional and is therefore seen as rough, common and even lower class. It is certainly not seen as a desirable quality for a mature adult.

97 In 1997 Indonesia was struck by financial collapse that brought about the fall of the Suharto dictatorship (1968-1998) and the establishment of democratic government. I was living in Indonesia over a period of six months during that time. Mary S. Zurbuchen’s (2005) *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present* is a collection of papers from a conference in 2001 in which participants revealed a continuing process of uncovering the truth about events in Indonesian history that had been fabricated through textbooks, museums, media, publishing, national ceremonies and monuments. The ongoing research into the extrajudicial killings, political imprisonment, disappearances, censorship, fear and disenfranchisement that occurred during Suharto’s rule remains contentious in Indonesia and has been actively resisted by some groups.
regime in 1998, and the period of instability and violence that erupted in parts of the country – much of which was ‘attributed to elements of the military or to thugs authorised and paid by Suharto and his supporters’ (Vickers 2006: 213). An event widely reported in Australia and condemned around the world was the massacre of at least 2000 people in East Timor during the referendum for independence offered by then President Habibie. At the time, Indonesians who had been brought up to believe the East Timorese welcomed them in 1975 found it difficult to accept the results of the referendum and chose to believe reports that Habibie had succumbed to pressure from the United Nations and Australia (Vickers 2006: 215). In Indonesian eyes, Australia’s support for an independent East Timor was widely perceived to be related to a grab for petroleum and gas reserves in the Timor Gap.

Iwan’s unresolved grief and loss over the tragic and untimely death of his mother when he was six years old has left a trauma that begins to surface out of the developing fissures in his relationship with Maddie. Instead of happy daydreams (memories) of times spent with his mother, he begins to be haunted by nightmares, and when the marriage falls apart he becomes ill and returns to his family in Central Java. His recovery encapsulates a reassessment of his art practice, his identity as an émigré and the ruins of his relationship with Maddie.

The novel attempts to address a lacuna in Australian literature: the lack of well developed Indonesian characters in Australian novels set in Indonesia. It is an experiment and a conversation (in the hermeneutical sense of question and answer) with its characters, text, the wider environment and context in which it is produced, my own relations to family and friends in Central Java. On starting out it seemed I was taking an enormous risk, and so finding theorists who believed in the possibility and necessity of such a task was essential. In the to-and-fro of practice-led research and research-led practice, the theoretical foundation offered by Snodgrass and Coyne’s (2006) application of hermeneutical theory to the architectural design studio, and to the ethical study of Asian architecture, offered valuable insight into my own creative process and practice. Their work also contributed to a new interpretation of Edward W Said’s theory of Orientalism. The vision of art’s contemporary multiplicities offered by Terry Smith’s (2011) Theory of Contemporary Art: World Currents was important for providing new understandings of emerging arts practices in Indonesia, Australia and the Asia Pacific, and reframed my characters’ place in a world that has moved on from the postcolonial.

To return to the questions: Does offering greater alterity to Indonesian characters in Australian literature have the potential to change Australians’ perceptions of Indonesia and of themselves in Asia? Does it have the potential to open up new cross-cultural understandings? The answer is yes, it does, but only if the reader is willing to approach the text or foreign other in a spirit of openness, curiosity and readiness for genuine dialogue. How does the author make this happen? In the novel the characters of Iwan and Maddie are obliged to enter foreign cultures, to experience their own foreignness in the foreign other. And for the reader, there is the
experience of finding the ‘familiar’ world of Sydney made unfamiliar and, hopefully, the unfamiliar world of the village and Yogyakarta made familiar.

The fusion of horizons is worked out by way of the dialectic of question and answer. Every text is the answer to a question, and the initial task of the hermeneut is to find the question the text answers. So likewise with the interpretation of a foreign culture. We come to an understanding of that culture by seeking the questions concerning the human condition that the culture answers, and applying these questions to ourselves. This is a matter of relating the horizon defined by the other to our own prejudice-defined horizon. We ask the text whether the question it answers is one that has relevance for us, here and now; and we ask whether the answer the text gives is an appropriate answer to the questions we are asking about ourselves in *our present condition* (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 160, emphasis added).

Interpretation involves judgement, skills and evaluation by way of a question-and-answer exchange to draw out the ‘radically different and the unfamiliar’ (163). To proceed by way of interpretation is different to the study of objects or critical analysis which ‘distances the alien and sees it as an inert and passive object that questions nothing’ (164). In the dialectics of interpretation, that ‘which is alien in the text of the other becomes the starting point for a process of questioning the horizons of our own prejudicial world in the hope of expanding and transforming them’ (Snodgrass and Coyne 2006: 164). It is a process of edification, one that is not without risk for, as Gadamer (1975) says, ‘Openness to the other, then, includes the acknowledgement that I must accept some things that are against myself, even though there is no one else who asks this of me’ (324). In this case, the I, whether the author or the reader, must accept the risk involved in engaging with a foreign other just as Iwan and Maddie in the novel place themselves in intimate proximity with each other, with Australia and with Indonesia; and in an ongoing process of understanding that is part of all our everyday lives and reading practices. As Schwab (2012) argues, ‘Texts that appear unfamiliar and strange force one to deal with their otherness or foreignness’ (3-4).

For the writer, and the reader, such an experience incurs transformations that ‘extend over time and unfold in close relation to other experiences, including aesthetic ones’ (Schwab 2012: 5). These traces contribute to new knowledges and understandings, cultural forms, structures of feeling and subjectivities: firstly, in the writer herself, and secondly, in the reader’s individual reading experience: ‘Literary knowledge in the strict sense is less “about” something than it is an embodied experience of something. It relies on intangible forms of knowing and … unconscious forms of knowing’ (4). As Hunt and Sampson (2006) describe, the ‘a mutuality of embodiment’ between the embodied writer and the reader ‘exerts pressure on us at the moment of composition because of the way ‘writing’ is both something which happens as we make our texts and also ‘happens’ – it “comes to life” – when it is read (148, emphasis in original). It is
in the reading that literature’s resistant and transforming epistemic dimensions may be generated (Schwab 2012: 5).

A culture’s literature and arts generate a certain cultural idiom, providing abstract shapes that resonate with particular culturally sanctioned emotions, moods, tastes, values and mental structures … literary texts operate as imaginary ethnographies … Literature does cultural work that crosses the boundaries between politics and psychology, and takes part in the continual reshaping of the historically changing notions of the human and of emergent forms of psychic life (15).

This dissertation builds on the idea that writing a cross-cultural novel has the potential to generate a new cultural idiom in the form of cross-cultural engagement between Indonesia and Australia, between Indonesians and Australians. It envisions the possibility of a relationship based on more nuanced mutual understanding of different ways of being, shared and separate histories, and our respective cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversities.

**Future research directions: on things, objects, colour, sensation, movement and gesture**

There are three main areas for further development of the themes of hermeneutical inquiry, alterity and ethical writing practice, and of the metaphor of travel/the journey in relation to writing the cross-cultural novel. They are: the philosophy (and travel writing) of Alphonso Lingis (linked to his studies and translation of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas); Karen Barad’s theory of Agential Realism; and the critical study of Australians writing within Asia and contemporary Indonesian and South East Asian literature.

In *Foreign Bodies*, Lingis (1994) sets out philosophical analyses and investigations of bodies in the material world and the ways in which they respond to their perceptions of ‘nutrients, paths, obstacles, and objectives’, the environment (ix). From the point of view of creative writing practice, Lingis’s travel writing and embodied experiences of places that challenge and unsettle ‘western opposition of self and otherness, mind and body, through an affective relation produced in the face to face encounter with place and culture’ suggest new ways of exploring the ethics of encounter with difference (Fullagar 2001: 172). A central concern in Lingis’s writing is his focus on the specificities of embodied affect which Simone Fullagar (2001) defines as the ‘sensory modalities of vision and touch alongside the spatiality of travel’ (172). Fullagar cites Stephen Muecke’s (1997) claim that writing affect is ‘a way of responding ethically, perhaps also inventing new ways of responding’ (176, cited in Fullagar 2001: 173). The ‘embodied intensity of affect’ in written work differs from emotion ‘by virtue of its intense power to produce a different experience of otherness in relation to oneself’

98 For Massumi (1996), emotion is a ‘qualified intensity’ while affect ‘escapes the logic of closure … is non-linear and potentially disruptive of western reasoning’ (220, cited in Fullagar 2001: 174).
In Lingis’s travel writing, this means that rather than ‘attempt to domesticate the otherness he encounters in travel through recourse to narrative closure’, he structures ‘each essay … around specific flashbacks of intensity that relate to the touch, the look or the scent of the human and non-human other. … [and this] more subtle excess … concerns itself with the sensuality of the sensory body and the specificity of the travel encounter in shifting our perceptions of self and world’ (Fullagar 2001: 174).

There are uncanny echoes of Hans-Georg Gadamer in Lingis’s conceptualisation of travel as ethical encounter that requires an openness that threatens to de-centre the self: ‘The other reaffirms his [sic] otherness in questioning me, disturbing the order of my perspectives and my reasons, contesting me’ (Lingis 1989: 135, cited in Fullagar 2001: 174). This ‘affective dimension of travel’, which involves ‘the desire to see, touch and know the other is moved by the reverberations of the other’s alterity’ (181). As a ‘liminal experience’ it ‘generates a spatio-temporality in which the self is connected with and differentiated from the vulnerability and mortality of other, through a vision mediated by affectivity of touch’ (181). In Lingis, life is nourished by sensations and sensuality and, Tom Sparrow (2007) argues, he asserts ‘[a]gainst Merleau-Ponty … that the perception of objects always occurs from out of a sensual state. Sensuality becomes the fertile ground of being-in-the-world’ (112).

In Lingis the centrality of the sensuousness and autonomy of objects nourishes our existence, and their ‘luminosity, tactility, and sonority bathe our sensitive bodies. As the real source of our nourishment, they lend us sensibility and illuminate the world’ (Sparrow 2007: 113). As mortal bodies and subjects moving through the world and through temporality, ageing and death and our habitual lives, ‘our sensory-motor schema adopts shortcuts that allow it to run on autopilot … a gamut of rites, rituals, ceremonies, secret passwords and slang, a whole social circuitry which invests the body with an identity and regulates its sensitivity’ (Sparrow 2007: 115). To oppose this ‘organised existence’ is to make ourselves a ‘body without organs’, that is, according to Deleuze and Guattari, to open up to experiment, desires, the sensuous world, to move nomadically, to ‘approach the limits’ (116). To live from sensation, therefore, is to ‘be a sensitive body traversing the earth’ (117).

Lingis … develops the thesis [in The Imperative] that our sensuality, by its very nature, commands our bodies to travel, to open themselves up to foreign sensations and respond to the enticement of affects we are not equipped to assimilate into our typical circuits (Sparrow 2007: 117).

In Foreign Bodies, Lingis (1994) draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s The Visible and the Invisible to argue that the ‘sensible field is a realm of being where all points become pivots, all lines become levels, all surfaces become planes, all colors become atmospheres, all tones become … keys … particulars generalising themselves … Each given is the spot and moment
in which a schema of being is being elaborated’ (7). It is, he says, something artists understand.

Artists have a precise knowledge of this; their knowledge consists in knowing what a color does to a field, to another color, to a zone of space; in knowing what a line does to the zone it molds, to the space it bunches up, bulges out, or flattens, to the color, to the field of tensions; and in knowing what shapes move, creep, crawl, leap, set up movement in a whole field. … Artists know how, with a few lines, a few strokes of color, to make things visible (Lingis 1994: 7).

Merleau-Ponty takes this sensing to be ‘a prise, a “hold”’ and, following Heidegger, ‘envisions looking – palpating with the eyes – tasting, smelling, and even hearing as variants of handling. The tactile datum is not given to a passive surface; the smooth, the rough, the sleek, and the sticky, the hard and the vaporous are given to movements of the hand that applies itself to them’ (8). This means, for example, ‘The hard and the soft, the grainy and the sleek, moonlight and sunlight in memory give themselves not as sensorial contents but as a certain type of symbiosis, a certain way the outside has of invading us, a certain way we have to welcome it’ (Merleau-Ponty 1986: 317).

The second field of inquiry is the provocative material feminism offered by Karen Barad. In an interview with Adam Kleinman (2012), the physicist, philosopher and feminist scholar argues for an Agential Realist ontology (or ‘ethico-onto-epistemology … an entanglement … of ethics, ontology, and epistemology) in which ‘“individuals” do not pre-exist as such but rather materialize in intra-action. That is, intra-action goes to the question of making differences, of “individuals,” rather than assuming their independent or prior existence’ (Kleinman 2012: 77). Agential Realism steps away from Cartesian distinctions and differences, to make ‘inquiries into how differences are made and remade, stabilized and destabilized’ (77). Barad’s process is not to synthesise but to ‘diffract’, to ‘get a feel for how differences are produced and how they matter’ (77). It is, she argues, about ‘the material intraimplication of putting “oneself” at risk, troubling “oneself”, one’s ideas, one’s dreams, all the different ways of touching and being in touch, and sensing the differences and entanglements from within. In fact, touch currently has me in its grip’ (77).

In future research I want to bring Barad and Lingis into conversation to shed light on an ethics of writing across culture, and inform my own readings of Indonesian novelists during the past decade and a half. In particular, I want to examine the implications for me as a writer and reader of Agential Realism’s queering of the ‘notion of responsibility’ in ethics. As Barad explains, “responsibility” is not about right response, but rather a matter of inviting, welcoming, and enabling the response of the Other. That is, what is at issue is response-ability – the ability to respond’ (81). ‘The point is,’ Barad says, ‘to live the questions and to help them flourish’ (81). 99
In the light of this new and ongoing research, the intention in the final draft of the novel is to experiment with the play of sensations, perceptions and affects through objects, colour, image, impulse, motion, and embodied feelings; to invoke a sense of dynamism, a lived energy and vitality, even while doubts and fear of failure incite a vulnerable receptivity to its characters, textures and hues. What I have learned from the interplay of research and practice is to keep moving forward – writing in a state of risk, openness, sensibility and danger – and accepting the aporia of what I have still to grasp hold of. In Rheinberger’s words, writing that is like ‘playing in the dark’ (cited in Schwab 2012: 3). Or, as Barad (2008) argues, ‘knowing is part of the world making itself intelligible to another part. Practices of knowing and being are not isolatable, but rather, they are mutually implicated. We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because “we” are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming’ (147).
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**Exhibition**

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Part 1 Leaving home
A village, Central Java 1980s and 1990s
When his mother died Iwan’s sense of abandonment was a fist of pain where his heart’s joy had been. First there was sunlight, laughter and colour, and then thick clouds of ash crept into the house and layered the surface of their lives. Pressed down on them while they slept and caused them to feel tired when they were awake. He was six years old when Suriani died, but no one told him she had died or, if they did, he didn’t hear, or perhaps he just couldn’t bear it. She was there one day and gone the next. He looked for signs, traces of her, but her clothes were gone, and even her scent. When he asked where she was, his big sister Hari said, ‘Mama has gone away.’ He begged her to help him find her but she said, ‘That’s not possible.’

So he waited, and that’s when he began thinking in colours. And then he found a little door to a secret place where he began storing flashes of memory of him and her together, and these fragments became a constant in his life. They were triggered by objects and things, smells and colours – the garuda wings on a batik sarong, a long plait jerking on his sister’s back, a broken kite that wanted to fly again, a drifting cloud of yellow butterflies. They were in vivid colours, or occasionally in sepia tones; sometimes focused and sometimes a shadowy blur. They lit up the things and people around him and connected him to her presence as well as her absence; the press of her body, her voice, her laugh, the scent of her scalp, the weight of her plait in his hand. Mostly they calmed him, made him happy, and as he grew older it seemed like they were from another time, perhaps even a time before he was born. Sometimes, though, they made him mad with loss, and then the world and everything in it was dull, grey and sorry.

When Hari left school to take care of their father, Totot, his two older brothers, Hidayat who was eleven and Ismoyo who was eight, and him, he shadowed her every move. Sitting on her lap if she sat, squatting by the fire if she was cooking, sleeping beside her at night. If the family burned like small sudden fires of mourning, Iwan and his father, Totot, were volcanoes that could and did erupt, often, and without warning, and no matter what Hari did, no matter how loving and sweet, there was only so much a thirteen year old girl could do with a loss like that.

After two years had passed and the family was settling into a new pattern, Totot decided to marry and so the family was forced to rearrange itself once more and, then, just as they did so there was a further blow; Suriani’s parents died within three months of one another. Along with the arrival of a baby brother and a marriage for Hari, this unforeseen death of both grandparents stretched the emotional and physical fabric of the family to its limit and it affected Iwan most of all. In the year he turned ten, Hari married and her husband, Wisnu, moved in with the family. Being banned from her bed was one thing, worse still was the jealousy, so that now even Hari was unable to control him.

As Totot considered sending Iwan to Jakarta to work for a rich family, Totot’s two older sisters stepped in and offered to take him to live with them in their village. It was a temporary
solution to the deteriorating relationships of father and son and the boy and his family, but it soon settled into something permanent and he found himself surrounded by a community who had known and loved his mother, and would love him similarly. The change gave him a fresh start and the colour seeped back into his life as he responded to his aunts’ gentle affection.
When he completed primary school, the aunts decided he would go on to the junior high school in Solo and so, at the age of thirteen, he went to live with a rich family in the city. There, he did odd jobs in lieu of rent and meals, and attended school six days a week. When his classes were in the afternoon he spent the mornings sweeping, mopping the floors, clipping the grass, or going to the market. Often the family was away and then there was just the maid, the security guard and him. It was easy then. But when the family were home he did his homework late at night, with only a candle to light the page if there was no electricity.

The arrangement was so successful that Iwan continued on to senior high school and this was where he began to study English and art with Pak Harto, a popular teacher who spoke English fluently and had an art gallery at the front of his house. Iwan loved the art classes especially, learning how to prime a canvas, the smell of the oil paints, dipping into art books, observing how colours changed when placed next to each other or in a different light. Pak Harto taught them to feel colour, in their bodies, on their skin, and in the way certain parts of their bodies responded. In the exercises he set them, the great artworks they studied, he excited their curiosity. Art led them to discover things about the world, not just when they went on painting excursions, but also when they participated in an art exhibition in Yogyakarta, or visited an artist’s studio. And when they finished school, a few of his classmates even had plans to go to the Institute of the Arts in Yogyakarta.

In the last week of school, Pak Harto called Iwan to his office to speak about the possibility of a scholarship to study at an art school in Sydney, Australia. A large map of the world was spread on the teacher’s desk and as they talked Pak Harto pointed to where Java was, then drew his thumb down the paper to a large island, and to a place on the east coast called Sydney. He asked him to think about the offer and when Iwan accepted, Pak Harto raised the matter with the aunties, who gave their permission, and then with Totot who also agreed.

He told them, ‘The art school will waive its fees and there’s an organisation in Bali who will provide him with basic living expenses for three years, as well as a return air-fare.’

To many, Totot’s second marriage seemed intemperate and ill matched. For Totot, however, the offer coincided with a growing fear that he was incapable of attending to his four children. He had been a broken man in the years after Suriani’s death and, as it turned out, the marriage to Yuni was not entirely loveless. Then as the second family grew up and melded with the first, his grief began to subside and it dawned on him that, thanks be to God, his and Suriani’s children, apart from Iwan who was still young, had married and were raising children of their own. They contributed to their community, tended their rice fields, and were even making sacrifices so their children could be educated.
He still remembered the day he saw Bung Karno passing through the village in a black car and heard him speak about *Pancasila*, the five principles for the republic. Bung Karno’s dream of education for everyone, not just the rich, was the dream of independence. It was what they discussed sometimes, the old men: democracy, belief in one God, respect for all religions, a country united, free from oppression, and social justice for all, especially the poor and weak. At the mosque it was said the only way to realise *Pancasila* was through education. ‘Educate the children, the rest will follow,’ the Imam said and Totot believed him. The Dutch only educated the high caste people, not the ordinary people, and they educated them in Dutch. That was the past and while some in the village only spoke Javanese, Totot could speak Indonesian well, and his children also, because they went to school for a few years at least. It gave him great satisfaction that Iwan, Suriani’s youngest son, was in the second generation after independence, but here he was, finishing junior and senior high school, and now Pak Harto was coming to him with this offer for his son. It would have made the boy’s mother so happy.

When Totot’s sisters first took Iwan to live with them he was relieved. He carried some guilt about this son who had her eyes, mouth and hands and the sight of him could still send a jarring stab to his heart. Some said Suriani’s parents were wrong to give her such a powerful name, but she came to them late in life and they named her for the light and warmth she brought. Her vivacity and sense of humour, her unequivocal love and affection for him and their four children, were a joyful bubble, and just as her parents had recognised the futility of trying to curb her exuberance, he too had to accept her deep felt need for personal freedom. If he ever tried to correct her, she responded always by making him laugh. She could appear gracious, refined, one minute and then loud and daring, perhaps climbing a tree to fetch down a coconut, the next. Even in the market they were amused by her wild ways and always reminded him still of the time she stole a bicycle and rode it round and round the market, staying just out of reach of the pompous school teacher who was its owner.
Pak Harto’s decision to create the scholarship for Iwan grew out of his belief that he was just at the right age to benefit from the skills, stimulation and encouragement the art school could offer. Iwan had a steely determination, it was as if he had been stamped ‘artist’ at birth, but Pak Harto also knew that in this culture, as in many others, perhaps all others, an artist was a nobody, or a somebody in the same way that everyone is a somebody. It was a not quite reputable profession and unless he became very famous it would do little to improve his social position or standing. A person’s place, their marriage choices, their ability to get a job and make money were determined by birth, family background and wealth. Leaving Indonesia and attending art school in another country were just added ingredients. Iwan didn’t need to leave Indonesia to realise his potential but Pak Harto saw that in the right place and circumstances, and with his naïve openness and driving curiosity, the young man might fly.

Decades earlier when he himself finished his studies in painting at the Institute of the Arts in Yogyakarta, Pak Harto went to Bali where older Javanese painters welcomed and occasionally fed him. They gave him constructive criticism, helped him sell his work, and treated him as a serious artist and an equal. Now, just as it was his turn to offer hope to Iwan in his development as an artist, his dream was that one day when Iwan returned to Indonesia he would himself inspire and assist other young artists. And, if he remained in Australia, he would inspire them anyway because he would always be an Indonesian artist, always be a Javanese artist.

On the day of Iwan’s flight from Yogyakarta to Denpasar, and from there on to Sydney, Pak Harto arrived in the village by taxi. For the occasion, a modest sized posse had gathered at Totot’s house to see Iwan off. There was Totot and his stepmother Yuni, his brothers Hidayat and Ismoyo and their wives, Hari and Wisnu and their seven year old daughter, Fitri, and son, Goenawan, who was three. There were neighbours and, of course, aunts, uncles and cousins. He had taken great care when choosing the day of the flight as he knew Iwan’s family would be reassured when they consulted the Javanese calendar and, remarkably, thankfully, saw that it was a propitious day for making long journeys and starting a new project. They knew Iwan was going a long way away from Java and would be flying over the ocean for almost a whole day. They knew too that when he arrived there he would be with Bule – white people and non-Muslims. But they trusted Pak Harto because he was a teacher, and he in turn felt honoured by their confidence in him. After greeting the family members he knew, Pak Harto withdrew and waited in the car as one by one they said goodbye to Iwan, wishing him well, and even pressing a few notes into his hand.
As he said goodbye to his son, Totot held himself stiffly. ‘Goodbye son, and remember to always be a good Javanese.’

Hari handed him a food parcel wrapped in banana leaves and as he was about to lower himself into the back of the taxi a small figure flashed forward and launched herself into his arms, almost knocking him to the ground. It was his six year old niece Fitri. ‘Little uncle, please will you bring me back a kangaroo from Australia?’

‘Of course, sayang.’

As he went to put her down, Fitri tightened her grip on his neck and her small frame began to shudder as loud hiccups of grief ignited the communal sadness and dismay felt at his imminent departure. Throats ached, there was a twitter of concern, and then Hari came and unpeeled the arms of the sobbing child so that Iwan could settle into the back seat of the taxi. Sunlight streamed down on the heads and raised hands of the family as the taxi drove away. No one, least of all Pak Harto, dreamed it would be more than ten years before they set eyes on him again.
On this day of his departure, not long after his twenty-first birthday, Iwan did not suspect that he would miss bundling into a colt – the little vans he caught when he went back and forth to Solo. Or consider whether he would miss the visits with friends and Pak Harto to the great Hindu temple Prambanan or the Buddhist monument Borobodur, where they slept in nearby villages and woke with the sun to make sketches and paint scenes in dull greens and grey oil paints. He did not wonder who would join him in breaking the daily fast during Ramadan, or how he would ask forgiveness of his father and stepmother at the end of the fasting month. If he’d thought for a minute that it would be a decade before he heard the Call to Prayer from the village mosque, or experienced the familiar barrage of evening and morning sounds around their house, would he have gone?

Pak Harto spoke little on the way to the airport and as the taxi sped past Prambanan Iwan tried not to think about the reassuring closeness of the young men who were his friends as they slept side by side or draped over one another while travelling in the colt. And then there was Mt Merapi, the glimpses of which always delighted him in the clear still dawn or by the light of a full moon, chuffing out puffs of gas or spewing trails of glowing orange-red lava. ‘I am thinking in colours’ he told himself, and he allowed soft blue-greens and pale turquoise to wash over and protect him.

Was it car sickness or fear that caused the churning in his gut and the flush of fever on his forehead? He clenched two hands together until it hurt, and then, releasing them, pulled his backpack onto his lap and hugged it for comfort. He never asked Pak Harto why he chose him above all the other students, some of whom had possibly a greater talent for art than him. True, he was the best student of English in his year, but now he was going on a journey to a place he could hardly imagine. He thought of Prince Rama in The Ramayana, banished from the court and going to live in the jungle. He knew he must be brave, but Prince Rama had Princess Sita and Prince Laksmana to accompany him, whereas he, Iwan, was setting out on his own. Pak Harto said there would be no Javanese where he was going, only Bule. Some Muslims and some mosques, but not many. He knew how to use a phone, having practised at Pak Harto’s house, but Pak Harto said that no one at the art school would speak Indonesian and he would find this hard at first even though Pak Harto was an excellent teacher of English, everyone said so.

He had faltered on a threshold of fear, grief and anxiety when Fitri’s sobs vibrated through him, but now he willed himself to remain calm. He was grateful to Pak Harto but at times he also felt a deep shame at being the one chosen. Only once did he speak of these feelings, and that was to his sister Hari. She listened and then told him that this was God’s will, God wanted him to do this, and God would take care of him. He relied on this truth now to keep him strong.
When they arrived at the airport the taxi driver handed Iwan his bag and Pak Harto presented him with a brown paper parcel. It was a gift, he said, and then they walked to the entrance doors. Pak Harto shook his hand and said, ‘Have a good journey. Work hard and try to do whatever the teachers ask of you. Be a good Muslim and don’t be in a hurry to return – stay as long as you can. Avoid temptations.’

And then, as an afterthought, he whispered with startling urgency, ‘Stay away from politics. There are spies. It’s not safe for you to criticise the government there. Be careful. People will be watching.’

Pak Harto led him to the security gates and pushed him gently forward, and when Iwan turned one last time he saw his teacher place the palm of his right hand to his heart.
Mama is making batik. I am watching Mama’s hands so I can learn to make batik too. Mama has fine, brown hands. Her fingers are long and slender, and there are delicate pale half moons at the top of her nails. These hands are my lifeline, they hug me when I hurt, they teach me and reassure me that all is well, that I am safe, that I will grow up and be a good man one day.

Mama works silently, concentrating, and I am quiet and still. I look at her eyes – they are dark, soft and kind like a happy cow’s with stars in them that are sometimes still. Hari says there are no stars in Mama’s eyes, but when she looks up she smiles and then I smile too because the stars are dancing. Her hair is darker than midnight and she has a thick plait that hangs to her waist and brushes the top of her sarong with a curly pointy end. Sometimes when she bends over the plait is very naughty and jumps over her shoulder and tries to run away, but she catches it up, scolds it, and flicks it back again. It makes me laugh to hear her say, ‘Very naughty to run away, now home you must go.’ Mama is beautiful, even more beautiful than Princess Sita.

The batik stand is at the front of our house and when the doors are open you can see it from the street. Today there is a creamy cloth draped over it and up close you can see the fine honey coloured lines drawn on it. Mama has a small fire of hot coals going to heat the wax. She holds the bamboo cane handle of the canting and neatly dips the small brass cup that is no larger than a rambutan seed into the melted wax. The canting has a minute spout so Mama is constantly scooping up the wax and applying it in pale snail trails to the cloth. I have been watching very carefully and, if only Mama will let me, I know I can do batik too.

‘Mama, let me try ... I can do it.’

‘Alright Iwan. Now you are five, perhaps you would like to make a batik of your own. True?’

‘True, true.’

‘Alright, you can make a batik on this cloth. Will you make a butterfly batik?’

Mama takes a pencil and draws a butterfly on the cloth.

‘Now you will learn to use the canting, but you must be very careful of the fire and the hot wax. Watch ...’

‘I know, I know.’

So many times I have seen them – my mother, Hari, my grandmother and aunties – tracing the hot wax onto the cloth.

‘No, Iwan, you’re too young. You might burn yourself,’ they always say but I practise when no one is watching. Today is a big day, today I make batik too.
My village is tiny, it has only a few streets, and our house is like all the other houses. It’s a wooden house with large doors at the front. In the day we open the wooden shutters to let the light stream across the reddish brown packed earth floor. When you walk in from the outside there is a large room where we sit on mats with our visitors to drink tea. There are bedrooms at the back and at the side there’s a big room with some animals in a small yard at the front. We have two goats but I wish we had a cow, I like cows.

‘Pay attention Iwan. See, this is how you trace the lines of the butterfly.’

Mama blows gently into the spout of the canting to clear the air bubbles. I like the sound she makes and I purse my lips and blow, ‘Phew, phew.’ It tickles and I start to laugh. Then Mama begins tracing a fine even line around the butterfly’s wing.

‘Let me. I can do it.’

‘Very well. Try first on this piece of cloth until you get the hang of it, yes.’

I seize the canting and dip it into the hot wax, filling the little cup. Phew, phew, I blow into the spout just like Mama.

‘I can do it.’

I practise and then it’s time to make my batik. Mama smiles and leans over me, inhaling quietly. ‘Very sweet,’ she says as she puts her face close to the top of my head. I want my hand to be steady but an ugly blob of wax goes ‘plop’, right in the middle of the butterfly’s wing.

‘Aduh!’ I scream, ‘It’s ruined.’

‘It’s nothing,’ Mama says and she deftly picks off the honey coloured blob with her fingernail.

Many times I have been with my mother and aunts to sell batiks in the markets in Solo and even all the way on the train to the big market in Yogyakarta. When I was really little Mama carried me in her selendang, and I lay in a tiny hammock on her back or against her breast. Sometimes Hari carried me in the selendang on her hip. The brown, cream and indigo patterns of our family’s sarongs, kebayas and selendangs are as familiar to me as my own skin and when I close my eyes I see them clearly.

When we hear the faint sound of the gamelan music Mama and I look at one another.

‘Quickly Iwan, it’s time to go to the shadow puppet show. Where’s Papa?’

Mama clears away the fire, wax and cantings. Then Hari, Hidayat and Ismoyo arrive, and Papa too. ‘Hurry, hurry,’ Papa says. ‘Let’s go.’
Sydney 1997
When the plane made its descent to Sydney airport the early morning sky was an intense electric blue, a colour Iwan had only ever seen in a paint tube before. There was not a single cloud and he felt moved as if God was granting him a special morning. Looking out of the egg shaped window of the plane he saw a vast spread of terracotta roofs interlaced with straps of bitumen grey. On the wider roads specks of cars inched forward in different directions like tiny ants. The grid-like order of the streets was like a child’s drawing, with row upon row of houses set in neat rectangles with a green patch like a field at the back. Fences were dead straight as if drawn with a ruler and he was puzzled by two straight narrow parallel paths that ran from a road down one side of the houses to a smaller building at the back. In some, glistening silver mirrors flashed like lonely rice fields waiting to be sown, and some had one or two smaller buildings as well as the main large building. Perhaps for other family members or servants. Occasionally he saw an expanse of dark grey-green vegetation, a jungle perhaps.

Sydney stretched in every direction. Yogyakarta was his sole model of a city and he’d imagined that Sydney, too, was a collection of villages, with a main street like Jalan Malioboro that bustled day and night with people, cars, motor bikes and betchaks. And he felt his body transported there, being pressed forward in a stream of bodies along the colonnaded footpath of Jalan Malioboro, casting sideways glances at the jumble of low set stalls selling leather goods, wooden toys and souvenir tee-shirts and to the other at the stores selling stationery, clothes, fabrics and electrical goods. Jalan Malioboro where sad-faced toothless women held out a cupped claw and whined until he gave up a few coins. The old women always reminded him of the children’s song, ‘Burung Kakatua’, and suddenly he could hear his little niece, Fitri, singing as she played with her friends.

*Burung kakatua*
*hinggap di jendela*
*nenek sudah tua*
*giginya tinggal dua.*

*Tredung, tredung, tredung tra la la*
*Tredung, tredung, tredung tra la la*
*Tredung, tredung, tredung tra la la*
*Tredung, tredung, tredung tra la la*
*burung kakatua.*

*Giginya tinggal dua*
*Nenek sudah tua*
*Hinggap di jendela*
*Seperti kakatua!*

1
The plane turned on its side and swept down across the water like a mighty bird, its gears and engines roaring and shuddering as if it was about to explode. Around him the other passengers and crew remained calm, bracing themselves. The child across the aisle held close to an emerald green elephant and he, Iwan, interlaced his fingers tightly in front of him as the plane’s black wheels reached for the ground and the ash grey tarmac rushed up to catch them. His body braced as the plane thundered forward, fear gripped his bowel, and when he touched his hand to his forehead a layer of sweat dribbled into his palm. The terror, the exhilaration. He willed himself to breathe in, and out, and when it glided to a final stop he had a deep trancelike desire to laugh crazy and leap up and down in a wild dance.
The journey from the airport was a pastiche of colour, sight, sound and speed. Cars trapped between white painted lines, indicators flicking like dragon tongues when they crossed from lane to lane, red and green lights conducting the stop-start of the traffic like a gamelan orchestra. Airplanes roared overhead and then faded away, returning the world to the dull rev of the traffic and voice crackles of the taxi’s radio. Enormous trucks appeared beside them, their drivers perched in high-up cabins. Some pulling long empty trailers, one or sometimes two, that made a loud rattling metallic racket as they passed. When the lights turned green they strained forward with their heavy loads, grinding their way up through the gears.

There was a puzzling empty neatness to the wide sealed roads, gutters and footpaths. Cars and trucks, but no bicycles, betchaks or motor bikes. It was almost seven and the February sun was turning up the heat on the grey blue road and concrete surfaces, bouncing blinding light flashes off rear car windows. The shining blue sky was now brushed with wisps of white. The foliage on the roadside plants appeared faded, washed out, dusty, as if the rainy season had refused to start. But Pak Harto told him there was no wet or dry season in Sydney. Instead there were four seasons and he wondered what that would be like. Only once in his life had he experienced real cold and that was when he and his friends climbed the northern slopes of Mt Merapi in the early dawn. No matter how many sarongs they wrapped around them, they could not get warm, and their feet ached as they slipped and slid on the damp mountain track in their leather sandals.

Soon the traffic untangled and began moving at dizzying speeds so that in less than thirty minutes he was standing on a wide bitumen footpath in front of a three-storey terrace house with a lopsided sign that read, Darlo Boarding House, Men Only − Apply Within. A second sign, No Vacancies, swung underneath on cup hooks. There was a white wrought iron fence and gate and, beyond that, a patch of green spiky lawn, clipped and watered, that breathed a humid grassy welcome as he opened the gate and stepped up to the concrete footpath. On a narrow verandah, a wood slatted seat with each slat painted in shiny red, yellow, green and blue was chained and padlocked to a nearby water meter. He stood on the coir mat with ‘Home’ printed on it and reached up to push the doorbell. On the other side he heard footsteps, the click of a lock, and then the door was swept open by Marj, a tall, large boned woman in a sleeveless summer dress.

‘Good morning. I’m Marj and this is my place. You must be ... how do you say your name? Eye-warne, is it?’

When she spoke, her voice was as booming and loud as the revving trucks on the road and it took some time before he realised she was asking a question.
‘Ee-waarn,’ he pronounced at length.

Her pale skin was covered in a thousand faded orange freckles and her short dyed auburn hair was curled and so thin he could almost see her scalp.


He felt intimidated and not just because of her loudness or the magnificence of her bare arms and ample breasts. Marj was commanding.

Marj hadn’t been especially keen on taking in another foreigner, not that she had any problems with Akira, and anyway you could only tell Akira was foreign by looking at him. When she asked Akira and the Boys what they thought, Akira said why not give him a go and the Boys said nothing. They’d been more concerned when she’d taken in Akira because as they said, ‘Not sure you orta be takin in a Jap Marjie.’ But ultimately it was Marj’s decision and no one could be better than Akira. He was clean, thoughtful, quiet – well except for the piano but that was alright. Seemed quiet now when he wasn’t playing.

There was an unusual stillness about this one. He was probably about five seven or eight but terribly thin, healthy but thin. He averted his eyes from her gaze but not before she noticed they were fringed with thick black lashes.

‘Ya, ya.’ Iwan nodded. He suddenly felt extremely tired.

‘Right you are then, Ivan, come on in. Wipe yur feet, there’s a good lad.’ Train them right from the start – that was her motto.

Leaving him to close the door, she headed off up the stairs with his bag. ‘Room’s just up here luv.’

Iwan hesitated.

‘C’mon dear. This way.’

He followed her up the stairs. At the first landing she turned right and went up several more stairs to a second landing which had several doors leading off a hallway. She stopped at a turquoise door, turned the knob, and stood aside for Iwan to enter.

‘Come in dear, these are your keys – one for the front door, one for the back, door that is, and one for your room. Everyone has a key so they can lock their door if they wish.’

The light filled room was simply furnished and had a faint smell of cleaning product that was not unpleasant. The walls and high pressed-tin patterned ceiling were freshly painted a warm white. The polished grey and white streaked linoleum was worn in patches and there was a
pale blue woven bedspread on the single bed. Marj pulled open the doors of a timber wardrobe to show hanging space on the left and an open shelf and drawers on the right. The early morning sun was shining through a single window that looked down an alleyway between the boarding house and the wall next door. Iwan glimpsed a backyard and saw men’s shirts in khaki greens and pale blues, pinned upside down on a line, their limp arms lifting and shaking as the whole danced on a wheel that went round and around.

‘Akira went and got that chair, and the bookcase. He thought you’d need it for your books and art materials.’

He saw that Marj had placed a hand on the back of a brand new navy desk chair that was pushed up under an old wooden desk with drawers down one side. The shelves of a two metre high pine board bookcase next to the desk looked oddly empty. There was an armchair in front of the open window.

Marj patted the desk. ‘My son used to study at this desk when he was at the university. He was a very good student and he’s a lawyer now you know?’

She smiled at Iwan and picked up the map that was lying on the desk. She pointed to an ‘X’ that marked the position of the Darlo Boarding House, and traced a series of arrows with her finger as she spoke.

‘See, this is us here. And to get to the art school you just follow the arrows – go down here, cross Oxford Street, it’s down that way, and then you turn right here. It’s very close.’ She looked up to see if he understood, ‘Arkie’s going to help you get ready for art school. The man says you have to go on Monday. Not tomorrow, next Monday.’

Iwan nodded. He felt lightheaded, as if this was a dream.


When Marj reached the door she turned and said, ‘Oh, I almost forgot.’ She beckoned him onto the landing with her index finger. The gesture was so rude that he thought she must be angry.

‘C’mon, I’ll show you the bathroom. You’ll be sharing with Arkie and you both have to keep it clean, and keep the lid down on the toilet. Alright? You can have a shower now if you want. A good idea I think.’

In the bathroom there was a large freestanding iron bath with an overhead shower, a shiny pink pedestal hand basin, and a matching pink toilet with a black seat and lid. A mirrored cupboard hung above the hand basin. To his dismay, Marj led him to the toilet.

‘This is the toilet. Here’s the paper.’
Marj lifted the lid and seat of the toilet to indicate how it was to be used.

‘You stand and point into the toilet like this. Right?’

Marj demonstrated.

‘If you want to do number two, you put the seat down and you sit. Right? No squatting on the seat. That’s very bad for the toilet.’ She wagged a finger. ‘When you’re finished you put the paper in the toilet and press the button here. It’ll flush. See ...’

Marj pressed the button with a flourish. ‘You see, no standing on the toilet.’ She shook her head and finger, back and forth, and looked down. ‘Then you put the lid down.’

Iwan looked at his feet for much of this performance. He was confused by Marj. Her body language and loudness suggested someone very *kasar*, unrefined, angry. He thought perhaps she was joking with him, but she seemed very serious. The way she closed the toilet seat was very loud. Visually he understood what she was communicating, but for what purpose he did not know and he contented himself and Marj by nodding, ‘Ya, ya.’ He did not want her to think him disrespectful.

Now Marj led him over to the shower. He had encountered modern plumbing before and then, as now, he felt a sense of awe as Marj turned on the tap and the cold water flowing from the shower gradually became warmer. The first time was in a new hotel in Yogyakarta where he and his classmates were attending an art exhibition. All had visited the men’s bathrooms to observe the urinal and toilet cubicles, the flush toilets and marble tiling, soft lighting, expansive mirrors and porcelain, but Marj’s bathroom was not as grand as that.

When Marj left him, he showered and put on clean clothes. He had laid his clothes on the bed and now began putting them away – depositing his three tee-shirts, two sarongs and underwear into the newspaper lined drawers of the wardrobe and hanging up two pairs of pants and a formal long sleeved batik shirt on the coat hangers provided. Next he took the assortment of paintbrushes, paints, pencils and sketchpads from his suitcase and arranged them on the shelves of the bookcase. At the very bottom of the suitcase was an old *wayang kulit* puppet of the Tree of Life. Worn from long use, the leather *gunungan* was his most prized possession and seeing a calendar, courtesy of the local butcher, he removed it and hung the puppet in its place.

Last of all he undid the parcel Pak Harto had given him at the airport in Yogyakarta. In it was a silk prayer rug, very fine, and woven in pale turquoise, soft browns and an earthy orange. As he opened it out on the bed and skimmed the soft rich pile with his palm, Iwan took in the border of flowers and stylised images of trees in the centre panel. In a beautiful and sacred garden. He wondered if Pak Harto had bought it on Haj in Mecca, but then this triggered another jolting realisation – that he didn’t know which direction he should face to pray. He didn’t even know which way was north.
The Darlo Boarding House was in a row of eight terrace houses and Marj’s house had the original wrought iron trimmed balcony with two pairs of French doors opening onto it from the upstairs front bedroom. Above that, the building stretched up to a third floor. It had five bedrooms and accommodated Marj and four male boarders who all had a room each. At the back there was a lean-to which contained the original outside bathroom and toilet but they were seldom used because Marj had converted two smaller bedrooms into bathrooms on the first and second floors.

On the ground floor there was an entry hall and staircase, with one large room off the hall that could be closed off into two separate rooms by some concertinaed doors that folded against the wall. In the front there was an upright piano and a formal dining table and chairs, and in the other half there was a television, some armchairs and a lounge. Beyond that there was an informal dining room with one large table and long benches that could seat up to five people on each side. When Iwan came downstairs at 8.30 he saw a young man sitting at the long table. He had long black hair pulled back in a pony tail. When he looked up and saw Iwan he smiled and stood up to greet him.

‘Hi, I’m Akira. You’re Iwan right?’

Akira gestured to him to sit down.

‘Have a seat, mate.’

Iwan scrambled in his brain for the English words and when spoken they sounded strangulated and hesitant, ‘Yes, thank you. And you, where you from?’

‘Originally Japan, but I came here with my family when I was ten. That’s ten years ago so you could say I’m Aussie now.’

‘Is Mrs Marj your mother?’

‘No, my parents live in Canberra. It’s a long way from Sydney so I’ve been boarding with Marj for a year now.’

‘You study also?’

‘I’m studying jazz piano at the Conservatorium of Music. That’s my piano in the front room. You’ll probably hear me practising – Marj and the Boys are pretty cool about that.’

Two older men entered the room. One tall and thin with black hair and a bald patch at the back, the other shorter and strong looking, with grey hair cut short. Both clean shaven.

‘Oh, here they are now. Hey guys, meet Iwan. This is Ernie and Bert – yeah, just like on Sesame Street. They board here as well. Sorry, Marj and I tend to just call them “the Boys”.’
Akira shook some cornflakes into Iwan’s bowl as well as his own. Iwan looked at them and picked up his spoon.

‘You put milk and sugar on them mate.’

He watched as Akira added milk and sugar to his cereal and did the same. Then he tried them, shook his head and put the spoon down.

Akira laughed. ‘Yeah, they don’t serve rice for breakfast. You get used to it after a while ... if you’re hungry enough! How about some toast? Marj is cooking bacon and eggs – you can have that, or sausages?’

‘I Muslim – not eat bacon.’

‘Okay, then you’ll probably want to steer clear of the sausages. They’ll have pork in them. Eggs?’ Iwan nodded. ‘Alright, I’ll let Marj know you’ll have poached eggs on toast. Yeah?’

When he returned Akira had a plan. ‘Look, my mum gave me a rice cooker for my room but I hardly ever use it. Too lazy. But I’m sure Marj would be happy about it if we brought it downstairs and cooked rice in the morning. We can take rice for lunch then as well. She’s good value, Marj, really understanding.’

Akira offered to be his guide that first day in Sydney and when they finished breakfast they walked up to Oxford Street. Lanes of traffic zoomed up and down the streets like choreographed robots, orderly and fast. The footpaths were wide, smooth and empty.

‘People, where?’ Iwan asked.

‘It’s Sunday, a holiday. That’s why it’s so quiet.’

At Taylor Square they flagged the Circular Quay bus and Akira demonstrated how to insert the card in the ticket machine. When they were seated he pointed to the red square button and explained how the bus driver only opened the door to pick up or set down at the designated bus stops. It was a different system – no waiting by the side of the road until it was full before starting off, no one collecting the fares or pushing people from behind with their baskets and bags, and no one hanging off the side calling for customers, or banging on the roof to tell the driver to go or stop. He’d had a job like that once, helping his uncle on his colt. The colts usually have room for a driver and two other passengers at the front and seats in the back for the rest. His uncle leased the colt from early in the morning and drove the route backward and forward from the village to Solo, picking up people on their way to work, school or the market, and bringing them back later in the day. It was Iwan’s job to collect fares and cram as many passengers on as he could, telling people to nurse their baskets to make room or taking their baskets off them as they got on and handing them back when they were seated. The job didn’t last though because his uncle said he didn’t squeeze enough people on.
The bus continued down Oxford Street, and then turned right into Elizabeth Street and headed north. Thanks to Akira, he was slowly getting his bearings. There were three traffic lanes and the traffic lights forced the bus to stop repeatedly. On the left he saw a line of glass fronted shops, all closed, and for three blocks on the right there was a park with green grassy lawns and large shade bearing trees. On the way, Akira pointed out the City Circle underground station entrances – Museum, St James – and the department store David Jones on the left which was showcasing artworks by final year school students.

‘Every year they choose works of art by Higher School Certificate Students – that’s Year 12 here, the final high school year – and they put them on exhibition at the Art Gallery, in some shop windows, and in some regional art galleries. You can see some of them over there.’

Iwan turned to look but they had already moved on and were soon plunging down a steep hill. For this stretch the sky was blocked out on both sides of the street by the tallest buildings he had ever seen. They were the last off the bus and when the central door dragged open they stepped out onto the footpath. Above them he saw a crowd of red and yellow cranes, sunlight sparking the tops of buildings, and shafts of shimmering blue sky. Now that he was on the ground the height of the buildings induced a kind of vertigo. Once again the streets seemed eerily quiet and empty as they made their way towards a line of grey buildings that stretched from west to east in front of them.

‘Circular Quay,’ Akira announced. There was a shuddering rumble overhead and he looked at Akira. ‘Trains,’ he said as they passed between the buildings and emerged in bright sunshine at the row of ferry terminals. Here there were swarming crowds of people and, beyond them, he glimpsed the harbour which was buzzing with ships, sailing craft, motor boats and ferries. There was a holiday mood. It was hot and the high summer sun burned the skin through their clothes. It reflected off the water and split the air, blinding Iwan for a moment. Then, beyond the Quay, arching over the water and dominating the skyline, he saw it for the first time, the gigantic grey steel sculpture of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. He’d seen pictures but now that he was in front of it, he felt a strange weakness in his legs and excitement in his belly. The scale of the thing, its dominating presence, caused his heart to pound, the back of his throat to swell and his eyes to sting. He had to look away.

As they walked along the Quay, the Bridge came and went from view as they passed each of the ferry terminals. Some were empty and on others passengers were disembarking from ferries or crowding together ready to go aboard. The harbour was immense and, together with the bridge, seemed to dwarf all human activity including the sailing boats slicing through the water with bulging triangle sails and colourful spinnakers. The wind had blown the water into choppy grey ridges tinged with white foam and they watched as an enormous cargo ship loaded with red, yellow, blue and green containers moved from the right of the frame to the
left, underneath the bridge, and then out of sight. To Iwan, the changing scene appeared two-dimensional, flattened, as if it was a full colour wayang kulit puppet performance.

At a small park at the edge of the Quay Akira pointed out the gleaming white cubist jumble of egg shell curves of the Sydney Opera House that arched up from a small peninsula diagonally opposite the bridge. They found a seat and sat in silence as the ferries washed drunkenly into their berths, causing rolls of water to slap and slosh against the massive timber posts that anchored the jetties. The smell of dead fish and sea water mingled and drifted on the salt air and somewhere above them the mechanical rumble of trains stopped and started from Circular Quay station. The silent emptiness of the city was forgotten – here people were enjoying the last day of the weekend. A group of pale-faced young people dressed in black sat chatting in a circle. A man and woman and their two small children were eating from a fat parcel of white paper and feeding food morsels to squabbling red legged seagulls. An old man dozed on a wooden seat, his head falling awkwardly forward. They joined the strolling crowd that stopped and gathered in circles to watch the buskers doing acrobatics, fire eating tricks and playing didgeridoo. On the esplanade that led to the Opera House, tourists took turns posing for photos in front of the Bridge, and after a walk around the foreshore of the Opera House Akira led him to the far off corner of an alun-alun where they entered the Botanical Gardens.

In the gardens, they were greeted by giant trees whose broad canopies of glossy dark green leaves and curtains of brown hairy aerial roots reminded him of Banyan trees. Here people and things – the hills, grass, trees, picnic rugs – all leaned or sloped towards the harbour, and the place was a blaze of refracted colour so luminous that he felt he’d been drawn into a modern day equivalent of the Seurat painting that so amazed them years ago in Pak Harto’s class. He saw exuberant flower beds and bats with sharp black faces and soft brown fur hanging upside down in the palms, hugging themselves with winged leather arms. Wild birds called strange messages. Paths led to other paths that disappeared behind clumps of trees or around corners. Families were picnicking on colourful rugs, children playing ball games or rolling down slopes, couples lying down reading in the shade.

The jostling kaleidoscope of images and impressions was beginning to overwhelm and, sensing this, Akira led them to a walled cactus garden. Here, succulent desert plants carpeted the pinky-red gravel of raised brick walled beds, or stretched upwards with disc-like or irregular shaped stems, leaves and branches. Spiked, clubbed, swollen, chiselled, curling leaf edges. Iwan took out his sketchbook and began sketching – he wanted to absorb their shapes. The dark greens and grey blue colours and strange textures of the foliage against the dark red pink gravel was surreal. The sketching soothed.

At Akira’s suggestion they left the cactus garden, followed a path alongside a wall until there was an opening, and then stepped onto a vast expanse of grass that was thick, spongy, and coolly damp, as if the earth had sprouted green hair and been given a short all over hair cut.
They took off their shoes and let the grass tickle the soles of their feet as they looked for somewhere shady to sit and watch the movement on the harbour while they ate the sandwiches Marj had prepared. When they finished eating Akira left him on his own to go and buy ice creams.

The afternoon heat was sucking the moisture from his body and his mouth and skin felt dry. It was so very unfamiliar and he felt helpless, like a small lost child. Akira was his lifeline and if he failed to return, he would be adrift in this strange and enormous city. To keep his panic at bay he pulled a sarong from his backpack and lay down on it on the grass. He could smell the earth’s distinct smell – sweet, different, utterly foreign – but it stimulated his salivary glands and made his mouth water, it entered into the pores of his skin and seeped through his entire body. He curled his body around their bags and with his face buried in the cloth of the sarong felt himself slide towards sleep.
Papa is ploughing the rice field with Pak Adji’s water buffalo and he waves to us. Mama says it is hard work but I think I’d like walking up and down in the squishy mud with my water buffalo.

Mama and I have a kite. We made it ourselves. A breeze bends the tops of the trees and little pieces of Mama’s hair are flying around as she unwinds the string from the block and I run away with the kite. Holding it up, then letting go, as it goes up and up.

The kite flies, waves and glides and Mama looks down and hands me the block with the string wound round it. I hold tight, I feel it tugging, it lifts my arms, it wants to lift me up too. I cry, ‘Mama’. ‘Good boy Iwan,’ she says and I see her laughing up at the leaping kite that wants to carry me away. Then all of a sudden the kite gives a funny twitch, leaps, and dives, ‘splat’, into a just planted rice field.

Mama lifts up her sarong and begins to walk between the rows of green shoots to rescue the kite. She keeps sinking in the mud and can’t stop laughing, and I start to cry because the kite is all wet. Mama’s feet sink down into the mud and when she lifts up one foot there’s a sucking noise, and then another, and then another, and makes her laugh even harder.

At last Mama has the kite and she holds it up high. When she comes out of the rice field she has thick grey mud on her legs like the farmers and I cry even harder now because I see the kite is all broken.

‘It’s nothing,’ Mama says. ‘Don’t worry. We’ll fix it.’

‘Look Mama, the yellow butterflies.’

They are following us home. I love Mama and so do the butterflies.
As she crosses the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Maddie has the roof down on the yellow convertible Volkswagen her parents gave her for her eighteenth birthday. Music blaring, she takes the western exit to Glebe, past the fish markets, and then swings the car the wrong way into a one-way street. She pulls up outside a large rundown two-storey terrace house and gives two quick beeps of the horn with her hand. A tall, lanky young man, his tangled blond hair unbrushed, comes out of the front door, pulling it shut behind him. With a scowl, he folds his long limbs into the front seat and pulls on the seatbelt.

‘Fuckin late again.’

Maddie plants a kiss on his unshaved cheek, ‘Hey Mack,’ then lets off the handbrake and putters off, with the engine chugging like a hotted up lawnmower. Peak hour is over but the traffic is still heavy as they head across town to the art school. In Burton Street she spots a car waiting to reverse into a parking spot and swings the beetle nose first into the vacant car space.

‘Not nice but necessary,’ Mack says. ‘Let’s get going before he jobs us.’

Iwan and Akira see the athletic blonde haired couple racing hand in hand along the street towards them and then disappear. When they arrive at the entrance to the art school they find the woman sitting nursing a bloodied knee on the cobbled stones and the contents of her handbag are scattered around her. The young man is holding out his hand to help her stand. Assessing the situation, Iwan begins picking up the items one by one. By now, Maddie is standing and when she looks around and sees he is about to pick up a tampon, dives forward to snatch it up first. There is a violent crack as their heads collide.

‘Shit, shit, shit, that hurt,’ Maddie jumps from foot to foot and holds her head.

Iwan’s head hurts too as he holds out the tampon with his right hand.

‘You okay? You hurt?’ he asks.

Maddie shakes her head and takes the tampon.

Mack is looking at his watch. ‘Sorry guys, we’re in a hurry. Sorry. Running late ... C’mon Maddie.’

‘Can you help us?’ Akira asks. ‘We’re looking for Building C for the life drawing class.’

‘Sure, I’m heading there now, you can follow me. Running late though, Maddie you go ahead.’

Iwan turns to Akira who nods, and then follows Mack who is striding after his friend. He hears Akira call to him and turns around. ‘Hey, Iwan, I’ll meet you back here at 5 o’clock, yeah?’ He smiles and gives him a thumbs up.
It is his first day at the art school, but more than that Iwan feels shaken by the close encounter with the young woman. The halo of blonde frizzy curls, the green eyes, the pale mask like skin, full deep red lips and straight white teeth. Her faint smell of sweat and shampoo and the whisper of her breath on his face have overpowered him. Only in magazines has he seen such women and, even then, only rarely. There is a tightening in his groin and he feels slightly faint and disgusted with himself as they enter the life drawing class. Most of the students are already seated at their easels and have a large drawing pad open in front of them. Taking a lead from them he puts his pad on the easel and reaches into his bag for his pencil case. It is quiet in the room and there is a sense of expectation. His hands are shaking.

The lecturer looks up from her watch. ‘Welcome to Life Drawing. My name is Jane Wilkins and I’m your teacher for this year. We’re just waiting on the model who will be with us shortly I hope. You’ll have two minutes per pose and I want you to focus on curves. We’re not worried about proportion today – just curves.’

All eyes turn to Maddie who enters wearing a mauve embroidered silk kimono. She finishes pinning up her hair before taking off the kimono and stepping onto a low platform. The lecturer waits for her to settle into a position.

‘Are you ready Maddie?’ Maddie nods and Jane presses a stopwatch. ‘Start drawing everyone ...

When Iwan looks up, the model is facing him. She is strong, muscular, and holds the position as steady as a statue. He immediately recognises her as the young woman from the courtyard. He cannot look away and takes in her broad shoulders and strong upper arms, the round firm breasts and dark pink moons of her nipples, the flattened belly, the broad slightly tanned feet. Her pale skin glows in the natural light and there is the bloody knee, red, angry-looking. He wonders if it still hurts. The platform elevates her above the students so she seems eight feet tall. The mass of pale curls she’d been pinning into a bun at the back of her head has already loosened and a strand hangs in a corkscrew at the side of her face. She is gazing at him through half closed lids. He looks down and when he looks up again she is watching him, with a slight smile as if she is laughing at him. He blushes, becomes flustered and struggles to regain his composure. He looks away but each time he raises his head she has her gaze still fixed on him. Shocked and humiliated, he keeps his head down to avoid eye contact. He feels great shame that he, that all of these students, are staring at her and drawing. He looks around the room, sees the other students are unhesitating, concentrating, drawing. He picks up the pencil but his hand will not draw. He puts it down. No one, nothing, has prepared him for this. Has she no father, mother, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles? What would they say if they knew? Maybe they sent her out to work like this? His heart pounds and the rush of blood is making his head ache. He gathers up his things and next thing he is in the courtyard, bending over as if he might throw up. A memory surfaces. A child’s drawing of a figure, an adult’s face looming, was it
his father’s or a teacher’s, and then his face stinging from being slapped so hard he feels his child’s body lift from the floor. He fingers the phone card Pak Harto has given him, telling him to call any time. But how could he tell him about the encounter with the beautiful woman when they arrived and then there she is, naked to a whole room of men and women. He cannot go back to that class. Cannot, must not. He sits in the shaded courtyard for some time before deciding what he must do.

At the front office, Iwan implores Liz, the office administrator, to excuse him from Life Drawing because it would be very wrong for him to be drawing young women who are naked. After hearing what he has to say, she says, ‘I’m sorry, Iwan, I can’t excuse you. I think it best you speak with Phil Clarke, the Head of Drawing. I’ll see if he can see you now.’ She picks up the reception area phone, speaks briefly, then hangs up and writes a name and room number on a piece of paper.

She hands the note to Iwan and says, ‘Phil Clarke will see you in his office now. He’s in Room 46. Just go down the corridor, it’s the third door on the right. Good luck.’

When Iwan first knocks on the door, there is no response. He knocks again, and this time a growling voice booms, ‘Come in. Come in.’

Inside, a giant of a man, his high forehead and hairless head smooth and shiny, is bent over a paper strewn desk. He is tracing the index finger of his right hand down the columns of figures on the sheet of paper in front of him. He stops, looks at a large desk calculator on his left, and drums at its keys with the fingers of his other hand.

‘Come in, come in. Close the door, sit down, I’ll be with you in a minute.’

Iwan does as he is asked but remains standing. Finally the man looks at him and he sees that his eyes are red, bloodshot, and his nose is a deep purple, and pitted with holes.

‘Sit down,’ barks the demon, and waves a hand at the empty chair in front of the desk.

Phil Clarke has been Head of Drawing for five years – he doesn’t mind the administrative work but he hates spreadsheets and budgets. If Liz hadn’t insisted he would’ve asked her to tell the young man to make an appointment for another time. He notices that Iwan avoids eye contact and knows it is a mark of respect rather than rudeness.

He places his fingertips together in front of him. ‘Your name?’

‘Iwan.’

‘Well, what can I do for you Iwan?’
In the morning light Iwan’s black shoulder length hair seems to emit deep indigo flashes and the draughtsman in Phil eyes with pleasure the large dark brown almond shaped eyes and almost perfectly drawn eyebrows. He remembers a visit to Bali, decades earlier, when he’d stayed at the house of an Australian artist, drawing all day and painting – he’d been so young, probably the same age as this young man.

Iwan searches for the English words he must use. ‘The life drawing class. No good. Woman naked. I Muslim, must not draw. For me, it very big shame.’

The words require effort, and beads of sweat catch the light on his forehead as he strives to smile, gives up, and then lets out a strangled giggle of anxiety.

‘You’re the Indonesian student right? Here on a scholarship right?’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘Well, you have to do the life drawing class. No exceptions – everyone has to do it, black, brown or brindle. You understand? If you’re a student and you’re a Muslim, you still have to do it. Get it?’

Iwan looks up. There is a casual elegance to his movements – the movement of his head, arm or hand. He is most likely a dancer, Phil thinks.

‘The human body is,’ Phil announces as he unfolds his six foot four tall body and grossly extended gut from behind the desk, ‘a beautiful thing.’ He wants to end this and get back to his spreadsheets. He strides to the door and holds it open for Iwan to leave. As he returns to his desk, he mutters to himself, ‘Whoever sends these kids should explain what they’re here for. They should know life drawing is at the heart of what we do.’ Then, settling back into his chair, he softens. ‘Poor bugger, might’ve been a bit harsh – better have a word with his lecturer.’
Maddie’s friendship with Mack dated from when they were toddlers. It lapsed during primary school and resumed in adolescence after they confided to a feeling they’d been born into the wrong family. There was no doubt in Mack’s mind that when he finished school he would spend one or two years saving and travelling overseas, and then return and go to art school. His parents tried to persuade him to become a stockbroker like his father because, as they put it, all their contacts were in finance and banking and they had none in the art world. But because he was so determined, they left him alone. Maddie was a year behind him at school and had no idea what she wanted to do. Initially she enrolled in an Interior Design course but she soon found it and the other students uninspiring. So then she worked nights as a waitress and did life modelling sessions whenever she was asked.

When Mack returned to Sydney the previous year he persuaded her to join him in applying to be volunteer tour guides at the Art Gallery. They were both accepted and over the year she discovered a love for learning and talking about art and art history. With every exhibition she studied the notes provided by the curator and discussed the artists’ work with Mack. She learned to experience the art at a feeling level, to give herself up to it, to make it the centre of attention. As a tour guide she learned to offer a cone of silence in which the art could resonate and the group could absorb what they were viewing without the constant sound of her voice. Some of the tour guides, she noticed, could flatten out the experience of the art – reduce it to words. In this, Mack was her best teacher. It was almost as if he deliberately set out to confuse his audience by challenging them with a range of contradictory ideas that forced them to form their own opinions. He praised their contributions as interesting or left them hanging and by the end of the tour she saw they felt they’d had an ‘enriching experience’.

By the time Mack went to art school, Maddie was becoming enamoured of the art world and beginning to think of enrolling in a fine arts degree. At exhibition openings she was meeting gallerists, critics, artists and collectors and discovering a world into which she could blend, where no one cared or asked what school she went to, who her parents were, who she knew or didn’t know. Unlike Mack, she did not aspire to be an artist, but her work as a tour guide forced her to consider the question, ‘If a contemporary Van Gogh or Picasso was here, would we or could we recognise him or her?’ How did genius, true artistic genius, get to be recognised? Would she recognise it or would she dismiss it? She wondered to what extent artists achieved success through the efforts of others who promoted and collected their work, people like Theo van Gogh, Peggy Guggenheim, Leo and Gertrude Stein. And their Australian equivalents, who were they? Sunday Reed, John Kaldor?

She looked for genius and brilliance and when she thought she recognised it she befriended it. In her conversations with Mack, he said, ‘There will always be artists that are on your wavelength, and artists that aren’t. Like Jackson Pollock – he’s amazing, And Laurie
Anderson. And Nolan. And the Japanese woodcut artists. And Japanese anime. But then some of
the installations I saw in Europe were so far out there I just thought, Hey, these guys are having
a lend. I mean some people feel like that about Morandi but I really dig his stuff – I mean that
guy just kept squeezing something new out of the same objects, over and over again.
He was obsessed but you have to admire the minute incremental realisation of his art making.’
He paused and smiled, ‘Maybe creativity, by definition, is a form of dysfunction.’

‘For a surfer you can be supremely eloquent sometimes,’ she said. ‘And insightful too.’

‘Yeah right.’

Their parents were friends. Their fathers had gone to the same elite private boys’ school,
rowed together in the rowing team, and now played golf together every week. In their travels
to Europe and New York with their families, going off to art galleries had been Mack and
Maddie’s only means of escape from the ghastly guided tours their parents relished. Their
conversations about art could last hours. Did either of them hope for the friendship to become
something more? They joked about getting married but also knew that no matter how strong
the love between them – however warm, loving, comfortable, generous and forgiving – what it
wasn’t, and would never be, was a grand passion. Although many thought they were an item,
including their parents, and this suited them most of the time, the bond between them did not
stretch to the illusion of being in love or lust. It was just the way it was.
Iwan made the train trip to Lakemba on his own. It was his first time on the suburban train system so Akira took him to Central, showed him where to buy a ticket and explained how the turnstiles worked. He found Lakemba very different to Darlinghurst and the inner city. Here there were Arabic signs on many of the shops, and inside them he found spices and foods he’d not seen before. On the street, men stood casually chatting or drinking coffee at outside tables, and he was surprised to see so many women with their hair covered. One was even wearing a black burkha, something he’d not seen very often before in Solo or Yogyakarta.

He was to meet with Pak Bambang, the social worker at the Islamic Council of Churches, who suggested they meet after Friday prayers. And so it was that for the first time in Australia he entered a mosque, joining with the other men who took their places for prayer, his prayer mat placed on the floor in front of him, standing one among many, facing the Qiblih, ready and waiting to respond to the familiar Arabic words of prayer, ‘Allaahu akbar’. Through each of the familiar movements, bowing, his hands to his knees, then performing the sujud on his knees, his forehead placed on the earth, on and on through the first, second, third and fourth Rak’ah, and then the Completion. Bit by bit, without him realising, the stress and anxiety that had gathered in his body over the past three weeks was released, and when he emerged onto the street he felt a deep peace and sense of safety for the first time. Just as the canny social worker had known he would.

He liked Pak Bambang the moment he saw him, perhaps because he reminded him of his old teacher, Pak Harto. As soon as they were seated in his office, Pak Bambang told him his own story, how he arrived in Sydney at the age of ten when his father took up a position at the Indonesian Consulate. He completed a degree in social work in Sydney and then returned to Indonesia to do a masters in Sociology at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta. He spoke both Indonesian and Javanese but said his Indonesian was better than his Javanese. After completing his masters Pak Bambang married his Lebanese wife Wafa. They met at university and had been married for 20 years. They had three girls were aged 14, 17 and 19 years. The oldest daughter was at university, the second was in her final year of senior high school and the youngest was attending junior high school.

After this brief résumé Pak Bambang encouraged Iwan to tell him about his family, the village, where he attended junior and senior high school, and how he came to be in Australia. Finally, when he thought Iwan was feeling at ease, he asked how he could help. For the next half hour Iwan related the story of his encounter with the life drawing model, the subsequent discussion with the Head of Drawing who looked like a giant demon, and his fears that he might lose his scholarship. Pak Bambang listened intently, nodding and repeating ‘Terus, terus,’ urging him to unstop the dam of emotion and complaint inside him. It wasn’t just the life drawing class,
there were other things troubling him, impressions, things he’d observed that made him
wonder what kind of place he had come to.

Pak Bambang encouraged him to speak out about all he had seen and heard, the things that
confused or shamed him, his judgements, uncertainties, fears, how he found some people very
angry, rude and unrefined. Even the Head of Drawing. They seemed out of control and at
times this made him feel nervous, even frightened. Perhaps it would be better if he were to
return to Indonesia even though he knew this would bring great shame to him and his family.
There were guilty secrets he had bottled up too, impressions that shamed. All the while Pak
Bambang sat listening and, finally, Iwan came to the most shameful – the prostitutes soliciting,
the homosexuals drifting in and out of bars on Oxford Street, the bondage displays in shop
windows, the used needles scattered in the park. But even more distressing, the homeless
people – sometimes abusive, drunk or on drugs – sleeping in parks or bus shelters.

It was not quite three weeks since he had arrived but already it seemed such a long time, and
he felt tired, so very tired with it all. His life had been filled with wild colours, jagged reds and
oranges, purples and greens. All competing, setting him off balance, and it was as if his
identity, self esteem, and even his very soul were under attack. The joyful boy once loved by a
whole village – that solid base – the sense of who he was and where he belonged, was gone,
lost. He was lost, and he knew he didn’t belong here. He’d known that the moment a very old,
foul smelling man had abused him with alcohol breath ‘Piss off, slant eye’.

The wave of joy and ease at being able to express himself in Indonesian instead of grasping for
the English words that he knew never sounded right swelled and carried him along, but now it
left him stranded, and in the silence he felt the colour rise in his cheeks along with a growing
self consciousness. It was rude to complain like this, what must Pak Bambang be thinking of
It’s nothing, don’t worry. Throughout the monologue, Pak Bambang continued to offer words
of consolation, acknowledge how confronting these experiences were for a young man arriving
from the village, a very small village, and the courage it took to seize the opportunities offered.
Pak Bambang inserted words of compassion and concern for those who were homeless or
driven to drugs or prostitution and explained the multiple disadvantages of life for some people
in big cities, even in a rich country like this. He recognised the ills caused by alcohol and
explained that alcoholism was an illness. He talked about mental illness and how the society
still had not found a way to properly look after people who suffered from it, not in Australia
and not in Indonesia either. He asked him about Marj, what sort of person she was, the two
men Bert and Ernie, Akira, his teachers at the art school, the librarians, the admin staff, the
other students.

In response Iwan found himself listing the many kindnesses he had experienced. Smoking with
Bert in the back garden, helping Ernie to prepare the garden beds ready for autumn planting,
Akira helping him to buy his art materials. When he came to Marj he was surprised at how many things she did for him – cooking, cleaning his room, washing and ironing his clothes, and enquiring about his studies. At the art school, he was making new friends with some of the other students, the ones he shared a studio space with or who were in the same group as him. Some came from country towns and villages like him. They too were feeling shy and out of place and so it was left to the more outgoing city students to involve them and draw them out – where are you from, where are you living, do you have family here?

Finally, the one remaining issue to be addressed was the one that had led him to Pak Bambang in the first place. Pak Bambang got up and asked him to wait, leaving him alone to sip his half drunk glass of tea. It was the real Indonesian tea he loved and he savoured the flavour as he sifted the stalks and leaves through his teeth. On Pak Bambang’s desk he saw framed photos of his wife and daughters at various ages and at first glance he felt there was something odd about the photos. What was that? Then he realised that in every photo they were all smiling, even Pak Bambang. It was something he’d not seen before.

When Pak Bambang returned to the room he said, ‘I’ve spoken with the Imam and he says you are to continue with the life drawing class. It is a very great opportunity for you to have this scholarship and you must work hard and complete the course. Of course, Allah will understand that you do it with a pure heart. God willing you will be a fine artist one day and will be able to help your brothers and sisters to educate their children as well.’

As he walked to the station, Iwan felt a great sense of relief, a lightness of being. He could continue his studies with a clear conscience. He would not bring shame to his family. As he waited on the platform, the announcements from the station loudspeakers were a slur of static. ‘Is it English?’ he wondered. When the train pulled into the station he found a seat in a carriage that was full of teenagers in school uniform. At one end there were raucous, swearing boys and at the other a group of girls chatting quietly and ignoring the boys, but he saw that the boys were drawn to turn and look at them from time to time. At each stop, several students got up and waved to their friends from the platform. Soon he was by himself in the carriage.

Iwan pulled a sketchpad from his bag and began to sketch the train’s interior. When the train stopped he did quick sketches of scenes on the platform – a light post, a bench, steps – but no people. Not yet. That would wait. As he sat there, he felt a growing sense of curiosity, even excitement, about attending the life drawing classes. Now, for the first time in his life, he allowed a dream to form that he, Iwan, might become an artist, perhaps even a famous one like Affandi. Perhaps one day he too would open an art gallery in Solo or Yogyakarta.
In the weekly three-hour drawing classes Iwan scrutinised the human body. The models varied. Some were regular fixtures so the students got to know them. Rose had been an artist’s model for more than fifty years, ‘I like it, it keeps me in touch with the young ones and the money doesn’t go astray either.’ And there was Bill, a thin wiry streak in his sixties with grey hair and concave buttocks, and red haired Eliza, whose immense bosom and multiple rippling folds of creamy white belly vibrated when she moved or laughed. Occasionally there was a pregnant woman or young women with strong masculine type bodies in Iwan’s eyes. Among the male models there were corpulent breasted giants, muscled narcissistic types with all over tans, outdoor labourers with roughened hands, and men with tight bulging guts. There was a black man too.

His first impressions were of the varying shades and textures of skin, then the effect of light and shadow on hair, angles and curves. Some people’s skin seemed to welcome and absorb the colours around them, some glowed next to yellow while others resisted or reflected or were drained of life by it. Bodies were draped with fleshy curves, had curtains of flesh or puckering skin, ropey muscle and sinew; others were wizened, jagged, bony. Women’s breasts pointed or drooped, were plump or wrinkled sacks, and the pubic hair of the women varied from soft orange curls that caught the light to straight matt black triangles. Nipples projected or lay flat, areolae were circular, sometimes elliptical, and all shades of yellow, pink, brown, almost black. Torsos curved in or ballooned at the waist.

Iwan studied bodies like some people study the weather. He saw similarities and differences and slowly came to experience the uniqueness of each person. He pondered the concept of beauty and wondered how the individual shapes, textures and colour of different parts of a body could influence how you felt about a person – from revulsion to attraction and even intense lust. Like the length of fingers or the shapes of their nails, dimples in a chin or cheeks, the way faces and eyes glowed when someone smiled or laughed, tiny blonde hairs on a freckled arm, furry black hair on a chest or back, the arch of an eyebrow. Smells too – of shampooed hair, a person’s breath, sweat, perfume, aftershave. These details and the way people moved – how they sat, got up, walked, stood – could pull on his emotions. They influenced the marks made on the page.

Jane Wilkins was an experienced teacher and practising artist and she directed him to study the drawings of other artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Rubens, Picasso, Brack, Whiteley. For a while he became obsessed with studies of Michelangelo’s painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in which the bodies of the women were so muscular and male, with breasts seemingly added as an afterthought. It puzzled him that such a famous and revered painting could have this flaw and when he discussed it with Akira, Akira sympathised.
‘Yeah, it’s like when I heard Joe Hodges didn’t always play in time. I was shocked – I mean, like, he’s like one of the most famous jazz drummers in Sydney.’

Throughout his life Iwan had been used to seeing women and men working bare from the waist up, with just a sarong around the waist, especially the older women and men who more often than not removed their kebaya or shirt when doing physical work – to stay cool or spare their clothes. The older women didn’t worry that their breasts hung like skinny pouches as they bathed or squatted in the family compound to grind spices. And yet, more and more in the village as he was growing up, women did cover up, especially when they went out, wearing pants and long sleeved tops, and hijabs, the scarves that covered their hair and shoulders and were pinned under the chin.
Tonight we’re going to the wayang kulit and Mama is wearing her best sarong and kebaya. It’s in my aunts’ village so we have to walk through the rice fields. We see Pak Adji and his new rooster with the shining copper feathers on the way. I don’t like the rooster, it pecks, but I like the birdcage. It’s made of bamboo and it has a round roof and its feet are carved butterflies. He bought it at the Bird Market in Yogyakarta – Mama says we can go there one day.

I like Pak Adji and I like his cow. She’s a soft yellow colour and he lets me pat her any time I want. She’s always happy to see me and I like the smell of the grass Pak Adji cuts for her. She makes a funny gnawing sound when she chews.

‘Good evening Pak.’

‘Yes, and to you Mas, Mbak. Where are you going Iwan?’

‘Wayang kulit, Pak.’

He gives me a thumbs up.

‘Very good, little one. Perhaps the cruel Ravana will beat Rama tonight?’

‘Oh no, Pak, no.’

Hari squeezes my arm. ‘Pak Adji is joking Iwan.’

Mama is excited and I am too because tonight the dalang is performing The Ramayana. It’s our favourite. Mama likes Sita and I like Hanoman. Papa likes the Mahabharata stories the best and so do my brothers. Hari likes everything. Mama likes a happy ending and the dalang lets me help him sometimes. That’s because he’s Mama’s uncle.

At the edge of the village there’s an arched sign that says Selamat Jalan. I read it to Mama, ‘Have a safe journey,’ and she smiles and takes my hand.

On the other side it says Selamat Datang, ‘Welcome’.

We’re going through the rice fields to save time. At first we have to go in single file on the little path so Papa leads the way, then Hari, Hidayat and Ismoyo, Mama and me. Mama and I go last because we like to look at things. Whenever a farmer comes along we have to stop and let him pass. Sometimes they carry their machete on their shoulder and sometimes they tuck it into the back of their sarong. Papa has one too but he won’t let me touch it.

The music is getting louder but we have to stop for some women. They’re very old, we can hardly see their faces because there’s a big pile of grass loaded on their back and they’re bent right over. Mama greets them. They’re from our village and they carry a stick in each hand so they won’t fall over.
In this new life, Iwan was taking everything in, shaping and funneling the intense feelings, the raw aliveness of being, and the heightened sense of opening up to what was inside him. But side by side with the exhilaration of discovery, there was always the grief and loss of being away from his family and the village, the shame when he couldn’t understand or be understood. He knew he was changing, opening up sinkholes in himself through which everything in his life could flow right on into his art making. Everything he’d ever felt and wondered was being poured into the painting and on the outside he appeared as calm as the ocean pool at low tide when the sun shone right through to the sandy bottom. All clear, no dark places, no sea monsters.

In the constant effort to stay afloat, to manage the anxieties of being alone in a strange and foreign place, he was buoyed by two things: his work and his adopted family at the Darlo Boarding House where Marj was radiant in her role as head of the household. She ruled and protected, asked questions – learned when assignments were due, insisted on knowing results. She knew more about their everyday lives than anyone because she listened and never judged, criticised or gave advice. She cooked and kept the house spotlessly clean. The linoleum and the pot plants shone. The rooms were freshly painted and her decorating style was pure kitsch, a fifties and sixties museum with flying ducks on the wall, black ballet dancers holding up pleated pink plastic lampshades, Fler chairs, Parker furniture and framed Tretchikov prints. Akira dubbed it a retro collector’s treasure trove. ‘Marj,’ he said, ‘is so far out she’s in.’

On their birthdays she cooked a special meal, usually a roast followed by her specialty, lemon meringue pie, and a birthday cake, complete with candles – one for each year of their life. And there was a card signed by her, Ernie and Bert, with a twenty dollar note inside. Ever alert, by late April she surmised that Iwan was already feeling the cold drill into his bones. By May he was coughing and sneezing and struggling with the whole idea of using tissues. If it hadn’t been for Marj, he would’ve frozen that first winter in Sydney as there was no heating in either the boarding house or at the art school. She took him off to various charity shops where they bought thick woollen jumpers and a jacket, long johns and an electric blanket. From May until late November he wore a black woollen beret, a birthday gift from Akira. Only when the temperature reached thirty degrees for two days running did he concede that summer was imminent and he could retire the beret in favour of a cream straw hat bequeathed by Ernie from his ‘days of sartorial splendour’.

Akira’s piano had pride of place in the house and if Marj, Ernie and Bert were driven mad by the sound of him practising for three, four or even five hours a day they never said so. Iwan loved the way the piano music inhabited the house, echoing in their bodies and the walls and spaces, even when he wasn’t playing. When Iwan began to paint, a drop sheet appeared on the floor of his room. Paint stained glass jars were removed, washed and returned, and he saw
them refreshed, cleaned, erased, like an invitation and a nod of encouragement to keep painting.

He lived as cheaply as he could, but still found the scholarship inadequate to live on and buy artists’ materials, so a few nights a week he worked as a kitchen hand in a Japanese restaurant at Kings Cross. Akira was a waiter there and on the nights they worked they walked home together from Kings Cross to Darlinghurst and that’s when he saw a different, often darker, side of the city, one inhabited by drug dealers, the drug crazed, homeless people with a mental illness or those just down on their luck. There were cruising men, streetwalkers, backpackers and, occasionally, the most dangerous, alcohol fuelled groups of young men. He noticed that Akira had an almost uncanny ability to avoid aggression, either by spotting its potential and side stepping it, or by being so self assured that even the drunks let them be.

The first time he heard the eerie mournful cry of the piano, sounding like five instruments at once, it filled his body with a strange and thrilling melancholy. The skin on his arms tingled. He had never felt the tug of music like this before and he sat on the stairs to listen as Akira played a tune he came to know as an old jazz standard called *Summertime*. It would always remind him of the summer days when he first arrived.

When Akira stopped playing he joined him at the piano.

‘I never hear music like this before. It sound like many people playing. What you call this?’

‘Oh hi Iwan, been there long? It’s a piano, these are the keys. See.’ Akira opened the top of the piano and he and Iwan peered down at the wooden pieces and strings inside.

‘You watch while I play,’ Akira played some scales and chords. ‘It’s actually a percussion instrument, y’know, like drums. You’ve never seen a piano before?’

‘No, not yet. It very good what you do. I feel it here,’ he said, putting his hand over his heart.

‘I’m jamming at a mate’s place tonight with a few people – why don’t you come too?’

The group of young musicians met weekly on the third floor of a city warehouse near Central Station where some of them lived. There was a creaking lift whose walls were painted in crazy bright swirls and on the landing a door opened into a large room with a baby grand piano, double bass and drum kit at one end and lounges of all shapes, colours and sizes lining the walls. A square of carpet covered the floor. The lift artists had been busy in this room as well.

The core of the group were three jazz students from the Conservatorium of Music – Akira on piano, Lisa on drums and Jacquie on double bass. Sometimes they were accompanied by Matthew on clarinets and saxophones, or Claire on vocals, or Josh on trombone. After his first
visit Iwan began attending every week, watching the way the musicians took turns to improvise, or improvised together, observing the flashes of joy on their faces at the sounds they made, the parts of their bodies that marked the rhythms, their laughter at the lines they individually or collectively laid down. The way they improvised astonished him – he was buoyed up by the richness and passion of the music, their growing competence, and the generosity and love they extended to one other. Sometimes, as the music washed over him, he felt his heart or chest might burst open or his legs became so restless he’d have to stand, move around, or go outside to the narrow bridgeway for a cigarette. Some nights, time became elastic, stretched by the music, and his whole being was transported with it.

Akira was the main composer for the group and often played his latest twelve bar composition to Iwan, explaining that it was the structure on which the musicians individually, collectively, and spontaneously fused their own listening and interpretation. Later, when he heard them improvising on their different instruments, each supporting the others as they played, Iwan realised that each was wringing their own truth and beauty from the composition. Hearing Akira practising alone was one thing, but what happened when they came together was another. As Akira put it once, it was like stepping off the cliff to express their souls together.

As the months went by he sensed they were improving, gaining in confidence, getting ready to step up to the next level of mastery. They were still students and this was a way of practising but as Akira himself said, ‘I “play” the piano, the others “play” their instruments, and when we come together we muck around.’ Iwan loved their playful approach, envied it, and was inspired to approach his own work in the same spirit. As an artist he wanted to capture the looks of concentration and pure pleasure on their faces as they wove their songs and endlessly surprised themselves and one other. He absorbed the colours of the music and afterwards, at home, he painted them, dancing the rainbow he called it, and he worked till all the colours, all the music absorbed into his body, were transferred to the canvas. He wondered if what he was witnessing – the sheer joyful collaboration and free ranging self-expression – was unique to the world of music or was it just jazz improvisation. To trust each other so implicitly, to bend and flow with, against and around one another like that, there was great spirit and openness in what they did. And respect. And later at professional gigs he saw the same thing with the more experienced musicians – old guys and a small number of women. Saw the roiling effects of the music in their bodies and faces, whether playing or listening, or both at the same time, and they didn’t care who saw them shaking, nodding, twitching, tapping.

One Sunday afternoon in response to his questions, Akira began explaining the history of jazz, playing him the great musicians, especially the pianists – Duke Ellington, Abdullah Ibrahim, Herbie Hancock, Jessica Williams, and Australians too like Mike Nock or Alister Spence, one of his teachers, and Barney McCall and the Japanese female pianist Hiromi. As they listened Akira called out the names of the instruments – saxophone, double bass, bass guitar, trumpet,
trombone – or their combinations. He took him to a friend’s music shop to see the instruments and described how the music drew on the African rhythms brought by the kidnapped slaves from Africa to the United States, Latin America and Cuba centuries ago. Gradually Iwan began imagining a world through the geography of music, and then one day Akira spoke of the Civil Rights Movement in America during the 1960s, and the violent struggles for the rights to non-segregated education, health care, transport, and entry to shops, restaurants, parks and swimming pools. But the talk of politics filled Iwan with dread and he recoiled, turned away. And Akira asked if he was boring him. He said no but they didn’t continue with the sessions after that.

For Iwan jazz improvisation was similar to painting. At the art school he was inspired by the work of the American artist Jackson Pollock, the passion and intensity of his paintings, the repeat notes and riffs. Like the twelve bar melody, you take a subject or palette of colour and you improvise, you take the basic rhythms, the colours, tones, textures and markings and you mix them up to create something fresh, a new way of seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling, sensibility. You go out of your body, time bends or stands still, the past present and future meld, ripple, flow, gently lift or hurl, thump or tumble, like waves bent into an ocean pool. Sometimes gently washing in, sometimes violently dumping, pushing and shoving, a fizzing swirling flow of water that grabs and pulls at the body and forces the arms and legs to keep working to stay afloat and in one place. The exhilaration and tingling pleasure of being immersed in the powerful swirling waves that tumbled over the rocky edge at Wylie’s Baths at Coogee at high tide spoke to him, reminding him to enjoy, be responsive, and be on guard.
Month by month, year by year, he learned about the lives of his house mates. Marj had a son, William, or Billy as she called him, who she raised as a single parent, initially on a barmaid’s wage. Then, after a favourite customer died and left her a house and a significant sum of cash, she moved in and converted the place into the Darlo Boarding House. Billy went to an elite private boys school and Ernie and Bert were invited to move in. They were both alcoholics and might have ended up on the street if not for Marj’s windfall. While it was possible that one or both men had been or still were Marj’s lovers he didn’t think it respectful to give it much thought and neither he nor Akira ever discussed it. Marj had grandchildren, two girls, who she rarely saw and their studio photos at different ages sat on a sideboard in the lounge room.

As the only smokers in the house Iwan and Bert often retired to a bench in the backyard that was reserved for their smokos. ‘Must be time for a smoko eh mate?’ Bert would say to him, and it was during the smokos that Bert began telling him stories of growing up in the bush. Once or twice he mentioned serving in New Guinea in World War II. There was a failed marriage after the war, but Iwan never learned the details of what happened although Marj confided, ‘A lot of the alkies you know, they were in the war. Never the same afterwards. I don’t think their families understood what they went through. As a barmaid you see the damage.’

Bert was the handyman around the house. Brought up on a farm, he knew how to fix things. Plumbing, minor electrics, or painting. The old laundry was his shed and in it he had a bench and tools that hung on a wall, each with its own spot marked by a trace of the tool’s outline. It fascinated Iwan that Bert was so fastidious about tools and insisted on them being properly oiled, cleaned and maintained. He was a stickler for safety and using the right protective equipment and when it came to fixing things, he’d sit for hours, days if necessary, tinkering until he worked out what to do. When he announced, ‘I’m stumped’, it meant a chat with Old Jim and the fellas in the local hardware shop to see what they suggested. And when Iwan began the sculpture elective in the second semester, he consulted with Bert for tips on the functions of the different power tools – drills, sanders, circular saws – or to discuss the best way to construct the things he saw in his imagination or sketched on paper. It was Bert who showed him how to weld.

No matter what he was doing Bert was always listening to the radio – parliamentary debates, current affairs, the races. He read the paper daily, usually the Sydney Morning Herald, (‘I wouldn’t even wrap me fish ‘n’ chips in that other lot after what that man did to Gough Whitlam’), and often went to Randwick Racecourse on race days. Marj didn’t mind an occasional flutter at the races, she said, but Ernie said Bert was a serious punter. Name any horse practically and he could tell you who the dam and sire were, or so it seemed. When Iwan
asked him about this he said his father used to race trotting horses, train them too, but he was into gallopers. Bert saw that Iwan was ‘educated’ to know the difference.

There were six kids in Bert’s family and his younger brother Jack took care of his finances. As Marj put it, ‘Jack’s a good bloke, comes to Sydney every year for the Royal Easter Show, sees Bert then. He had Bert live with him for a year but his wife couldn’t hack it so that’s when Bert came back to Sydney to live. Jack makes sure Bert’s got money and when he comes to Sydney he always brings me a bunch of flowers and a pound of prawns.’

Iwan like the juxtaposition and smiled as Marj continued, ‘What you gotta understand about Bert is he’s very kind and he’d give money away to anyone. So Jack makes sure the rent is paid and gives him a weekly allowance – enough for a few beers a day.’

It was Bert who kept Iwan up to date about what was happening in Indonesia and called him to the television as reports of the worsening economy, rising petrol prices and the collapse of the rupiah led to widespread, sometimes violent, student led demonstrations across the archipelago. Seeing the images, Iwan bought a phone card and called Pak Harto to find out what was happening and enquire after his family. Should he try and send them money? Pak Harto promised to keep him informed and they agreed he would phone on the first Sunday of the month for updates. He mentioned his concerns to Pak Bambang the next time they met and learned that a good place for news on the ground was from the men who attended the Indonesian language mosque near Tempe. But he had classes on Fridays so he could only attend Friday prayers there during the semester breaks.

Ernie was the gardener of the house and the whole of Marj’s backyard was divided into raised rectangular garden beds filled with rich composted soil and horse manure brought from nearby stables. He grew vegetables all year round and Marj stored what they didn’t eat in a freezer, either cooking it first or simply freezing it. There were two lemon trees, some banana trees, a persimmon and passionfruit vines. Ernie had no family, he said, but grew up in Balmain during the depression. During the war he put up his age so he could get a job as a guard at the prisoner-of-war camp at Cowra and, after the war, he worked as a wharfie in Sydney. Every now and then Marj would have a ‘quiet word’ to Iwan and Akira and they would wander out into the garden to ask Ernie if he needed a hand with anything. In this way Iwan became familiar with the seasonal work of the garden – preparing the soil with rich layers of manure and compost, and the planting and nurturing of seedlings. Ernie insisted they wear gloves in the garden, but he himself seemed to relish plunging his worn rough hands into the dark soil.

With every crop, the seeds were harvested and stored in labelled containers, ready for planting the following spring or autumn. It was from Ernie that Iwan learned the English names of the vegetables – even those he’d not known before such as capsicum, zucchini, eggplant, broccoli.
As they worked side by side, Ernie would hand him some just picked peas to eat, or he extract a carrot from the soil, wash it and urge him to eat it raw.

Ernie’s passion for growing vegetables had taken hold when he was a little kid growing up in Balmain. Gardening, he told Iwan, was better than alcohol and maybe better than sex. When Iwan raised an eyebrow he chuckled, ‘Well, runs a close second then.’

‘In Balmain we had an old eyetie living next door, y’know, an Italian bloke, and he had a big garden. He even had chooks. And I used to hang about in there ’cos me mum and dad were always at the pub and I guess they took me in, him and his missus, felt sorry for me I s’pose, being left on me own all the time. I’d give him a hand and they’d feed me. Pretty fair exchange eh? Y’know what though? I never tasted tomatoes like what he grew. I keep tryin’ different varieties but I still can’t get ’em to taste like what he grew.’

Ernie became silent and then when he spoke, his voice was raspy, ‘They were good to me and I always called them Mr Rosso and Mrs Rosso, not first names like nowadays. See them persimmons, I got them in memory of them. I left ’ome at fourteen and went jackarooing and that was that. I never went back and I dunno what happened to ’em. Never saw me old man or me mum again either. I ran into someone once and they said they died. Dad got hit by a train, drunk I s’pose, and Mum, I think she mighta married again.’

Ernie didn’t like him asking questions when he talked like this, and so Iwan continued thinning a dense line of carrot seedlings.

‘You have the same vegetables in Indonesia?’ Ernie asked.

‘Rice, onions, garlic, ginger, many things the same. Sometimes tomatoes, beans. But mainly different.’

He didn’t know how to describe the many varieties of fruits and vegetables in Indonesia because there was no comparison, and he only knew the Indonesian or Javanese words. Here, he decided, there was not the same variety because the food people ate came with all the different migrants. It was not what indigenous people ate.

‘Marj reckons you’re a Javo? That right?’ Iwan nodded. ‘Yeah well I knewed some Javos back in the war y’know. I was workin’ at Cowra POW camp when they brought ’em in from New Guinea. Poor buggers had a hard time, coming in winter. They been up in the tropics and didn’t have no warm clothes. They nearly all got sick – measles, flu, pneumonia. Nine died. A terrible business.’

‘P-O-W?’

‘Prisoner-of-war camp. It’s where they put enemy prisoners in the war – y’know, Germans, Italians, Japs, but we weren’t at war with Indonesia y’see, so they was political prisoners. The Dutch brought them over from New Guinea when the Japanese invaded.’
'They from Java?'

'Yeah, I reckon. They’d been in a prison camp up some malaria infested river in Dutch New Guinea. Forget the name of the place, sounded real bad but.'

'Why they in gaol?'

'The Dutch told the Australian government they were “dangerous criminals” but in actual fact they was sent to New Guinea because they was pro independence. When the Australian government got wind of the fact they was political prisoners the Dutch had to set them free ’cos they hadn’t broken any Australian laws had they? Bringing them to Australia turned out to be a bloody big mistake for the Dutch, that’s for sure.'

Bert had a habit of making statements and assuming Iwan knew what he meant and so he said, ‘What?’

'Well when the Japanese surrendered and word got out that Sukarno and them in Indonesia had declared a republic, that really upped the ante if you get what I mean. That was in ... um what year was that? Musta been in ’45 I reckon.

'17 August 1945?'

'That’d be right. I was livin’ in Sydney by then and workin’ on the waterfront. See the trade unions were on the Indonesian side. So the idea was to stop any ships from taking Dutch soldiers and arms up to Indonesia to fight the Indonesians. There was bloody strikin’ Indian sailors all over the shop wantin’ a bed so we had to set up a strike fund to feed ’em.’

'Indian sailors?'

'Too right mate. Didn’t hesitate to walk off the ships once they knew what was going on. See they’d had a gutful of the Brits in India as well.’

'I not know this.’

'Well the Javos was pretty bloody savvy and well organised. They knew the Dutch would want to go back to the good life like before ... Can you pass me that fork? Good man.’

Iwan passed him the fork and Ernie dug out two stubborn weeds.

'Well when the war ended the Indonesians wanted to go home to fight for independence. So that’s what happened. The Labor government made sure they got back alright. Least that’s accordin’ to readin’. Reckon it’s right, but. Now if Menzies had been in power the Javos woulda been buggered. Too right, ’cos Menzies woulda just done what the Dutch wanted. The United Nations had already recognised Indonesia by the time he got in so that was that, game over red rover.’

It was the longest conversation Iwan had had with Ernie. Mostly, they worked in silence, or he explained how to do things like pruning or thinning seedlings or told him which insects were
beneficial. Ernie was always delighted to see a ladybird beetle, native snail or praying mantis eggs.

‘Well you’re one o’ them, like them Javos. I’ll be buggered. Marjie said you was.’

There’d been a few spots of rain and they still had a bed of lettuce seedlings to mulch before they were done.

‘Y’know I was right keen on this girl called Mollie, she was a beauty. Aussie girl, a born organiser and she was helpin’ the Javos and puttin’ on fundraising concerts and dances, that sort of thing. She married one of ’em, forget his name, and went over there to live. I never heard nothin’ about her after that.’
The singing is starting so it’s not long before the wayang kulit starts. The other kids push past Papa and run ahead. No one waits for me but Mama says, ‘Look Iwan.’

There are two white waterbirds – one is standing in the water and the other is its reflection. I call ‘Selamat sore, bird’ and it lifts its wings and rises up out of the water with its long thin legs dangling. It floats up high like a kite and then turns on a wing and flies away.

Papa calls to us to hurry. It’s getting dark now and the wayang kulit screen is shining up ahead. It’s under the hairy old Banyan tree, and I can see the gamelan orchestra too. We soon see lots of people, and candles and kerosene lanterns. There are big tubs of food on mats on the ground, and some people have mobile carts with glass cases. I can smell the satays and corn cobs cooking, and there’s rujak, Hari’s favourite. Mama and I made it once from green fruit salad, palm sugar and shredded green coconut. Enak sekali.

The gunungan glimmers on the screen. Everyone is talking, some are eating. Papa unrolls a mat on the ground next to my aunties and he and Hidayat go to buy food. I know where Hari is and I want to go to her. Mama leads me through the groups of people sitting all around and I drop my right hand down like her to be polite as we pass. Hari is behind the screen watching the dalang get ready. He’s Mama’s big uncle and very famous. Mama sits down next to Hari and I sit in her lap. It’s a special privilege to sit behind the screen like a king. I call the dalang Pakdhe. When he sees me he gives me a signal with a blink of his eye. I can see the puppets – Prince Rama, Princess Sita, Prince Laksmana and all the others. I look for Hanoman, the White Monkey general. He’s there.

Papa brings us food as the play begins. The dalang is funny, he makes everyone laugh. Sometimes I fall asleep but tonight I’m going to stay awake the whole night. I wait and wait, and when a rooster crows I’m fidgeting, ready, waiting for Pakdhe to call me over to him. Then he lets me help put the gunungan into the banana trunk at the bottom of the screen. The show is over but the gamelan keeps playing. Papa is waiting and when he sees us he picks up Ismoyo and carries him. Hari and Hidayat are very sleepy, but Mama and I are not sleepy at all. When we reach the rice fields the sun is a fire ball floating up and Mama puts her hand over my eyes to stop me looking at it. We wait for the rice fields to catch fire and then a noisy flock of ducks comes gabbling down the track and then skive off, beak first, legs paddling, into the water. Mama and I laugh and laugh, and then we see the white waterbird again – walking around, lifting its skinny stick legs up and stretching them out one at a time like a silly soldier. I try to walk like the bird and Mama laughs and tries too. Hari is too sleepy and she leans on Mama.

In the village the women are scratching the roads clean with their stick brooms and burning off little piles of rubbish. Thin trails of smoke curl up and greet us as we walk to our place. ‘Selamat datung,’ they say. Welcome home.
Sydney 1997–1999
During those first years Iwan roamed the city. He studied her moods, her expressions, her poses. He admired her beauty and experienced her seductiveness, accepted her underbelly of crass commercialism, grieved when eye-catching graffiti was removed, and treasured her trash, often combing the labyrinth of back lanes to see the variety of objects put out for garbage collection. Some of it he brought home but much of it he left where it was, or photographed it. He befriended her wharves and ferries, the Opera House and Harbour Bridge, Luna Park, the headlands and beaches, forests and foreshores, parks and reserves. Walking, exploring, sketching, painting and photographing, at different times of the day or night and in different seasons, again and again. In Darlinghurst he studied the faces of the many homeless men and women who inhabited its crooked streets, or spent the day sheltering in the shade of its majestic Moreton Bay Figs, their meagre possessions kept in a shopping trolley or plastic bags. They were strangely familiar to him. Sometimes he thought they looked like a relative or friend from his village and this made him think about humanity. We are all the same and we are all different, but not so very different.

Among the entire student body there was only a handful of students that could be called ‘Asian’ – he was the only Indonesian, there were two students from Japan, and one who was born in Vietnam, two Koreans. He didn’t feel Asian, or even Indonesian for that matter, unless someone drew attention to it. When he saw Asian students or people in the street or on a train he sometimes saw them as different. He was a student and artist like all the rest, sometimes sure of himself and what he was doing, sometimes unsure. Writing essays caused him the most anxiety although the school arranged for him to have help with that. The main real difference between the students was in terms of age and experience – about thirty per cent came straight from school but the majority were in their mid to late twenties, thirties, right up to their sixties, one was seventy. Some had children still in school, some were having a first child, some had studied or worked as graphic designers, lawyers, teachers, fashion designers, miners, signwriters. A small number had been artists their whole lives. Above all they saw themselves as peers, but for the mature age students full-time study was a joyful privilege, a dream come true. They were there to make the most of it and this lent an intensity to the way they worked – nine to five, Monday to Friday, in class or in their studios. Those who found it too demanding dropped out, some enrolled at less taxing institutions.

That first year the students studied art history on Mondays, drawing on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and completed six week courses in painting, printmaking, ceramics, sculpture and photography on Thursdays and Fridays. Two thirds of the way through the year they were asked to select two disciplines to focus on in second year. Unlike some who knew exactly what they wanted to do and resented being made to study anything else, Iwan found it difficult
to choose. He would’ve been happy to keep doing them all he said and so, after talking it over with Marj, the Boys and Akira, he chose the subjects he did best and worst in – the best was a High Distinction for printmaking and the worst a Credit for painting.

He didn’t see Maddie again during first year and, while he hadn’t forgotten her, he no longer expected to see her at the art school. When she reappeared as a model towards the end of his second year Iwan was surprised. More than a year and a half had passed since he fled that first encounter with its crushing emotions. Not only could he no longer find any trace of them, there had been a shift in his perspective as well. It was the line on the page, not the model, that was the subject, and this absorbing process – the flow from the body and eye to the hand, to the charcoal or pencil marks on the page – happened in a zone that permitted no other exchange – no thoughts, no connections – in fact a state of not knowing. White light.

At the lecturer’s prompts, Maddie changed position and adopted a different pose. She recognised Iwan and now that she was facing him, almost catching his eye, she saw he was working as if in a trance. The lecturer, Jane Wilkins, was circulating, looking at each student’s work, murmuring feedback or encouragement. When she came to Iwan she paused – she was beginning to see a rare quality in his work. It seemed to trigger a frisson that forced the observer to look again, or more closely, to experience an emotion or even a feeling of recognition. Phil Clarke, the Head of Drawing, had advised her that he’d be joining the class. This whole week he was trying to visit every class in the art school and he finally slipped into the room, nodded in her direction, and moved from student to student to look over their shoulder at their work. Like Jane, he paused awhile when he reached Iwan, moved away, and then returned at the end of the class to ask to see more of his work. As he flipped over the pages of Iwan’s sketchpad some of the other students gathered to look as well.

‘Good work. Good to see. Keep it up,’ he said brusquely before heading out of the room with Jane.

‘That’s the young man who begged to be let off life drawing at the beginning of last year, said it was against his religion. I told him he had to do it.’

‘Oh, that’s right, he missed a few classes early on but after that he never missed a beat.’

‘I was a bit tough on him. Fully expected to have to deal with an anti-discrimination ruling for that but he seems to have carried on. Impressive – it’s going to be interesting to watch his progress.’

‘He’s doing well. I expect he’ll top the class.’

‘I’d like to see him do drawing in an honours year. What’s his major?’

‘Painting I think.’
‘I don’t get why so many students choose painting, do you? In fact I don’t get painting.’ Phil was an installation artist and it wasn’t the first time Jane had heard him say that.

‘He could still choose drawing for honours if he wants,’ she said, ‘but there’s a year to go before he has to think about that.’

Maddie was meeting Mack at a nearby café after the class and when she arrived there was no sign of him. She was soon joined in the queue by a group of boys from a nearby high school and as the line edged forward, the boy behind her was bumped into her by his friends. The first time it happened the boy apologised. It happened again and this time his friends burst out laughing. She scowled but said nothing. When it happened a third time Maddie swung around to face them. ‘Look here,’ she said, ‘cut it out!’

This seemed to incite an override in the boys’ normal inhibition and habits of courtesy and they momentarily became a pack. Embarrassed, the boy in the front moved to the back of the group so that another boy was standing next to Maddie. Then this boy was pushed into her.

This time Maddie yelled, ‘Just quit it, okay?’ The boys’ laughter subsided into guilty silence, and Iwan who was ordering his lunch at the front of the queue turned and saw what was happening. He left his tray on the counter and walked up to Maddie, took her by the arm and steered her to the front of the line, then gestured to her to order. He made room for her salad on his tray and they moved towards the cashier.

‘All together?’

Iwan nodded and handed the cashier the money.

‘Thanks for that – I was getting ready to cripple those guys ... But you shouldn’t have paid, here ...’ Maddie tried to hand him the money but he waved it away, shaking his head.

‘C’mon, we’ve all students. You can’t afford ...’ She stopped mid-sentence for fear she might offend him.

‘I’m Indonesian ... we don’t appreciate a Dutch treat,’ he said lightly.

Maddie laughed and put up her hands in surrender. ‘I won’t argue with that ... Thanks.’

‘Please,’ he said, gesturing for her to eat. His fingers were long and slender, the skin fine textured, the nails on the right hand were long and looked almost manicured even though completely discoloured with paint. The thumbnail was a good inch in length but on the left hand, which rested on the table, the nails had been cut short.
The cafe was becoming quieter as people left to go back to work or their studies, so when Mack and three friends entered they collectively infected the place with the noise of the street. Seeing them, Maddie waved to catch Mack’s attention.

He strode over and kissed Maddie on both cheeks, ‘Hey Mads.’

‘Everyone, this is Iwan,’ she said.

‘Yeah we know,’ said Mack, ‘he was in our group last year. How ya goin’ mate? Hey Mads, d’you wanna hear a joke? There’s this magician on a ship, right? And every day when he does his tricks, the Captain’s parrot gives him a hard time.’ Mack mimics the voice of the bird. ‘“He’s not really sawing that lady in half, there’s two ladies in that box ...” Or, “That box has got a false bottom in it ...”

‘Every time the magician’s doing his show, the Captain’s parrot is there, and every day he ruins everything by telling the audience how the magician does his tricks. Like, the audience loves it, thinks it’s part of the act, but the magician is getting seriously pissed off.’

Iwan had got to know Mack over the past two years but he still found him hard to understand at times. Something to do with the way he moved his lips hardly at all when he spoke, and his use of idiom which Iwan was still learning. Also, while he could mostly understand a conversation one on one, it was still difficult to follow conversations in a group so if he felt tired he switched off. Other times he made a judgement that what was being talked about wasn’t important and switched off anyway. This was one of those times and he focused on his meal.

‘This goes on day after day ... the magician’s getting really fed up. Then one day the ship hits an iceberg and sinks. The magician finds himself in the water. He looks around and sees a plank of wood floating by and grabs hold of it.’

Maddie looked at Mack and then back again to Iwan. On the one hand she found herself observing the almost stereotypically Australian masculinity of Mack. The strong, tanned, muscular surfer, the knotted blond curls, the large hands. Mack’s size, exuberance and loudness were in marked contrast with Iwan’s thin narrow shoulders, high cheekbones, wispy beard and sensual mouth – the skin on the palms of his hands was lighter than on the top, the arms were hairless except for some scattered longish black hairs.

Mack’s friends waited for the punchline. ‘The magician clings to the plank of wood and after a while he looks up and sees the Captain’s parrot sitting on the other end. For a day and night they drift together. Neither of them says a word.’

Iwan looked up from his meal to see Maddie looking at him. He returned her smile.

‘Finally the parrot can’t stand it, “Okay,” he says, “I give in ... What did you do with the ship?”’ Mack’s friends laughed and scattered to the counter to order their lunch.
Maddie pointed to Iwan’s sketchpad, ‘Would you mind ...?’ He looked on as she turned the pages.

‘Do you think I’m fat?’ she asked.

‘Not at all,’ he replied. But he had magnified Maddie’s curves and body shape, giving them a voluptuousness reminiscent of the sculptures and carvings of the Indonesian monuments Borobodur and Prambanan, which he had often visited as a student in Central Java. When Maddie handed back the sketchpad, Iwan got up to leave and waited while Mack and his friends sat down with plates of spaghetti bolognese, hamburger and chips, salad niçoise.

When Iwan had left the cafe, Mack said to Maddie, ‘He’s a bit odd isn’t he?’

‘I like him,’ she replied.

‘He’s a bloody good artist. Has a bit of a problem with the language, I think, tends to keep to himself. But he’s improving.’

‘He shouted me lunch and when I tried to pay him back he said he didn’t like a Dutch treat. It took me a minute to get the joke.’

Mack looked puzzled, ‘So, what’s the joke?’

Mack’s friend, Jordan, rolled his eyes, ‘Like durr? Indonesians were colonised by the Dutch – also it’s customary to shout if you invite someone to eat with you.’

Mack paused before biting into his hamburger, ‘But if you had to shout everyone you invited to lunch you’d go broke. I don’t think that’d work.’
Lots of people are getting sick. Some babies have died. My little cousin died. Mama was very sad and so was Father. Me too, I miss him. Now Pak Adji who always lets me pat his cow is ill too. Mama says it’s because there isn’t enough food. Sometimes I feel very hungry and Hidayat and Ismoyo show me how to eat the shoots of the banana flowers. We catch grasshoppers and fry them on tiny fires made with dried cow manure. At night we make a lantern to catch larongs in a bucket. It’s so exciting when the flying ants swarm towards the light, and Mama makes us wrap selendangs around our heads so the larongs won’t get in our ears. The neighbours come and help and everyone is laughing and even Papa thinks it’s funny. After that Mama makes patties with the larongs and they’re very crunchy.

Mama is serving rice and we each have a spoonful on a banana leaf. Mama has an egg and it’s very exciting when she is peeling off the shell. Then she cuts it into six tiny portions and serves a small piece of the cooked white and a fraction of the yellow yolk to Papa, Hari, Hidayat, Ismoyo and me, and then the last little bit is for her. We all wait and then we mix the egg in the rice and eat it and it’s yummy.
The Art Gallery of NSW was a favourite hangout for Iwan because it was free. He could spend a day there or just a few hours. Sometimes he visited a single section or exhibition, other times a single painting. There were free films, talks, a bookshop. The State Library had free exhibitions too and he could borrow art books from the art school library or the city library. He occasionally went to other museums but even with a student discount it was expensive. He also discovered artworks in odd places around the city, in city squares or the foyers of buildings. Someone told him about a street in St Peters where graffiti artists regularly painted the warehouse walls and he visited it often. Different councils held mural competitions and sometimes friends co-opted him to help on those. At the beginning of each year the students went to Cockatoo Island or North Head to draw and there was the annual event, Sculpture by the Sea, where artists exhibited their work along the coastline, in view of the ocean.

His preferred pastime on weekends was to wander aimlessly, catch a random bus or just let his feet lead until he found a place to sit and sketch. His sketchbooks were a diary – recording where he went, what he saw, how he was feeling. Sometimes he went into a rail station at peak hour to catch quick sketches of people rushing to work, or catching their train home at the end of the day. He would study the expressions on their faces or the way they wrapped themselves into their bodies. On Sundays he often gravitated to Circular Quay, where he came with Akira on that first day, to find a spot to sketch, paint or pretend to fish as he idly watched the life swirling around him – people interacting with the buskers, the movement of yachts, ferries and container ships on the harbour, the honk of tugboats, the dancing light patterns on water.

At the beginning of his third year of art school, Maddie spotted Iwan sketching clouds by the water’s edge at Circular Quay. It was early April and a flush of autumn coolness had driven the crowds into the sunlight at Circular Quay.

She called out to him, ‘Hey Iwan, are you fishing?’

He looked up, ‘Oh hi Maddie – fishing, yes.’

‘Really? Mind if I join you? Are you allowed to fish here?’

She sat down beside him.

‘Catch anything?’

‘Not yet,’ he said and pulled in the line. It had a hook, sinker and ... ‘No bait,’ he said and threw it back in.

He stopped sketching and they sat watching the improbable and curious collection of passersby. Some punks dressed head to toe in black with elaborate spiky cocky’s combs on their otherwise shaved heads, neat and tidy mums and dads with their two point four children
all wearing hats. Nearby a man and woman wearing colonial dress and coated in thick silver paint posed still as statues. Further along an Aboriginal didgeridoo player was drawing a large crowd, and there were three small children playing child-sized violins next to a cardboard sign in a child’s handwriting ‘Saving for overseas tour with Children’s Orchestra’. Clowns arrived and began juggling on stilts, and then got down on the ground to practise some fire eating and sword swallowing stunts. They told the audience they were still learning.

They saw elderly men wearing polyester mismatching checked pants and jackets, their wives with gold hooped earrings, tight stretch jeans and running shoes. A man with a cockatoo on his shoulder had a trail of bird shit down his back. When two men appeared wearing white and black spotted costumes that matched a pair of dalmatian dogs, Maddie felt a rising sense of hysteria. She sensed Iwan was studying each of the passing scenes with objective interest but for her, sitting there next to him, the familiar scenes began to seem staged, a colourful pageant being played of a strange world called Sydney. It was like the building sense of hilarity she felt when watching the repetitive play of everyday life scenes in Jacques Tati’s Monsieur Hulot films where the simplest most familiar actions and sounds became overwhelmingly strange and hilariously funny the more they were repeated. Finally, as if sensing her thoughts, Iwan said, ‘Many kinds of Australians ...’

This was the final trigger and Maddie burst out laughing and couldn’t stop. Then when she stopped, it started again, and continued until she groaned from the aches in her belly. Iwan was watching with concern. Finally she calmed herself. What did he think of her? She remembered the first day they met and how, after she had tried to come on to him, he had got up and suddenly left the life drawing class. It felt like a victory but it dawned on her later that she’d misread him. She wanted to leap over the wall of reserve gathered around him, to experience more of his sense of humour, to be a friend if nothing else. Was he gay?

‘By the way, do you know Grove Gallery? My friend, Gerardo Pettini, owns it and he might be interested in your work. He’s got a very good reputation for looking after his artists.’

Iwan nodded and she continued, ‘I wondered if I could maybe come by and see your work at the art school so I can get a sense of what you’re working on before I see him.’

Iwan agreed and they made a plan to meet at Iwan’s studio at the art school the following week.
After their meeting at the art school, Maddie went to the Darlo Boarding House to see the rest of Iwan’s work. When she arrived Akira was practising and Iwan came to answer the door.

‘Who’s that playing the piano?’ she asked.

‘Akira. He live here too.’

When they reached his room, Maddie saw that every surface was taken up with canvases, paints, brushes and other paraphernalia such as library books, ring bind folders, sketchpads. The walls were papered with postcards, theatre and exhibition posters, cuttings from magazines, photographs of friends and fellow students, press clippings.

‘Wow, how does your landlady feel about having an artist-in-residence?’

‘Marj cool. Just clean around.’

‘She cleans your room?’

‘Yes, empty bin, sweep, new sheet, towel. Just once a week.’

‘So, you and Akira board here? Any other students?’

‘No, just us, and Ernie and Bert.’

‘Bert and Ernie? You’re kidding?’

‘No. Sesame Street, yes?’

‘Are those really their names?’

‘I think yes. Maybe ...’

‘What’s your landlady’s name?’

‘Marj.’

‘She sounds amazing – it’s like a home away from home for artists. Does she cook for you as well?’

‘Oh yes. And laundry.’

‘Wow! Do you think I could move in too?’

While his body remained calm and quiet, Iwan’s eyes widened.

‘Just kidding,’ she said, laughing.

Iwan showed her the canvases and left her to look through his sketchbooks. As she pored over the drawings he continued working on a large canvas with a blade, spreading on metallic greys, rust and deep broody blues, with spot lathers of yellow that glowed dully like lamps in a...
fog. It was part of a series of industrial dockland and harbour views he was working on and the
smell of oil paints hung heavy in the air despite the open door and window. He wondered if
she found the smell unpleasant.

Downstairs Akira began to play a lyrical piece. Single notes, right hand, an upbeat joyful
melody, repeated over and over, then joined by a rich layer of chords, dreamy and soft. Iwan
looked up from his painting and saw Maddie sitting very still by the window, having
surrendered to the music. When Akira stopped playing, the notes floated in the air. It was like
being captured in a still life painting, he thought. Maddie looked as though she was still
listening and he saw her shake her head. Neither of them spoke.

There was a knock on the open door. ‘Hey man, you ready to head off? Oh sorry mate, didn’t
know you had visitors? Maddie isn’t it?’

Akira stood in the doorway and Iwan moved forward to introduce them.

‘Hi Akira, I really enjoyed hearing you play. Did you compose that last piece?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ Akira said. ‘Excuse me Maddie, just checking with Iwan, do you still want to go and
eat? We’ve done the sound check already but we gotta be there by eight.’

When Akira, Maddie and Iwan left the Darlo Boarding House the air was oppressively warm
and humid and they saw a bank of thick dark clouds gathering in the direction of the city.
Akira and Iwan set off towards Central to a favourite noodle bar and Maddie said she would
meet up with them later. The Jazz Collective was an artist run affair that sponsored and
organised weekly gigs for up-and-coming jazz musicians. The gigs gave them an opportunity
to play a sixty-minute set with a line-up of one or two established jazz musicians and the
students were encouraged to play their own compositions. Tonight Akira was teamed with a
well-known double bass player and a percussionist, both of whom performed regularly as
sidemen or band leaders at venues around the city.

It was a big night for Akira and Iwan wanted to be there to support him. Looking around he
saw a number of older musicians in the audience as well, there to relish the chance of hearing
the Jazz Collective’s younger artists whose confidence, musicality and professional
commitment impressed them. Like any community the jazz community’s colour emanated
from its inclusive nature – the combination of flighty show offs, smart arses, cool Christians,
drug and alcohol abusers, gay and straight dudes, and petulant narcissists. But the glue that
bound the community was the shared appreciation of superb musicianship, generosity, grace
and a sense of humour.

The venue entrance was on a busy, main road. Inside there was a small stage and the seats for
the audience were an odd assortment of worn lounges that had most likely been gifted or found
in second-hand shops or on the street. Iwan was early enough to claim an empty lounge and Maddie soon joined him. The audience consisted mainly of young people, nursing a glass of wine or beer, and no one spoke during the performance. As the band played, the siren of an occasional police car or ambulance rose and fell just metres from where they sat and, when that happened, the music somehow stretched beyond the room to envelop the city. At the end of each song there were whoops, yeahs and clapping and when the set finished the audience demanded an encore. When it was over Akira and the other band members left the stage to speak to friends and by the time he got to Maddie and Iwan, he was relaxed and relieved.

Maddie was enthusiastic. 'That was great Akira. You must be so happy. What was the name of the last piece you played? We heard it this afternoon, and that was magic, but hearing the band play it was extraordinary too.'

'It's called *Rainy Day At Marj’s* – I wrote it for a composition assignment last year and a few people asked if they could play it. This is my first time playing it myself but I was pretty happy with how it went.'

'So what's more important to you – composing or performing?' Maddie was curious.

'Well, I like both I guess. Improvising and performing and composing – they all tend to feed into each other.'

Iwan went to buy drinks for the three of them and returned just as the emcee was introducing the next band. The room darkened and this time the student was a bass guitarist, playing with a well-known drummer and female saxophone player. The room hushed.

When Iwan, Akira and Maddie emerged from the venue they saw it had been raining. The reflections of street lights and neon signs shimmered on the wet surfaces of the streets, blurring lines of colour and, picking up where the music left off, the swishing tyres of the passing cars added their rhythmic beat to the pulse of the city. They located Maddie’s car in the canyons of silent warehouses, old factories and office buildings and soon she was chugging away, a receding dash of yellow in the shadowy dripping streetscape. With Iwan’s kretek cigarette leaving a trail of sweet clove smoke, they made the uphill trek to Darlinghurst in silence. By the time they hit Flinders Street a thin misty rain was blurring the glow of the street lights and dampening their clothes and hair. They were euphoric. It was one of those rare and wonderful moments when life brimmed with possibility.
The annual Graduate Show showcased the bodies of work of final year art students to the industry and general public. As well as having works in the curated exhibition, each of the graduating artists had a studio exhibition where anyone could meet them and see more of their work. Having finished their third year final assessments in early November, the students set about preparing for the exhibition in late November. A range of scholarships, residencies and cash prizes were offered to selected students and gallerists saw it as an opportunity to identify new talent.

Iwan had topped his year in painting and with encouragement from the art school had applied for a visa extension as well as a scholarship to do an honours year. Mack had done well too and had plans to enrol in a graphic design course with a view to getting work in advertising.

On the day before the opening Iwan ran into Maddie outside the art school.

'Hey, Iwan – do you want to have a coffee?'

'Can’t, sorry – have to get studio exhibition ready. '

'Okay, I’ll see you at the opening then. '

'You coming?'

'Sure, I wouldn’t miss it. My parents are coming too. They’re friends with Mack’s mum and dad. I’ll introduce you. Yeah?'

Mack and Iwan had been delegated to stand at the entrance to the art school, just inside the quadrangle, to welcome guests, hand out maps, and direct them to the bar where free drinks and snacks were being served. It was evening and a pink light still suffused the sky when Akira, Marj, Ernie and Bert arrived. Marj was wearing the pale mauve satin dress with matching jacket she’d last worn to Bert’s nephew’s wedding. Not long after Iwan’s arrival, Marj had stopped dyeing her hair and her brand new perm twirled her thin grey hair into fluffed rolls. Akira had on indigo dyed batik pants and loose jacket, his long black hair was pulled back in a pony tail, and Ernie and Bert were done up in wool ties, creased pants and tweed sports jackets. They were freshly shaved and Marj had given them both haircuts. When they spotted Iwan, they made their way over to him. The three men waited while Marj gave him a kiss and a hug and then they all solemnly shook his hand.

Marj said, ‘We’re all real proud of yer, Ivan, aren’t we boys? Real proud. We’ll go and have a good look round and see you later. Don’t you worry about us, Arkie’l look after us.’

Iwan handed them a map and they agree to meet up at his studio after the official proceedings, but before they could walk off, Maddie arrived and Iwan introduced her to Marj and the Boys.
Soon Maddie’s parents joined them and Maddie kissed and hugged them both, ‘Hi Mum, Dad, this is Iwan. Iwan, my parents Helen and Ian. He’s one of the stars here tonight …’

Helen and Ian went through the motions of shaking hands with Iwan and then turned their attention to Mack who said, ‘Oh yeah, thanks a lot …’

‘I said one of the stars. They already think you’re one!’

‘Congratulations Mack dear, I can’t wait to see your work. Are Robert and Elizabeth here yet?’ Helen asked.

‘They said they’d wait for you at the bar,’ Mack said. ‘I’ll take you to them.’ And he led them through the crowd, saying, ‘Excuse me, excuse me …’

Maddie turned to Iwan. ‘I’m sorry about that,’ she offered.

Iwan shrugged and smiled, ‘Many kind of Australians …’

Maddie laughed and he was pleased she remembered this shared joke from when they sat watching the passing crowd at Circular Quay.

‘You know how I spoke to you about Gerardo Pettini from Grove Gallery. He’s here tonight so I’ll try and introduce you,’ Maddie said.

There was still the official opening to get through. The Director made the same speeches she made every year and no one minded because they were already well on the way to becoming quietly pissed on the free alcohol. When this part of the proceedings was over, a small queue formed to purchase catalogues which included a photo of the artists, grouped by art speciality, as well as an individual colour photo of one of their artworks. Like the other graduates, Iwan was wearing a laminated name tag which also featured a photo of his artwork from the curated exhibition. He was on his way to his studio when Maddie called to him. She was with a stylish man in his forties who looked vaguely familiar.

‘Hi Iwan. D’you have a minute? This is Gerardo Pettini from Grove Gallery – he’s the gallerist I told you about?’

Gerardo greeted him warmly, ‘Pleased to meet you Iwan. I just bought your painting. Heard so much about you – from Maddie and from some of your lecturers as well. I hear you’re going on to do honours. Well done.’

Maddie’s phone registered an sms and she made her apologies and left Gerardo to accompany Iwan back to his studio exhibition. As the gallerist looked at each of his paintings, Iwan was impressed by the attention he gave to each of them and the intelligent questions he asked about influences, the artists he most admired, what he felt he’d gained from studying at the art school.
Finally, Gerardo said, ‘Maddie tells me you’ve got more work at home. I won’t look at that now but I can give you a space in my December–January Group Show if you’re interested. There’ll be some big names showing so it will expose you to some fairly astute collectors. I could take one large piece or a couple of smaller pieces.’

Iwan nodded.

‘You can? Good. Bring over what you’ve got on Saturday and we’ll decide what to hang. Here’s my card.’

He patted Iwan’s arm. ‘Must fly ... good to meet you.’

When Gerardo left his studio, Iwan tried to take in what had just happened. He’d heard so much about the gallerist, who was a familiar figure at graduate shows. Everyone wanted to exhibit in Grove Gallery, partly because of his reputation for being ethical and generous and partly because he was a strong advocate in promoting the interests of his stable of artists. If he took on an emerging artist it was understood they could look forward to a strong future.

An hour later when Maddie arrived at Iwan’s studio she was excited and curious. ‘How’d it go? What did he say?’

‘He asked me to bring over some work on Saturday – for a group exhibition in December.’

‘That’s fantastic. You know that gallery don’t you, Grove Gallery? It’s probably number one in Sydney, perhaps in the country.’

They walked downstairs and out into the main courtyard to where Akira was waiting for him.

‘I put Marj and the Boys in a taxi. I think they were pretty impressed. You probably noticed that Marj insisted we dress for the occasion.’

Maddie signalled to a passing waiter. ‘Here, she said, ‘Let’s celebrate.’ She took a glass of champagne from the tray and handed it to Iwan.

‘Er, um, no thanks.’

‘Oh ...?’

Akira said, ‘I’ll take that one.’

Iwan handed the glass of champagne to Akira. ‘Wait,’ he said and headed in the direction of the bar.

Maddie said, ‘Gerardo Pettini just offered to hang Iwan’s work in his annual group exhibition.’

Akira said, ‘Cool. Iwan doesn’t drink. He’s a Muslim.’

Iwan was back with a champagne glass of sparkling mineral water. He was happy.

Akira raised his glass, ‘Here’s to ya mate! It’s bloody good news.’
Mack soon joined them and they went off to a nearby pizza cafe with some of the other graduates.

Later that night when Iwan and Akira arrived back at the boarding house, they made coffee and went to Iwan’s room. As well as selling his painting and securing a spot in Grove Gallery’s annual group show, he had won an honours scholarship and a $500 voucher for art materials from a fine arts shop he often went to for paints, brushes and canvases. The scholarship meant he could remain in the country and continue his studies for another year. More than all his other good fortune, this was the most significant. It meant he could stop worrying about the future for another year.

Akira picked up the guitar and began to pick out some notes while Iwan set to work on the dock scene he hoped Gerardo would take for the group exhibition.

‘What’s with you and Maddie?’ Akira asked.

Iwan was surprised. It was uncharacteristic of Akira to ask such direct questions.

‘What you mean?’

‘C’mon, mate – it’s pretty obvious she’s keen on you.’

‘No ... I don’t think ...’

‘Fair dinkum ... Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.’

Iwan shrugged, ‘I think she in love with Mack.’

‘She’s interested in you, mate, can’t you see that?’

The question unleashed a flood of unacknowledged longing in Iwan and he put down the blade he’d just loaded with thick yellow paint and joined Akira on the bed. He picked up a bamboo flute and began handling it, then holding it to his lips he played a few bars of an Indonesian ballad. He felt too agitated to play it and got up off the bed.

‘What can I do? I poor man, have nothing.’

He wanted to move, pace up and down, but the space was too narrow and too crowded with art materials. ‘I cannot dream to marry someone like Maddie. We from different worlds. When I go back, teaching job, I should pay bribe ... I cannot afford. Even I borrow I cannot repay ... What future I have? Maybe sell batik in markets ... become tailor like brother-in-law.’

He looked down at his outstretched empty hands and then at Akira.

‘Mate, I’m not talking about marriage – you don’t have to marry her to go out with her. Anyway, I’m not sure she’d be too interested in marriage.’

‘But I Muslim ...’ he said.
The excitement and sense of hope stimulated by the successes of the night had dimmed. As he saw it, they were a fluke that gave him some slight relief from thinking about the future. The things his Australian peers might regard as choices in life were not for him because of his circumstances – family, nationality, profession.

Akira continued, ‘It’s how it is here mate, it’s like you have a relationship, you get to know someone, maybe it works out that you marry them or maybe you don’t. It’s open. You can live with them or not, marry or not. It’s up to two people, what they deem fair, what they feel comfortable with. So, if Maddie’s keen, why not enjoy her company for the time being and leave the rest for later?’

After a minute of cold silence, Iwan declared, ‘I a village boy, I from village and I return to village.’

He felt angry with Akira and wanted him to go out of his room.

‘I’ve seen the way she looks at you ... and funny thing is I bet part of the attraction is that you’re not trying to get her into bed. She’s probably wondering if you’re gay.’

‘I not gay. How can you say this? I Muslim.’

‘So, there are no gay Muslims?’

Iwan shrugged. Of course he knew there were gay people but he couldn’t really say if there were or were not Muslims who were gay. When he first came to Sydney he attended the Gay Mardi Gras parade. It wasn’t what he expected – people, lots of men especially, showing off their bulging muscles, wearing strips of leather on their crotch and little else, or in elaborate sparkling evening dresses with high heels and hairstyles. It was colourful, festive, theatrical. Everyone was having a good time. He saw families, parents with small children, watching on and that was shocking to him. When he discussed this with Pak Bambang the social worker explained the history of Mardi Gras, the gay rights campaign, and how gay men and women had been discriminated against, bashed, even killed. He spoke about the AIDS epidemic and how the early marches tried to raise awareness of safe sex practices to stop the spread of infection. The effect of this chat was that, in spite of his friendships with openly gay artists at the art school, Iwan began to associate being gay with danger.

When Akira left the room he found he could no longer paint. His head was crowded with thoughts, admonitions and arguments against the views put by Akira. To have a relationship with Maddie without intending to marry her was disrespectful and sinful. She was not used to living the way he was used to. And if they did not marry and had a child? The child would not belong in his family. He willed himself to put the tangle of thoughts from his mind but sleep escaped him and he got up from the bed and began painting again, selecting colours that soothed him.
Us two, Mama and me, are taking a bath in the river. Mama is washing her hair and her eyes are shut tight to stop the shampoo stinging. The shampoo is from a little packet she bought at Lik Dul’s shop and it smells sweet, like jasmine. Mama has so much hair and she pushes it up and around with her hands to make it all soapy. Mama’s sarong has fallen to her waist, I can see her boobies. I want to suck on them again but I’m too old. I put out my hand in a little cup for Mama’s boobie and Mama gets a fright. She opens her eyes. ‘Aduh!’ she says. I’m laughing but Mama smacks my hand away and it hurts.

I start to cry and cannot stop because Mama hurt me. I hate her for hurting me. I try to get out of the water. Mama calls me, ‘Darling, darling’ but I keep trying to get out of the water. She catches me by the waist and tries to hug me to her in the river, laughing while I wriggle and squirm. ‘You frightened me,’ she says, ‘it’s nothing, don’t worry.’ I fight, kick, and finally I’m free. I run and run and hide behind some bushes. Mama is calling me but I feel very sad.
Sydney 2000–2001
At Grove Gallery’s Annual December–January Group Show all three of Iwan’s paintings sold to collectors who prided themselves on spotting an up-and-coming talent. Gerardo had twenty to thirty committed collectors keen to acquire works by emerging artists but the interest in Iwan on the night was such that he thought he might be forced to an auction of one of the works. To resolve the situation Gerardo made a promise to the loser that he would be granted a preview of Iwan’s forthcoming solo exhibition. The only problem was that Grove Gallery exhibitions were booked at least two years ahead and he had only just met Iwan. Also, while the group show was an opportunity for an up-and-coming artist, it was Gerardo’s policy not to take anyone on while they were studying. It put them under too much pressure.

The white lie had been a way out of a tricky situation but now the client kept asking him for the dates of the exhibition for his diary. So, when Madrill, a major artist, announced he was moving to New York and wanted to cancel his next scheduled exhibition, Gerardo decided to assess whether Iwan had work on hand, and of sufficient quality and strength, for a solo exhibition. If so, he knew he could reduce some of the pressure on the newcomer by having a more experienced artist upstairs, possibly a sculptor or someone so well known they wouldn’t be worried about the possibility of being upstaged.

When Gerardo arrived at the Darlo Boarding House Marj let him in. She told him Iwan was expecting him and called out to Iwan. There was no reply so she invited him to go on up. When Iwan returned to his room he found Gerardo already pulling out canvases that caught his eye. He offered him tea or coffee but he declined.

Gerardo was peering at the canvases and the paint brands on the tubes of paint on his desk, ‘Good to see you’ve not been cutting cost on materials. It’s always disappointing when people do that,’ he said.

Iwan looked on, curious about which paintings caught Gerardo’s eye, the way he moved canvases to the front and arranged them side by side, or stepped back to view them from a distance. It wasn’t easy in the crowded bedroom and Gerardo picked up five or six canvases and began lining them up in the adjoining hallway.

‘Well it seems you’ll have plenty to give me for an exhibition. I can see why some of your teachers were enthusiastic about your work. You’ve clearly worked very hard.’

Gerardo was particularly taken with the industrial dockyard scenes.

‘Okay, you need three things. A studio, materials and, tell me if I’m wrong, some cash to keep you going? Am I right?’

Iwan opened his mouth but no sound came out.
Gerardo continued, ‘Madrill is leaving for New York – he has a studio in Surry Hills and he wants to hang onto it in case it doesn’t work out over there. It’s not flash but it would do, and you could live there as well. I think Madrill will be pleased to have someone in there till he makes up his mind.’

As it turned out the studio occupied half of the fourth floor of a rundown warehouse in Surry Hills, not far from where Iwan used to go to Akira’s jam sessions. He asked Akira to go with him and they found Gerardo waiting for them when they stepped out of the creaking old style lift. In their eyes the studio was enormous and light filled. It had fourteen foot high ceilings and a row of six foot high sash windows along the northern side. A long table covered with painting paraphernalia dominated the work space and some thirty giant sized canvases, painted and blank, sloped against the walls. At one end a small kitchen contained a bar fridge, sink, stove and fifties style red laminate and chrome table and red vinyl chairs. A door painted in Rousseau inspired green foliage led to a bathroom with a clawfoot bath and shower, hand basin and toilet.

By the windows there was a double bed mattress on a raised wooden platform and in front of that an old green lounge suite – a couch and two armchairs – arranged around a large square coffee table constructed from timber pallets. The coffee table was strewn with well-thumbed art books including one on Madrill. Two painted bookcases housed Madrill’s much prized jazz and blues vinyl collection. At this height the rumble of traffic on Elizabeth Street was just a low hum and from the windows there were sweeping views of Central Station clock tower, Belmore Park and Haymarket, and the railway tracks where they plunged underground.

Iwan was blushing with gratitude. ‘This very good. Thank you.’

‘Don’t mention it. Self interest okay? I want good work from you for the exhibition in March. For now just concentrate on your studies. You can move in as soon as I organise with Madrill about storing his paintings and the vinyl collection. Give me a month. That alright? It’ll give you time to get things sorted out with your landlady as well, yeah?’
Iwan’s windfall became the talk of the art school and for the first couple of weeks after he moved in that October there was a constant stream of visitors. Within days it was a common room for fellow students, a place to hang out, and he turned no one away. When Akira asked why he didn’t just shut the door to stop them dropping in, he said, ‘I like it. People come, I feel good, happy. Otherwise, lonely.’

Iwan painted steadily. Day or night. He enjoyed the buzz of people but rarely responded, even when they asked him questions or expressed an opinion that he really should do something about the cockroaches. In time the visitors stopped complaining that the milk was off or the sugar had run out. They made their own tea or coffee and bought more if supplies ran out; they entertained themselves – reading his library books, playing Scrabble, arguing about politics or the arts, swapping notes on which exhibitions, movies or plays to see. They even put up signs to remind one another to wash up. As the weeks and months went by the stack of new blank canvases and paintings resting against the walls multiplied. On the floor piles of art books and reference books rose like miniature skyscrapers.

When Maddie visited the studio for the first time, she found Akira, Mack and a young woman she didn’t know playing Scrabble. They looked up as she entered.

Mack got up to kiss her on the cheek. ‘Hi Maddie, do you want to play? We could start again seeing they’re wiping the floor with me.’

‘No thanks Mack. Hi Akira. I’ll just say hi to Iwan.’

Iwan nodded to Maddie and she said, ‘Hi, just came by to see how you’re going’, and when he didn’t respond, added, ‘Mind if I look around?’

She saw that he was glancing at the shadow puppet on the wall as he painted and recognised it as a recurring image in quite a few of the paintings propped against the walls.

‘Hey Iwan, what’s this?’ she asked.

Iwan looked up, ‘This shadow puppet, gunungan, Tree of Life. We use at beginning and end of shadow puppet play.’

Iwan put down his painting tools and took the Tree of Life down to show her. She noticed the careful, even loving, way he handled it. It was clearly old, fragile, made of leather, shaped like a pyramid and intricately carved. Although worn and faded she could see traces that it had once been brightly painted. He pointed to steps leading to a pair of double doors, ‘Giants guard gates to temple.’ She could just make out the temple doors and the guards poised with shield and sword at the ready. She pointed to the heads of two large creatures on either side of the temple roof. ‘What are they? Dragons?’
'Guruda. Like eagle. Freedom.' She traced her finger upwards, ‘So here’s the Tree of Life, and what is this? She pointed to a fearsome face, and then a snake weaving itself up the trunk of the tree towards the flower at the top. 

‘Banaspati, guide and protect from danger. Naga is like snake, mean like this life, how you say it, path in life, different lifetimes, grow in spirit. At top, flower, tundjung, wisdom, holiness.’ 

‘I see,’ she said, ‘so the Tree of Life promises freedom, wisdom, like Buddhist nirvana, yes?’ 

Iwan nodded, ‘Tree of Life like family, many branches. Not just human but all creatures, all connected. Exist together, yes, how you say in English?’ 

‘Co-exist.’ 

‘Yes, you understand? See, Naga looking down, tail reach down to bottom, to the earth.’ 

Iwan turned the puppet over.

‘Oh, two sides. What is this one?’ asked Maddie.

‘First one, good energy. This one, bad energy.’ 

‘Oh.’ The second side presented a demon face with open mouth, tongue hanging out, eyes bulging. Its head was framed with flames. 

‘This side show evil, bad things, destruction. But there third side too.’ 

‘Oh really, how is that?’ 

‘This one when become shadow in shadow puppet play. This one, ancestor spirit, does not change. A puppet master gave me. Is very old, very precious. When I kid I love very much wayang kulit. My mother also love ... family go together and we stay all night, watching. Puppet master very old man, uncle, he love me. Still live, not die yet. Very clever ... he know many things. Everyone in village love him. He speak truth.’ 

Iwan hung the Tree of Life back on the wall with the positive side facing into the room and went back to his painting. 

Then as if suddenly remembering, ‘You want coffee?’ 

Maddie looked at her watch, ‘No, no. It’s okay. I just came by to invite you to our party. On Saturday. It’s a vermilion party ... red, everyone has to wear red. Can you come?’ 

Iwan said he would and Maddie left an invitation on the coffee table and handed out copies to Mack and some other students who were just arriving. 

‘Anytime after nine ... the theme is vermilion. Okay everyone ...?’ 

When she reached the door of the studio, Maddie turned and saw that Iwan was completely absorbed in his painting, ‘Well, see you Saturday then ... Iwan?’
Music, bodies and the sweet smell of weed spilled out of the redbrick semi-detached Bondi bungalow. The house was about three blocks from the beach and the majority of guests were past and present students from the art school, as well as the occasional lecturer. It was a warm summer’s night and about a dozen people were at the front of the house, standing on the lawn and footpath or sitting on the low brick fence. Most had made some effort to dress in red or shades of pink and red. A couple had on matching male and female retro swimming bathers, there was an overheated devil wearing an all-in-one suit with crescent shaped horns, and a woman had dressed as a child’s paintbox that displayed all different tones of red. A bored looking cattle dog cross lay on its belly on the footpath, its chin resting on its paws. Its owner had dyed its coat red and it was sporting a red and white polka dot kerchief around its neck.

The front door of the house opened into a short hall that led into one large living area. All furniture had been removed and there were mattresses and cushions around the walls for people to sit on. The place throbbed like a giant’s heartbeat and under the stairs a group of people, including Maddie and Mack, lounged on cushions, talking and laughing. People streamed in and out of the room, walking back and forth to the dining room and kitchen at the back where beers were buried in tubs of ice. The party was still warming up.

A taxi pulled up out the front and as it pulled away partygoers saw two men wearing masks cross the street and freeze into a dance pose on the pavement. They were slim, brown skinned, and one had on a blank white carved mask. His torso had been rubbed all over with red paint powder and his chest and arms were bare except for a pair of intricately patterned gold leather wings strapped to his upper arms. A deep red woven sarong was wrapped around his hips and fell in folds to the ground at the front. On his head there was an elaborate gold metal headdress that was decorated with red hibiscus flowers which jittered when he moved. Next to him another young man was wearing a similar outfit but his mask was demonic and had coarse straight black hair that covered his back down to his knees. Bunches of coarse black hair protruded from the carved red nostrils and a long red and gold tongue hung from its mouth. Two sharp fangs curved round on either side.

The man in the demon mask held a small drum under his left arm and began to play a slow beat which marked the beginning of the dance. The white masked dancer was standing on his left leg which was bent at the knee, the foot turned out slightly and flat to the ground. His right leg was bent forward and rested lightly on the toes. At the end of his outstretched arms the fingers were pointing down and pulsing. He caught up a strand of the scarf in his right thumb and index finger and drew it out to the side and let it drop as his body began to flow in slow curves, the movement extending down into the wrists, hands and fingertips, his head moving the mask in a back and forth movement at the neck, left to right, right to left. At times the mask seemed menacing, at times benign, sometimes young and playful, sometimes ancient.
'Who’s that?'

'Dunno.'

'Maybe Iwan?'

'Yeah, gotta be.'

'Hey, Iwan is that you?'

The partygoers became mesmerised. The performers were bare footed. The one playing the drum was the puppet master and the dancer was like an elaborate puppet, gathering up and extending one strand of the scarf, dropping it, and then repeating the movement on the other side with the other strand. As they inched forward, making their way down the path and into the house, the guests saw that both were wearing a large brass handled knife held in place at the back by the scarf around their waist.

A young blonde haired woman had entered the house with two backpacks ahead of the dancers and warned the DJ and he faded the music to an abrupt silence that was soon filled by the steady, insistent beat of the drum. In the lounge room people pressed themselves around the edges of the room, and Maddie and Mack, who were sitting under the stairs, suddenly found themselves hemmed in by a wall of legs. They scrambled out to see what was happening.

The dance lasted several minutes. It was part of a battle scene in a Javanese mask dance that Iwan learned as a boy. When it was over he sensed the audience wanted more and so he turned to Maddie with his arms and hands outstretched, and beckoned her with nods and dancing downward pointing fingers. She resisted, pressing herself back against Mack.

'Go on,' Mack whispered, and pushed her forward, 'I think it’s Iwan.'

She allowed herself to move with the masked dancer. Awkward at first and then slowly the movements began to flow, call and response, drawing everyone in as the drum beats became stronger, faster, louder, pulling dancers and spectators into a breaking wave of sound that vibrated in their hearts. Then, finally, with a signal from Iwan, sound and movement froze. There was a pause, and then a roar of applause and appreciation was released into the room.

A small crowd gathered around to look at the masks and head dresses as Iwan and Akira waited a moment, and then removed them. There were questions about the rhythms and the dance itself but the answers were drowned as the DJ turned up the volume once more. When he looked around, Iwan saw Mack pulling a joint out of his shirt pocket and lighting it. Maddie was looking up at him as he inhaled deeply and passed it to her. Maddie repeated the action and then held it out to Iwan who shook his head. She handed it back to Mack who began whispering something to her that made them both begin to giggle. Still laughing, they moved to the mattress under the stairs, and leaning momentarily into one another, sunk down onto it.
and got themselves comfortable. Maddie looked up at Iwan and patted for him to sit next to her but he turned away and saw that Akira was dancing with Lisbeth, the young woman who had earlier carried their bags into the house. He felt strangely out of place and unsure. A few people were dancing and the sexual energy in the room gnawed at him as he spoke to Akira.

Iwan retrieved his backpack, the drum, masks and headdresses from under the DJ’s table and went out through the kitchen to the backyard. A wafting fragrance of lemon scented gum followed him through the tangled kikuyu grass to the back gate. When he stumbled on some exposed tree roots, a couple on a makeshift bench pressed the pause button on a heated argument about an exhibition to urge him to go easy. Beyond the Hills Hoist clothesline he caught a whiff of damp rotting vegetable matter and somewhere in the shadows he heard groans, urgent whispers and small cries. When he came to the back gate he flicked his lighter and, seeing the gate had no lock, pulled back the bolt and dragged it open. In the back lane a cone of light fell unimpeded from a street light and the sudden glare made him blink furiously. A dog, sensing his presence, emitted deep growling barks that shook the fence opposite and caused him a flash of gut turning fear.

As he walked away from the party Iwan tried to shake the image of the intimacy between Maddie and Mack from his mind. It would soon be time for him to leave Sydney but no matter how often he tried to picture what his life might be like when he returned to Central Java, the life here now in the present got in the way. It enveloped him with such vitality that the other life, the life of the village, appeared faded and colourless. He gulped in the cool night air to stop the tears, an outpouring of grief over a fading dream he had hardly even recognised. He sat for a moment on the kerb, lit a cigarette, and drew comfort from the sugary clove flavour.

Slowly the work awaiting him in the studio came into focus and propelled him to move. He pulled pants and a tee-shirt from the backpack, put them on, and carefully wrapped the mask and keris daggers in Akira’s sarong and put them in the backpack. With the other sarong wrapped around his shoulders for warmth, he carried the headdresses in one hand, the drum in the other, and set off home. Uphill towards Bondi Junction, along Oxford Street, and past Centennial Park. It was past midnight and the city appeared like an Edward Hopper painting, empty of people but beautiful in its colours, shapes and design. Even the cars seemed subdued as they passed before tall fixed mannequins in illuminated luxury boutiques in Paddington. They wore fashionable, expensive, but strangely tasteless, clothing, and he imagined them as museum exhibits or installations in some far off time.

At Paddington Town Hall his stride lengthened as the road bent downhill, past the sandstone walls and palm trees of the army barracks. The bookshop windows caught his eye, then the cinema posters, a men’s clothing store. At that hour, the gay bars and colour-bright windows of adult sex, toy and leather shops alone seemed animated. Neither strange nor exotic anymore, he found their presence familiar, a sign he was close to home. Home. Yes, the studio
was home. The thought jolted him and a blast of sadness and grief pressed down on his shoulders. He quickened his pace, he wanted to fall asleep, but if sleep wouldn’t come he’d paint.

‘Hey, mate. S’bit early for Mardi Gras, aren’t ya?’

He vaguely recognised the night club bouncer, a box of a man with thick fuzzy hair, flattened nose and large soft lips. He was balanced on the balls of his feet with arms loose to accommodate his bulging biceps. Ready for anything but it had been a quiet night. Iwan saluted him with an upwards nod of the head.

There was nothing to add and the exchange warmed them both.
The day after the party Iwan heard a knock at the open door and looked up from his painting. It was Maddie and he saw that she was upset.

‘Hi Maddie, is something the matter?’

‘You left the party without saying goodbye.’

He was perplexed, ‘Sorry. Think you not notice.’

‘What d’you mean?’

Iwan shrugged and didn’t reply.

‘Come on Iwan ... what’s that supposed to mean?’

Maddie’s anger uncapped a return surge in Iwan. He needed her to see and feel the distance in their lives as he did, a student on a visa, someone passing through. His time was running out and he couldn’t imagine what his future might hold. Everything here was coming to an end. It would all end. They would go on but not him. He didn’t want to let go the life he had now. Whatever the future held, he had to accept that she would have no part in it and the time was approaching when they would not see each other again.

He looked down at the mix of paints on the palette and pushed them around a little with a flat rounded spatula. Then he looked at her, ‘Why you here Maddie? What you want?’

She met his gaze. ‘I’m here because I care about you, about being friends with you. I know the exhibition is important but it’s okay to chill occasionally.’ She tried to smile, but then looked as if she might cry. Now she seemed like a ghost. Very still. Silent.

‘Maddie, this what I am. I nobody. Poor man from village. I paint, that all I know.’

Maddie’s hands rose as if to catch hold of his words and then, having caught them, she let them drop to her sides. She glanced around the studio, as if for the last time, took in the stacked canvases, the Tree of Life puppet in pride of place, the brooding dark green foliage of the bathroom door, the grimy sun-filled windows. He saw her eyes rest on the vase of deep pink and red geraniums Marj had picked for him from her garden. Then she turned on her heel and disappeared.

Had she even been there? Had he simply imagined it? He heard her taking the stairs two at a time. She always did that. He looked at the straight angled pattern of deep reds and blues on the palette and saw such sadness and grief. A sweat broke out on his forehead and top lip, a volcano erupted inside him, bending him sideways, forcing him to put down the palette. Rage flashed up the names of all those he felt most angry towards, not just Maddie and Mack, but all the others too, his teachers, even Gerardo. He walked over to the grime smudged window and rubbed at the glass so he could see out more clearly, see the trains being sucked into tunnel en
route to Museum or Town Hall stations. He imagined Maddie jerking opening the yellow car
door, dragging her seatbelt across her chest, turning on and revving the engine, letting off the
handbrake, edging back and forth till she was free to drive away. Her car made a chugging
sound, it had no will to dominate. Her rage and his had collided and ignited in an impossible
intimacy. Now she was gone like a rocket bursting free of earth’s gravity. She was gone from
him, that was what he knew. That was it.

One of Marj’s famous phrases came into his mind, ‘I find it’s best to always give people the
benefit of the doubt.’ Everyone he met here saw things a little differently to each other.
Politics, religion, age, class, city or country, male or female, where they were born, the kind of
life they had – they all had to be taken into account but he didn’t find it easy to predict the
result. Marj and the Boys. Maddie and Mack. Pak Bambang’s family. The other students. The
teachers. Gerardo. All Australians, but they were like sunlight passing through a crystal, the
light remained unchanged even while a cloud of rainbows shimmered on the wall. So while he
gave thanks for the generosity of those he was close to, there was always the risk or hope that
things might not be as they seemed. It was a paradox and when Marj explained what the words
meant, he’d felt their wisdom and asked her to write them down so he could memorise the line.

He opened a sketchbook to a drawing of Maddie and, looking at her face, repeated over and
over as if it were a mantra, ‘... the benefit of the doubt.’
Every year Pak Bambang invited Iwan to join him and his family for prayers at Lebaran, the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. This year the weather was fine and so at 7.30 am they gathered with hundreds of others at an oval next to the Georges River in Tempe. It was a brilliant spring morning, a real celebration, and a large slice of Sydney’s Indonesian community was there. He saw many friends, and afterwards he went to Pak Bambang’s house in Bankstown for lunch with the family. Iwan had made a painting for the family and, as was the custom in the village, gave each of Pak Bambang’s three girls a crisp new ten dollar note. In return, they presented him with a book on contemporary Australian Aboriginal art.

Pak Bambang and Bu Wafa and their three daughters lived in a suburban seventies style home in walking distance of Bankstown station and, from the moment he encountered the suburb’s shopping and pedestrian malls, he was enchanted with the place. On that first visit Pak Bambang met him at the top of the stairs at the station and then took him on a guided tour. First stop was a ground floor fruit and vegetable market in a rundown shopping centre to buy items for Bu Wafa, then on through a bending arcade and back onto a street where the pungent smell of spices announced themselves before they even set eyes on the rows of half metre high spice cones in rich hues of cream, orange, ochre, deep red, and brown. While he waited for Pak Bambang to scoop different spices into the cellophane packets provided, Iwan took photos of the mounds and enjoyed the sensation of his nose being tickled by their aromas. Then they recrossed the railway line to a Lebanese sweets shop with a long glass counter that displayed many variety of biscuits that were sold by the kilo. When a young man appeared from out the back, Pak Bambang ordered a serve each of rubbery strings of cheese topped with a sweet honey sauce and strong coffee served in small cups. From then on, the word ‘Bankstown’ would make Iwan’s mouth water.

On subsequent trips he discovered even more scenes around the station that delighted him. Once at eight-thirty in the morning he saw crowds of high school students flowing out of buses and trains, and converging on the street that led to their high school. ‘Where from?’ he asked Bu Wafa and she rattled off a list of countries, ‘Lebanon, Iraq, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Egypt, Syria, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, China, Vietnam.’ He had never seen so many people from the world and here they were, in one place, at the corner takeaway ordering hot chips and milkshakes, the young men greeting one another with their special handshake.

There was a second-hand shop that sold amber jewellery and he spent ages peering at the minuscule insects locked inside the polished stones. In an arcade, with most of its shops empty, there was one unassuming shop whose shelves were stacked high with the brightly coloured fabrics worn by African women. Again and again he found himself drawn back to study the loud patterns and surprising colour combinations, the finest of which were imported batik from the Netherlands.
From his very first visit with the family he was warmly welcomed by Pak Bambang, Bu Wafa, Fatima, Mifta and Miriam. At the time, Fatima was studying accountancy, Mifta was in her final year at school and would go on to study architecture, and Miriam was just thirteen and in her first year at high school. Bu Wafa was also studying, doing her Masters in Education part-time while working three days a week as a teacher’s aide. Pak Bambang jokingly complained he hardly saw her because she was so busy.

As he got to know them better they invited him to join them for important Indonesian Muslim holidays as well as Christmas Eve. All the girls addressed him in Indonesian as uncle, ‘Om Wan’, and he addressed them in turn as younger sister – Dik Fatima, Dik Mifta, Dik Miriam. At home the family spoke English, but Pak Bambang almost always spoke to his daughters individually in Indonesian, and they replied in Indonesian or English. When they felt like it they also joined in Pak Bambang and Iwan’s Indonesian conversations.

‘I have only spoken to the children in Indonesian so they understand and speak it quite well. Miriam tends to speaks Lebanese better than anyone – probably because she and her friends speak Lebanese at school. It’s the cool thing to do apparently!’

Pak Bambang was a self-described ‘enthusiast’ and, after meeting Iwan, the family became set on a growing passion for art. This meant that over lunch they often asked for his opinion or, more commonly, for him to adjudicate disputes – one disagreement was about whether Nolan was a great artist, another time it was Joy Hester – with Bu Wafa insisting she was the best of her generation. There was argument about Jackson Pollock’s Blue Poles, and another time it was on who was the better Australian painter – Fred Williams or John Olsen. Annual art events such as the Archibald Portrait Prize exhibition and ArtExpress, an exhibition of high school students’ final examination artworks, invariably stimulated heated discussion at the dinner table. Each year Pak Bambang brought out a notebook and recounted the issues and concerns of the previous year’s exhibition of students, and compared them with the present year. He insisted on counting up and announcing the number of students of ‘Asian’ background who made it into the Art Gallery’s ArtExpress exhibition and was always disappointed that there were many more Chinese or Vietnamese background students than Indonesian. It didn’t seem to matter that, as Bu Wafa pointed out, they had bigger resident populations to draw on.

Several times a year the family made the three-hour journey to Canberra to visit the National Art Gallery which, Pak Bambang discovered, had a collection of textiles – batiks and woven cloths – from different parts of Indonesia. For Bu Wafa’s sake, he became concerned that Middle East or Central Asian textiles weren’t a strong part of the collection and raised the matter with Iwan.

‘Y’know, when we were in Lebanon we visited Amman in Jordan and saw the most wonderful embroidered costumes made by Palestinians. Then in Damascus in Syria I met a textiles
collector in the old souk. His tiny cramped shop was an aladdin’s cave, filled with the most remarkable textiles – jackets, dresses, decorative pieces. Such knowledge this man had – he knew the provenance of them all, which city or tribal region they were from, their age. Wonderful, wonderful! I visited him again and again. Of course, the raggiest pieces were often the most expensive because they were so old or rare. He told me a curator from a Tokyo museum visits him every year to acquire textiles for their collection. You see, they are building a collection of Central Asian textiles in Tokyo. Of course I’m happy that the National Gallery has Indonesian weaving and batik, but surely there’s an opportunity for it to be looking to Central Asia and the Middle East as well. Is there someone you could speak to about this?’

Iwan didn’t think so but suggested Pak Bambang write to the National Art Gallery and send the card of the collector in Damascus. Maybe they would like to contact him too.

On his many visits to the family, he and Pak Bambang would pore over books on Pak Bambang’s latest passion. These were mostly borrowed from the local public library or the university library although Pak Bambang had a personal library that was crammed into every corner of the house. Every wall in the living room was lined with shelves of books that were organised by subject. Some were even in Dutch which Pak Bambang couldn’t read but which had belonged to his late father, and he couldn’t bear to part with them. He even had a single volume of President Sukarno’s art collection, published in 1960, which included paintings by some European artists who lived in Indonesia prior to Independence.

On one of his visits, Pak Bambang wanted to discuss the issue of identity. It was at the time of his fiftieth birthday and he began by admitting to feeling less and less tolerant of the tiresome question, ‘Where are you from?’ Perhaps because with the divisive politics in recent times, he had begun to feel there was an edge to the question that hadn’t been there before.

‘I always reply Bankstown,’ he said, ‘but I already know what will come next, “But where are you from originally?”’

‘What can I say? I was born in Indonesia, lived there for ten plus two years and I’ve lived in Australia for thirty-eight years. You tell me where I’m from.’

‘Yes many people ask me the same question,’ Iwan said.

‘But it doesn’t stop there, “So do you feel more Indonesian or more Australian?” they say.’

The best thing about these conversations was that they were in Indonesian which meant Iwan was often surprised by his own reflections. He said, ‘Sometimes I feel like I belong here, other times there’s a gap, like I’m either invisible or too visible, out of place. Or it’s as if there’s a perspex wall and I can’t reach through it. Not just language, although that’s part of it. Sometimes I know what I feel, believe, understand, but it only seems real when I meet
someone who is also Javanese and we can speak that knowledge. Sometimes a Balinese or Batak will be just as strange to me even though they are also Indonesian. It’s very odd.’

‘Yes, I know what you mean. Look at us Javanese, we may have been born and grown up in Central Java but we come from different villages and went to different schools. Perhaps we even practise a different religion. Then we take different paths in life and that exposes us to new experiences again ... all part of the journey. Life! It’s life that shapes identity! You’re an artist, your friend is a musician, the conversation you have together is different to the one you as an artist might have with another artist or he might have with another musician. Isn’t that true?’

Iwan nodded. Pak Bambang had thought about the issues of identity a lot, particularly as politicians began to ramp up their rhetoric on refugees and boat arrivals. Politicians and certain parts of the media were fuelling hatred and fear and Pak Bambang was convinced it was exposing a reality in the national psyche that had been patched over by the rhetoric of multiculturalism. The language of tolerance and human rights was cast aside too readily when it came to refugees seeking asylum.

‘Of course demonisation and hostility can also shape identity. We see that daily here in South Western Sydney. And also in Redfern. For instance, I have an Aboriginal friend and he has people challenging the fact that he’s Aboriginal because of his white skin. He says, “My skin is white because of what happened to my ancestors after the white invasion but I know how I was treated growing up as an Aboriginal kid. Aboriginal is who I am.” He is making a different point about identity and I respect him for that.’

Miriam chipped in, ‘Have you told him Mama has started wearing the hijab?’

‘Not yet,’ Pak Bambang said. ‘Let’s consider multiculturalism. Its supporters say it’s about respecting difference, diversity. Others say it masks a desire for power over difference. Pauline Hanson is against it and the people in her One Nation party are afraid of it. They feel oppressed by it they say.’ He sighed, ‘Fish and chips, she owns a fish and chips shop.’

Sometimes, it seemed to Iwan, discussions with Pak Bambang invariably came back to the topic of food.

‘Fish and chips are yummy,’ said Miriam.

‘Fattening!’ said Mifta.

‘See, I rest my case,’ Pak Bambang laughed, ‘Have you tried them? Terrible, tasteless, soaked in oil. Look at the Lebanese, the way they eat – fresh delicious flavours, eating what’s in season. I don’t get fish and chips but there you go.’
Wafa intervened, ‘Darling, no one is making you eat fish and chips. You see Iwan, he gets mad talking about politics, but you have to agree our present prime minister has a very small experience. In my opinion, he’s not comfortable with people from different cultures.’

On the train back to the city, Iwan thought about Pak Bambang and Bu Wafa. They were like family to him now and he felt privileged to be invited into their home. He’d never seen such a family where every meal was an arena for exchanging ideas, argument and discussion. Sometimes if she couldn’t remember her argument, Bu Wafa would get up from the table to fetch a book and read out a quote. At first he’d felt intimidated but because they paid great attention to his opinions he gradually learned to join in when someone said, ‘So, what do you think Iwan?’ This lasted a year and after that it wasn’t unusual for Wafa or one of the girls to say, ‘Alright, that’s your opinion, what’s your source?’

Passing through Sydenham, Iwan became attuned to the murmur of different languages in the carriage. There was an older Chinese man and woman; a group of young people with dark hair – some with blond or red streaks – whose English was sprinkled with Lebanese sayings; two couples sitting opposite one another were speaking in Vietnamese (a guess on his part); a woman answered her phone in Indonesian. The languages cut in and over each other – it was peaceful.
As she drove away from Iwan’s studio that day Maddie felt humiliated. There was a barrier between them and she couldn’t bridge it. Deep sobs pushed their way up into her throat and she was forced to pull over to the side of the road until they were spent. She felt bereft. Tired and emotional, she told herself, need to get a grip, need to talk to someone. She thought of Akira, maybe he could help her to make sense of it all.

At the Darlo Boarding House, Marj answered the door. ‘Hello luv, how are you? You after Iwan – he doesn’t live here anymore.’ Marj, Bert and Ernie still called Iwan ‘Ivan’ to his face but they knew it wasn’t his name. They could pronounce his name when they introduced or referred to him, but ‘Ivan’ remained a mark of their intimacy with him.

‘Oh, hello Marj. Actually I’ve come to see Akira.’

‘I’ll call him. Come in luv. I’ll go up. He’s probably got the earphones on, does that so he doesn’t disturb the Boys. Y’know? Won’t be a tick.’

There was something about Marj that made Maddie want to fling herself into her arms. She fished in her bag for a tissue and blew her nose. The house was filled with the aroma of a still cooking Sunday roast lamb lunch and by the time Akira came downstairs Marj had brought Maddie a cup of coffee.

‘Hi Maddie. Are you alright?’

‘Yes, I’m fine. Just a bit emotional. I had a bit of a scene with Iwan. You know, he left last night without saying goodbye and I went to his studio and, well, we didn’t part on very good terms. Sorry, I’m not sure why I’m here.’

‘You were upset about him leaving and not saying goodbye last night?’

‘Yes I was. I really like Iwan ... but, well ...’

‘Asian men ... we’re impossible!’

‘Oh Akira, I didn’t mean that.’

‘Never mind, that was just my lame attempt to make a joke. I’m sorry you’re upset Maddie, but how can I help?’

‘Well, I just wanted to ask is he gay? One minute I think he might be interested in me, then I feel like he doesn’t even want to be friends.’ She looked helplessly at Akira and then added, ‘And I don’t get the religion thing either.’

‘Maddie, I can’t answer for him but ... first of all, he’s Muslim. Maybe he’s not practising at the moment, feels guilty about it? I dunno. Maybe he’s attracted to you and feels guilty about that too.’

‘But why? What’s wrong with that?’
'Well, there’s nothing wrong with it. But let’s just think about this for a minute. You come from a rich first world country and he comes from a poor third world country whose economy has crashed big time. Right? Your family is wealthy, his is poor. He’s a Muslim, you’re perhaps a Christian. He’s met your family and probably reckons they wouldn’t regard him as a suitable husband. And at the end of this year his visa ends and he has to go back to Indonesia.’

‘Yes, but we could still be friends ...’

‘Well, yes, of course, but only if you don’t put any pressure on him.’

‘But I don’t ... didn’t ...’

‘Maddie, he’s got this exhibition. He’s working well and he’s happy. So all his friends have to do is let him focus on that. What’s happened may not mean what you’re thinking. If he wants to come to you, he will. I think you just have to cut him some slack.’

‘You think so?’

‘Yes, a lot rides on the exhibition and, really, who knows if it will be successful or not?’
Iwan’s exhibition at Grove Gallery opened in late March. The paintings were hung on the
ground floor and included eight large canvases and twelve smaller paintings. On the night, a
bar was set up in the internal courtyard and candles were in place and ready to be lit when the
sun went down. By six o’clock the place began to fill. As well as Gerardo’s regular clientele of
collectors, media and critics there were former teachers and students from the art school, Pak
Bambang and Bu Wafa, Iwan’s Indonesian friends, Marj, Bert, Ernie, Akira and Lisbeth. One
large painting already had a red dot because Gerardo had made good on a promise to allow a
collector a private viewing the day before.

Throughout the evening Gerardo maintained an upbeat and reassuring presence.

‘Don’t worry darling, I’m pretty sure of at least three or four sales. It’s your first exhibition so
people might hold off on the more expensive work. Try and enjoy yourself, that’s the main
thing. The art school have done a good job publicising it so there should be a good turn up.’

People made their way to the courtyard to pick up a drink and then, catalogue in hand, moved
around looking at the paintings. Near the gallery entrance, Iwan’s Artist’s Statement and some
biographical details were displayed on a wall. One in English and the other in Indonesian.
Gerardo spoke, the Indonesian Consul General opened the exhibition. In a brief speech, Iwan
acknowledged his fellow art students and teachers from the art school, Gerardo, and Ernie
whom he credited with inspiring him to pursue the theme of shipping and the shipbuilding
industry that had been so vital to the economy of the city. With Ernie to guide him he’d found
his way to Pyrmont, Glebe Island, Garden Island, Cockatoo Island, White Bay,
Woolloomooloo – sketching ships, wharves, slips, cranes and other paraphernalia, relics of a
previous era. Painting them, being up close and experiencing their immense scale somehow
reminded him of the monuments in Central Java that he’d drawn and painted with his friends.
*Borobodur* and *Prambanan*, both built in the ninth century, had also been symbols of empire.
Then they too were abandoned and neglected when the regencies declined and the ordinary
people had no further use for them.

For two hours Gerardo worked the room. When a painting sold, he reported it to Iwan. Pak
Bambang and Bu Wafa had hoped to buy, and Marj too had discussed the possibility with
Akira. When they saw the high prices, however, both parties felt discouraged. Discovering
this, Gerardo led them to a shiny yellow metal cabinet in his office and slid out the top drawer.
It contained a folder of works on paper and he left them to consider these instead. If they found
something he could arrange the framing.

‘Three large paintings have sold, two thinking about it,’ Gerardo said before presenting a
woman with vibrant red hair and red framed glasses. ‘Isabel is the *Art Times* critic and she’s
going to write a review of the exhibition, aren’t you darling?’
As Isabel laughed and moved away with Gerardo, Iwan looked across the gallery and saw Maddie with a group of people he didn’t recognise. She looked up, saw him and smiled uncertainly. He raised a hand in a half salute and saw her smile broaden. Just then Gerardo was back with a young couple who were considering one of the smaller paintings; two of his art school lecturers came up to shake his hand – they’d both bought paintings. Now Gerardo was with him again, excited because five paintings had sold. Then off he went again, to charm and cajole. He was witty, tireless, and he sold.

By eight o’clock Iwan felt drained. In the past few weeks his greatest anxiety had been that nothing would sell and the world would know he was a fraud. So now, there was relief, but his mind was blank. He realised he’d not eaten since mid-day. People were leaving, the bar was packing up, Pak Bambang and Bu Wafa had arrived early and left after an hour. Marj and the Boys had left by taxi and he couldn’t see Akira and Lisbeth. Marj had told him she was going to sleep on which painting to buy and this had upset him. He told her he would give her any one she wanted.

He began moving towards where he’d last seen Maddie when suddenly she was beside him.

He looked at her, the way the yellow curls framed her face, the electric blue eyes. ‘Do you have to be anywhere?’ he asked.

‘No, why?’

‘C’mon then, let’s go.’

He collected a leather jacket and two motor bike helmets from the gallery office and led her outside and around the corner to a shiny black motor bike. He helped her into the leather jacket, placed the helmet on her head, checked it was properly clipped, then mounted the bike. He held it steady and nodded for her to get on behind him.

‘I haven’t been on a motor bike before,’ she said.

‘It’s nothing. If I lean, you lean the same, okay? Don’t worry, we not fall over.’

He reached behind him and pulled her arms around him so that her upper body was pressed safely in behind him. Then, looking left and right, he eased out onto the street and accelerated down the hill to William Street.

At Bondi Beach they parked the bike and went to order fish and chips from a busy seafood takeaway. The warm night had brought hundreds of people onto the streets but the cool salt filled breeze bit through their clothes. With helmets in one hand and white paper packages of fish and chips in the other, they made their way towards the headland at the southern end of the beach. A path led them around the edge of the sandstone escarpment, and on until they
came to a sheltered overhang. Here Iwan pulled a sarong from his backpack and put it down for them to sit on. He was hungry and the smell of Maddie’s perfume made his mouth water. They unwrapped their parcels and Iwan squeezed quarters of lemon over two large pieces of battered fish. He made a little holder with some of the paper so Maddie could hold the fish without burning her fingers and from their cosy shelter they looked out to the Pacific Ocean. There was no moon but somehow in the darkness they could see the swell of the incoming tide as it pushed up and fizzed out onto the rocks platform, making womblike gurgling and sucking sounds as the waves broke, spread out, and sucked back into the sea. They ate in silence, taking turns to pull the chips through a hole Iwan had made in the parcel. When they finished they wiped the salt and grease from their fingers and lips and Iwan pulled a packet of cigarettes and a lighter from his backpack. He gestured to Maddie for permission to light up.

‘You don’t talk when you’re eating Iwan, why is that?’

‘I don’t know. Habit I suppose – food taste better if I quiet.’

‘I see. In my family dinner time is when we come together as a family and talk. Or it used to be when my brothers still lived at home. It was when we talked about our day. Sometimes we had arguments as well. I remember feeling sorry for some friends whose families ate dinner in front of the TV instead of around the dinner table. I was the little one so my mother used to make my older brothers listen and not interrupt.’

The slight breeze, the light spray that drifted up onto their faces and the sound of waves washing in and out was melting their bodies. They both felt it. As if they were being peeled back to some timeless intangible indestructible part of themselves that was one with the rocks, ocean, stars. Seconds, minutes, perhaps lifetimes, passed before slowly, gradually, they were returned. Neither of them spoke but they were both becoming aware of their bodies stiffening from the cool damp air and chilled rock beneath them.

‘Are you cold?’ Iwan asked.

‘A little.’

He pulled a sweater from his bag and wrapped it around her legs. ‘Better?’

Maddie nodded. ‘Do you think you’ll stay in Australia?’

‘Visa finish in October. I happy for extension, but government say no more extension.’
It was almost midnight when they arrived back in the city and, after the crisp sea breeze, the air in the studio seemed sultry and stale so he opened all the windows to let in the night air. As usual, the sea air had made him hungry and so he set about making a bowl of noodles for them both. Maddie stretched out on the lounge. ‘So, what’ve you been doing since I last saw you?’

‘Painting.’

‘Of course! The exhibition was amazing. Gerardo was thrilled. You sold five?’

‘Six. Yes Gerardo happy, who knows, maybe sell two more.’

Maddie picked up a book from the coffee table and began to flick through it. The studio had filled with delicious food smells and as Iwan picked up the two bowls he saw that Maddie had fallen fast asleep. The open book lay face down on her chest and he picked it up and put it on the coffee table. Looking at her as she slept he saw a limp vulnerability had spread over her and her face appeared soft and trusting like a child’s. For reasons he could not articulate he felt honoured she was sleeping on his lounge.

He collected a sketchpad and charcoal sticks and began drawing her as she slept, urgently scratching marks onto the paper as if afraid she would awake. As he finished each drawing he tore it from the pad, sprayed it with fixative, then left it to lie on the long table at the centre of the studio. He moved around her to find the image he wanted – her face, the side of her head, the length of her body, hands, hair, feet, elbow. He sketched all night, until there was nothing left to draw and his aching hand was black with charcoal.

When Maddie woke the sun was streaming through the dull dirty windows. Iwan had showered and changed into a sarong and tee-shirt and the sketches, about thirty of them, lay scattered about the room. As he looked up from brewing a pot of coffee he saw Maddie take a moment to register where she was. She looked at Iwan, saw the blanket covering her, and took the mug he was holding out to her.

‘Milk, no sugar. Right?’

‘Thanks. I’m sorry, I seem to have slept all night. Thanks for the blanket too.’

As Maddie sat up she saw the drawings as well as the beginning of a large painting on the easel. She looked at Iwan and smiled.

‘I usually charge for this you know.’

Iwan held out his hands. ‘Sorry, I just wanted ... Are you angry?’

Maddie laughed. ‘No, it’s okay. Serves me right for falling asleep on your lounge.’

Iwan brought a plate of buttered toast to the coffee table.
‘Tell me about your family,’ Maddie suggested.

‘Well, there’s my father and stepmother and I have six brothers and sisters. My mother died when I was six ...’

‘Oh, I’m sorry. That must have been terrible. What happened?’

‘She had an accident,’ he said, ‘I can’t remember her face.’

‘You have no photos of her?’

‘No.’

‘Have you tried drawing her?’

‘No, no. I can’t.’

Iwan looked down at his coffee. Black, sweet, just as he liked.

Everyone’s asleep except me – Hari, Hidayat, Ismoyo are all sleeping. Mama and Papa are awake. There is a candle and I can see them. Mama’s hair is loose and hanging down, she doesn’t know I’m awake.

Mama is coinig Papa’s back. Her hand moves slowly, starting at the top and down to the bottom and I know Papa’s eyes are closed even though I can’t see them. They are quiet. Mama is wearing her old brown sarong with garuda wings – it’s her favourite to wear to bed. Papa’s back is criss crossed with angry red lines now. Finally, Mama murmurs ‘sudah’ and then Papa turns around and I can see him looking at Mama. He takes her hands and looks at them, and then he pushes the hair away from her face. He smiles at her, and then leans over and inhales – first on one side of her face and then on the other.

Iwan looked up and saw Maddie looking at him.

‘Iwan, are you okay?’

‘Yes, yes ... sorry. I was just thinking about my parents. Another coffee?’

‘No thanks. I need a shower. Do you mind?’

‘Go ahead. There’s towels and sarongs in cupboard in bathroom. Please ...’

Iwan returned to his painting.

Eventually Maddie emerged from the bathroom. She was laughing and trying to secure a sarong but the ends kept slipping from her fingers. Seeing her dilemma Iwan moved to retrieve the sarong which by now had fallen to the floor. He wrapped it around her and gently tied the ends in a knot above her breasts. The closeness made him bold and he raised his hands and
placed them on her shoulders, drawing her towards him and putting first one cheek and then the other to each side of her face. On each side he rested momentarily to inhale the perfume of her skin and hair. Desire flushed through his body.

‘Mmmm ...very sweet,’ he said.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Sniffing. It’s the way we kiss.’

He placed his hand flat on Maddie’s chest and felt her heart pounding a beat that mirrored his own. A joyful exhilaration, painful in its intensity, suffused his entire body and tears begin to trickle down his face. Laughing, crying, pushing and pressing against one another, they fell towards the bed.
With the success of the exhibition a dream took shape – of a life as an artist, with Maddie, in Australia. And part of that dream was the children he and Maddie would have. When she left the studio that evening Iwan took out Pak Bambang’s prayer rug and began to pray once more. He was moved by an immense gratitude, for Maddie’s love and for the success of the exhibition, but slicing into his excitement and joy was a sadness and guilt that he was abandoning his past, his family and his country. So, as always in moments of extreme emotion, colours and patterns filled his body and mind, pinks of all shades and variants – the colours of a certain variant of bougainvillea, the flesh of mangosteen, the fiery glow of sunset in flooded rice fields, certain artists’ palettes.
Sydney 2001
Maddie was doing her honours year of a Bachelor of Fine Arts. She had research to do and a thesis to complete and hand in. She was hoping for good results so she could enrol in a masters the following year. This meant her affair with Iwan had to take a second place to her studies but she spent any spare time she could with him. Other friends were neglected including Mack who was now working as a graphic designer in an advertising agency. After many rainchecks they arranged to meet for coffee.

‘So, howzit going with Iwan?’

‘Fine ... it’s fine.’

‘“Fine”? ’

Maddie was smiling. ‘Well, he wants to get married ...’

‘Far out!’

‘I’m not really the marrying kind ...’

‘Say that again! So what’s changed your mind?’

Maddie looked at him and remembered a conversation she’d been meaning to have with him. But not now, not today.

‘He feels guilty about making love when we’re not married.’

‘How quaint!’

‘Mack, please, I need you to listen.’

‘Sorry, please continue. Did you say yes or no?’

‘Well, he needs to marry so he can stay in Australia. If he goes back to Indonesia now it will be the end of his career here.’

‘Whoa! Hang on a minute. Are we talking love and marriage, or career management?’

‘Well they’re connected obviously.’

‘Okay then, now tell me this: do you, as we say in the movies, love him?

‘Well, yes I do ...’

‘Convincing? No. I sense a but ... am I correct?’

‘My family don’t know yet ... Dad will go ballistic, mum will be “disappointed”. You know what they’re like?’

‘Yep, ’fraid so, but you’re used to that aren’t you? I mean if you really love him and want to get married, then it’d be the first time you’ve actually got that reaction for something that
wasn’t pure rebellion. No offence ... Knowing Iwan, I kinda think this is not part of your usual shock horror being dished up.’

‘So you approve?’

‘Darling, you don’t need my approval. You’re my sister, best friend, soul mate extraordinaire. I don’t know if you’ll be happy with him but you have to believe it’s worth a crack. Put it this way, you have my blessing. I want you to be happy.’

‘Well thank you very much.’ Maddie was relieved.

‘And if you’re not happy, I want you to get a divorce.’ Mack planted a kiss on her forehead and she playfully bopped him. He put his arm around her and she leaned into him.

‘Well that’s my news, how’s your love life?’

As she turned to look at Mack, Maddie saw Iwan watching them from outside the cafe. His face was distorted with betrayal and grief. She stood up, rummaging in her bag, dropped some money on the table, and rushed to the door.

‘Oh great ... see you then,’ Mack called after her.

Maddie flew after Iwan who was a good hundred metres ahead of her. When she arrived at the warehouse the lift was groaning upwards so she took the stairs and arrived on the fourth floor just as Iwan was entering the studio.

‘Iwan ...’ she pleaded.

Ignoring her, he went to his easel and began squirting tubes of colour onto a plate. She waited and then tip toed up behind him and touched him lightly on the shoulders. He shuddered.

‘You were kissing Mack,’ he said hoarsely. He was struggling for control but the tears were trickling onto his cheeks and he tried to brush them away with his sleeve.

‘I often kiss Mack, we’re old friends.’

‘It looks like more than friends to me.’

‘I was telling him about us getting married. He was happy for us, that’s why he kissed me.’

Maddie put her arms around him and pushed her body into his back.

‘I think you’re jealous.’

He was jealous of Mack, always had been, jealous of their easy intimacy and physical demonstrativeness. In his country men were affectionate with other men, boys with boys – holding hands, arms around one another, sharing a bed even. But not women and men, not girls and boys. That was not acceptable. Seeing them sitting close and touching, hugging, kissing, it hurt and, worse, it was in a cafe.
‘Iwan, please turn around. Would I say I want to marry you if it was Mack I loved? You have to know how I feel about you and you have to trust that, no matter what.’

The icicle of fear that formed inside him as he watched Maddie and Mack through the window of the cafe had made his body stiff as a board, unable to bend or move, but now the heat streamed from her body and into his. Heat flushed through his body. Relief too. The colour returned to the world and, at last, he was able to turn and look at her. She was radiant, smiling, luminous.

Hours later Maddie felt for Iwan in the bed beside her. He wasn’t there and when she opened her eyes she saw him praying on a small rug on the floor. At first she was curious, but then, thinking she should give him some privacy, she went to take a shower. When she emerged he was sitting on the bed, his back propped on the pillows against the wall.

‘Do you want to hear a story?’ he asked.

‘Sure, I love stories.’ She sat on the bed and rubbed at her wet hair with a towel as he told her a brief version of *The Ramayana*. It was the only way he could think of to express what his hopes were for their relationship.

‘It’s a story my mother often tell to me – the story of Rama and Sita. Rama was a prince, very handsome, strong, wise – the reincarnation of the god Vishnu. He marry Sita and they very happy. One day they become king and queen, but one of King’s wives trick King, and so Rama not be king anymore. No, King tell to Rama next king is other son, one younger. So Rama must go to forest, leave father, leave palace. He go with brother Laksmana. And Sita also. She give up all jewels, fine clothes and happy life in palace. She love Rama very much and she go with Rama and Laksmana to live in forest. But Sita very beautiful and a wicked demon want Sita for wife. He trick Rama and Laksmana. He kidnap Sita, take her far away. Then there is great war, and finally Rama kill wicked demon and rescue Sita. This is story of *The Ramayana.*’

‘I’ve heard of that. I’m glad it has a happy ending.’ She got up to go, but Iwan hadn’t finished.

‘This story from shadow puppet theatre. I grow up with *The Ramayana* since little boy. It love story, about man and woman, how when they marry they stay together, even when hard times, always support and forgive one another.’
Maddie knew that Iwan was a definite fail on her parents’ marriage partner scorecard. He didn’t go to the right school, he was not just ‘a foreigner’, he was a non-European foreigner, he wasn’t rich, his family wasn’t rich, his father was not a doctor or a judge, he had not a shred of noble ancestry, and he was from a place they still referred to as the ‘third world’. Even worse, he was an artist! She invited Helen to lunch – she would break the news to her mother first, just blurt it out, then take it from there.

They met at the Art Gallery restaurant. It was a sunny day and so they took their trays, they’d each chosen the mushroom soup, and glasses of pinot gris, and sat at one of the outside tables in the shade of an umbrella.

‘Iwan and I have decided to get married.’

The announcement slammed into Helen and caused her to spill her glass of wine.

‘Maddie! Oh look what you’ve made me do.’

Maddie waited while Helen regained her composure. Her mother was very elegant. She wore a blonde bob hairstyle, a string of tiny pearls on a plain black top with three quarter length sleeves and tailored cream pants. Her plain black shoes had a small heel. She wore makeup and chose a colour of lipstick that set off the outfit perfectly. Today she was wearing red lipstick with a hint of pink in it. Her skin was pale and smooth and you could barely see the lines around her eyes until they were creased in a smile. But now she was frowning, her top lip was trembling. Was she going to cry?

Watching Helen reach for her bag to bring out a perfectly ironed white lace handkerchief, Maddie said, ‘Mum, are you crying? What on earth ...?’

‘Well, it’s a shock ... I, we, your father and I didn’t even know you were seeing this man. Who is he? It all seems a bit rushed. What do we know of him or his family?’

‘You’ve met him a couple of times.’

‘That’s not the same thing. You didn’t say you were seeing him or were serious about him.’

‘Is it because he’s Indonesian, Muslim or an artist? It’s all three, isn’t it?’

‘Certainly not. I don’t know why you have to spring this on us like this. What’s the rush? You know very well your father will be very upset when I tell him.’

This was not going as Maddie expected. At the very least she had expected curiosity on the part of her mother, about Iwan, about her love for him, about how she imagined a future together.

‘Well, it’s what we both want and I wanted to tell you first. It’s important to both of us to have your blessing.’
Iwan knew, even before Maddie told him, that her parents would not be in favour of them marrying and this upset him. When he discussed it with Akira, his friend pointed out that Maddie’s parents could not stop them from marrying. Even so, Iwan insisted on asking for their blessing and both Pak Bambang and Marj agreed it was the right thing to do. When he told them about the forthcoming lunch with her parents Ernie and Bert each gave him a piece of advice, something they had never done before. Far from reassuring him though, their solemn care on this occasion gave him a sense of foreboding.

When Bert explained that he had been at boarding school with people like Ian, Iwan noticed that he had the same polished accent as Maddie’s father. ‘It’s important not to be afraid of him,’ Bert said. ‘He might try and intimidate you so the main thing is to maintain eye contact. Don’t let him think you’re weak and don’t let him think you’re afraid of him.’

Ernie, practical as ever, said, ‘Just make sure you give ’im a good firm handshake.’ Ernie held out his hand, ‘Here, shake, this is what I reckon he’ll do.’ Iwan looked down at Ernie’s hand, freckled and rough from outdoor work and twice the size of his own. He felt it envelop his hand and then squeeze like a python with its prey. ‘Feel that,’ Ernie said, ‘you’ve got to match it. Again ... that’s it, good lad.’ Iwan held out his hand and as Ernie squeezed tighter and tighter, he imagined he was absorbing his strength and returning it, blocking the paralysing grip of the first handshake. Ernie loosened his grip, clearly pleased with his student. ‘So if he tries that on you, you watch the expression on his face. He’ll get a shock.’

‘Now don’t get him all worried,’ Marj said. ‘You’ll be fine dear. Just be yourself. Maddie is very lucky to be marrying a nice young man like you. Isn’t she Boys?’

‘Oh I dunno Marj ...!’ Ernie joked.

Maddie tried to explain to Iwan what her father was like. ‘My father has no curiosity. Really! It’s very difficult for him to let in any new information or different opinions. He loves me and I love him but difference unsettles him. He can be quite misogynistic and even racist at times. I think he has a fearful insecurity about his own superiority. It’s part of his upbringing, the colonial mentality, White Australia policy, but he’d never admit it. Even different cuisines are a challenge for him – he still won’t eat pasta for heaven’s sake.’

As she spoke Maddie became aware of how out of place her father seemed and it saddened her. ‘He’s a barrister, well educated, travelled extensively. Been to every great museum in the world practically. He’s seen so much but, in the end, it is his bank account and not his soul that has been touched. Travel is information to him, he might as well have stayed home and read the travel book.’

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‘I used to be so embarrassed at the way he expected everyone to speak English and when they didn’t he still spoke English to them, only louder. If he really felt out of his depth he’d get angry with the hotel staff. It was awful. That’s why we stayed in five star hotels. Oh god, how I hated those organised tours! The best time was when Mummy and I went to Rome by ourselves for a month. Mummy was studying Italian and we stayed in a cool old apartment instead of a hotel. We pretended to be locals, going to the same bar for a pastry and coffee every morning and getting around on public transport. We even went to a nightclub to check out a famous female DJ.’

‘Rome – I like to go one day,’ Iwan said.

‘You’d love it. Anyway, don’t worry about Dad, he’ll come round.’

Maddie was trying to reassure him but it tugged at him that she was so critical of her father. He felt uncomfortable with the way Australians talked about teachers or politicians, their prime minister. He saw this even in Pak Bambang’s family. For him, respect was important and he wondered how he would teach this to his own children if they grew up here. Could a child adjust to different ways of behaving in two or more cultures?

Maddie’s parents lived on the leafy north shore of the city. The house stood on a large block. It had a sweeping circular driveway, tennis court and swimming pool, and the kitchen and family room opened onto a terrace at the back. Beyond the tennis court, which was surrounded by a low clipped hedge, there was bushland that extended down a valley to small creek. On the inside of the house, floor to ceiling windows filled the rooms with daylight. There were large artworks on the walls and he recognised the artists – Boyd, Olsen, Gascoigne, Olley, Preston, Nolan. The Nolan, an oil on canvas, was unusual, a desert landscape, 1.5 x 1.5 metres. He shivered when he saw the artist’s signature in the bottom right hand corner. In the mountain cliff on the right he saw the rough downward brush strokes, delineated, pink brown, orange brown, powerful, commanding, overseeing, and then his eye was drawn to a creamy orange valley that stretched towards the central horizon, faint curling bends of a river, a trace of trees, and in the far off distance, orange, purple and grey green ranges. The frame completed by mesa like forms on the left, green in the foreground, a khaki smudge of vegetation, the only suggestion of green in the painting. Half the painting was given over to wide open sky, blue, soft clouds, and higher in the atmosphere, a bank of mauve, grey, and rub of yellow.

‘Do you like it?’ Maddie asked.

He gave a start and wondered how long she’d been standing beside him, ‘Nolan?’

‘Yes, Central Australia 1988, I think. They bought it at auction in the early nineties on advice from their interior designer. It’s a privilege to have grown up with it.’
He would have liked to linger, to study each of the paintings, and the other objects he’d glimpsed in other parts of the house as they walked through – an exquisite Murano vase with a wave like fold, some glass and marble sculptures by British and Australian artists, a cream and soft grey porcelain assemblage by an Australian ceramicist he admired. There was a baby grand piano as well.

‘You play?’ he asked.

‘No, not me. My mother, Helen.’

When they sat down to lunch on the terrace, Ian poured chilled white wine into each of their glasses. Sensing that Maddie was about to tell her father he didn’t drink alcohol, Iwan gently touched her knee and when she glanced at him shook his head.

‘How’s Mack, dear, do you still see him?’ Helen asked.

‘Of course. He’s fine, busy with the new job.’

Ian said, ‘I saw James at golf. Said Mack’s working for an advertising agency. He’ll go far. He was a darned fine rower you know.’ He turned to Iwan, ‘Do you row?’

‘Dad! I totally don’t believe you. Mum ...!’ She looked to her mother for support but Helen refused to be drawn in.

‘Row? A boat? Yes, yes ... I have – once or twice,’ Iwan replied.

After lunch they moved back into the living room for coffee. Since drinking the unaccustomed wine, just one glass, Iwan felt such a sense of calm that he could almost have lain down on the pale green carpet and fallen asleep. But he knew that now was the time to act, and when he looked across at Maddie he saw she was waiting for him to speak. He looked over her head and into the deep valley of the Nolan. By now she was standing next to him and he could feel her presence and resolve igniting his courage. He had rehearsed the words with Maddie so he knew that what he had to say was the correct grammar and pronunciation.

Marj had advised him to keep it simple and so he looked first at Helen and then Ian, ‘Helen and Ian, Maddie and I would like to marry. We would like your blessing.’

There, it was done, the words were out there. Now there was silence. He wanted to look at the Nolan but knew he must keep his eyes on Ian’s face which had turned the colour of mangosteen. He was opening and closing his mouth as if gasping for air, then Helen touched him lightly on the arm and released his voice, strangled and hostile, ‘If you’re asking us the answer is no. If you’re informing us the answer is still no,’ he announced, and Iwan had the feeling he too had been rehearsing his words. But the words, far from being powerful, signified a defeat.
It was a tableau. They were puppets, waiting for the puppet master’s next move. Time passed.

Iwan was still, silent, and when he didn’t respond Ian began to sulk. His face had returned to its normal tanned hue but now all he could say was, ‘We’re not happy.’

There was an impasse. Maddie slid her arm through the crook of Iwan’s arm in a gesture of solidarity. They were as one.

‘Darling please,’ Helen said. ‘Sweetheart, Iwan, it’s just that your father and I feel it’s too sudden. We’d like you to wait, perhaps get engaged but put off marriage while you finish your studies. This honours year is very demanding and I know you want to do well Maddie. It’s best not to have distractions.’

‘Why do you want to marry an artist? There are no artists in my family, never have been. It’s not a proper job,’ Ian said.

Hearing this, Iwan permitted himself to look again at the Nolan. For the first time he saw scratchings in the paint just above the signature, vegetation. There were no human beings in the painting, they could only stand outside it, but what was it that he was saying. It nagged at him but now he got it, he was showing them that the land was alive, living, immortal, infinite, part of us, and we were part of it.

Helen wanted to appease. ‘Sweetheart, it just seems too rushed.’

‘Mummy, we want to marry so Iwan can stay in Australia – otherwise he’ll have to return to Indonesia.’ Ian looked up hopefully, ‘And, really, I can’t go to Indonesia, I’ve got too much on with finishing honours plus I want to go on and do a masters or a doctorate. I suppose I could do it over there but I’d have to learn Indonesian and, anyway, we’d still have to marry to do that.’

Iwan looked at Ian and Helen. ‘We would like your blessing. This is very important to us.’

Ian was thinking what if they had children? A string of racist slurs echoed in his mind – terms heard in playgrounds or on shockjock radio – they would apply to his own grandchildren. He momentarily saw them being surrounded and taunted by other children. His head was throbbing and he brushed his forehead as if to clear his thoughts for, in a flash, they/them merged with we/us. It was a rare moment of empathic awareness in Ian’s life and it caused an involuntary and audible expression of pain.

‘Dad?’

He looked up, ‘Alright but I expect you to support Maddie. I don’t want you to think she has to support you. You have to support her, artist or no artist? Is that clear?’

‘Yes sir, that is what I want also, and to have a family.’
‘Iwan!’ Maddie looked at him in surprise. ‘I’m twenty-three.’

He looked at her and nodded. ‘One day,’ he said.
Maddie was curious and held out her hand for the Javanese calendar which Iwan passed to her. It was all black ink type on poor quality newsprint. She could see the days of the month on each page, the writing in each of the boxes, but none of it was in English. He had borrowed it so he could find the most auspicious date for their wedding.

‘Will this tell you which is a good day or bad day to get married?’

‘Yes, it tells you what each day is good for ...’

‘So, it’s like astrology?’

‘Sort of.’

‘Does everyone follow the calendar?’

‘No, not everyone. Some people don’t.’

‘But you do?’ Iwan nodded. ‘And what will happen if we don’t choose the right day?’

‘We may not have a good wedding or happy marriage.’

‘You really believe that?’

Iwan had a sense of disquiet. He felt restless, agitated. The impending marriage had reminded him of his family, of being Javanese, of responsibilities and obligations. He wanted to tell Maddie how important it was to have children, to have a family, about the role of a wife and mother, the role of a husband and father. If she were Javanese he wouldn’t have had to explain and he wouldn’t have felt odd consulting the Javanese calendar.

Later, when Maddie told him the celebrant wasn’t available on any of the dates he chose, his unease escalated.

‘It will have to be the 3 or 24 August if we want this celebrant ... what do those days look like...?’

‘Well, the 24 August maybe.’

‘Okay, we’ll have to go with that then because Mum and Dad are away for September, October.’

Twice in the coming months Iwan bought roses and when it was still dark rode his motor bike to the sprawling cliff top cemetery at Bronte. There, on the headland overlooking the Pacific Ocean, he stripped off the petals and waited for the sun to rise, watching the sky colouring from palest blue to pink, red, before the glaring orange orb slid above the rim of ocean. At that point he prayed, spoke to his mother, begged her forgiveness, begged her permission to marry in a foreign land, begged her blessing, and then scattered the rose petals to the ocean below. When it was done he was filled with a deep sense of peace.
Mama is making a batik. She bought the finest cotton and drew the design, then she applied the wax with the canting. Her work is very fine. Everyone says so. Sometimes I watch, sometimes I work on my own batik, and sometimes I play with my cousins and forget to do batik at all. I want to do batik as fine as Mama.

Many times Mama has dyed it, doing everything herself. Papa’s friend from the factory brought her the dyes and helped her as well. She has made a batik for every one of us, now it is my turn. But sometimes she is busy and does not work on it for weeks or even months.

‘This is for when you are a grown man Iwan. In it I have waxed my dreams for you. Shall I tell you what I wish for you when you grow up?’

‘Yes, Mama.’

‘You will be a kind man. You will love your wife. You will have children. You will have children, yes?’

‘Oh yes Mama.’

‘How many children Iwan?’

‘Two, I’ll have two.’

‘Only two, darling?’

‘Three, I’ll have three.’

‘Yes, that is what I thought. See here. You will go to school and learn many things. And you will be very clever. Maybe you will be a rich man. Would you like to be rich one day?’

‘Maybe a little bit rich Mama. Then I will buy you a beautiful present.’

‘Really, how wonderful. What will you buy me?’

‘I will buy you a kite and a baby elephant and a new kebaya and ...’

‘Thank you. I see you will be a very generous man as well. But also I hope you will be generous in love and forgiveness for that will make your marriage and your family strong.’

‘Can I have my batik now Mama?’

‘Not yet. You will have it when the time is right.’
On Observatory Hill there is a rotunda and from there a person can look out onto the grey steel arch of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, see the trains and cars scuttling across it and, on its top outer rim, make out the band of visitors, like wee insects, climbing to its summit. Immediately down the hill is The Rocks where shiploads of English soldiers, convicts and settlers first struggled to make a settlement on the harbour shores dubbed Port Phillip Bay from 1788. All of this land as far you can see is the land of the Indigenous Gadigal people, of the Eora tribe.

On this sunny unseasonably warm Saturday in mid-August, a crowd of about forty people have gathered in the rotunda to witness a marriage. The couple are wearing traditional Javanese wedding sarongs, the ceremonial part is over, and they have gathered round to have a photo taken.

The photographer calls, ‘Smile ...’ He looks up and sees that everyone is smiling except the groom who has assumed a serious and dignified pose.

‘Iwan are you happy ...? Can you smile? For the camera? Ready ...’

Maddie lets out a shriek as Mack tickles her ribs and everyone turns to look at them.

‘Look this way please. Smile.’

In all the wedding photos Iwan looks like the adult waiting patiently for the children to stop mucking up.

Ian and Helen’s wedding present for the couple is a paid deposit on a forties style two-bedroom apartment in Darlinghurst, not far from the art school. It is in one of four identical apartment blocks, two on one side of the street, the other two directly opposite. Each block has a low dark brown brick wall at the front which contains six tiny mailboxes and a wide tiled path that leads to a pair of chrome-framed glass front doors. They are three storeys, with two two-bedroom apartments on each floor – each of which has French doors and a Juliet balcony at the front. At the rear a staircase zigzags to a radiant sun-filled raggle taggle backyard. Two Hills Hoist clotheslines, one on each side of the block, are connected to a communal laundry by a concrete pathway. The lawn is overgrown, tangled, and shaded in patches by a variety of tall eucalypts. Bushy native shrubs screen the timber fences on three sides and provide a haven for birds and butterflies. There is a makeshift brick paved barbecue area and a variety of salvaged benches, tables and chairs, arranged as if in conversation. They have put the apartment in Maddie’s name only and the couple will pay off the mortgage.

Maddie, Iwan, Ian and Helen meet in front of the building and Ian uses a key to open the door into the south facing foyer. A large art deco stained glass window extends from the first floor to the ceiling of the third floor and draws light into the entry and stairwell. The walls are lined with rich dark wood panelling and the floor is tiled with small hexagonal mosaics arranged in a
green, black, white and orange pattern. Ian and Helen lead the way up the grey marble treads of the polished oak staircase to the third floor.

Ian tells them, ‘You’re on the top floor. I’ve checked the contract and you could build in the airspace later if you want. The place is vacant so you can move in anytime.’

A week later there is a working bee to help them move in. Cars are loaded up, a van hired, and wedding presents, books and furniture are carried up the stairs. Marj arrives and sets about washing out cupboards and helping to unpack. Ernie and Bert mow the backyard, trim bushes, whipper snip, weed and rake. By five o’clock everything is packed away, the removalist van has been returned, pizzas are ordered, beers handed out. When Gerardo arrives with champagne a housewarming party is already in full swing.
Part 2 Artist-in-residence
Sydney 2007–2008
When they were first married Iwan and Maddie promised themselves that they would visit Iwan’s family in Indonesia but, despite a fifth wedding anniversary coming and going, their plans had been scuttled, partly because they were both balancing ambitious work and study programs. In preparation Maddie even attended Indonesian classes and pleaded with Iwan to practise with her but that plan faded too as other priorities took over. Iwan returned to art school for two years to do a masters degree and Maddie completed honours, did a masters over two years and then, after a two-year break, began a doctorate focusing on modernist women artists in the mid-twentieth century. At first she thought she wanted to become an art museum curator but, by the end of her second year of study, she knew her passion was art history and theory.

That weekend they had been to their regular first Sunday of the month lunch with Helen and Ian. The monthly visits had become a chore for Iwan because although Helen was loving and friendly, Ian remained hostile. On every other Sunday they had a roast lunch with Marj, Ernie, Bert, Akira and Lisbeth and this was a relaxing ritual that even Maddie enjoyed. Last weekend Akira and his partner Lisbeth had broken the news that she was three months pregnant.

Lisbeth grew up on a property down near Wagga Wagga and Marj warmed to her from the day they met. She was always joking with and teasing Ernie or Bert, making them laugh, and the house seemed joyful and lively when she was around. Like Akira, she was a musician, a jazz vocalist, and the couple met when studying at the Conservatorium of Music. It was part of her character, too, to be always ready to burst into song, often with comedic effect.

The day after the announcement, Marj, Bert and Ernie asked Akira to sit down and have a cup of tea and then Marj asked, ‘So now that Lisbeth is having a baby, what are your plans?’

‘Well we’ve been talking about it but the main thing is to find somewhere where I can have a piano and still practise. Lisbeth’s housemates said we could live there with the baby but there’s not really enough room, and anyway I need a place for the piano, as you know.’

‘Well, the Boys and me had a bit of a talk and we thought Lisbeth could move in here. What d’you reckon about that idea? You could have Iwan’s old room for the baby.’

Akira smiled. He’d been wondering about this, even discussed it with Lisbeth, but it had seemed too much to ask.

‘We would love that – I think I can speak for Lisbeth but I’d better check. What about having a crying baby in the house, you don’t think that would bother you?’

‘Won’t bother me because I’m half deaf anyway,’ Bert replied. ‘I’m happy as long as Marj is happy.’
'Ernie?'

‘Couldn’t be worse than you banging away on the piano all day could it?’ Akira wondered if Ernie was covering his tracks, it might even have been his idea.

‘Marj?’

‘Y’know what luv, babies sleep most of the time and I reckon I haven’t lost me touch after all this time.’

And so Lisbeth moved into the house and six months later Eloise was born. Iwan and Maddie visited the hospital to welcome her and when it came time for her to be christened, Akira and Lisbeth asked them to be godparents. There was some discussion about whether a Muslim could be a godparent to a child who was being christened in an Anglican church but then they decided that since Akira’s family was Buddhist, Lisbeth’s was Anglican, Maddie was an atheist, and Iwan was a Muslim, they probably had all bases covered.

The night after the christening Iwan had a dream.

We are bathing at the river, Mama and I. The rains have stopped and the water is clear and clean now, there is no one else about. I like it when we are alone in the river. I like to splash, and sing, and float and swim down to the bottom with my eyes open. When I come up Mama’s sarong has slipped to her waist and I can see her back. Her skin is wet and glowing. She is soaping her hair and her eyes are squeezed shut.

I want to play a trick so I sink down until the water is up to my shoulders and slowly, slowly, I move, closer and closer. Now if I want I can reach out and touch Mama. Mama stops, she listens but I am so quiet. She calls me, ‘Iwan?’ I have a piece of grass and I tickle her under the chin. Mama’s eyes flick open. I start to laugh, I tickle her breast.

‘Don’t – stop it!’ she brushes my hand away and I fall backward. The water goes into my nose and I start to cough. When I come up again Mama is ducking her head into the water to rinse off the shampoo so I sneak around behind her and when she stands up again I push her hard on her back.

Mama falls down under the water and I watch carefully, I think I know where she will come up. I see the bubbles spreading out, joining the ripples in the water. I’m looking and looking but Mama doesn’t come back up. Where is she? Where has she gone? I can’t find her, ‘Mama, Mama.’ I’m scared, crying, ‘Mama ...’

Iwan tosses and thrashes in the bed, making stifled frightened grunts and cries. Maddie wakes and turns on the light, and pats him on the shoulder to wake him up.
‘Darling, it’s a dream. It’s me. You’re dreaming.’ Finally he becomes calm and opens his eyes, sees Maddie, is momentarily confused, and then quickly looks around the room.

‘Mama.’

‘What is it? What were you dreaming?’

Iwan sat up. ‘I dream my mother gone. She fall in river and drown.’

‘Oh, how awful. But that is not how she died is it?’

Mute with grief, Iwan shook his head.

‘Are you okay? Come, lie down.’

They lie down in the bed and Maddie turns out the light. She snuggles up beside him and, with her head resting on his shoulder, falls asleep. After some minutes, in which parts of the dream replay over and over in his mind and body, Iwan realises he is wide awake and doesn’t want to be alone.

‘Maddie?’

‘Mmm?’

‘I can’t sleep.’

‘What’s the time?’ She looks at the clock, ‘God, it’s 3 o’clock. Go back to sleep.’

‘I can’t, I’m hungry. Will you come while I get something to eat?’

Maddie rouses herself. ‘Sweetheart, I’ve got a big day – I’m teaching and I’m giving a seminar paper. Remember?’

Fierce angry resentment jabs at him as he listens to the slow rhythm of her breathing. ‘A good wife would,’ he mutters in Javanese and gets up. He pulls on jeans and tee-shirt, grabs a jacket, and heads downstairs. It is almost 4 am as he makes his way along Darlinghurst Road, across William Street, and on through Kings Cross. The usually busy streets are practically deserted. A solitary red-eyed youth offers him pills and he shakes his head and stops to buy a takeaway coffee. At the El Alamein Fountain a fine mist drifts off its sputnik top and settles all on his hair and shoulders. The square is one of his favourite places and on Macleay Street, a trickle of cars cruises up and down, some with showoff deep rev engines and boom boom stereos blasting.

The dawn brings a drop in temperature and he zips up his jacket, pulls up his collar, and sets off towards the harbour. As daylight displaces the streetlights, garbage trucks are edging along and picking up the marshalled clusters of wheelie bins by the side of the road. A council truck with a water tank sprays water into the gutters as it passes, sending the night’s debris to the nearest stormwater grate.
At the waterfront, he sees the ships berthed at Garden Island and then moves on past the old Woolloomooloo Finger Wharf until he reaches a sandstone cliff. Metal stairs lead him up to a flat grassy tree studded park that is covered in a light layer of morning dew. With each springy step his canvas sandshoes became soaked and stained with murky green streaks. At Art Gallery Road he pauses in front of a fringe of giant Moreton Bay Fig trees, uncertain which way to go. He can hear the rumble of traffic on the expressway below and the Botanical Gardens beckons to the north. He considers following the road to the harbour but changes his mind and walks briskly south to College Street, past St Mary’s Cathedral, an indoor public swimming pool, and billboards advertising animated dinosaurs at the museum.

At this hour he sees the city with uncluttered eyes, without the constant movement and distraction of people and cars. In Hyde Park solitary individuals jog or walk a dog as if it is their private garden. Beyond them the city’s skyscrapers sprout like a clutch of fungi. He turns his back on the city at Stanley Street and almost takes flight on the steep descent to Darlinghurst where Italian coffee shops are already heating up their espresso machines. He orders a macchiato and stands at the counter to drink it before tackling the steep uphill climb. He’s been gone hours and done a full circle but the niggling irritation returns as soon as he begins climbing the stairs to the apartment. Once inside, he thinks he hears Maddie moving around in the bedroom, and now she enters the kitchen, fully dressed, rushing and smiling at the sight of him.

‘Why didn’t you wake me? I hope I’m not late for class.’ She quickly spreads butter and Vegemite on a slice of toast and goes to give him a kiss as she heads for the door.

Sensing his mood, she says, ‘Ouch ... what’s up?’

‘Well, I had a bad dream.’

‘Oh, last night. I’m sorry. I’ve gotta go. We’ll talk later. Alright?’

Vegemite toast in one hand, backpack in the other, she tips him on the nose with a finger and rushes out the door.
Traditionally Iwan hosted a lunch after each exhibition at Grove Gallery. This was his sixth solo exhibition. He still worked part-time as a gardener but prices for his work were rising year by year and they were selling well. This led Gerardo to begin connecting with other institutions in the region to promote his work and, as a result, he was one of five contemporary Indonesian artists invited to show at the Singapore Art Museum later that year. It was Gerardo’s view that the global focus in visual arts was shifting away from China and India to South East Asia and, with this in mind, he had begun looking at other emerging artists from the Asia Pacific region.

A year earlier Iwan returned to Indonesia for his niece’s wedding. He’d gone alone because Maddie was immersed in her doctorate and could not afford the time off. Altogether he was away for three weeks – time enough to spend time with family and catch up with Pak Harto and friends in the artist communities in Yogyakarta and Solo. While there he found evidence of greater prosperity. Nieces and nephews were attending university, people had mobile phones and television sets, children rode brand new motor bikes to school and, for him, a marker of real progress was that many of the packed soil floors of village houses had been replaced with concrete, and even tiled. He missed the dark earthen floors that were so cool and soft underfoot although at his father and stepmother’s house nothing much else had changed, although there was electricity now.

His sisters and brothers were investing energy and resources in educating their children in the hope they would get good jobs later on. With Maddie’s support, he had been allocating ten per cent of his income from exhibitions for family projects – a small restaurant for a younger brother, a batik enterprise for a nephew, electric sewing machines and overlocker for a brother-in-law’s tailoring business, the purchase of some ducks for Hari, the payment of school and university fees. It pleased him how helpful the small sums had been, and he was particularly impressed that his nieces and nephews were so intelligent, confident and entrepreneurial. So different from himself when he set out for Australia ten years earlier. Looking back he couldn’t believe how innocent he had been. Such a village boy then. Perhaps still was. There were the usual questions about when they would start a family and the family was disappointed that Maddie was not with him so before leaving he had promised he would bring her when she finished her studies.

In preparation for the Sunday lunch, Iwan went early to the Sydney fish markets and had been chopping, grinding, marinating and cooking ever since. The aroma of cooking spices filled the apartment. The meats were from the halal butcher in Surry Hills, a bike ride away, and Akira had arrived early to give a hand. Maddie too was up early to clean the apartment and set the table. In the garden the barbecue was readied to cook snapper wrapped in banana leaves and
chicken satay sticks so that by the time everyone arrived Iwan had laid out a delicious smorgasbord.

Gerardo was the first to arrive with his latest boyfriend, a fit young Greek man with large strong hands. Mack brought a young woman from his advertising agency. There was Marj, Bert and Ernie – Marj was almost universally referred to now by the title of Bu, the shortened version of the Indonesian word for mother, Ibu. Maddie’s parents – Ian and Helen – had sent their apologies but Pak Bambang and Bu Wafa arrived with a dish of satay sauce. Lisbeth and Eloise were absent, having gone to visit Lisbeth’s family.

When their plates were piled high and they were all seated, Gerardo called on Iwan to join them.

‘Come on Iwan, grab a plate and join us.’

‘Please ...’ Iwan waved a hand for them to begin eating. He preferred to wait and eat when his guests had gone but now everyone was expecting him to join them. Mack got up and handed him a plate and finally, when he was seated, they began to eat. Akira had responsibility for the drinks and was up and down, topping up glasses with wine, water or fruit punch while Maddie removed their plates as they finished and placed them in the dishwasher.

‘Fabulous meal Iwan. Come over to my house and cook sometime.’

‘Fish in banana leaves was great. Sambal too. Do all Javanese men cook as good as this?’

Iwan looked at Maddie who was gathering up the plates from their guests and said, ‘Javanese men don’t cook, they marry good Javanese wife who macak, manak and masak’.

‘And, that means ... Iwan dear?’ Gerardo said.

Pak Bambang translated, ‘Makes herself beautiful, has children and is a good cook.’

Mack jumped in, ‘Too bad, you fail Maddie.’

‘Thanks Mack, I thought you were my friend.’

‘Well you are blessed with beauty and brains so who cares if you can’t cook, won’t have babies and don’t wear makeup.’

Two red spots had formed on Maddie’s cheeks and she turned on Iwan, ‘Oh right ... and what does a good Javanese husband do?’

His anger had been swirling inside him for months but he was beginning to feel ashamed that it had erupted at their lunch. He knew the catalyst was the birth of Eloise, but this had been compounded when Akira confided the news that Lisbeth was pregnant again.

‘Nothing, I knew it. Those attitudes are so passé,’ Maddie said.

‘Well... I am from a third world country, what do you expect?’
Unable to resist, Mack weighed in again, ‘Ace serve Iwan. Ball’s in your court, Maddie …’

‘Hey, you two, we are joking aren’t we?’ Gerardo asked.

Marj said, ‘Now, now.’

But Maddie was glaring at Iwan and Iwan was acting as if he was not in the room.

‘Well, that’s showbiz,’ said Mack. ‘What’s for pudding?’

An argument over what makes a good Javanese wife? Where had that come from? And why had it come up now, at this time, like this? It was the first time Iwan had expressed dissatisfaction with their relationship in public or private and Maddie needed to know what was going on. It was almost eight when the last of the guests left which gave them a couple of hours to tidy the apartment and get ready for work the following day. Other times they would have sat down with a cup of tea and reviewed the conversations, bits of news and gossip, and shared stories the other might have missed. But tonight they worked in silence, each immersed in their own thoughts, each unsure how to respond to what had taken place.

She would get to the bottom of it but at the same time she had unshakeable confidence in their relationship. Her love for him and her faith in him as an artist were enduring. She was proud of him, proud of his success and, importantly, constantly surprised and delighted by his artwork. In her eyes he was a great artist and when he expressed doubts about himself, or felt his work somehow failed to meet the standards of his own vision, she interpreted these as healthy and necessary components of the creative process. Of course the comments may have been hurtful if they were perceived as critical, pointed, disloyal even, but Maddie refused to believe Iwan really meant those things. It wasn’t in his nature.

When she entered the bedroom he was asleep so she turned out his bedside light and slid in beside him. His back was turned to her and she moulded her body to his by pressing her breasts and belly into the curve of his back. When he didn’t respond she placed her lips against his neck and let the tip of her tongue taste his skin as she ran her hand across his chest and down his belly. Under her touch his penis stirred but then, quite suddenly, he pulled away and without a word or backward glance got up from the bed and left the room.

At first she lay back in disbelief, but when the memory of what happened at lunch flooded back, she yelled at his departing back, ‘I suppose that’s part of your culture too is it? What’s the matter with you?’ The afternoon’s comments she could forgive, but this was an attack on the sacred space of their intimacy. By the sum of his rejection and her accusation, a line had been crossed and they found themselves wondering how this had happened, how they of all people had fallen into saying and doing things to needle and hurt. Still on the bed, Maddie began to sob in angry gasps, but then her perspective shifted and it was if she was looking down on herself. How pathetic, she thought, that is not who I am, that is not who I want to be.
She got up from the bed, grabbed a carryall and filled it with clothes, collected toiletries from the bathroom, her laptop from the study, and walked out of the flat.

Iwan lay on the lounge with his eyes closed. He heard the sobbing, then the silence, then the bang of the front door. He felt calmly vindicated, satisfied and excited even, that he could bring their relationship to the edge of a cliff that would force them to see clearly what it would or would not bend to. For more than a year, whenever he suggested putting aside the contraception she had said no, kept putting it off, kept putting him off. Would she ever agree to have children? And would it be too late when she did? These constant and persistent thoughts had been occupying him more and more, especially since the birth of Eloise, so much so that he found it difficult to even look at the child. That had been his guilty secret and now, with the news that Lisbeth was pregnant again, the old desperation nagged. It was as if the ancestors were urging him. Sometimes he thought he heard a child speaking, or caught a glimpse of her, a little girl of about four years of age with straight black hair, a fringe, dark eyes. All would be well, he thought, and fell into a restful sleep.
When he woke he was certain Maddie had returned. The clock showed 11 o’clock and he wondered if she’d gone to work already. He went into the bedroom and saw the wardrobe doors and Maddie’s drawers were wide open and the clothes on her side of the wardrobe were missing. Her underwear drawer was empty, there were gaps in the line-up of her shoes on the floor, and her laptop was not in her office. This was not what he expected. Yes he had wanted to punish her. But now he was the one being punished. He wanted something from her but not this. Not her absence. As the reality of her disappearance set in, his body began to shake, and his heart was pounding so hard he found it difficult to breathe. He grabbed at the phone, pushed a button, waited and, when Akira answered, tried to speak, but all that came out were hoarse gasps for breath. He felt like he was dying.

‘Who is this?’ Akira demanded.

‘Iwan.’

‘Mate, you sound like shit. What’s up?’

‘No breathe. Maddie …’ He tried to suck the air into his lungs. Fear and panic had weakened the muscles in his arms and legs and he felt as if he might melt into the floor.

Akira spoke, ‘Mate, listen to me, take it easy. Sit down. Are you sitting down? Just breathe. Listen to me … You’re having a panic attack. It’s alright. Happens to us musos all the time. Breathe … breathe in, breathe out. C’mon mate, big slow breaths.’

It was as if Akira was standing by his side.

‘Don’t say anything, just keep breathing. Don’t have a cigarette. I’ll be there in ten … Just keep breathing. Focus on breathing. It’s okay, you’re okay. I’m going to hang up now. Just keep breathing, alright? You’ll be okay. I’ll be right over.’

When Akira arrived, Iwan was sitting on the lounge, his head back and eyes closed.

‘Hey mate, I’m here. I’ll get you a drink.’

He poured Iwan a glass of water and waited while he drank.

‘What happened? Where’s Maddie? Is she alright? She hasn’t had an accident has she?’

‘I think she leave me. I don’t know where she go.’

‘What happened?’

‘Um, I can’t say.’

‘Was it over what happened at lunch?’
‘Kind of, I was still angry, do something Maddie not like. She yell very loud. She cry, very upset. She leave. When I wake up she still not here.’

‘Mate, you can’t get angry with Maddie for not being a good Javanese wife, whatever the hell that means.’

‘But ...’

‘Yeah, well, and you married an Australian, I think you’d better talk with her about what’s going on. You can explain how you see things. Maddie is who she is. Not right, not wrong. Maybe you’re the one who has to change, mate. Either love her as she is or get out of the way. Have you thought of taking her to Java to meet the family?’

‘I think about it but she busy. Both busy. I want children like you and Lisbeth but Maddie say to wait.’

‘So that’s what this is about? Listen mate, Maddie’s still a young woman. How old is she? Twenty-nine?’

Iwan nodded. ‘Soon she be thirty. That very old for woman to have baby.’

‘Not here mate. It used to be but now some women have their first child at maybe thirty-five, forty.’

‘Old woman then.’

‘Not these days. You think about it, how old was your mother when the last child was born?’

‘Stepmother.’

‘Well, your stepmother. How old was she when she had her last child?’

‘Maybe thirty-eight.’

‘And, how many children did she have before that?’

‘Four, maybe five.’

‘See, it’s alright. The main thing is you’re healthy and fit, and Maddie is too. What does she say exactly?’

‘She says wait, need proper job ...’

‘Well fair enough. She probably wants you to continue painting and you can do that as long as she earns a regular income. Yeah?’

‘But I scared to wait. For me, there is pressure.’

‘Talk to her mate. You’ve got to talk to her.’

‘She say get doctorate then job, but maybe this not so easy.’
'Well you have to trust her. You’ve got plenty of time. It’s wonderful having kids but it’s not easy and it’s full-on when it happens.’

It was more than a week before Maddie would speak to Iwan. When she did he apologised – both for his words at lunch and his actions that night. After that they met in the Botanical Gardens where they sat on the grass and talked for two hours. She remained silent as he described how on his return to Indonesia many people had wanted to know when they would have children, even asking if there was something the matter with him or Maddie. Then there was the birth of Eloise, and now the news of Lisbeth’s second pregnancy, which had aroused in him a renewed sense of urgency and resentment towards her around the issue of starting a family. He explained how to him it was a sacred thing, not just for himself, for him and her, but for his ancestors, both their ancestors.

When it was her turn to speak Maddie reiterated how she wanted to establish her career and earn a steady income to offset his irregular artist’s income, and that it was important to establish a sound financial footing before they had a child, if they were to be so lucky. It was not new territory but as they took turns to speak and listen, the strains and stress marks on their relationship began to dissolve. And afterwards, when Maddie returned, they found a new intimacy, one deeper and stronger than before, but tinted by a new vulnerability because now they knew the possibility of losing one another. In the end they agreed that all talk of having children was to be put on hold for the time being. Maddie would continue tutoring while completing her thesis and Iwan would continue working three days a week as a gardener and the rest of the time in the studio. They would put off having a family for a few more years and support one another in achieving their goals. There was also the issue for Iwan of finding a new studio as Madrill’s studio was to be sold.

As Maddie progressed with her doctorate, her career prospects strengthened. Realistically, though, she knew that even with two powerful mentors on her side her dream might take years. When she asked Iwan if he was willing to let her be the main breadwinner while he cared for the baby he refused, even though Akira did exactly that when Eloise arrived and would care for both children when Lisbeth’s maternity leave ended.
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Maddie was first approached by the student, Silvia Larsen, at the end of a lecture. The young woman asked if she could have Iwan’s contact details as she was planning to write her masters thesis on him.

‘I want to examine his art in the context of his being Javanese and how that shapes his worldview and artistic vision.’

‘I see. And how can I help?’

‘If possible, I’d like to interview him. Do you have a number where I can contact him please?’

Maddie wrote down the number and handed it to Silvia.

‘You may be lucky and get a real person and not a machine.’

‘Thank you ... very much.’

The next time Maddie saw Silvia she was speaking to Iwan at a Grove Gallery exhibition opening and when Maddie joined them she was surprised to hear them speaking Indonesian. Silvia greeted her, said goodbye to Iwan, and went to join a group of fellow students.

‘What was that about?’

‘Oh, a student. She’s been interviewing me.’

‘Yes, but what was she saying?’

‘We were arranging another time to meet.’

‘When?’

‘Friday?’

‘When on Friday?’

‘11 o’clock. Why? Have we got something on?’

‘How come she can speak Indonesian?’

‘Her mother Indonesian, family live in Yogya, she quite fluent – it’s not that unusual you know?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Have you seen enough, I ready to go home.’

And that was the night it happened. Something about the shadow of the younger woman had caused a recklessness. No condoms in the packet. Alarm. Persuasion. And next morning: anxiety and regret on her part, apology on his. Remorse on hers, disguised hope on his.
‘Sorry,’ Iwan said, ‘None left ... It not hurt.’

‘Won’t hurt...?’

‘We miss before. It be okay.’

When she returned from having a shower, Iwan was sitting up in the bed.

‘What if I get pregnant?’

He smiled nervously and Maddie looked at him suspiciously.

‘Did you plan this?’

‘No, of course not.’

The following Friday Maddie arrived at Iwan’s studio as Silvia was leaving. The new studio was in their neighbouring apartment. It came onto the market soon after Madrill announced he was selling the Darlinghurst studio and, with the help of Maddie’s father, they bought it and he moved in.

Once again, Maddie found Silvia and Iwan speaking in Indonesian. ‘I’ve got eight weeks to go before I hand in the thesis so I may need to check a few things with you before I do if that’s alright.’

‘Of course. Any time. It’s interesting.’

‘Great, I’ll be in touch.’

Maddie stood in the doorway. She didn’t understand what they were saying and she felt invisible.

‘For heavens sake, would you mind using English seeing we can all speak that perfectly well?’

‘Maddie, I’m sorry. I thought you spoke Indonesian. Goodbye then.’

A dark cloud settled between Maddie and Iwan.

When she missed her period Maddie waited before making an appointment with her local doctor.

‘Well, you were right. You are six weeks pregnant.’

‘Oh damn. Oh well, it may be what we need.’

‘Why, are you having relationship problems?’

‘Things have been a bit rugged lately ... mainly because Iwan wanted to start a family now and I want to wait. And I confess I’ve been getting annoyed with him for pressuring me and he’s
been getting annoyed with me for being reluctant to talk about it.’ She smiled ruefully. ‘He’ll be happy about this turn of events.’

After leaving the surgery, Maddie crossed the road to a park. It was a clear sunny day and a nearby wattle was alive with the murmur of bees, a sign that winter was in retreat. She sat on a park bench. How to absorb this change in status? Although fairly certain what the doctor would say, her bald statement had been a shock.

The park contained a fenced off area with colourful hard plastic play equipment. It was soft underfoot so that a child would be less likely to break a limb if it fell. Maddie watched a man playing with a small child, a boy, his words and hands to the ready as he let him slide down the slippery dip or make his way on unsteady feet to a rocking horse seat on a coiled metal spring. The man was so focused on the child’s safety and delight that he was unaware he was being watched. She wondered what Iwan would be like as a dad.

A baby’s cries reached her even before she saw the tall red haired woman pushing the pram. There were two small girls with her, both about three or four years old. The woman opened the childproof lock on the playground gate, letting the girls race towards the swings. Then she wheeled the pram over to where Maddie was sitting and leaned into the pram to pick up the screaming infant. By now the girls had captured a swing each and were walking backward, pushing their bottoms up in the air until, standing on tip toe, they swooshed their legs forward, then back, then forward, riding gravity and competing to make their swings go higher and higher.

The woman undid her blouse. Then with one hand cupping the baby’s head and the other holding her full breast, she pressed the two together until the whole of her nipple disappeared into the baby’s open mouth. In the sweet silence, the baby let out breathy snorts as it suckled. Now the woman relaxed and settled into a more comfortable position. She looked up, checked the girls were safe, then glanced at Maddie and smiled.

Maddie returned the smile. ‘Are those your girls?’ she asked.

‘One is – the red head. The other one’s her friend.’

‘Does it hurt?’ Maddie asked. The woman looked at her blankly, and then followed her gaze to the breastfeeding baby.

‘Not at all. I had a few problems with my first – cracked nipples, that was no fun – but it’s been smooth sailing with this little chap. Touch wood. It’s very pleasant actually and so convenient not having to mess with bottles.’ She looked at Maddie questioningly.

‘I just found out I’m pregnant.’

‘Oh, congratulations! Pregnancy is wonderful. I didn’t think it would be but it was. Well, for me anyway. Everyone’s different.’
'What about the birth? Doesn’t it hurt?’

‘Well yes, a bit. But I’m a marathon runner … used to pain I guess, though my labour only lasted a couple of hours.’

On her way back to her car Maddie decided not to go to work. She had no face-to-face classes and she wanted to tell Iwan the news. She began to laugh as she imagined how he might respond. She heard the bees in the wattles as she opened the car door, she saw a pair of blue wrens, the male in all his iridescent royal blue glory, the female plain and brown. They mated for life. They had to be outdoors on this beautiful day, it was so alive, so bursting with colour and life, perhaps they could go for a picnic to Watsons Bay, or the beach. Sit on the headland, look out to sea, perhaps even see some whales, on their annual voyage to give birth in the warmer northern waters. Me a mother, how hilarious!
Iwan had met with Silvia three times and he’d found their conversations stimulating and enjoyable, particularly because of her deep interest in and first hand knowledge of contemporary Indonesian art and artists. Before starting on her masters Silvia had worked in a community arts organisation in Jakarta for a year and then in Yogyakarta for another year after that. With a Dutch father and Javanese mother she had spent her childhood in Indonesia, part of her adolescence in the Netherlands, and completed the final years of high school and university in Sydney. Her father, he discovered, studied at the Institute of the Arts in Yogyakarta and was a well-known Australian printmaker. He’d been sorry when they finished their third and final interview that he might not see her again, but then she’d gone away to write the thesis.

Before meeting with him for the first time, she had studied his painting and his evolution as a painter in detail and also interviewed Gerardo and some of his teachers from the art school. At first he found the questions intrusive and confronting because he wasn’t used to speaking about his work or why he did what he did, but gradually, as the rapport between them grew, he found she was drawing him back to the village, to examining what it was there that shaped his arts practice. She was keen to find out what interested him as an artist in the context of his life, both prior to and since coming to Australia. While he hadn’t particularly seen himself as either a Javanese or an Indonesian artist, but more as an Indonesian who was an artist, now, after living in Australia for some fifteen years, it came as something of a shock to him to discover how much his art was sustained by the world of the village, his family, and a particular landscape in Central Java.

In their first interview she had asked, ‘You grew up in a village in Central Java? What was that like?’

They would return to this question again and again with Silvia probing gently for greater detail. When he said his father used to say that he knew everyone in a one kilometre radius she wanted to know why that was important to him. When he mentioned that his mother had died when he was six she wanted to know how his life had changed from that time.

They met in his studio and the sessions flowed, largely because she spoke Indonesian fluently and with the smallest trace of an accent which he found engaging. She also used a rich smatter of slang that he occasionally had to ask her to explain, and this caused them both to laugh. He was from the village, while she had lived in Jakarta and Yogyakarta in recent years and been exposed to ways of speaking that he seldom came into contact with. Her questions were intelligent and insightful and her interest was flattering and intriguing, particularly because she seemed to know his work in a more profound way than he did himself. She was self possessed, sure of the worth of her work and this reflected on his work as well; she told him of her plans to give conference papers and submit articles to visual arts journals about his work.
He found himself speaking of things he’d not articulated before and this created a sense of intimacy between them, and a sense of gratitude as well. Now her supervisor, having read a first draft of her paper, had suggested she meet with him again to clarify and expand on some of the areas they’d discussed. And so Silvia arrived promptly at the agreed time and, as on the previous three visits, they sat opposite one another with the microphone resting on the coffee table between them. She was wearing a low cut top and short skirt, and she tucked her long brown legs to one side. Her black hair was fixed into a loose bun at the nape of her neck and he noticed for the first time that there was a sprinkle of tiny freckles across her nose and cheeks.

She checked the microphone was on and, looking at her notes, began by asking about the influence of batik making on his development as an artist. It was a question he’d not really considered before and he was conscious of being curious about what he was going to say. It was often like this in their conversations, that he felt he was being led into unfamiliar territory.

He said, ‘With batik there are many stages – preparing the cloth, making the design, applying the wax, dyeing, applying more wax, adding more colour, and so on. The final product is so completely itself that only a skilled practitioner can guess the stages that have contributed to it. The finished batik is both completely different to and more than the sum of all the stages. That’s the magic.’

‘But why is that important to you as an artist?’

‘It’s important because I can choose to make the stages and elements of my painting completely visible or invisible to the viewer.’

‘And which do you choose?’

Iwan smiled. ‘Sometimes one, sometimes the other. It depends.’

‘Some people would say that batik is no longer a big thing in Indonesia, that it’s a stereotype. Do you agree?’

‘If it is, then my family and whole village are living in a stereotype. My aunties and cousins still make batik. They certainly wear it, just as I’m wearing these right now.’

He was wearing a batik shirt, unbuttoned, over a black tee-shirt, and a batik sarong.

She looked at the sarong and noted its fine quality. ‘Is the sarong from your village?’

‘Yes, my sister-in-law sent it to me for Lebaran last year. She probably bought it from one of the local factories.’

‘Have you been influenced by batik in your painting? For example, do you think the layering of images, text, colour, and use of symbolism – which is such a strong element in your painting – is linked to or a reflection of the batik process?’
'Possibly, I was always very interested in the symbols, colours and designs as a child so in that sense you could say I’ve been influenced. But it’s not something I’ve been conscious of.’

She ticked that question off her list and he studied the top of her head as she looked down. He thought of Hari whose hair was cut short now and flecked with grey.

‘You mentioned that you loved the wayang stories – The Ramayana and Mahabharata. What did you take from those stories?’

‘Many things. My mother loved The Ramayana and often told me that story, and we went to performances of course in the village or nearby if there was an occasion, but my friends and I mostly talked about the Mahabharata, who our favourite characters were. We spent hours arguing over what they did, if it was the right thing or not. That was fun actually because I learned that morality and truth are never simple or clear cut, something that can be dictated. The ambiguity in the stories is what causes real examination and therefore understanding. That’s how we learn about the consequences of our actions and individual responsibility.’

‘Philosophical discussions about right and wrong, actions and reactions, that sort of thing?’

‘Yes, I guess you would say they were philosophical arguments. What also interested us was the story telling. I remember once we decided to try and write a version of the Mahabharata where Arjuna refuses to listen to the Lord Krishna, and refuses to kill his cousins.’

‘And is this story telling also important in your role as an artist?’

‘Yes, very much so.’

‘There have been many changes since you left Indonesia in 1997. To what extent have you been able to find out about and keep track of those?’

‘Well I’ve been back once. That was in 2007. I was only there three weeks but it was a shock to see so much change. The economy was still recovering, of course, but the main changes for me were to do with democracy, freedom of speech, that sort of thing. That was a huge change. There was a lot of blame about the present state of things, especially the corruption, and a fear that it was getting worse, not better. I guess I’m at a distance from it all now so I see things a little differently.’

‘In what way?’

‘Well, I think we’re all responsible, responsible for the good and the bad.’

‘So what is the answer?’

‘I’m not sure there are clear answers, but I don’t think blaming or punishing people for past wrongs is going to solve anything.’

‘But what of the people who have been active in hurting others – perhaps killing or torturing or enslaving people – shouldn’t they be brought to justice?’
‘I think the most important thing right now is for the truth to be told about what happened in 1965, after that and even before that, during the 1950s. There’s a lot of history we don’t know about.’

‘But what about the people who were put in gaol and who suffered from a loss of citizenship because they had a family member, say a parent, who was labelled forever and discriminated against because of that. People treated them very badly, even in their own families.’

‘Yes, and in a way this is what I’ve been exploring in my last exhibition.’

‘Would you say then that your work has become more political?’

‘No, not the work. The work is what it is. For me as an artist though I’m very curious about justice, forgiveness, tolerance, kindness, inclusion, generosity and what they mean to me as a practising artist.’

Tick. She looked at the list again and he saw she was wearing an identical bracelet on each wrist, black, rubber perhaps. They looked like barbed wire.

Silvia said, ‘Getting back to being Javanese. Is mysticism a part of that?’

‘Of course.’

‘Can you expand?’

‘It’s hard to talk about. It’s just something that we, I mean Javanese, know and do.’

‘Examples? Fasting, the Javanese calendar, interpreting signs ...’

‘Yes, all of those things.’

‘Do you fast?’

‘I have done in the past, during Ramadan of course, and on important dates ...’

‘Okay, let’s leave that for a moment. I’d like to talk a little about your perception of Australian and Indonesian masculinities and where they diverge. What were your impressions of Australian men when you first arrived?’

‘I was a little surprised I suppose by the drinking. I’d never seen people drinking or acting drunk. I was living at Marj’s house and although I knew Bert and Ernie had been alcoholics, they didn’t drink that much anymore. And they were very quiet men. And I was hanging out with Akira who wasn’t into drinking even though there was some heavy drinking going on in the music scene. Perhaps the thing that was most shocking was if a teacher or someone older got drunk, someone above me, and they started acting like the other young men. I guess I had the view that once someone was married they should behave in a different way.’

‘Have your views about this changed?’

‘Not exactly but now I’m more used to it.’
'And what about since Reformasi, do you think there have been changes in how men see themselves in the family in Indonesia? Are men still to be considered the head of the family? Or with democracy do people question authority more now – the head of state, head of village, family, that sort of thing?'

'It’s hard to say. Now there is freedom of speech but people seem to be saying that this is confusing, makes it hard to go on with their life because they don’t know what to think anymore, what is truth or not.’

'But wasn’t that also the case before? That the government controlled the media so you only got one point of view instead of many.’

Iwan laughed. ‘I guess people find it difficult to have all these different views out there now. Maybe if there was media regulation it would make it easier. Like you have here.’

‘Isn’t that what democracy is about though? You have to find out information using whatever sources you can and then decide what you think? Surely that’s easier now with social media and the Internet.’

‘Well, perhaps in theory but in reality how many people want to do that? Most just believe what they read in the paper, or what someone tells them on Facebook or the Internet. I’ve even heard some say they want “strong leaders”.’

‘Meaning? Another dictator? Someone like Suharto?’

‘Possibly.’

‘Do you think this is related to fears that Indonesia could break up into different regions, or that the fundamentalist religious groups are becoming too strong, and too violent?’

‘I think both.’

‘And these are issues that concern you as an artist?’

‘Well they concern me as a person, a citizen and as an artist. I grew up believing it was dangerous to question authority. Even now that we have freedom of the press, it can still be difficult to find transparency and accountancy, but we have to persevere. You know about KKK – collusion, corruption, nepotism – these things don’t just go away. We can’t say the solution is to have another dictator, or let religious groups dictate how we are to live and behave.’

‘Would you say that your own arts practice has become more overtly political, and that this is linked to Reformasi, that is, events in Indonesia since 1997 and 1998?’

‘There is a link. You see, I grew up during the Suharto regime but I wasn’t part of the generation of artists that struggled to develop during that time. By the time I came of age Suharto was gone, and then for a while there was instability, economic hardship and, in some
places, violence. But I was in Australia, separate from what was happening, and in a way over the top of it. It was very different for those who were training as artists in Yogya, say. My struggle was different to what they were dealing with. I was living in a different culture, language, sometimes hostile country, at least to Indonesians and Muslims. Being away, my grip on what was happening in Indonesia was very slender and I couldn’t keep up. I felt guilty too.’

‘Why guilty?’

‘Because I escaped, because I wasn’t part of the suffering or of what was being built. Does that make sense? I suspect or fear that I’m not part of that world any more – even though that is where my roots are. I worry that the day will come when I will have lived here as long as I lived there.’

‘Is that a good thing or a bad thing?’

‘Well it’s both good and bad. It gives me the freedom to see the big picture in terms of my own place as an artist, but it’s painful too, difficult in the sense that sometimes I feel like an outsider here and there. But maybe that’s not a bad place for an artist to be? I don’t know.’

‘Can you imagine this changing at all?’

‘In relation to Indonesia or living here?’

‘Both.’

‘I think my sense of belonging here or there could change if we were to have children but I don’t know for sure. Thanks to Gerardo promoting my work and supporting my career I feel confident about my future here to some extent, but in Indonesia I don’t come up on the radar at all. I’m told there have been changes in the art market and many artists are making a lot of money, even young artists, but there’s a concern they’re not getting the opportunity to develop as they would have previously.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well they’re being asked to produce work for group shows, work the curators know will sell. The work sells but the lack of solo shows constrains their creative development. Of course, I’ve had one solo show a year with Gerardo and I’m very grateful because it’s kept me in work and also kept me developing. I still do a couple of days gardening a week but I don’t mind that. There aren’t too many artists who can live solely off their art and I’m certainly not one of them.’

‘Not yet! Do you have plans to return to Indonesia to live and work?’

‘I dream of this but it’s not practical. My wife has a job here and I couldn’t ask her to give that up but I’m sure we’ll visit one day soon.’
'What about overseas travel, scholarships?'

'We talk about it but, again, we’ve been too busy. Maddie’s been many times to Europe and the United States. I’ve not been at all and I’d very much like to go to China and Japan, perhaps I’ll get a residency at some time.'

Silvia thanked him for his time, closed her notebook and bent forward to turn off the tape recorder. As she did, Iwan felt he could almost see to her waist. She looked up, smiled broadly at him, and he realised she’d done it deliberately. She had been flirtatious with him at their other meetings and he’d been very careful not to encourage her. Now he felt a strong desire to touch her, to feel the texture of her skin. He stood up quickly with the aim of backing away from her, away from the smell of her perfume, but Silvia stood at the same time. She looked up at him and he took her hands and looked at the bracelets.

'What are these?' he asked. ‘They look like barbed wire?’

'Yes, that’s the idea. I work for Amnesty International as a volunteer. I wear them to start conversations like this.'

'You work for free? What do you do there?’

'Oh anything they want – filing, stuff envelopes, produce the newsletter. I just go in one day a week.'

He realised he knew very little about her. He let go her wrists and now she reached out both hands, sliding one hand around his ribs and pulling at his tee-shirt with the other till he felt her hand circling his back. His heart was pounding and he knew she could feel it. He drew her to him and felt her mouth opening against his as they began pulling at each other’s clothes. She pushed her breasts against his chest, he wanted to feel her breasts, bare against his skin, and he pushed his hands up under her tee-shirt to release her bra so he could take her breast in his hand. She felt her hand pushing down the front of his sarong and a moan escaped from his lips. Just then the studio door opened and Maddie was standing in the doorway. She had a hand over her mouth and was so pale he thought perhaps she was a ghost. His body buckled with shame and he pushed Silvia away from him. This shouldn’t have happened. He began to dry retch. Silvia turned to see where he was looking and saw Maddie staring at them both. She collected her things and almost ran from the room as Maddie slammed the door after her.

Maddie’s body sagged and she fell back against the door, her mouth opening and closing, and then she began to moan and shake her head as if to wake from a nightmare. Iwan saw her pain, felt it flooding into him, and felt powerless to offer comfort or words of remorse.

‘My god, Iwan ...?’

‘Nothing happened,’ he protested.
‘How long has this been going on?’

He wanted to rewind everything, he wanted her to forgive him, he wanted to forgive himself.

‘Well, it’s your duty to win me back ...’

He saw her body buckle and the distorting look of hatred and disgust.

‘It’s my duty!’ she screamed at him. ‘You! You must be mad!’

She looked around the room and then ran to the wall and ripped down the fragile Tree of Life wayang puppet and began tearing at it.

‘No, not that, not that,’ he thought or said, he wasn’t sure which. He tried to take it from her but she held it high and moved over to the open window and threw it outside. Unspent, she began flailing at him with her fists and feet, landing blows wherever she could. Then, suddenly, as if in answer to another call, she stopped and raised both hands above her head in a gesture of helplessness and went and opened the door.

Turning, she said, ‘I don’t know who you are or who we are anymore. You have no idea ...’

And she walked out.
Two and a half weeks went by and when she did not hear from Iwan she was sure he was with Silvia. She was staying with Mack who was also shocked at what had happened. Each time she tried to call Iwan the phone cut to the answering machine message and she heard her own voice asking her to leave a message. Time was running out, she had to act while her resolve was strong. She knew she didn’t want to go ahead with the pregnancy on her own, but Mack begged her to give it more time. She made a booking at a clinic in the city.

On the day of her appointment they caught a taxi into the city. The clinic was close to Central and when they arrived there was a gaggle of right-to-lifers holding up placards and half heartedly chanting ‘abortion is a sin’ and ‘abortion is murder, God will punish’. Their comments weren’t directed at anyone in particular as they couldn’t tell who was arriving for an abortion and who wasn’t but Maddie still found them unsettling. As instructed over the phone, they found the front door locked and entered the pin to get in. A lift took them to the tenth floor and opened onto a waiting area with comfy orange lounges, embroidered cushions, and several large paintings on the walls. On a coffee table a flowering orchid gave off a faint smell of the Australian bush.

‘Phew, I needed that like a hole in the head!’ Maddie said as they stepped out of the lift. A woman wearing denim jeans, loose white cotton shirt and turquoise canvas shoes got up from a computer and stepped forward to greet them.

‘Good morning. Sorry about that. Terrible, isn’t it? And, you are …’

‘Maddie Spence.’

‘Hi Maddie, my name’s Sheree and I’m a clinic sister here.’

She gave her a pen and asked her to fill out some forms while she let Lucy, her designated counsellor, know she’d arrived.

‘I’d like to skip the counselling if you don’t mind.’ Maddie said. She couldn’t imagine what good counselling would do at this stage.

‘Mads?’ Mack pleaded. She was sorry she had to drag him into this but who else could she turn to? He was almost grey under the tan and she tried to smile but then her mouth began to wobble so she looked at the floor and said, ‘Yes I will see the counsellor. Thank you.’

There were no other clients in the room and when they had seated themselves on the lounge, Mack said, ‘Please Mads, are you sure about this? We can leave, go home? It’s not too late.’

‘Mack, I’ve thought about nothing else for the last two weeks and I know I’m not cut out to be a single parent. I can’t. It’s not what I want.’

‘I support you … it’s just that … don’t you think it might be a good idea to talk to Iwan first?’
‘No. I won’t bring up a child on my own. I just can’t. Anyway I haven’t heard from him. Not at all.’

A women came through the door and held out her hand to Maddie, ‘Hello Maddie, my name’s Lucy, would you like to come with me? Bring the form with you and I’ll get your Medicare details when we get inside.’ To Mack, she said, ‘Maddie will be ready to go home in about three hours so if you like you can go out for a couple of hours, come back about two thirty. There’s some very nice coffee shops around here and there’s also a library just up the road.’

‘No, it’s okay,’ Mack said, ‘I brought a book and my iPad so if it’s all the same I’ll just stay here in case she needs me.’

‘That’s fine, you can help yourself to tea, coffee, biscuits in the kitchen there on the right. If you do go out, be sure to get the pin to come back in. We have to change it all the time.’

Mack gave Maddie a warm hug and she followed Lucy out of the room. For a week she’d been feeling that this was the worst thing that had ever happened in her life but now, despite her initial protests, she submitted to the counselling. Lucy had blonde spiky hair and was so gentle and understanding that Maddie began to feel a deepening calm. She asked Maddie questions that Maddie knew needed answers and, satisfied with what she had to say about her situation, explained what would happen, each step of the way – what the doctor would do, what she would feel, how long it would last, what would happen afterwards. Later they would talk about how to take care of herself in the coming weeks.

Lucy held her hand throughout the procedure. Then when it was over she took her to the recovery room where she waited on her, made sure she was comfortable, and brought her cups of tea and a delicious salad sandwich. Then Lucy gave her a packet of information and explained some effects the abortion would have on her hormones and emotions, the need to care for herself in the coming week especially, what to do if there were any problems such as pain or fever. Lucy’s support and care had turned what was a terrible choice into an empowering experience – she was exercising choice, it was her body, her life, and it was for her to decide what she found acceptable and could live with. At first she didn’t want to leave that warm, nurturing space and Lucy told her she should not feel she had to go until she was ready. Lucy had spoken to Mack and he sent a message that she had all day, there was no hurry, it was for her to decide.

When they left the clinic the right-to-lifers had packed up and gone home. It was mid-afternoon and a light rain was falling. Back at Mack’s place she found love heart balloons floating on the ceiling of her room and a vase of yellow perfumed roses that lit up the mantlepiece. His thoughtfulness made her smile and she touched him lightly on the arm.

‘You’re my best best friend, you know that?’ she said. How lonely and lost and afraid she would have felt if he hadn’t been with her.
Mack said, ‘I think we both need a cup of tea. Yeah? Or would you rather a stiff scotch.’

‘Cup of tea.’

He left the room and she put on pyjamas and got into bed, pulling up the doona. A cloud of sadness and grief loomed over her.

‘Are you decent?’

‘Yes.’

He carried in a cup of tea and plate of buttered oatmeal biscuits on a tray and laid it on the bed.

‘Here you are then ducks ... Drink up. Want anything else?’

She shook her head. She wanted to ask when he’d put the roses and balloons in the bedroom but the words wouldn’t come.

‘I’ll leave you in peace then,’ he said and slipped from the room.

He was in his room checking his email when the phone rang. When he picked it up it was Iwan.

‘Hello this Iwan, can I speak with Maddie please.’

‘Oh g’day Iwan. Sorry mate, she’s having a rest right now.’

‘What’s the matter. Is Maddie ill?’ Lie, ya bugger, lie, Mack told himself. Oh shit, oh fuck. Let the cat out of the bag, stupid stupid.

‘She’s fine. Just sleeping.’

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Look mate, I’d rather not say. How about you leave it with me and I’ll get her to give you a ring later?’

Maddie slept for two hours and then got up to have a shower. Mack didn’t mention that Iwan had called, or his obvious concern, and they were busy preparing dinner when the doorbell rang. When Mack opened the door, he saw Iwan standing on the doorstep. He tried to block his entrance but Iwan was insistent and if he didn’t know better Mack might even have thought he was drunk.

‘I want see Maddie.’

‘Trouble is mate, she really doesn’t want to see you. I said I’d ask her to call you so now I’d like you to go.’

As Mack tried to close the door Iwan pushed past him and headed down the hallway.
‘Great bloody timing,’ he muttered to himself before calling out to Maddie, ‘A visitor, it’s Iwan.’

Maddie was chopping vegetables into small piles on the kitchen bench when she heard Iwan call her name. Now she looked up in shock. ‘Iwan, what are you doing here?’

‘I rang, Mack said you resting. I thought maybe sick. I want to see you – talk to you. I miss you,’ he said.

She felt strangely detached as if her body and mind had separated. Chop chop – the dismembered vegetables lay on the board, the onion fumes were making her eyes water and she wiped them with her sleeve, ‘You’ve got your girlfriend, I’m sure she’s happy to have you all to herself.’

‘She not my girlfriend, and I very sorry. Very stupid. I very stupid. I want you to come home. I promise this not happen again. Never.’

‘Iwan, that was weeks ago, I haven’t heard from you.’ She put down the knife and went to the sink to wash the onion juice off her hands.

‘I confused. I go to mountains. I afraid but I back now. Mack say you sick. Is something wrong?’

She stood still at the sink, her back to him. She could not bear to look him in the face. ‘I’m not sick, I just had an abortion. I was coming to tell you I was pregnant when I saw you with that woman.’

‘The really sad thing’, Maddie continued, ‘is that I was just starting to accept being pregnant because I knew how happy it would make you. Then ...’ She began to sob, ‘I saw you ... her. I couldn’t go ahead with it on my own. But I wanted to have that baby and I waited two whole weeks to hear from you and nothing. And now you show up. Now ...’

Iwan moved forward and picked up the knife on the bench. He was flying backward off a cliff, birds of prey were diving after him, screeching. He began moving towards Maddie with the knife. At first she said nothing. Then as he kept moving closer she said quietly and firmly, ‘No, stop it Iwan, put it down.’ But he kept coming. She stepped back, two steps, three steps, behind a chair. He pushed it out of the way. He was holding the knife high above his shoulder, and she moved again and again until, finally, she knew she was trapped. But then her fear and paralysis were transformed to screaming outrage and she let forth a loud piercing roar of anguish and pain.

Iwan snapped back into the room, saw Maddie’s pale terror, the trail of mess, the knife in his raised hand. In horror he opened his fingers and let go the knife which clattered to the floor. Then he turned and pushed past Mack who was coming to investigate.
‘What? You’re going man?’

Maddie’s eyes were closed, face a ghostly grey. Seeing her sinking slowly to the floor, Mack rushed forward to catch her and as he struggled to lever her limp body into an armchair, he spotted the knife lying on the floor. Thinking the worst, he began checking her for injuries until, with a sense of relief, he propped some cushions around her, picked up the knife and put it in the sink, and went to find a damp washer to wipe her face. When he returned her mouth was distorted with silent grief and the tears were streaming down her face.

‘What the hell? Maddie, are you okay? Sorry, silly damn question. C’mon girl, I think you might need to just go rest for a bit. I’ll get the dinner. We can eat in your room. Okay hon?’

It was the silence of her tears that hurt him the most.
Mama is climbing the giant mango trees and us kids are all excited. We’ve picked all the low down mangoes but there are still lots up high. I think Mama loves climbing trees because she’s laughing, and she looks so shining among the branches and leaves. One by one she calls our names and throws a mango and we run to catch it and put it in a basket. We’ve filled one already.

Mama is a laughing butterfly, a singing bird, a quacking duck, a chee chak gecko, a moo moo cow, a buzz buzz mosquito. There’s light all around. I’m happy when it’s my turn and I catch the mango, but the little ones cry if they miss. I call, ‘Look Mama, there’s one. Over there.’

There’s a loud crack. Mama tries to find another branch to hold onto, but then another crack, and Mama is falling. Mama on the ground. Crumbled and twisted. I think she is dead. Her head is turned, eyes closed. She doesn’t move, but then she groans.

Auntie makes us move away but I want to put my arms around Mama. Hari fetches Papa and he tells Hari to take me away but I don’t want to leave Mama. So then Papa yells at Hari and Hari and I both start crying, and Hari lets me sit on her knee and she puts her arms around me. It’s hot sitting on Hari’s knee and I put my hand up to her face and she lets me feel her wet cheeks.

Papa and Pakdhe Dul carry Mama inside. They are very gentle, they carry Mama like she might break. Mama is very still and quiet.

It’s as if the sound’s gone off. I’m afraid, I can’t hear, my mouth is open but I can’t talk. I’m like Mama, I can’t talk.

Hari is crying and I say, ‘Is Mama hurt? Is Mama going to die?’

Hari says, ‘Mama will be alright. Come, let’s walk to the river – we can see Mama when we get back.’

But Mama lies in bed for a long time and everyday I go and see her and she smiles at me but the stars in her eyes aren’t there anymore. I ask Hari, ‘When will the stars in Mama’s eyes come back?’ and she begins to cry and I cry too because of the stars and because Hari is crying.

Hidayat was mean. He never let me play with his shanghai but one day I found it and put a stone in it, and when I saw the bird pecking at the flowers on the tree I just aimed like Hidayat, and let the rubber go. The stone flew and the bird fell down on the ground, just like Mama. I touched it but it didn’t move. I killed the bird. I was scared – maybe Mama would die now too, because of this thing that I did.

I run inside the house, ‘Mama, Mama.’
Mama opens her eyes. Papa is sitting beside her and she smiles at me.

‘Mama, where are your stars?’

‘Dear boy,’ she said, and went back to sleep. That’s when Hari came to fetch me and when she took my hand Mama opened her eyes and said to Papa, ‘Be kind to the boy.’

I wait for Mama to come back. I know she wants to.
It is mid-afternoon and Iwan lies in semi-darkness on the lounge, staring at the television screen. There is no sound and when he hears Maddie’s voice he thinks perhaps he is imagining it, and with it comes that pain again. The pain that won’t go away. It has been with him for weeks now and it crushes his chest, grips his scalp and makes his head ache.

‘Iwan.’ He looks up and she’s standing there, next to the television. ‘May I?’ she says and, without waiting for an answer, she reaches over and turns it off. ‘Please ... we must talk.’

He cannot move or speak. The colour and images fade from the screen and there is a blank darkness where there was colour, light, life, movement. Now the screen becomes a mirror and as Maddie opens a blind to let in the daylight it reflects the play of grey light and shadow, and him. He sees himself there now and this is unbearable. He rolls onto his back and looks up at the ceiling.

‘Iwan, I beg you ...’

He does not know if he remembers words, but his voice stumbles, ‘B-b-broken,’ he says.

‘Iwan, please? We have to talk about all of this.’

He wants her but he cannot bear to look at her. It hurts.

‘Well, if you won’t try and talk I will just leave.’

‘But you my wife ...’ It’s all he can say. He fears he will cry if he says any more.

‘Please, Iwan, we don’t have to talk right now. We can make some other time, we can go to a marriage counsellor.’

The faint perfume of her presence causes the weight on his chest to press down so heavy that he fears he cannot breathe, let alone speak. He turns away, he wants to stop the pain, but the pain remains.

He hears her leave but he cannot move. The door closes.

Painting is one way he can anaesthetise the pain, that and music – and he plays CD after CD of jazz while he works, original recordings by local musicians whose performances he’s seen and heard many times. The familiar, raw intensity of the music is a tunnel through which he directs what he is feeling onto the canvas. Pak Bambang had lent him a new book about the events in Indonesia during 1965 and afterwards. It told a different story to the one told in the three-hour film they were forced to watch at school every 30 September and now he was recording the sheer scale of those events – the shame and trauma of witnessing or participating – whether willing or forced, as well as the aftermath. Canvas after canvas bears witness to the horror of the massacres, the haunting silence, the empty ruined houses, the mass graves, the missing.
Here were the wounds carried and passed on to the next generations, to him, to everyone he knew. All that cruelty and inhumanity practised on those imprisoned without trial, beaten and tortured, killed or enslaved. And for those who survived and were released, the prolonged persecution, discrimination and harassment of not just them, but their families as well. Year after year, decade after decade. A reign of terror.

When Pak Bambang visits he finds several canvases in various stages of completion, all of which depict some kind of violence or violent act, or its aftermath. Vivid depictions of men, women and children, young and old, being raped, tortured, murdered. Bodies piled one on top of the other in an open grave or on the back of trucks. Bodies floating or snagged by their clothes on fallen tree branches in rivers. Here is a person is being beaten by a group of men with sticks and machetes. Behind them is a mosque. At the side of the road there are three vehicles – a United States military jeep and two sleek black cars, one with British flags, one with Australian flags. Pale faces look on through the darkened car windows. It is hard to look at them.

Pak Bambang says, ‘This work is very powerful, almost frightening.’

Iwan indicates a book of the artist Botero’s Abu Ghraib exhibition which lays open on the coffee table, ‘It’s something I’ve been thinking about but I didn’t know how to approach it until I saw Botero’s work on Abu Ghraib.’

Pak Bambang flicks through the pages of the abject paintings of Iraqi prisoners being ritually tortured by their United States army prison guards. He’s seen the images before, as photos taken by the same prison guards, a souvenir of their despicable deeds. They leave a bitter taste in his mouth. ‘How did they help?’ he asks.

‘They speak of suffering, how art can show pain, injustice, cruelty. Bear witness or restore memory. I’ve been reading about what happened in 1965 and the years after that, but I can’t feel how a million or more of our people suffered or were brutally massacred, tortured, enslaved. Maybe it’s easier when you can see and know the enemy as other, but here the enemy is other Indonesians and that hurts, doesn’t it? I can’t feel how the victims and their families suffered. I can’t feel what it is for the perpetrators to live with what they did? What must it be like to know you did these terrible things and you were never punished? What do their families know or don’t know about what they did. How do they live with that? How would I feel if I knew my father or grandfather or uncles did those things? I wasn’t born until ten years later but you feel things, it is all around you, festering in the silence. Everything the regime told us was lies. We know this now.’

Pak Bambang nodded for him to continue, ‘In my cousin’s house his uncle came home one day. They said he had been on Buru Island and us kids thought he must’ve been on a holiday.
My cousin liked his uncle and I did too, but it was like he was a ghost. No one took any notice of him and they made him do all the dirty jobs in the village. Collect rubbish. We knew he was a scientist at the university before and now he had no job. He wasn’t a bad man but the adults told us not to ask questions and we sensed their fear. That’s how it was.’

Pak Bambang nodded, ‘Yes, and people had good reason to be afraid. Another part of this tragedy is the talent and knowledge and skills that were lost to Indonesia for a whole generation. The million or more teachers, doctors, journalists, intellectuals, poets, community leaders that were killed or died or were sent to prison. Such a waste. No one questions whether this was too high a price to pay for the West to have its way with our cheap labour, materials, resources.’

Iwan made coffee and when they were seated Pak Bambang said, ‘I’ve been speaking with Maddie, Iwan. She asked how you are.’

Iwan was still. It was unusual for Pak Bambang to visit, especially without calling first.

‘When Rama was sent into exile in the forest, Sita followed.’ He begun to sob. ‘Maddie had a ... a ... a ...’

‘Yes, an abortion. I know, I’m so very sorry to hear that.’

‘She doesn’t want to be married anymore.’

‘Perhaps she thinks you’ve found someone else.’

‘She killed our baby.’

‘She said you were kissing another woman. Then you didn’t contact her and so she thought the marriage was over. I can’t condone what she did of course but perhaps she felt she had good reason.’

‘She’s living with another man.’

‘She’s been staying with Mack and he’s been caring for her. That’s true. But I’m not here to speak of Maddie. I came to see how you are. Shall we go and get something to eat?’

Iwan’s nightmares were occurring almost every time he closed his eyes to sleep now. There was him and his mother doing things together – making a kite, planting rice seedlings, holding a duckling. Sinking into the comfort of her love and attention, feeling it envelop him, and then when he looked up he saw only the shining white light where her face should be and it terrified him. Day or night, the ghostly images of the faceless mother haunted him, causing him to become more and more fearful of sleep. He began adding the image to his paintings, first one, and then another and another until every canvas was embedded with the haunting witnessing
faceless mother. He worked day and night, stopping only to sleep or eat some hastily made snack or other. He rarely went out now and piles of dirty dishes joined ashtrays full of cigarette butts scattered around the studio and apartment. As the weeks passed the violent scenes depicted on the canvases were painted over with life sized images of the faceless mother nursing a child, making batik, squatting to grind spices, in prayer. The earlier scenes of torture and violence lay like traces under the images of everyday life. He worked with such intensity that he had finished all the works for the exhibition planned for the following February by the time Gerardo called by.

Gerardo had tried phoning Iwan but when there was no reply he decided to drop in. He found the studio door wide open and Iwan lying on the daybed with eyes closed. He barely stirred when Gerardo spoke to him and for a moment Gerardo wondered whether he was asleep or unconscious.

‘Hey, Iwan, you okay?’ He began opening windows. ‘My god, this place smells and so do you.’

He could not rouse Iwan and, reluctant to leave him on his own, he called Marj and Akira and explained the situation. They said they would leave immediately and come over.

While Gerardo waited for them to arrive he began looking over the work. He was thrilled at the quality and complexity of it – it was a new direction and he was keen to discuss it with Iwan but that would have to wait. In less than an hour Akira was at the door with bundles of shopping bags he’d carried up the stairs for Marj. Gerardo had warned them about what they would find and so Marj had bought everything she thought she might need to restore some sort of hygiene and order. But, despite Gerardo’s warning, they were not prepared for the state they found Iwan in, or the apartment, and when Akira failed to wake him, Marj told the two men they could leave her to look after him. Reassured, the two men left, but their fear for Iwan’s state of mind snapped at their heels as they made their way downstairs.

Marj began by cleaning out the fridge so she could pack away the food she’d brought. Her next step was to clean the bathroom and when that was done she went to wake Iwan. She got him to stand and held him steady as she steered him across the hallway and into the apartment. He only weighed a pocketful of pennies at the best of times but she’d never seen him look this poor. The bones in his cheeks and on his collar bones were so prominent it was as if he’d been starving. There was a week’s beard on his face, he smelled of stale sweat and cigarettes, and his hair was greasy, knotted and dank. The flesh under his eyes was almost black as if he’d been in a fight.
‘I’m afraid you look like a bloody scarecrow Ivan,’ she said as she manoeuvred him into the bathroom. ‘Now we’ll just get you showered and fed and you’ll be right as rain, won’t you? There’s a razor and shampoo there so you can give your hair a good wash too, dear.’

When he emerged from the bathroom Iwan found sandwiches and a steaming mug of coffee waiting and began to wolf them down. Marj was moving about the apartment collecting up every skerrick of rubbish in green plastic bags which she sealed and left on the landing for the men to take downstairs later. Iwan had still not spoken a word and when she returned to the living room he was fast asleep on the lounge. She covered him with a doona and then she set to work in earnest, only stopping at intervals to have a cup of tea. Ernie and Bert had offered to accompany her but she thought she’d get more done by herself. In the past year or so they had been trying to get her to slow down, to leave more for Lisbeth and Akira to do, but no matter what they said she seemed to stretch time to do more than ever – clean house, cook, mind children, read them stories and take them to the park.

In another dream, the little boy Iwan watches as Suriani applies another layer of wax to the batik. Together they place the batik into the dye. They are both excited when they remove the cloth from the tub and hang it up to dry. But when he looks up at her smile, there is only the shining white face and he wakes in a panic, his body covered in sweat. He struggles to untangle himself from the doona, tries to stand but his legs give way on him and he falls to the floor. Tears stream down his face and Marj gets up from her crossword and helps him back onto the lounge, all the time reassuring him that he’s safe. As soon as he is settled, she phones her doctor.

By the time Akira and Gerardo arrive that evening, the doctor has been and gone. They are not surprised when Marj repeats what he said. ‘Doctor Joseph says Iwan’s real crook from working too hard. He wants him to stay in bed and have complete rest. He said he could put him in hospital but I said that wouldn’t be necessary because we can look after him. He said it was very important that he not be left on his own.’

So Marj agreed to stay with Iwan overnight and Akira called in the next morning with the news that Pak Bambang was on his way. During the night Iwan had woken again and again in great distress and Marj even thought that perhaps he didn’t recognise her on one occasion when she went to calm him. They were hoping Pak Bambang would be able to help him.

When Pak Bambang knocked, Akira opened the door. ‘Hey Pak,’ said Akira, ‘Thanks for coming, Iwan’s having lunch so you can go in. As I said on the phone, Marj got the doctor and he thinks he’s had a nervous breakdown. He wants him to go to hospital but we thought we’d see what you think first.’
Pak Bambang was with Iwan the whole afternoon. Gerardo arrived after lunch and he and Akira worked at the table on their laptops while Marj took a nap. When Marj re-emerged they had afternoon tea and, soon after, Pak Bambang came to talk to them.

‘Iwan’s asked me to tell you he blames himself for everything that’s happened between him and his wife. Added to that he’s distressed that he did not seek the blessings of his mother, at her grave, and his father, for his marriage. He feels that this is connected to the present difficulties.’

‘Is he okay?’

‘He’s very weak – mentally and physically. The marriage breakup has caused him a lot of sadness and, I’m guessing, rekindled the trauma of his mother’s death when he was a little boy. I’ve suggested he return to Indonesia. He went back in 2007 for three weeks, but I think he needs to return, touch base with his own soil. It’s best he go as soon as possible so his family can look after him. He’ll be well cared for and, given his present state of mind, that’s the safest thing for him right now.’

Gerardo asked, ‘So what can we do to help? Is he well enough to travel?’

‘I think if he has a week or two’s rest and good nourishing food he’ll be alright. I agree with the doctor that he should not be left alone. If necessary I can take him to my house but it’s very busy there, people coming and going, so if it can be managed I think it’s better for him to stay here where it’s quieter.’

‘He’s fine here. We can arrange a roster to make sure there’s someone on hand to cook and look after him,’ Akira said.

‘You’re all very good to him and he’s very grateful,’ Bambang said.

‘We’ll organise the plane tickets and help him get away. You’ve done more than enough by coming here today. We appreciate it very much.’ Gerardo got up to shake Bambang’s hand.

‘Yes,’ said Akira, ‘so now our main concern is to get him well enough to travel.’

‘Well, I suggest you get the doctor in again and I’ll certainly come by before he leaves. If I have any concerns we can always postpone the departure or, if need be, organise for someone to accompany him. But let’s see how he goes.’

For ten days, Marj, Akira, Ernie and Bert took turns to stay with Iwan, and Gerardo called in most days with Indonesian meals from a nearby restaurant. They saw his vulnerability and tried to give him plenty of privacy, but his passivity and weakness frightened them. The studio remained locked and he showed no desire to go in there. When the doctor and Pak Bambang agreed he was strong enough to travel, Gerardo bought the tickets and Akira obtained a list of
family and friends and he and Lisbeth went shopping for the obligatory souvenirs to take with him.

On the day of departure, as Gerardo and Akira drove him to the airport, they wanted to reassure him they were not packing him off home because he was too much trouble.

‘I’ve got you booked for an exhibition in February. The work’s done I know but you’ll be back by then won’t you?’ Gerardo looked across at Iwan. ‘I hope you will.’

Iwan was looking out the car window and did not respond. Two weeks had passed since Gerardo had found him and during that time he’d barely spoken to any of them.

Mama is taking the kettle off the fire and pouring the hot water into a deep tin dish. She puts my batik butterfly into the hot water to remove the wax. Then we wash it with soapy water, and then clean water. She holds it up out for me to see.

‘See darling, now it’s finished. What a clever boy you are. Do you like it?’

‘No, it’s no good, Mama. I want it to be good like Mama’s batik.’

‘Don’t worry, little one, one day you will be even better than Mama.’

‘I will?’

‘Yes, of course. But I think it’s a beautiful butterfly – do you want it or shall I look after it for you?’

‘It’s for you Mama.’

‘Really, a present for me? What does it mean this beautiful butterfly?’

‘It means … everything will be alright.’

Mama laughs, ‘Is that what butterflies mean?’

‘Yes Mama. When I see a butterfly this is what I think.’

‘You do? What a clever boy. Dear Iwan, do you know how much I love you?’ She hugs me close and I breathe the smell of her.

‘Yes Mama.’

‘And you know what else?’ Mama says. ‘Not just me. Many people love you and so you will always be looked after. Always.’

As he waited in the departure lounge Iwan was overwhelmed by colour – freckled patterns of blue-grey greens, muddy yellows and subtle hints of red and pink, like the sun-split understorey of the Australian bush.
Maddie was marking papers in her office when she heard a knock on the door and then a voice. ‘Hi Maddie.’

When she looked up, Silvia standing not one metre from her desk.

‘Silvia?’

Silvia spoke quickly, ‘I’ve brought you a copy of my thesis on Iwan. I’ve also written a piece for an international art journal which they’ve accepted so I’ve included that as well. It’s called, “How being Javanese informs the artist Iwan”. Maybe you could forward them to him for me – I believe he’s returned to Java. Or I could send you PDFs if you prefer?’

Maddie couldn’t move. The pain of all that had gone on was reignited. Now, here was Silvia standing so brazen by her desk, in her office. It was like a bad dream. Wasn’t she ashamed to even show her face?

Silvia continued, ‘I just wanted to say I’m sorry for what happened. It was my fault. And you should know that I’ve not heard one word from Iwan or seen him again since that afternoon.’

‘Get out of my office!’ Maddie’s eyes blazed and her reddening face was contorted with disbelief. She felt the hairs of her arms prickle as heat and then a chill suffused her body.

‘But I think you have to take responsibility as well. What do you really know about Iwan, his family and culture? I think you’re spoiled Maddie. You’ve never learned Indonesian, you’ve never visited his family. And since he’s been with you he’s stayed away as well. Anyway, here are the essays.’

Silvia laid an envelope on the corner of the desk and retreated, pulling the door closed after her. An object on her desk had caught Maddie’s eye and she was staring at it. It was a little red truck, a pencil sharpener, and she remembered that Iwan had given it to her for her birthday the year they first got together. She wondered where it came from, she must have found it and put it there herself but she had no memory of doing that.

The raw sounds of grief that spluttered from her body were utterly unfamiliar to her. The envelope Silvia had brought lay on the edge of her desk and she got up it flopped to the floor. She felt violated and the vulnerability of the past weeks returned. Had Silvia really been there, really said those things? She saw the envelope lying on the floor and stepped over it to lock her door, and then went to sit on the sandstone window ledge, legs pulled up, chin resting on her knees. Arrows of rain were striking the leadlight window panes with such ferocity she could barely see the opposite wall of the quadrangle. She could not stop the flow of tears.

When Mack arrived home that evening Maddie had almost finished reading Silvia’s paper. She looked up when he entered.
‘I’m reading a paper about Iwan.’

‘Not the one by the evil temptress?’

‘Not funny. It’s made me think about all things that shape us as we grow up ... how indelible that all is.’

But he wasn’t listening. ‘I’ve got something to tell you,’ he said. ‘I’ve met someone.’

She looked up and waited for him to speak. He looked so boyish and excited she could not help smiling.

‘I think I’m in love,’ he said.

‘Really? You think? Man or woman?’ They never did get round to having that conversation and he was looking at her so lovingly she felt she might cry.

‘Man of course and he’s coming to dinner to meet you. Tonight!’

Maddie waited.

He looked at her one raised eyebrow and said, ‘I think you knew before I did, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, we knew or thought we did. Gerardo and I. But we weren’t sure of course and we knew you just needed time to work it out – one way or the other. Were we wrong to do that?’

‘No, I honestly didn’t know. I know that might seem strange to you. I mean I knew I wasn’t happy, or things weren’t right, but I didn’t know what the solution was.’

Maddie stood up and put out both arms for a hug. ‘I’m so happy for you,’ she said, kissing him warmly on both cheeks. ‘Now I’d better get ready, want to make a good impression.’

Maddie showered and dressed and they began preparing the dinner. As Mack passed her the lettuce she said, ‘I’ve decided to enrol in an Indonesian class again.’

‘What for?’

‘Well I might go there one day ... meet Iwan’s family.’

‘Oh god, I forgot ... sorry sorry sorry. Did you know Iwan’s gone back to Indonesia?’

‘No, what? When?’

‘Apparently he had a breakdown and was in a really bad way. They even had a twenty-four hour roster going to look after him. The counsellor thought it best he go home to his family so they can look after him.’

‘But I’m his family.’

‘Look hon, sorry about this. I didn’t know anything until I saw Gerardo last night at an opening. He went yesterday. That was the first I knew about it as well.’
Maddie was livid that neither Akira nor Gerardo had told her about Iwan’s illness or departure. She felt diminished by their failure to consider her and went to Grove Gallery to confront Gerardo. ‘Why didn’t you tell me? I’m his wife for fuck’s sake.’

‘I’m sorry Maddie, Iwan said he didn’t want us to tell you until he’d gone.’

‘So that’s it, he’s just gone? When will he be back?’

‘Well, hard to say. He’s got an open ended ticket. I tried to get him to say he’d be back by the February exhibition but he wouldn’t commit. He was barely communicating, that’s how bad he was. I didn’t want to pressure him. He’s not well Maddie – it could be a long recovery. And that counsellor friend of his, Bambang, said he needed to go home and deal with his demons.’

‘What demons?’

‘Well, he didn’t actually say that, he just said he needs to be on his own soil and he’ll also be safe with them. I took that to mean the family will make sure he doesn’t commit suicide or do anything silly. I’m sorry to tell you this, he looked terrible, like a scarecrow, so thin. He’d been painting day and night, fasting during the day, then not eating properly at night.’

‘I feel so bad,’ Maddie said. ‘I assumed he was with her but when she came by my office she said she never saw him again after that day. She also said she made the first move. And a few other things I didn’t want to hear.’

‘Yes, well I think maybe he used up everything he had in the painting – it was like he was in a race against time. You’ll see what I mean, the work speaks for itself. It’ll be his best exhibition yet.’
Part 3 Return
Central Java 2011–2012
It was September in Yogyakarta and the rainy season was months away but he sensed that sometime that day there would be a downpour. His skin, dried by the Sydney winter, sucked in the hot steamy air and he felt pinpricks of sweat gathering in beads and then running in trickles on his forehead and down the middle of his back and chest. His underarms felt clammy, his feet tight and damp inside his trainers. On the long journey from Sydney, thoughts of Maddie caused his body to recoil as if from the stabbing kick of an angry water buffalo.

In the taxi he asked the driver to take him to a Wartel so he could phone Gerardo to let him know he’d arrived.

‘Gerardo speaking.’

‘Hi it’s Iwan.’

‘Hey Iwan. Get there alright?’

‘Yes thank you. Please to tell Maddie she can move to apartment?’

‘No worries, I think she’s already planning to do that. It’s become a bit crowded at Mack’s now that he’s in love.’

‘What you say?’

‘Mack’s head over heels. First big love and all that.’

‘Oh? Not Maddie.’

‘No, he’s fallen for a stockbroker. Met him in a bar. It’s all wine and roses.’

‘A man?’

‘Yeah! Quite sweet really.’

‘Mack is gay?’

‘Yeah, he’s finally come out the closet.’

‘But he have many girlfriends.’

‘Yes, well friends who were girls. He seemed like a bloke’s bloke, all that surfing and rowing, but really he just liked hanging out with a crowd.’

‘Why he not tell me he gay?’

‘I think he’d not met anyone. That was part of it. But also it might be harder for a man to tell his straight male friends.’

‘Did Maddie know?’

Gerardo laughed, ‘I think she knew before he did!’
‘And his family?’

‘I guess it’s only a matter of time before they find out. Oh, and by the way, Maddie was really upset that no one told her you were unwell or that you were leaving. She’s very cross with all of us.’

When Iwan thought back over the years there was nothing about Mack that told him he was gay. It just didn’t seem possible. Gerardo said Maddie always thought so but she never told him. She said they were just friends, but it seemed to him that Mack was always competing for her attention and affection. He tried to call Maddie and listened as it switched to the answering machine.

‘Hi, it’s Maddie and Iwan. Please leave a message.’

‘Maddie, it’s me. I call from Yogyakarta, I go see my family. I sorry not tell you.’

Maddie heard Iwan’s voice as she was opening the door. She hurried to pick up the receiver but it was too late. She’d visited the day before and found the place clean and tidy, then a note from Marj that she’d been in to ‘give it a good going over’. The simple message brought tears to her eyes, ‘Ah Bu,’ she cried. In the bedroom she opened Iwan’s side of the wardrobe. All that remained were some pairs of pants, a few shirts and on the floor a pair of boots and shoes that held the character of his foot. In the top drawer there were two brown, cream and ochre sarongs, side by side, neatly folded. It was the pair they’d worn when they married. She put her hands out to touch them both.

When he first showed her the sarongs she was disappointed. She thought the earthy browns ugly and didn’t want to wear them. But then, patiently, he explained that the colours were a feature of the batik produced in Central Java and that his sisters and aunts and the generations before them all made batik. He brought books to show her the batik process and invited her to smell the wax still held in the fabric. Finally, he told her that his sister Hari had done the waxing on the cloth and he pointed out the shapes and colours in the design and described the meanings and good fortune that wearing them would bring. It was hearing that Hari had made the batiks that really convinced her to wear them.

Maddie lifted the sarongs out of the drawer and lay down beside them on the bed, examining them closely, trying to work out the processes, the layers of wax, and the repeat dyeing. She tried to recall what made them so auspicious but all she knew was that they were imbued with a sister’s love and best wishes. As she traced the symbols with her finger a calmness infused her body and she drifted into a deep and restful sleep.
She did not hear from Iwan again and nor did anyone else. Neither Akira, Marj, Gerardo, nor Bambang. It was as if he had disappeared. He had refused to own a mobile but even when they emailed him there was no response. Thinking he would stay in touch they had not thought to obtain a postal address for him. Sometimes she felt frantic, that maybe he was very ill or dying. She began to dream violent vivid dreams of Java, recurring dreams of dark uniformed figures appearing in the darkness to take people away, women’s and children’s voices crying, rivers red with blood, being pursued in the dark, stumbling or falling over.

A friend persuaded her to take up yoga and the concentration and physical work helped ease the feeling she had of constantly bracing herself against some future calamity. In the quiet final moments of the yoga class she would ask the question and listen with her body, and in this way she came to know that Iwan was still alive. With this conviction, she convinced herself that no matter how weak the thread between them, it was up to her to find ways of strengthening it. And so, after reading Silvia’s essay, she went to see Pak Bambang. When she mentioned she was thinking of trying to study Indonesian again he encouraged her, saying he thought it might help heal the grief and loss that kept tripping her up without warning.

At the three-hour Saturday Indonesian classes she was joined by others who were linked to Indonesia in some way – through family, friends, business, work or travel. Their teacher, Rosida, was a young woman from Central Java. She made learning a language fun and non-threatening and Maddie found that learning this time around was much easier than before. This time the language was opening her mind and body and her curiosity led her to the library where she began borrowing books about Indonesian history and art. For months she studied, read, and practised Indonesian whenever she could spare the time. Then her attention shifted to Indonesian contemporary art and she was surprised and excited by what she found. At other times she felt taken over by a form of culture shock which caused her to feel stripped bare, vulnerable, as if her identity was a piece of orange, sucked dry. And, far from bringing her closer to Iwan, he grew more distant. Was this how he had felt living with her – always having to adapt, bend, compromise, give up or give in – unable to explain desires that were so culturally and religiously integral to who he was. The more she studied, the more the cultural differences were thrown into sharp relief – Australian and Indonesian – until one day she could no longer contain a growing sense of despair.

‘But our cultures are so different. How can Australians and Indonesians ever even communicate, let alone get on? In Australia, if you’re extroverted you’re popular, in Java it’s crass. In Australia people think they have a right to complain, in Java you apologise if the hotel bath plug is missing. In Indonesia you smile when you’re giving sad news so the other person doesn’t feel so upset, here they’d think you a cold hearted monster if you did that. In Australia people in power give orders and dominate, in Indonesia they’re quiet, reserved, humble ...’
The litany of differences was addressed to Rosida whose face was lit with a warm, amused smile. There was silence as all the class listened. Some were nodding, they wondered the same thing. Then, as one, they all looked at each other, and then at Rosida, and burst out laughing, Maddie included. They were doing it. Between the class and Rosida there was respect and appreciation, and now, at this moment, a shared sense of irony. What they loved about their teacher was the way they could be drawn into a conversation that was changing what they knew about the world, and also challenging what they accepted as normal. It was understanding of a kind that would never be total or complete.

Several times Maddie had recurring dreams in which Iwan appeared in a demon mask with blood red eyes, wild yellow straw hair that reached to his knees, long orange tongue lolling from fang lined mouth. His foot long razor sharp fingernails threatened to rip apart her body and face. Iwan or this creature wanted her to have his baby and, when she woke, she would find herself in a lather of perspiration and, once or twice, filled with an aching lust.
When the taxi stopped in front of his father’s house in the village, a niece Iwan no longer recognised began spreading word of his arrival. He paid the driver and, picking up his luggage, turned and saw his stepmother emerge from the house. She seemed to have shrunk since he’d last seen her but now she was hurrying towards him, murmuring his name. He took her hand, bowed and lifted it to his forehead, and when he released it she clasped him on both shoulders and put her face to one side of his face and then the other. The next to arrive was Hari who now lived in the new house they had built next door. She stood, head on one side, looking him up and down and smiling broadly. Then, without touching him, led him into the house with her shoulder dropped submissively and her hand extended to guide him up onto the verandah and through the open doorway. One by one, other members of the family began arriving – on foot and by motor bike – his brothers and their wives, neighbours, Hari’s husband, Wisnu, and finally, his father, Totot, who had hurried back from the rice fields.

The house bubbled with voices, laughter, energy, curiosity. Glasses of hot tea were brought by the trayful. Snacks were placed on a table. Iwan’s suitcase and other bags stood like orphans on the verandah, and the visitors made their way around them while the children pulled at the zippers and fingered the small brass padlocks. For a time Iwan remained standing so as to greet another wave of visitors as the aunts, uncles and cousins from other villages began turning up too. Totot slipped away to bathe and reappeared in clean clothes. He sat across from Iwan and drew a cigarette from a crumpled pack. It was the same brand as always. By the time Iwan finished drinking his tea, the crowd had thinned and his father asked, ‘Your wife – is she joining you?’

Suddenly the emotional and physical weakness Iwan had been keeping at bay threatened to overwhelm him. As the panic attack took hold, he tried to stand. Gasping for breath, he staggered and put out a hand to stop himself from falling. Wisnu responded quickly to try and break his fall and was soon joined by his older brothers, Hidayat and Ismoyo, who, on Hari’s instruction, transferred his now unconscious body across the garden to her house. They laid him on his side on a bed and Hari brought water to bathe his forehead. A doctor visited and prescribed complete rest, plenty of rice porridge and vegetables, and no spices or fried food until he said so.

Iwan spent six weeks sleeping and being cared for by Hari and the rest of the family. The relapse left him in a weakened state but it seemed that whenever he opened his eyes Hari was there, helping to bathe him morning and evening, getting him to eat the small portions of food she prepared that he complained he could barely taste. Often she was sitting nearby, preparing ingredients for a meal, picking small stones from the rice, or applying wax to a cloth. They rarely spoke and when she saw him looking at her she smiled gently and let him fade back into sleep. Once he managed to say, ‘So big sister, you’re looking after me again?’
‘It’s nothing,’ she replied. She was happy to have him back after such a long time and it brought back memories of how it had been for her, for them all, when he left. His absence had been a continuing ache and now, God willing, even though he was so ill, she knew she could make him better. But what happened? Why was he so ill? Where was his wife and why wasn’t she taking care of him? Why was he alone? They kept the questions to themselves as the various households went on with their daily lives and soon the neighbours stopped prying as well. Several times a day, his father looked in on him and spoke quietly to Hari, or sat on the verandah as if keeping vigil. Children came and went to school, adults attended meetings to discuss water allocations, there was work to do in the rice fields, crops to be harvested, the women made batik and went to their weekly sessions at the mosque to study the Koran.

At the end of the second month Iwan was beginning to recover physically but it was a slow process of building his muscle strength and energy to do the simplest of things like sitting up, standing, and then walking without support. Step by step he became more aware of the life around him, both inside and outside the house. The Call to Prayer marked the passing of the day and he sensed the household’s response. Hari getting up to bathe and pray at 4.30 in the morning, then beginning her day’s work, the sounds of the family taking turns to bathe and pray. He heard the echoing croak of a toky, the mad squawk of hungry ducks feeding. Village life began to penetrate: the cacophony of roosters at dawn, the bellow of cows as they were scrubbed clean of parasites, motor bikes passing by, the putter of a motorised plough heading out to the rice fields. At different times of the day, raucous children trudged to school, their excited voices fading as they entered the school yard down the road. Sometimes Hari’s grandchildren came to watch television and the melody of Shaun the Sheep filled the house. Twice now he’d heard Hari humming the tune as she did her chores. Occasionally he got up and joined the family as they watched comedic talk shows in the evening or, if it was too hot or the mosquitoes were too bad inside, they lit mosquito coils and put down woven cane mats on a small patch of grass in front of the house and sat outside.

Despite improvements in his physical recovery, Iwan’s emotional and psychological state proved less resilient and, several times a day, tears streamed down his face without warning. At such times, or when the panic attacks made it difficult for him to breathe, Hari brought ginger tea. The days when he was unable to get out of bed gradually became less frequent and as soon as he was strong enough to bathe and dress without Hari’s help, they booked a masseur to come every second day to give him a massage. When the masseur dug his fingers into the painful points and knotty muscles of his body, Iwan cried out and, hearing him, Hari appeared and warned the man to be gentle.

By the fourth month the return of his sense of taste meant he could enjoy Hari’s cooking once more and he began to put on weight and feel more energetic. He relished the signature sounds of passing food vendors – the tink tink of spoon on plate of the *bakso* man, the melody of the
es daum vendor ... (da da da, dadadada da), and the bell ring of the jamu lady who came daily to mix him a tonic drink. At first he couldn’t drink the grey-green liquid at all, the effort tired him, but as his strength returned he was able to gulp it down. He even began sketching in the mornings and, bit by bit, ideas for new work were forming. By then he knew it was time for him to find a studio and place to live.

Everyday he thought of Maddie and wondered how she was. Scenes of their marriage came to him time and time again and sometimes the loss was too great and he withdrew from the family for days at a time. No one in his family asked him about her and this was both a relief and a sadness to him. The thought of what might have been haunted him and he worked hard to banish them from his mind, but it wasn’t so easy and he wondered if he might ever recover. He had no contact now with anyone from that life and he was pleased about that. He missed them, but he felt unworthy.

One morning on Hari’s verandah he found Totot sitting, enjoying a smoke. As he sat down next to him Hari arrived with some rice topped with an egg and glasses of tea for them both. They nodded but did not speak. Finally, when he’d finished eating, Iwan spoke up, answering the question his father had asked on the day of his arrival.

‘Maddie, that is my wife ... we’re separated. It was my fault, I wanted her to be a good Javanese wife but she’s not Javanese, she’s Australian. We argued a lot because of this and I think I’ve lost her now.’

Pak Totot was silent for a while, lost in a struggle with some long ago memories of his own. Over the next hour or so, he told Iwan the story of his mother Suriani. It was the first time he had ever spoken of her that Iwan could remember.

*Your mother was called Suriani. When she was born she was called Wagiyem but even when she was a child she was called Suriani because it suited her so well. She was like sunlight – she shone so brightly that when her flame went out there was darkness. Everywhere darkness. For me, perhaps also for you and your brothers and sister and for everyone that knew her.*

*As you know, my village where I was born is across the river but after my father died I came here to work for my uncle. He was a blacksmith with no sons so he asked for me to come and help him. Before that I was working in the batik factory.*

*The first time I saw Suriani I thought she was very beautiful and very graceful, and it always seemed as if there were yellow butterflies following and protecting her. One day I even followed her to the river and watched her playing with some children in the water. As soon as they saw her they started shouting at her and teasing her and straightaway she started playing wildly, chasing and ducking them in the water, splashing. It was such a contrast. First she was*
so quiet and refined, then she was so lively like a naughty boy. It made me laugh and I had to creep away before anyone saw me spying on her.

The matchmaker arranged our marriage and I moved into your grandparents' house. For one year I did not see her. Yes, that's right. She hid from me. Every morning I got up and Ibu Tini, your grandmother, brought breakfast for me to eat with your grandfather. I went to work every day and in the evenings your grandmother brought me my dinner and again I ate with your grandfather. I slept alone for the whole year. Sometimes I saw her sarong or kebaya drying on the clothes line, that is all. Always there were clean clothes for me, a glass of tea on a tray, but I was never sure if they were prepared by Suriani or Ibu Tini. Every day Ibu Tini said to me, 'Your wife cooked these. Your wife washed these.' Every day was the same. I only ever saw her in the distance. But I waited. For a whole year I hoped something would change but it didn't and so I divorced her and went back to my uncle's.

Ibu Tini and Pak Daliman were unhappy when I left but I think Suriani must have been pleased. Perhaps she was too young – only seventeen – but eventually the matchmaker came to them with another offer of marriage to a man who was quite a lot older and whose previous wife had died. Suriani wasn't happy about this marriage either but her parents insisted. After the man took her to his house Suriani was having tea with her new mother-in-law and sister-in-law when the new husband came in and handed her some dirty clothes to wash. She was so angry he treated her like this that she told him if he just wanted someone to cook and clean and wash his clothes, then he should get a servant. And she left the same day and returned to her parents' house and the village.

The whole village was talking about it. They said she was spoiled and no one would marry her now, which was exactly what she wanted. Well, about a year later the matchmaker came to see my uncle again. She said that Suriani left her husband because she realised she liked me. Of course, she told Suriani that I hadn't married because I still liked her. The matchmaker said Suriani had changed, grown up, matured and so, eventually, I agreed to marry her again. This time her parents were strict with her but even though we shared the bed she wouldn't talk to me or look at me. She put a bolster down the bed between us and every night we lay side by side in the dark. No matter what time I woke in the morning she would be up already and when it was time to eat she would bring me some rice and egg. Sometimes our hands would touch briefly, but still she refused to look at me. Despite that I loved her more and more each day.

Every night the bolster lay between us in the bed. And every night I'd say goodnight and blow out the candle. Then we'd lie in the dark and soon I'd hear her breathing and know she was asleep. I longed to hold her of course but I decided to be patient. I simply believed she had some feelings for me.

One day I saw her returning from the river with some other women from the village. They were carrying bundles of washed clothing and I watched from a distance as they joked and talked.
Then she saw me watching and that was the first time she smiled at me. The other women saw this and started to tease her.

Not long after that Suriani was making the bed in the morning and I couldn’t stop myself. I walked up behind her and touched her arms and she stood very still, then she turned around and we were so close and face to face. She stood very still and I leaned forward and inhaled the perfume of her skin and hair. She stepped back then and as I walked down the road to my uncle’s I looked back and she was watching me go. I waved to her. I was so happy that day.

Things went on as usual but one day something happened that changed everything. Suriani was cooking in the kitchen and there was a snake sliding towards her. She was very frightened of snakes and at first she didn’t see it but then the animals became agitated so she became aware of its presence. She froze. I was outside when she screamed and I came running. I killed the snake but she was crying and trembling in fear so I went up to her and she let me hold her and comfort her.

That night when I went to bed the bolster was gone and step by step we began to touch one another for the first time. Soon after that we became husband and wife.

The two men remained sitting on the verandah and then Totot handed him a parcel wrapped in thick plain paper and tied with a thin ribbon of cloth. Iwan untied the ribbon and inside the leaves of paper he saw the batik sarong his mother had made for him all those years ago.

Totot said, ‘Your mother wanted you to have this when you married but I wouldn’t let Hari send it. I thought it might get lost. Maybe I was wrong, maybe this is why your marriage hasn’t succeeded.’

Shuddering pent up grief and sadness shook Iwan’s body as he pushed his face into the cloth in search of any lingering scent of wax. His father waited calmly for his throaty gasps and tears to subside before getting up and touching his fingertips gently to his shoulder.

When he opened out the kain Iwan found tucked at its centre the batik of the butterfly he made as a child. For the first time in months a warm golden brightness began suffusing his body, pressing out the greyness. He became aware of the damp air in contact with his skin, the fresh smell of the earth, the flowers and fruits on the trees, the maturing of the rice crops. There was life all around him, and he was part of it. Life beckoned – there were things to do. He would build a studio, a place to live and work.
Iwan’s curiosity about the myriad changes that had occurred since his departure in 1997, and also since his brief visit in 2007, deepened with his emotional and physical recovery. Through Pak Harto he was drawn into the artist communities of Solo and Yogyakarta. In the south of Yogyakarta he made new friends and soon had offers of places to stay when he attended exhibition openings. He met artists he’d known only briefly or read about in art journals. The current democratic era, referred to as Reformasi, was more than a decade old now and it brought benefits as well as threats for artists. Voices previously suppressed now asserted themselves, progressive as well as conservative. For those whose arts practice was shaped by resistance, the past decade had been a time of reassessment and renewal. For Iwan that generation of artists were an inspiration because their practice remained deeply rooted in familiar cultural practices and beliefs.

While his own development as an artist had brought him to European, American and Australian contemporary art as well as, more recently, Chinese artists, he was discovering his fellow Indonesian artists were more likely to be inspired by each other or other artists from the region. Something intangible was happening – something diverse, unpredictable and exciting – and it was even inviting many artists to play with the old art forms. But he felt like an outsider, like he had no part in the art world here, but when he spoke of feeling like this to Pak Harto, his old mentor reassured him.

‘Don’t worry. Whether you recognise it or not your work is grounded in Central Java. If anything, this exile of yours has sharpened your sensibility. Perhaps you don’t recognise it yet. An artist never arrives ... they are always on the way. Of course they may have stops along the way, but they are just that. Stops. There is no future, only the present.’

Iwan’s perspective was that of a kite flying high – over the politics, the history, the chatter in the street, the powerful and prolific art world of the cities. In the foreground, however, were the village, the river, the surrounding rice fields and nearby villages where the branches of his family lived. He saw the river snaking its way towards the coast; motor bikes, bicycles, pedestrians waiting their turn to cross the plank bridge; and ten metre long rows of screen printed fabrics spread out on the ground to dry. He saw clusters of red ceramic tiled houses tied to one another by brown earth tracks or bitumen grey roads, the glint of fish ponds and the texture of lines drawn by rows of tomatoes, cassava or beans.

He sensed the ghosts of the powerful empires that rose and fell in the 1600 years before the Europeans brought their particular brand of oppression and hardship. It was an ancient culture and an ancient land, with layer on layer of knowledge that had been ground and spiced in cosmopolitan encounter. The victory over the colonising Europeans, that proud struggle, was linked by a strong thread to the overthrow of the Suharto regime and the ongoing call to end
corruption, collusion and nepotism. The chorus of voices in favour of strengthening the rule of law was growing, he was sure of it.

Surely no country could be better placed or more experienced in dealing with globalisation than the archipelago. Every day he saw rich and poor, young and old sending text messages and talking on mobiles. A stroll through the village and he saw that most houses had televisions. Children were playing computer games, and at least one betchak driver he knew had an iPad. In Sydney he refused to use a mobile but now he found them a necessity – to call a taxi, to learn of exhibition openings and other art events, to be picked up from the bus station, to see if Hari or his sisters-in-law required anything from the markets.

Many of the younger artists were incorporating multimedia into their arts practice – working collectively or alone. They were active on social media. At exhibitions he saw people photographing the artworks with their smart phones and wondered why. Were they posting them on social media, sharing them with friends? He met foreign artists who were living in the city or visiting as artists-in-residence. It amused him that the younger artists addressed him as ‘Pak’. He was thirty-five and they saw him as an old man, someone to look up to.

Where should he live? Should he remain in Indonesia and make it his base? Perhaps he could remarry? Should he move to Yogyakarta to be part of the artists’ community there? Or Solo? Or Jakarta? Or should he build on land that he owned opposite Hari’s house – there had been a school there once and the foundations were hidden under a swathe of weeds.

In the end he built a studio with timber doors that opened onto a garden of fruit trees and, beyond that, to rice fields on two sides. He re-discovered how much cheaper everything was here – not just building materials, but artist supplies as well. He began painting and, as Pak Harto predicted, his work began to absorb the colour, light and images of the village. Lighter and brighter than the paintings he’d done in Sydney, they reflected the kite’s eye view of the world that occupied him now. And whenever he felt stuck, or restless, he borrowed a bicycle and went cycling in the late afternoon or early morning light. Sometimes he rode all the way to the morning markets in Masaran where he loaded up the saddle bags with fruit and vegetables. He saw broccoli and cauliflower for sale in the market, something he didn’t remember seeing there before. A bunch of fresh watercress reminded him of Maddie making a salad and he wondered where he might find olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Then he remembered the supermarkets that had sprung up in his absence, which stocked all kinds of things he associated with his Sydney life like muesli and pasta and baguettes, even jam. Who bought them? Was it people like him who had lived overseas? It bothered him to even consider that the local growers’ markets might one day disappear, but he hoped they would always be here, selling what was fresh, locally grown, and in season.
And this was how it went. He would think of Maddie – something would remind him of her. Then another thought would come, and another, and he would be thinking of something else entirely. His artist friends assumed his marriage was over. Cross-cultural relationships were difficult and everyone had a story to tell – their own or someone else’s. Of those that endured – usually in cases where an American, Australian, Japanese, European or Canadian woman was married to a Javanese – it was discussed as being down to the woman’s behaviour to make or break the relationship. One success story according to two of his friends, Nuranto and Yusuf, was where the English wife was seen as being ‘more Javanese than the Javanese’.

‘In what way?’ Iwan asked.

‘Well, she serves drinks to her husband and friends?’

‘Is that it?’ he asked.

Yusuf nodded, ‘Even the sultan’s wife serves her husband drinks, she might not make the drinks but she serves them.’

The two men were well-known artists in their late thirties. They did exciting work and were well regarded but, it seemed to him, they had very traditional marriages and you rarely saw their wives at exhibition openings. Would such a relationship satisfy him? Was it really that easy? Their wives took care of the daily practicalities of life, looking after the children, buying and cooking food, clothing everyone, keeping track of their expenses, dealing with the bureaucracy.

‘So, your wives serve you drinks?’

The men laughed. ‘No,’ said Yusuf. Iwan looked at Nuranto, ‘No. Well maybe sometimes if we have guests.’

‘So you’re just talking about Western women serving drinks then?’

In his own family Iwan watched his father and brothers sitting and waiting for their drinks and meals to be served. His stepmother, sisters-in-law, and sister Hari were still traditional in that respect but the men often cared for the children, worked hard in the rice fields, participated in village and mosque activities. He asked his niece Yuni, who was studying anthropology at university in Yogyakarta and whose fiance Dedy was studying to be a doctor, whether she thought this an important custom.

‘If I have time I will. But I expect Dedy and I will both be working so we’ll have to share all the tasks. It’s different now, a different age.’

‘So, they say a good Javanese wife should make herself beautiful, have children and be a good cook. What do you think of that saying?’ Iwan asked.
‘Well, I think men say that. It dates from a time when women were seen as possessions. You know the old saying, “In order to be happy a Javanese man needs five things: a house, a vehicle, a kris, a wife, and singing birds.” Dedy doesn’t think like that. In fact, in his family his mother and father both cook but if Ibu Titik has cooked she’ll sit and chat with guests while Dedy or his father serve drinks.’

‘So it’s changing then?’

‘Well, maybe not for us in the village so much, but in Dedy’s family – his grandparents and parents studied abroad – the women have professional jobs.’

‘I see,’ said Iwan. ‘So, what do you think the role of the wife is now. Like, in The Ramayana, would a good wife give up her life of luxury and follow her husband into the jungle like Sita did for Rama.’

‘The Ramayana? Oh uncle, it isn’t so simple is it? Look at Rama’s treatment of Sita?’

‘How was she treated?’ he asked.

‘Well Rama fought the battle with Ravana and then he made Sita enter the fire to prove she was pure. Three times. Then, after all that he banished her into the forest, pregnant, with nowhere to go. What a jerk!’

‘You don’t think Rama did the right thing?’

‘You know what Uncle, I think most of us just work out what’s fair. It’s not like the wife will do this, the husband will do that. Lots of people get divorced these days but maybe it’s because they can’t work out how to care for and listen to one another. Is that why you split up from your wife, Uncle, because you couldn’t work it out?’

Iwan was taken aback. ‘Perhaps you’re right. Perhaps that was the problem.’

‘Well, can’t you make it up, start again? Are you just going to walk away? You could easily get another wife couldn’t you? You could get a Javanese wife if that’s what you want. But maybe you wouldn’t be happy with her either? Maybe you would just want your old wife back? Maybe you’d make the same mistakes.’ She stopped. She’d gone too far, again.

‘I’m sorry Uncle. Please forgive me?’

Iwan smiled, ‘I’m not sure she would have me back.’

‘Have you asked her?’

‘Well, no.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m sure it’s too late. Anyway, she might have found someone else by now.’

‘What’s to lose then Uncle?’
‘Come on,’ he said, ‘let me buy you ice cream.’ He could sense she was worried she had been too outspoken.

‘Okay,’ she said, ‘but only if you’ll promise not to give up yet.’

‘My dear Yuni, how did you get to be so wise?’

‘It’s easy to be wise Uncle, it’s putting it into practice that’s so difficult.’

As they waited to cross the busy road to the ice cream shop they turned and looked at one another. She had crossed that line again. He saw her look of contrition and burst out laughing.
Central Java May–June–July 2012
Maddie arrived in Yogyakarta in early May and for the first month she studied Indonesian at a nearby college and boarded with Mas Firdaus and Mbak Mifta and their three children aged two, six and nine. Iwan had been gone for eight months and contact with him had been sporadic. With a sense of foreboding, Gerardo, Akira and Marj called a meeting with Maddie to discuss what was to be done. Maddie still had access to his bank accounts so she could at least provide some assurance that he, or someone, had been drawing money out. In fact, some fairly hefty amounts had been withdrawn in the past two months and, if he continued spending at that rate, he might run out altogether. The only deposits to the account were the proceeds from his February exhibition which had gone ahead despite his absence.

Marj asked Maddie if she would consider going to Indonesia to see if he was alright and she said she wanted time to think about it. By the end of the meeting, however, she promised to go. She applied to the university for leave and was given the go ahead to use the time to conduct preliminary research into contemporary Indonesian women artists. Before her departure, Pak Bambang sent her the name of Iwan’s village which she located on Google Maps in the regency of Sragen, about thirty kilometres northeast of the city of Solo. A further online search confirmed it was in the batik producing area and this gelled with what she knew already. She even found advertisements for batik factory tours to the area. That was all they had so she’d just have to go to the village and see if she could find someone who knew the family. She had brought some family group snapshots and photos of Iwan with her as well in the hope they would be some help.

Thinking it would be impossible to remain committed to the research if she met Iwan and he rejected her, she decided to dig herself deeply into the work first. Her head of school, believing the proposal fitted with the national agenda for greater ties with Asia, had backed her wholeheartedly. On her return, she would write the research proposal, make a case for funding for an exhibition, and hopefully combine that with a contemporary art forum that brought together Australian and Indonesian curators, female artists and critics. Colleagues had also generously offered up the names of academics with links to Indonesian artists, and their combined effort meant she had a list of people to meet with on arrival. The majority had responded positively to her emails and were waiting to hear from her when she got settled.

She found the Indonesian language studies really paid off because the more people she met the more she found herself bombarded with text messages advising of exhibition openings, invitations to meet, and offers of introduction to relevant interested gallerists, curators, collectors and artists. On the advice of colleagues back home her first stop was the Indonesian Visual Arts Archive which housed an extensive collection of books and exhibition catalogues from the past decade or longer. She found the staff, Ina and Gunawan, so helpful that by the end of her fifth week her initial long list of possible artists had grown, shrunk, grown again,
until finally she had whittled the list down to five artists. The next step was to thoroughly research their work, visit their studios if they were local, talk to their gallerists or curators as well. In the monograph she was writing the focus was on three artists only but she had plans to write about all five at a later date.
Raindrops began striking the road as she strode towards Jalan Parangtritis, the main road south to the beach. She was in the main tourist area in the south of the city and heading back to her hotel. Motor bikes sped past, going faster than usual to beat the rain. Several betchaks were parked at intervals along the street in the hope of picking up tourist trade from a string of restaurants and hotels. Now the drivers were draping hooded plastic cloaks over themselves and plastic sheets over the roofs of the betchaks. If the rain became too heavy they would crawl inside to wait it out. As she passed they called hopefully, ‘Betchak Miss?’ but Maddie shook her head or waved no with her hand. One wiry old fellow with grizzled grey hair and a rascally tooth-gapped grin that spread all the way up his face to light his eyes had driven her to her hotel during a downpour a few days earlier and offered to repeat the service for the same price. But still she declined. She had just spent the equivalent, probably, of a driver’s fortnightly or monthly income on lunch and was feeling slightly ashamed – ten Australian dollars was a lot of money here and most days she ate for one or two dollars at nearby warungs. Today, however, when she arrived at the cafe favoured by resident expats, the manager had tempted her with the day’s special of rack of lamb served with couscous, chickpeas, stuffed baby eggplant, and a mild tomato sambal. Then she had a cafe latte and read the English language newspaper The Jakarta Post.

From time to time a wave of homesickness rolled over her, usually when she was tired or hadn’t eaten, or a situation seemed particularly difficult. They weren’t life and death issues, more often it was ordinary mundane things that got under her defences like arriving at the post office and finding it closed, or realising she’d paid too much for a hand of bananas. Sometimes she longed to do her own washing and hang it in the sun to dry, or she craved some food or other, like poached eggs on sourdough toast.

The Indonesian language course was recommended by Rosida, her Indonesian teacher in Sydney. Not cheap, but professionally run and with good quality learning materials. The college was a short walk from her homestay and she attended individual lessons with two teachers for four hours a day, six days a week. For the rest of each day she revised and did homework. She’d been lucky with her homestay family. She and Mbak Mifta were the same age and with her help, and that of her teachers, her knowledge about Indonesian life burgeoned. She learned about local dishes and specialities, how to eat with her right hand, and the intricacies of text message abbreviations. She soon got used to squat toilets and using a dipper to scoop cold water from the bak mandi, the waist high blue tiled tub, to splash over herself for her twice daily shower. With Mbak Mifta available to take her across the city on a motor bike she had her mobile phone set up and a modem for her laptop all organised by the evening of her second day.
She became an observer of life, watching, trying to understand, wondering. As well as introducing her to local Yogyakarta dishes at home and welcoming her help in preparing the ingredients, Mbak Mifta took her on a tour of the growers’ market where she insisted she photograph and write down the names of all the fruits and vegetables she’d never seen before. She was astounded at the variety and abundance – thirty-four varieties of banana alone.

Living with the family was novel and fun but by the third week she began to feel the strain of the unfamiliar as well as the lack of privacy. The heat and humidity taxed her, but then there was the sheer necessary concentration to understand and be understood. Everyday life was no longer ordinary and the encounter with so much stimulation and strangeness, as well as the challenge of being sensitive to and absorbing kaleidoscopic ways of being and doing, made her feel so intensely alive that she felt she might burst out of her skin like an over ripe tomato. This gave rise to suppressed irritation and even shameful small eruptions of impatience at the slightest provocation – a Call to Prayer that seemed too loud, the price of a taxi or meal that was too high, the constant inquiry of ‘where are you from?’ An honest answer to this question was invariably followed by an invitation to buy a ticket to a play or dance performance or visit someone’s shop. She disliked these waves of negativity and the accompanying sensation of being perpetually on the edge of bursting into tears.

So after telling her hosts she needed to be closer to the major art galleries and arts community she moved to a hotel in the southern part of Yogyakarta. This gave her time alone to read, think, plan, write and manage what could only be spiralling culture shock. The hotel had a pool, air conditioning, clean sheets, flush toilet, wifi access in her room, and hot water for a bath or shower twice daily at seven in the morning and five in the evening. She loved it but there was no avoiding the feeling she was just a spoiled tourist after all, paying big money, nineteen dollars a day, for solitude.

She found the south even hotter and more humid than the north and on some days it was so hot she found it difficult to take a breath when she was out. She tried walking more slowly but it was as if she was wired to power walk. She was working full time now on her research and as she met more and more people they began inviting her to events – the official opening of a massive group art show, a twenty-four hour dance festival, a public weekend viewing of a private collector’s extensive collection that meant a two-hour journey into the mountains on the back of a motor bike.

As the frequency of the rain blobs amplified to a spattering rhythm Maddie breathed in the aroma of damp earth – like freshly cut ripe pears, different to how it smelled at home but just as sweet. She tucked her book under the shawl Mbak Mifta insisted she wear at all times to protect her skin from the sun, and pulled her umbrella close to the top of her head. Looking back on the past six weeks she was surprised at how much she had fitted in. There had been project presentations by visiting artists-in-residence at local galleries, an all-night wayang kulit
performance in the artists’ village, various performances at the sultan’s palace, and an evening of mask dances by a visiting troupe from Cirebon on the north coast. There was so much still to learn, such as why there were no obvious price lists for the artworks at exhibitions. Why was that? Were they not for sale? How did it work here? She was yet to find out.
By the last week of her second month life seemed a little easier to Maddie. Things that seemed strange in the beginning had become familiar, even homely. She had routines. She had befriended an Indonesian journalist, Eko, at an exhibition and he invited her to meet his wife, Tata, a visual artist and graffitist. The three had become friends and Tata had led her to some women artists whose work was fresh and original, and introduced her to some prominent local curators. The couple were both from Central Java originally – Eko from Yogyakarta and Tata from Solo – and they met while completing postgraduate studies in the United States. They spoke English fluently and Tata was helping Maddie with interpreting and translation.

There was a vegetarian organic restaurant not far from her hotel that opened mid-afternoon and had small octagonal gazebos scattered throughout a large tropical garden. It was where they usually met up and on this occasion they were lounging on cushions around a low table in one of the gazebos. The couple had a passion for debating politics, art and culture. They often disagreed and were generous with their time and hospitality. Every time they met, Maddie had a list of questions or things she was curious to know more about, and while Eko was the more vocal of the pair, when Tata spoke he always turned and gave her his full attention.

Most days Maddie tried to read the English language daily newspaper, The Jakarta Post, which gave her a sense of local breaking news, and for international and Australian news she went online. It was odd observing Australian politics and society from another place and at a distance she saw how others in the region might find the comments of its politicians ill informed and even crass. Fortunately, however, not too much notice was ever taken of their southern neighbour.

The day’s news had prompted Maddie to ask, ‘Australia and Indonesia are part of the same geographical region yet they barely see each other, why is that? It’s like the other doesn’t exist.’

Eko who had spent several years working in Melbourne in the early 1990s had his own theories. ‘We have very different colonial histories. Also in Australia the indigenous people were outnumbered and outclassed with modern weapons after white settlement. In our country the population was a source of cheap labour for the colonial power, and when we finally gained independence, global capital combined with dictatorship to deny us the kind of justice the union movement fought for in Australia – the living wage.’

‘Yes, but why don’t they really see each other?’ Maddie repeated.

Tata said, ‘They both think they’re superior to the other, that’s why.’

‘In what way?’ Maddie asked.
‘Well Indonesians think Australians are rude and uncouth as well as quite stupid, their politicians and media at least, and Australians think whites are superior to non-whites but they’re not sure about it and that worries them.’

Eko disagreed, ‘It’s more than that. Australians are focused on the land, they fear the sea and what it might bring, so borders and the whole issue of border protection is an over reaction. Keeping out certain newcomers is their greatest priority and so politicians exploit it. It’s a paradox because it’s divisive and it’s a cheap nation-building project.’

‘Indonesia has porous borders and a population of 240 million to be worried about. But wouldn’t it be good if the two countries could learn to understand one another. Maybe it’s just up to individuals,’ Tata said.

Being in Indonesia, living here for two months, caused Maddie to wonder why, despite being married to an Indonesian, she hadn’t had much curiosity about the place before. Looking back, it seemed she had been hard wired to the idea that the priority art centres for her and Iwan were in the United States, Europe and, more recently perhaps, China. The wedge that forced her to consider Iwan’s work in terms of place and culture, that is, Central Java and the Asia Pacific region, was Silvia’s paper. Prior to reading it she had been situating him inside an Australian and Euro-American art historical context that had limited her understanding of the rich web of meaning in which it was situated. Now she wanted to know whether Eko and Tata thought the visual brilliance and conceptual purpose of South East Asian art could be seen and reviewed on its own terms, without being judged on the basis of a Western art theory approach.

‘What would such a framework look like? Where would you start?’ Maddie asked.

‘Well for a start you might consider their use of aesthetic and discursive strategies, themes, use of narrative, a communitarian outlook, a feel for materiality, a deeply rooted spirituality ...’ said Eko.

Tata added, ‘Conceptual thinking has been a strong feature of arts practice across the region, possibly due to postcolonial repressive governments, plus in Indonesia at least there have been more accepting attitudes towards women as social actors.’

‘Really?’ Maddie was surprised. ‘Why is that?’

‘Women were very active traditionally in Javanese society as well as in the struggle for independence,’ Eko said.

Maddie wanted to know what they thought about Silvia’s thesis that alternative critical frameworks to the Western art historical perspective were needed in order to mend the legacy of disrupted intra-regional communication brought about by colonialism.
Tata said, ‘Since the 1980s there’s been a rethinking about art and its purpose which led to a focus on concept and locally rooted experimentation. As you know, many of our artists have been travelling overseas to exhibit, many even live abroad for a time. They’re in touch with what is happening in the world and what other artists are doing, especially around the region. I think you’ll find that this generation of artists is developing contemporary artworks on their own terms and the work is distinctive, powerfully original and closely linked to local aesthetic and cultural forms.’

‘Well, that’s what you would say because you support that,’ Eko said, ‘but some of the curators don’t have this broad picture of what is happening the way you do’.

When these conversations were taking place, Maddie found herself reaching for her notebook.
Maddie loved the Yogyakarta accent, the way it dropped a loud emphasis on the last syllable. JogjA, BeringharjO, ayO. Sometimes this was used to great effect as with a cross-dressing comedy duo who emceed a dance festival she attended. While her lack of language fluency was often frustrating, she found she was absorbing much by observing and paying attention to what was going on around her. This became clear when she borrowed a friend’s bicycle and, just ten minutes from the main road, found herself passing through a sea of rice fields. On her rides she witnessed many small scenes of people doing everyday jobs such as the women throwing the rice up in flat cane baskets to let the chaff fly away or a group of men making thin grey bricks by the edge of the track. Further along she saw batches of the same bricks that had been fired to all shades of red. Here, just ten minutes from her hotel, there was space, nature, sky, fresh air.

On her earliest forays off the beaten track she’d felt fearful and even projected that the place and people she met were hostile. But as she propelled herself into these uncomfortable and confronting experiences, forced her body towards the unknown, she felt herself opening up to changes in herself, a shift from a certain anxiety to a feeling of being okay, from dis-ease to at-ease, towards acceptance and familiarity. Passing from unfamiliar to familiar, incompetent to competent, anxious to relaxed, she discovered she was actually functioning better, communicating more, and becoming confident about her aimless wandering on bicycle or foot. By making herself enter the fray she was becoming more independent, more adult, as she was in her other life. She could serve herself in the padang restaurant now, send mail, extend her mobile phone coverage, buy food in the market or street warungs, bargain with the betchak drivers.

Every now and then she came to a village, so tidy as if an official entry in a tidiest village competition. Clean swept streets. Flowering pot plants lined up along the outside of fences to beautify the street. Not a cigarette butt or scrap of paper or plastic anywhere. On an early morning walk to catch a view of Mt Merapi before it was hidden by a curtain of grey cloud for the day, she came to a small square. A woman was placing a woven mat on the bare ground. She had large metal containers of meat and vegetable dishes and one of rice which she placed in position around a low stool. No sooner had she set up than people began streaming from all directions to place an order which she served either onto the plate they brought or onto brown waxed paper that she folded into a pyramid parcel and sealed at the top with a fine stick.

The following morning Maddie returned to the square with some money. She was determined to sample the dishes of the makeshift chef and was practically the first to arrive. Competition was fierce and within ten minutes the food was all gone and she’d missed out. As she turned to leave a lively discussion broke out in Javanese among those remaining. She felt teary and
dejected, but resolved to try again tomorrow and this time, she told herself, she’d push and shove with the best of them.

When she arrived in the square the woman was setting up and once again customers were emanating from the adjoining gangs. When they came together they were animated, with one man gesticulating excitedly. She couldn’t understand, they seemed to be talking about her, voices were raised. Were they angry? Did they not like her being here?

Slowly it dawned on her, they were standing back, waiting, inviting her to place her order first.

In all these small ways she was absorbing the city, it was becoming a part of her, imprinted in her, and with this realisation she knew it was time to try and find Iwan.
Eko navigated the car through the narrow streets of the part of the city known as the artists’ village until they came to a large white cube building that was bordered on three sides by flooded rice fields. It was Maddie’s first visit to the gallery which was built and owned by an artist whose work had been selling at very high prices in Singapore and Hong Kong for more than a decade. By the time she, Eko and Tata got out of the car in the makeshift carpark across the road, the sun had slipped away and left a shimmering blue and pink light in its wake. On first entering the ground floor exhibition she was taken aback by the massive proportions of the space that seemed to almost dwarf the row of very large abstract paintings hanging on the walls. They were by a single artist and each of the paintings was textured in different tones of a single colour – one in blues, the next in greens, then reds, pinks and oranges. The oil paint had been applied in thick slabs, as if with a trowel, and each painting was sealed with a gloss finish that somehow cheapened the effect. The works overall were strangely lifeless and flat, garish even, but one caught her eye – here the artist had departed from the formula and achieved a three dimensional effect in which blue marks strained forward as if trying to escape the shades of brown and beige that formed a receding background. ‘There’s something interesting happening here,’ she thought, ‘it’s nothing like these other works.’

The man standing in front of her began turning as if to respond to her thoughts but when he set eyes on her he became transfixed, as if digging deep into his memory for a link between them. And she too was captured by his face, then the details of what he was wearing, and how he held his body.

It was a delayed reaction, ‘Iwan?’

Iwan was shaking his head too as if trying to wake from a dream. He turned away and she stepped forward and put a hand on his shoulder. He flinched and turned to her again.

‘Maddie ... is it you?’

‘Yes, it’s me,’ she said laughing. ‘I was imagining you’d been listening to my thoughts about this painting and were about to reply.’

‘I think it cannot be you, must be ghost. So often I think I see you since I am here, in Jakarta, in the market in Masaran, on a visit to Candi Sukuh. What are you doing here?’

‘Different things but I came to see how you were. I was going to come to the village to find you there. I didn’t expect we’d meet like this.’

Iwan led her out of the gallery through a middle courtyard to a low wall at the back of the complex. The wall ran alongside the rice field and was just the right height to sit on. It was bathed in light from the gallery and a surround sound broadcast of frog and cricket song from the rice fields. A band just starting up in the courtyard.
It was strange after all that had happened to be exchanging news and her first question was about his health. He said he was well and asked for news of everyone in Sydney. She gave a brief rundown and said that everyone sent their love and were hoping to hear from him soon.

‘You are coming home sometime aren’t you?’

When he didn’t respond she tried for a more neutral topic.

‘How is your family? Are they well? What about the art scene here, how do you find it? Are you painting?’

As the questions rolled out of her he laughed, ‘So many questions?’

‘Yes, truly.’

‘Alright, but first, tell me, how long you are here, why you come?’ The words faltered in his mouth. He was unused to speaking English.

She described her research project, the artists she was meeting, the friends she had made, and her Indonesian language studies.

‘You study Indonesian?’

‘Yes, I began studying just after you left. It was Pak Bambang’s suggestion. He thought it might help me through a difficult time.’

‘And did it?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe. It was wonderful to meet Rosida – she said she knows you – that you’ve been going to Friday prayers with her husband for many years.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Abdullah I think.’

‘Ah yes, Mas Dul. He’s a lecturer at a university – Sydney I think.’

‘That’s him. I learned so much in her classes. It’s frustrating not being able to speak the language better but I manage simple conversations and luckily there are many people here who speak English.’

‘I never knew this,’ Iwan said. He took out a cigarette and, after looking to her for permission, went ahead and lit it.

It seemed entirely fantastic to be sitting with him on a wall in Nitiprayan. ‘Look, a firefly,’ she said as a tiny cloud of yellow green lights hovered barely a metre away and then faded into the darkness. There was a splash, probably a fish or bird, or perhaps a frog leaping into the water.

In the courtyard the music stopped and someone was making a speech. After a while there was clapping, followed by another speech.

‘Have you been painting?’ she asked.
‘Yes, I work on exhibition for Jakarta and also submit painting for JogArt festival. I just build studio.’

‘Oh, that explains the withdrawals in your bank balance.’

‘Yes, I need place to work and already have land which I buy already. Remember?’ Maddie nodded. ‘So I have studio, place to live as well. Simple. It overlook rice field.’

‘It must be great to have your own place?’

‘Yes, I happy ...’

Maddie looked up and saw that his chin had fallen onto his chest, his body and shoulders were hunched forward, it seemed as if he was being drawn into the dark watery surface in front of them. ‘Iwan?’

He straightened and looked across the rice fields to where the lights of a village flickered in the distance. Then without looking at her he began the story of his mother, Suriani, as told to him by his father when he was recuperating. The world around them receded as he brought her to his mother, and the light and nurturance of her presence. Later she would look back and know that no matter what happened after this, whatever they could become or not become together, they had sat side by side next to this rice field and felt Suriani’s love and blessing.

When he stopped speaking she said, ‘It seems we are not too different, your mother and I. I think we would’ve gotten on well together.’
When the train pulled into the station in Solo he was waiting to take her to her hotel. He’d been relieved to receive her text message to say she was on the way. His plan for the day was to show her the city, the parts that meant something to him. His old high school, some favourite eating places, the batik museum, the antique markets. His nephew had told him about the batik museum and he hadn’t been there yet. It was a large private collection and when he mentioned it as a possibility she had leapt at the suggestion.

The batik museum was new, air-conditioned, and the entry fee included a guided tour with a young woman leading them through a series of rooms. In each room she described in English inflected with an American twang the significance of the pieces according to where and when they were produced. With barely a pause, she pressed them on. All the most famous Indonesian batik producers and styles of the twentieth century were represented including those of Central Java – Solo and Yogyakarta – and the north coast cities. It opened his eyes as well to see the history of the art form unfold. First there was the batik produced before 1912 which used natural dyes, then the use of chemical dyes that were widely used after that date.

He sensed Maddie’s frustration as the tour guide hurried them through the time, space and place making of the exquisite batiks, drawing attention to the regional differences in colour and design. He noted Maddie’s curiosity and sensitivity to the ambiguity and meaning in the textiles, the colours, symbols and mystical qualities imbued in them and their ceremonial and everyday significance. Things he took for granted he was seeing with fresh eyes. She wanted more than the guide was giving but it was all there in the work if she would only look. The styles of Central Java attracted her interest the most, partly because of their abstract and highly stylised designs, but also for their use of shapes and signs to hide complex information. She had questions, wanted to know why it was that some designs could only be worn by royalty, but the guide resisted any attempt to linger.

There was so much to get through and they felt overloaded with information by the time they reached the end. At this point they left the air-conditioned gallery and entered a large batik making workshop. In one section groups of women were sitting on low stools in small circles. The guide showed them the small brass canting the women used to apply the wax by hand and explained that they were producing batik tulis, hand drawn batik, which was the most highly prized because of the time and skill it took to make. Then they moved on to where some men were using the brass stamps known as a cap (chop), which they placed into the hot wax and then pressed a block design onto the cloth, positioning the stamp precisely in just the right spot to form a continuous border pattern. In the dyeing shed they saw the huge round drums of coloured liquid sitting idle and Maddie was disappointed not to see the dyeing today.

Back in the reception area and shop Maddie began looking at the batik on sale but he discouraged her, telling her they would find much finer batik in the village. So she bought a
book about the exhibition instead. During their two days in Solo, also known as Surakarta, he
introduced her to some of his favourite food stalls – Warung Nuke was a tiny room with
windows opening onto a quiet gang, too narrow to take cars. Three women ran the restaurant,
busying themselves with cooking and making drinks for their customers who helped
themselves to the dishes that covered a large wooden table. He also took her to a street where
there were several warungs that specialised in serving tofu that melted in your mouth. From
there they went to the antique market so she could look at old batik, some faded and thin, some
still strong in colour. He instructed her on which were the best quality, those that were tulis,
those made using the cap, and those that were a combination of tulis and cap. He explained
how to tell batik from screen printed fabric, encouraged her to bargain with the shop owners,
suggested prices, and was impressed when she got an even better price than he suggested. She
bought several sarongs, an old brass cap in the design of a water lily and a wooden puppet of a
woman wearing traditional sarong and kebaya. The puppet had a strong haughty face, there
were bone sticks to move her arms, but the shop owner couldn’t tell them who she represented.

Heavy drops of rain began scoring the footpath as they left the markets and drove them into a
nearby hotel. As the waiter showed them to a table in the open air pavilion a curtain of water
drenched the surrounding pavement and garden, drawing inwards those seated around its edge.
The rain cooled the air and then departed as abruptly as it had arrived. After the emotional
highs and lows of the past eight months it was as if they had finally been brought together on
neutral territory so that words, insights and stories could flow like a river to the waterfall. He
wanted to know about the artists she was researching, the families at the Darlo Boarding
House and in Bankstown, and her roiling feelings of culture shock while learning the language.

When it was her turn, she returned to the questions she’d blurted out that night at the gallery
and so he told her about his weekly visits to Yogyakarta for exhibition openings, how
impressed he was with the work of some of the artists of his generation and older. A number
had international reputations and some had even relocated to other countries while still having
regular exhibitions in Indonesia. This globalisation of art and artists was a surprise and he told
her how being here was connecting him with the world in a way that didn’t seem possible in
Australia. To him, Australia seemed to be cut off from what was happening in the region and
perhaps in the world.

‘Do you want to be part of the art world here?’ she asked.

He smiled, ‘Perhaps, but at the moment I feel more like Australian artist than Indonesian. Do
you think it strange?’

‘No. Of course not. You’ve lived much of your adult life there, fifteen years. It’s where you’ve
trained and exhibited. Do you feel divided?’

‘No, not at all, I feel lucky that maybe be part of both.’
‘What about all the changes since you left? Has that been difficult to adjust to?’

‘Yes, maybe, but somehow being in village slow it down. Yogyakarta look same, but Jakarta big surprise. Very modern. Many tall buildings. Shopping malls. This I not expect. You see, I not been there before.’

‘What about politics – when you left the country was under a dictatorship right?’

‘I still worry if people talk about politics. I not used to this. In Australia yes, but not here. Here I think someone listen, spy. But is okay, I get used to it.’ He was trying to understand what it was about her that was different. ‘You seem calmer,’ he said.

‘Perhaps from being on holidays?’

‘No, it something else.’

‘You seem different as well, on your own soil. It’s strange that here I’m the one who stands out.’

‘Does it bother you?’

‘Sometimes. It’s funny, I look in the mirror and what I see is a shock. It’s like I’m thinking I look like everyone else – black hair, brown eyes. That’s odd, but the main thing that bothers me is feeling cut off by language, when I can’t communicate easily. You must have felt that too?’

‘You get used to it.’

He wanted to ask about Mack. ‘Gerardo say Mack gay. Is true?’

‘Oh yes, he’s met a lovely man. They’re very happy.’

‘I didn’t know. I thought you loved him.’

‘Well I do, of course, but not in a girlfriend–boyfriend way.’

‘This something I not used to. Here men and women friends like that, they get married.’

‘Even if they’re gay?’

He considered this, ‘Maybe especially if gay.’

‘But why?’

‘Well it’s important to marry, have children. It’s what makes you human, Javanese, an adult.’

‘What if someone doesn’t marry?’

‘That’s unusual.’

It was time to go and he signalled to the waiter to bring the bill.
'Iwan, we need to talk about what happened to us. I’m so sorry about the abortion and I’m so sorry I didn’t really understand about the pressure you felt to have children. Bambang explained...'

'I think you understand but you just not ready. I too impatient.’

‘Well no, I don’t think I understood it the way you felt it. The sense of urgency. People rush into marriage much younger here, they used to in my parents’ generation too. So, at thirty-two I’m still a chicken in Australia, but here I’m an old chook.’

Chook was a swear word in Indonesian but this was not why he laughed. The image she painted made him feel happy.

‘I still can’t think about this thing, y’know? But when my father tell story of my mother I impressed. His love is very great. He forgive. I feel much respect for my father.’

‘And Silvia?’

‘I very sorry. When it happen I think your fault. Why? I don’t know. We do wrong things, we want blame someone else, yes? This human nature maybe.’

‘She came and saw me.’

‘Who?’

‘Silvia. She said it was her fault, that you didn’t see her again. I didn’t know, I assumed you were together. You wouldn’t talk to me so that’s what I thought. It hurt. Plus I felt such terrible grief after the abortion. So much loss ... I felt so worthless. Anyway, just when I was feeling better “she” came to my office and gave me a copy of her thesis on you. Then she told me that what happened was because I never learned Indonesian,’ Maddie paused to take stock of the emotion that had been rekindled and realised she could make a joke about it now. ‘So I threw her out of the office, probably would’ve punched her too if she hadn’t got out the door so fast.’

He nodded for her to go on.

‘I read her essay. She got a High Distinction and I confess she has really opened up my thinking about art history, particularly in relation to the region. She also reveals aspects of your work I hadn’t known about or considered, just by coming to it from the angle of your Javanese heritage. I think you’ll find it interesting too. I brought a copy with me – it’s at the hotel.’

Back at her hotel, they had a swim and ordered beers to drink by the pool.

‘So, have you taken another wife Iwan?’

He laughed and shook his head.
‘Not yet, too busy.’

The fear that she might have met someone else was niggling him as well.

‘And you? Is there anyone else?’

‘I still love you Iwan. There is no one else.’ She said it matter of factly and he didn’t know how to respond so he said nothing. She gathered up her things and went to get dressed for dinner. He was taking her to meet Pak Harto and his wife.
On the way to the village Iwan asked the taxi driver to stop at a fruit market so they could buy baskets of fruit for the family households they would visit that day. Their first stop was the house of his eldest brother Hidayat in Masaran but when they arrived the neighbours told them Hidayat and Nur had gone to Solo so they left a fruit basket and drove on. He directed the taxi driver to take the route to the village so that they entered the village along a straight tree lined road that cut through a grid of silver sky mirrors, all recently planted with even rows of spiky green rice shoots.

Each plot was a regular sized rectangle lined with narrow trimmed banks. ‘How does everyone know who owns the plots? Are they owned by all different people?’ Maddie asked.

‘Yes, all different.’

‘But what if they disagree? Are there deeds of ownership?’

‘Sometimes. If someone buy.’

As the vehicle slowed at the entrance to the village he pointed out key buildings and the houses of family members. On the right, a high school, then his niece’s house, then his second brother Ismoyo’s house which had a tiny mixed business at the front. Then a batik factory and showroom, followed by a string of houses and the primary school on the left. At the cross street he pointed to the dark timber building on the corner that was his studio. Then they turned right and after several houses and a side street he asked the driver to pull up outside his father and stepmother’s house. He had sent a text message to Hari to say they were on the way and his father, Pak Totot, came out of the house as they stepped onto the verandah. He was wearing a clean white singlet and sarong. He shook hands with Maddie and then Ibu Tuti joined them, followed by Hari. Both women were wearing hijabs, a sign that the welcome for Maddie was to be a formal occasion. Pak Totot and Ibu Tuti sat down and gestured to Maddie to join them on a set of four cane armchairs arranged around a low coffee table. Iwan sat next to her, bobbing up from time to time to greet visitors and introduce them to Maddie. A tray bearing glasses of tea was soon placed in front of them, followed by a plate of snacks, and a small hand of stubby bananas. She felt welcome but uncomfortable too because, whether she liked it or not, all eyes were on her.

They’d entered the living room through two wooden doors that were slid wide open. On the left side of the room there were two sewing machines, a wall unit containing fabrics, and a wide wooden bench on which someone was part way through cutting a piece of cloth to a paper pattern. Three pairs of open shutters drew air and light into the room and thin shafts of sunlight slipped through strategically placed perspex tiles in the tiled roof to light the work
area. The underside of the roof tiles formed the ceiling and timber beams supported the roof. Woven mats lay spread on the floor in the centre of the room.

As individual women arrived they were introduced and then disappeared through a door at the back where Hari had gone earlier to prepare the food. Soon Maddie was invited to move to the mats on the floor, at the centre of which was a stack of clean plates and cutlery. An array of food dishes was brought in. Rice, jackfruit curry, gado gado, a platter of fried fish, and a dark green vegetable which Maddie correctly guessed was cooked papaya leaf. Pak Totot asked Iwan to tell her the fish were from Hari’s pond.

At Iwan’s suggestion, Hari had provided a fork and spoon for Maddie but she ate with her right hand like everyone else, something she’d learned while staying with Mbak Mifta and Mas Firdaus. He was worried that she might feel uncomfortable being surrounded by everyone speaking Javanese but she told him to relax, and so he let her eat in peace. When they finished eating the plates were whisked away. Coffees were brought, and a platter of papaya slices. When he suggested they move on they collected up their belongings and walked next door to Hari’s house.
Hari’s recently built house was constructed out of thin red bricks like the ones Maddie had seen the farmers making in the rice fields in Yogyakarta. The floors were formed of rough concrete and the brick walls were exposed, with a thick even line of grey mortar between each row. The internal walls were also brick and reached only as high as the wooden triangular beams that supported the tiled roof; the spaces left for windows were boarded up with thick planks of raw wood. Presumably the floors would be tiled and glass windows installed at some later date when there was more money. In the sitting room there were four woven cane armchairs, a coffee table, daybed and television. A souvenir tea towel of Australian native birds hung on the wall above the television.

Hari’s husband, Wisnu, joined them and Hari brought glasses of tea. When they finished their tea she opened a door to a bedroom next to the living room. A small four poster bed took up much of the space and was veiled on four sides by a pale green embroidered mosquito net that reached almost to the floor. The mattress was covered in a crisp floral patterned cotton sheet and there were thin pillows at one end. A child’s school uniform hung from a hook on the wall and there was a chest of drawers in the corner. Iwan handed Maddie’s backpack to Hari and she put it on top of the chest of drawers. Then Hari took her down the hallway, past a tiny bedroom on each side, to show her where the bathroom was at the end of Hari’s kitchen. The kitchen was a single room across the back of the house. There was a knee high low shelf that served as the food preparation area. An empty wok sat on a gas fuelled hob and, at the far end, outside the bathroom, two large tubs of clean water stood ready for washing glasses, dishes and vegetables. In the bathroom a double sized smooth grey concrete bak mandi was filled to the brim with crystal clear water and, beside it, there was a squat toilet. The only ornament was a holder on the wall for soap, toothbrushes and toothpaste. Single taps, one in the kitchen and one in the bathroom, provided running water, presumably from a well.

Hari left her to use the bathroom and when she returned to the living room Iwan was sending a text message. He looked up, ‘All okay?’ She nodded.

‘We have to go to Ismoyo’s house now, they’re expecting us,’ he said.

She was touched at how solicitous he was, as if he had concerns about how she would manage in the village, with cold water for bathing and the lack of flush toilets. This was confirmed later that afternoon when Hari offered to heat some water for her to bathe. She said no, she was used to splashing cold water from the bak mandi over herself.

By now it was three in the afternoon and the heat pressed down on her as they walked through the village to Ismoyo’s house. She saw now that there were several streets parallel to the main road. Many of the houses had their front doors open, with a timber batik stand at the front that looked like a Victorian towel rack. Next to it was a low wooden stool no more than a foot high. A few people were on their verandahs or standing chatting in the street, and they called...
out to enquire who the visitor was. Maddie could feel the sweat coating her face and skin, her bra was soaking wet and she felt streams of fluid trickling down her ribs. She hoped she wasn’t getting sick.

At Ismoyo’s house they were greeted warmly by Ismoyo and Dewi, his wife, and once more they sat on mats while first tea, then snacks, then more food were brought. One by one Ismoyo’s young adult children arrived and were introduced and once again she felt suspended in a tumble of Javanese language, buoyed up by it, as she went through the motions of eating, and being fussed over. The young people chatted and joked with Iwan and he translated from time to time. Some men from the village dropped by and Iwan joined Ismoyo in entertaining them. Iwan’s nieces were taking turns to serve the food and then Ismoyo’s wife, Dewi, emerged from the kitchen and sat next to Ismoyo. She did not join in the conversation but sat back to listen, smile and sometimes laugh at the animated repartee between the young people and Iwan. She later learned that Dewi only spoke Javanese.

Eventually Iwan’s nephew, Jaya, arrived from Solo. Iwan had asked him to come because he spoke English well and, as soon as he entered, Ismoyo directed him to sit beside her. He was an attractive young man, confident and not shy at all. He immediately began asking about her trip, her research, where she was staying, how she found living there. She learned that he had studied English at university and now had his own business designing and making batik scarves for stores in New York and San Francisco. At Iwan’s prompting Jaya invited Maddie to go and see the studio workshop.

In an adjacent room, a group of five women were sitting on low wooden stools around a gas heated flat bottomed tin dish of simmering wax. All but one was wearing a colourful hijab over long sleeved blouses that covered their pants or jeans to the knee. They sat sideways in the circle so they could comfortably dip the *canting* into the creamy orange liquid. The wax set instantly and she saw how they held the wooden handle of the *canting* with their right thumb, middle and ring fingers, while using the little finger and index fingers of the left hand underneath the cloth, to steady and guide the flow of wax onto the cloth.

The women worked from seven in the morning until twelve, and then returned to work for two hours later in the afternoon when it was cooler. They were seated at the front of the building with the doors pushed wide open. Through Jaya they asked Maddie a tally of questions. When did she arrive? (This morning) How long was she staying? (Just one night) Why not longer? (I have to return to Yogyakarta to work) How old was she? (Very young) Why didn’t they have children yet? (She was too young). She had learned from Mifta that such questions were asked out of politeness and an answer that made people laugh was as good as any.

Jaya showed her pieces of white cloth that had intricate pale gold wax patterns applied to them. In some parts there were solid areas of wax, in others finely drawn leaves and flowers and shapes that contained repeat geometric patterns. He took one piece and explained that it
was for a man’s shirt and that all parts of the design ensured that when the shirt was made up
the patterns on the sleeves, back and front would match when it was worn. While the men’s
shirts and the sarongs were all worked on high grade cotton, most of the scarves were in
various grades of silk, some of which had to be sourced from other countries. The designs
were his and the work of the women was fine and intricate.

One woman was working on fresh white cotton, setting down the first fine even trace of wax
over the pencilled outlines of the design and the others were working on pieces that had been
dyed already in bright orange, purple or dark green. Some pieces had already been through two
lots of dying and had a bright orange or green background where it was once white, others had
dark grey or black parts added to bring up the design. They were nothing like the batiks they’d
seen in the batik museum and there was a Japanese flavour to the designs. After finishing each
stage of the waxing the women got up and hung the cloth on bamboo poles strung in parallel
rows from the ceiling. Then they took another piece to work on.

Maddie wanted to understand the process better and asked Jaya if he would write out the
stages of making the batik for her to study. She wouldn’t allow herself to take photos until
she’d really seen and smelled and listened, and now she closed her eyes lightly and listened to
the ‘phew phew’ outbreaths as the women blew away the air bubbles in the spout of the
cantings. Beyond the rhythm of breaths she heard other village sounds – a cow mooing, a
woman’s voice, ducks quacking, the splutter of a motor bike that wouldn’t start – but above all
she felt comforted by the soothing smell of wax.

Jaya had disappeared into the house and came back carrying a suitcase. He opened the suitcase
to show her a pile of exquisite finished scarves and sarongs while explaining that the problem
he had selling them in the United States was that there was little or no understanding of the
detailed handiwork that went into their making. Seeing these finished pieces, Maddie found
she too had trouble envisaging the processes of waxing and dyeing they entailed, or even
predicting how the pieces the women were presently working on would look in their final
incarnation.

Maddie said, ‘This is very fine work and your designs and sense of colour are wonderful. I
hope you’re very successful.’

‘Thank you.’ Jaya bowed modestly.

Just then Iwan arrived pushing two bicycles. ‘I thought we could take bike and see studio on
the way,’ Iwan said.

It was a while since she’d ridden a bike and she was surprised that she could still do it. The
studio formed an L-shape on a corner block at the cross roads and had rice fields on two sides.
It was built of recycled timber, the only house on that side of the road. Iwan led her up a
narrow path and into a courtyard that contained the remnants of a garden of fruit trees. The building had an L-shaped verandah on the side facing into the garden and its two large wooden doors were padlocked. Iwan undid the lock and slid the doors back, one on each side, and they stepped into the studio which was one long room that looked out over the garden and, beyond that, to the rice fields. A collection of very large paintings leaned against the walls ready to be sent to Jakarta for an exhibition. The timber floor was covered with a thick plastic sheet where Iwan had been painting and in the base of the L there was a kitchen and bathroom. There was little furniture – four cane chairs around a marble topped table on the verandah, some improvised plank and brick shelves for paints and art materials, and in the bedroom a thin single bed mattress, and, surprisingly, a fine antique chest of drawers with a marble top. The bedroom window looked out onto the rice fields.

‘How long did it take to build?’ she asked.

‘Several months but I ask my brother to supervise and I focus on painting.’

‘Do you mind if I ask how much it cost?’

‘Well I own land already. Perhaps $15,000 all up. There was school here before but it fall down so we use foundations. We buy timber from old house they pull down in my auntie’s village.’

‘The timber is beautiful. It seems like the building has always been here.’

She turned her attention to the paintings. From a distance they appeared to be aerial shots of the countryside, similar to what she’d observed on Google Earth, but up close she saw images floating beneath the surface of the flooded rice fields – faces, symbols, monuments, Javanese characters, words and expressions, all depicting the ghostly presence of the past in the present, some from recent history and some dating back centuries in Indonesian history. Were they expressing a view that the events of the recent past, the distant past and the present were linked? All part of a web of cultural and historical affiliations and engagements that extended from the far and recent past and thickened the present? A mapping, statement and reminder that responsibility for the present lies with everyone? Were they a way, she wondered, of grounding the fears and tinges of shame Iwan said he felt about being absent when the mass of recent changes were taking place? Still were? Tolerance and forgiveness and the need for vigilance seemed to be key strands in these works. She could see that because of her studies, the time she’d spent here and also because of the conversations she’d been having with Tata and Eko and the other artists she’d met. She became aware of a deeper sensitivity in responding to his work than previously.

She slept at Hari’s house and on her second day in the village another niece showed up. Her name was Umi and she worked in Jakarta for one of the big banks. For the past eighteen
months she had worked with the same bank in London. So while Jaya had an American accent, to Maddie’s amusement Umi spoke with an English accent and often playfully injected cockney expressions into the conversation. She joined Iwan and Maddie on a ride around the villages during which she explained to Maddie all the correct forms of address to use with Iwan’s family. She was preparing her to be accepted into the family, to find her place, as a daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, aunt and even a granny.

‘Granny? How can I be someone’s granny? Maddie asked.

‘Well, you’re not really a granny, it’s just that they have to address you as granny ...’

Maddie said, ‘Let’s write this all down when we get back. It’s doing my head in.’

Umi laughed. ‘Yes, okay. We’ll do a family tree.’

Her teachers at the language school had wanted to teach Maddie the forms of address but she really couldn’t see the necessity. Now she realised it was about finding your place, being accepted and behaving appropriately. When they got back to the village they visited each family to say goodbye. This was not to be rushed because at each place there were food and drinks to be consumed.

Before they left Hari’s house, Hari called for her to sit on the bench beside her and asked Umi to interpret. Then she looked at Maddie affectionately and spoke to her in Indonesian.

_Maddie, maaf ya... rumah kami sangat sederhana jadi mungkin kamu gak betah lama-lama tinggal disini. Makanannya juga gak mewah kayak di Australi, maklum di kampung jadi cuma gini-gini aja, seadanya. Kapan-kapan kalau berkenan, main dan mampir ke sini lagi, jangan kapok dan gak usah malu, kami semua masih keluargamu. O ya, walaupun kamu sebentar di sini, semoga berkesan._

Even before Umi translated, Maddie felt touched by Hari’s words, ‘Maddie, I’m sorry ... our house is very humble, so perhaps you won’t feel comfortable to stay here longer. Our food is not as good as the food you have in Australia, but ... please understand that we live in the village, everything is modest. Next time when you have time, please come to visit us again, don’t be shy, we’re still your family after all. Oh, and although you just made a short visit, I hope you enjoyed it.’

‘Terima kasih banyak,’ Maddie said. She was filled with love for this woman and felt blessed by what had just taken place. She wanted to respond appropriately, ‘What do I say?’ she asked.

Umi said, ‘You can say thank you very much for having me here ... and I’m sorry if I’ve been a burden on you.’

‘Okay, how do I say that?’

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‘You can say, “Terima kasih banyak atas segalanya ... dan maaf kalau saya sudah merepotkan”.’

Maddie turned to Hari and, with as much sincerity as she could muster, repeated the words.

It was about an hour’s ride by motor bike to the station in Solo and when they arrived the parking attendants directed them to the parking area. They bought her ticket and, after a word to the station attendant, Iwan led her to the women-only carriage of the train. When it came time to say goodbye she stepped forward to hug him but then recoiled to find him still and stiff like a plank of wood. Remembering where she was all of a sudden, she turned and stepped into the train.

‘When will I see you again?’ she asked from the doorway.

‘I come this week to Yogyakarta. Wednesday. Lunch maybe?’

‘Great. Send me a text. Oh, by the way, Akira and Gerardo have both smsed me to get your phone number. Can I send it to them?’

‘Oh yes, please ....’

Maddie waved to Iwan for as long as she could see him and then settled down for the hour long journey. Unlike the other carriages in which many were forced to stand, the women-only carriage was half empty. At each station whole families crammed into the carriage, only to be told by the guards that the men had to go to another carriage and, more often than not, the women and children went too, leaving spare seats in the carriage all the way to Yogyakarta.
As the train faded away Iwan was possessed by the thought that he might not see Maddie again, that she would slip out of his life once more. But what did he want? He was finding the art scene very lively here, particularly the way older artists embraced and supported the younger ones. There was no doubt that contemporary artists were receiving more international recognition and many wealthy collectors were buying up artists’ work, not just in Indonesia, but in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Hong Kong as well. He had met several artists living entirely on their arts practice, in part because it was cheaper to live here – land, housing, food, transport, and artists’ materials were more affordable – but also because the artists were getting good prices for their work.

Maddie must have sent his phone number to Akira, Gerardo and Pak Bambang because there was a phone call from Gerardo before he even reached his motor bike. This was quickly followed by text messages from Akira and Pak Bambang. Then there was a second message from Akira that had clearly been dictated by Marj.

*Dear Iwan,*

*I am very happy to hear that Maddie has been able to find you and that you are well. We miss you and hope you will return soon. Ernie and Bert are well though Bert’s right knee has been playing up again. The children are growing up. Akira is a very good father. Please give our best regards to your parents and family.*

*Yours, Marj*

The message brought his former Sydney life into focus. He found himself trying to imagine how much Eloise and Frank had grown since he left. He imagined them working in the garden with Ernie, or sitting next to Bert on the lounge to hear a story. He saw Marj carrying Frank up to bed and taking the paper off a chocolate Paddle Pop for Eloise. He realised he missed them too. They were part of his life in Sydney. As were Bu Wafa and Pak Bambang, and Gerardo.

He’d been surprised at how well Maddie’s visit in the village had gone. She seemed relaxed and comfortable with everyone in the family, sometimes playing with the children, drawing and making craft things. Sitting with the women making batik. Showing an interest in Jaya’s batik business and even going with Hari to pick beans for dinner. Riding around on bikes with Umi, insisting they take tracks he’d not been down before or which led to dead ends. Happily eating whatever Hari cooked and wanting to help. When a motor bike laden with baskets of sweet cakes stopped in front of Ismoyo’s shop she bought enough to feed three households. He’d thought the family would find her unrefined because of her Australian ways but oddly, it seemed to him she was more Javanese, quieter and more still. Perhaps because of the time in Yogyakarta or the language barrier that prevented her from joining in.
Could he forgive her for the abortion? He believed he had. Could he love her again as he’d once done? He didn’t know. They had history but the connection between them had been burned by grief and anger. He had to see her again but he knew they would make no plans.

By the time Maddie’s train pulled into the station in Yogyakarta it was almost five o’clock and the emotional see-saw of the past few days had caught up with her. She felt cross as she alighted from the train and when a group of hopeful taxi drivers pestered her with offers to take her home for twice the usual meter rate she stormed out of the station and was almost run over as she crossed the road. In Jalan Malioboro she hailed a taxi and, after giving the directions, slumped back in her seat. ‘I won’t be unhappy to leave Indonesia,’ she thought. By the time the taxi pulled up outside the house she now shared with two artists, Monique and Ketut, it was raining steadily. She’d met Monique when she was studying Indonesian and they soon found they had a lot in common so when a spare room came up at their house the couple persuaded her to move out of the hotel and in with them. Now, as a welcome home treat, they brought her a cup of English breakfast tea with fresh milk and soft white medallions of freshly baked baguette lashed with butter and Vegemite.

Then came a string of questions from Monique, direct and personal, one after the other.

‘So how was it with you two?’ she asked.

Maddie shrugged and pushed back the tears. ‘I wish I knew. I don’t know that either of us does. I didn’t think he’d ever forgive me for the abortion and I guess he thought I’d never forgive him either. But it happened and I think we’ve both accepted that we can’t go on blaming each other.’

‘A truce?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Isn’t that a good thing then?’

Monique was like Mack’s recently acquired fox terrier dog, Spud. If he had someone’s sock and you tried to take it off him he would not let go. Nothing could distract him, not even a piece of cheese which he loved.

Ketut got up to go for a smoke, ‘I’ll leave you to it ... You know, Maddie, that Monique’s parents are social workers, don’t you?’ he joked.

‘Friends talk about things,’ Monique said to him. She turned back to Maddie, ‘So is a truce a good place to be right now?’

‘I guess so,’ Maddie replied. ‘I feel hollow, emptied out. I’m unsure where we can go from here.’

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‘Do you think he’s met someone else?’
‘I was worried about that, but he says not.’
‘Do you believe him?’
‘Yes I do.’
‘So how did you feel then?’
‘Relieved I think. Yes I was really happy when he said that.’
‘Well, in your heart of hearts, do you think you could get back together? Is that what you want?’
‘There’s a link but it’s so weak, I’m not sure it’s possible to bring life to it. He’s coming to Yogya on Wednesday and we’ve agreed to have lunch. I miss him but I’m not sure if it’s him or being a couple that I miss. Maybe I just want back what I thought we had. Is that even possible? I really don’t know.’
Maddie began writing her paper on the three Indonesian women artists the day after she returned from the village. She was keen to make a start while she was still in the country, but also because she often didn’t know what she thought or felt until she began writing. One of the artists who lived in Belgium had recently had an exhibition in Yogyakarta and while the artist did not make it to the exhibition Maddie was able to interview her twice on Skype. The other two artists lived in Yogyakarta so she’d been able to visit their studios in the previous week and interview them about their work. She put together a dossier on each artist including documentation from international arts events they’d been a part of. She needed some kind of overall theme to link the three but hopefully that would emerge in the process of getting down the first draft.

At about eleven o’clock that night there was a loud knocking on the door. Ketut and Monique had gone to a music event and she doubted they would be home till after midnight so she went to the door and pulled the curtain aside to see who was there. To her surprise it was Iwan and she could tell something was the matter.

‘Iwan, what is it? Come in. What’s happened?’

‘I’ve just hear from Akira. He say Bu die.’ His face was swollen with grief and haunting growling sobs shook his body from the belly up. At first Maddie was confused, but then it sunk in that ‘Bu’ was what they all called Marj. It took a moment to register the shocking news and then she moved to put her arms around him. She led him to her room where they sat on the bed but her imagination could not, would not, stretch to the possibility or reality that Marj had died. Iwan was still sobbing and she placed the tissues on the bed beside him.

‘Stay here, I’ll go and make tea.’

When she returned she found Iwan curled up on the bed. He was quiet now and sat up to drink the tea. Maddie waited for him to speak, ‘Akira phone. It happen tonight when Bu cook dinner. She wash potatoes and fall on floor. They call ambulance but no good.’

‘She died? Who found her?’ she asked, wondering why such details were important.


‘It’s okay, darling, take your time.’

‘Ernie very upset. He think should save Bu but paramedic say maybe she die before she fall. Nothing he can do. I want to call Ernie but Akira say ambulance take him to hospital. Doctor want him stay there one night. For shock. So Bert go to hospital with Ernie.’

‘What do they think caused it?’
‘Not sure. Wait for report. Akira say Bu take tablets. Maybe for blood pressure, or heart.’

Iwan finished his cup of tea and looked at Maddie. ‘I have to go to funeral for Bu,’ he said, ‘Will you come?’

‘Yes, of course. I’ll book tickets now.

‘What about your research?’

‘I’ve done a lot already. If necessary I can come back, or finish it in Sydney. What about the Jakarta exhibition?’

‘I pack already. My brother take to Solo to courier. He know where to go. I just have titles to do.’

‘When is the funeral? Do you know?’

‘Not yet. Akira call again tomorrow.’

Maddie got up from the desk chair and went to him. They lay down together in silence, on their side, facing one another, inhaling and just looking. A layer of grief caused by news of Marj’s death now mingled with the pain they both felt over their separation. The burden of this double loss was too much for either of them to bear alone and so they allowed their fears, hesitancy and caution to be put aside. Taking off their clothes they came together, skin on skin, body on body, so that the pain of the past few months, and the pain of the moment, fuelled a reconnection.
The news of Marj’s death reignited Iwan’s nightmares and he didn’t want to be alone. Whenever he was alone, and even when he wasn’t, tears would suddenly stream down his face. His family were worried he was becoming ill again but Maddie reassured them he would be alright. The couple had become inseparable.

‘Let the tears come Iwan,’ Maddie said, ‘It’s okay to feel sad about Marj going. You loved her. And she loved you.’

‘She so kind when I come,’ he said. ‘And Akira and the Boys. She give home, a place to live, work. Safe, no pressure, only love.’

Maddie held him and let him speak. He needed to speak Marj’s name, to verbalise what she meant to him because he had never told her.

‘I not tell Bu I love her. I not say thank you. I never say sorry.’

‘Iwan, you didn’t need to. Marj didn’t need you to. She gave you refuge when you first came, she welcomed you, but she knew how you felt about her. She knew that by the way you included her in your life, the way you brought the rest of us to her – me, Gerardo, even Bambang and Wafa. We all paid our respects to Marj because of what she meant to you. You didn’t need to tell us, any of us, we knew it and so did she.’

‘I can’t imagine what it like with no Bu. What about Ernie and Bert? What happen to them? Where they live?’

‘Marj would have made provision for them, I’m sure. But I think Bert has money of his own anyway, doesn’t he? Marj told me he had a farm which he leased to his brother.’

‘What Akira and Lisbeth do? I’m sure they want stay with Bert and Ernie.’

‘They’ll be so very sad, but at least they have had this time with her so the children will remember her.’

An email came from Akira to say the funeral would be a celebration of Marj’s life. He and Bert and Ernie were collecting photos and other bits and pieces and he asked if Maddie would be willing to combine them into a slide show, perhaps with photos she and Iwan had taken over the years. There was also talk about whether Iwan could donate a painting to be auctioned to raise money for a scholarship for an overseas student at the art school.

Something about Marj’s can-do attitude and energy, her earthy common sense, her welcoming inclusiveness had inspired a desire to do something constructive around the event of her death. For Iwan, this other life – the community of friendships, colleagues, fellow artists in Sydney – was drawing him back, reminding him that he still had links and responsibilities there.
Back in the village, Maddie left Iwan to pack and went to see the women doing the batik. When Jaya showed up, she was delighted that he had written the notes she’d requested about the stages of making a batik.

*Here I explain stages of the batik process Auntie. I am sorry if the English is not understandable but hopefully you get the meaning.*

A. Before waxing
   1. *Ngemplong:* cooking cloth in order to make the fibre ‘compact’ so that there is no more shrinkage in the cloth during the batik process
   2. *Nyorek:* drawing the design on the cloth using pencil – usually the master drawing (on paper) is placed under cloth. So, actually it’s tracing

B. *Mbatik / Waxing*
   3. *Nglowongi / ngengreng:* making the first outline using wax and canting by following the pencil drawing
   4. *Ngiseni:* making ornament inside the design. For example, if the design is a leaf then the ornament inside leaf can be lines or dots. The purpose is to make the design more interesting
   5. *Nglemahi:* making ornament to the background. It can be spreaded of dot (ceceg kepyur), or the vine design (lung-lungan), or spreaded 3 dots (sebaran nyuk lu)
   6. *Nembok:* blocking or covering with wax any area want to keep it white. Usually it’s for different line of color, so either area has to be covered 1st when doing the other color. Like red and blue, so when working on red, the area we want to make blue, we cover with wax

C. *Medel / coloring / dyeing*

Dye the fabric has two types:
   1. **Small area coloring:** In order to make more color without many process of waxing and dye whole cloth, the small area coloring is solution. So, we can color what area and color we want using small brush.
   2. **Whole cloth coloring:** It’s to dye whole cloth. Why doing this instead small area coloring? It’s because making big open area even. Using brush to color big area will make uneven color

D. *Lorod / taking wax off:* Lorod is final stage of batik process. It’s taking wax out by cooking waxed cloth in the boiling water that has soda ash or tapioca flour, not just water only
But, batik stages depend on the color we want. Stage A to D is just one set process, if the color is many and using whole cloth coloring, so, the batik process can take more than one set process.

Example: to make batik has red, blue, and beige lines. So the 1st set process is to make blue, 2nd set process is making red and cover blue, 3rd set is only color whole cloth with beige color, unless we want two different reds and two different blues, so some reds and blue we cover with wax, and leave some other red and blue open. So when we dye beige, and then take wax out again (means 3rd time lored), it will make:

1. Pure blue
2. Blue mixed beige
3. Pure red
4. Red mixed beige
5. Beige itself (usually at outlines or other area we want)

Complicated right? Well, it’s batik.

Maddie looked at the notes and tried to match what the five women were doing as they applied the wax to the different pieces of cloth that were being taken down and worked on. Seeing her sister-in-law, Mbak Dewi, applying wax to a fresh white cloth, finely covering the pencilled lines with a thin unbroken fine line of wax she said, ‘Nglowongi?’ Mbak Dewi pronounced the word for her and she repeated it back to her, ‘Nglowongi?’ ‘Betul,’ she agreed.

Another woman was adding dots to the inside of leaves, just as in Bambang’s example so she said, ‘Ngisenti?’ She wanted to imprint the process in her mind and uttering the words like this and linking the word to the actual fabric and stage of waxing helped with that. She sat watching the women for over an hour. It was a gentle process, and it required patience and faith. The parts could only be seen in the whole if you knew and understood each stage and how it related to each other stage. Could you really understand it all unless you were present for each small step, seeing what worked, seeing what didn’t, understanding how each stage related to each other stage? She had wanted to see the dyeing but that wouldn’t be happening on this trip.

Iwan asked her to go to a local factory with him to buy batiks to take to Australia and as the manager took the piles of batiks out of the glass fronted cabinets she wondered whether their friends would appreciate the traditional local designs and colours of brown and indigo on a cream background. How far removed Jaya’s batiks were from these traditional designs and
colours. Here he was working with purple, bottle green, orange, soft shades of silver grey – exquisitely fine work, modern designs, some apparent Japanese influence and style, but somehow still of the place, of Central Java and of their village. She didn’t know how his creations were received locally but she found them utterly beautiful and original. She was sure there would be a market for them in Australia.

As with the layers of process that went into the making of the batik, so too with Iwan’s latest work for Jakarta, which brought together layers of history and meaning from ancient times to the present, lines from letters, snatches of poetry from the old classical manuscripts, images from the great monuments of Java, events linked to Dutch occupation and the struggle for independence, and many of the symbols that fused the hundreds of small islands and cultural and linguistic groups into a nation. In each of the paintings these elements floated just beneath the surface of the rice fields and the viewer had to look closely to find them. It seemed as if he was reminding people that the familiar stories, symbols, legends and fearful past events were still active in the unfolding present and future.

The paintings had been shipped already and Maddie was typing the titles for him to email to the gallery. He spread out some large prints of each painting on the verandah of the studio and, pointing to the first in the line, stated the title, ‘The Ship of Unity’.

‘What is that?’ Maddie wanted to know.

‘Ah, it from speech by Sukarno 1926 about movement for independence.’ Iwan pointed to a detail of the painting and Maddie saw a ship with three sails labelled Nationalist, Islamic and Marxist. ‘He say Ship of Unity unite people movement for freedom, bring “single, gigantic and irresistible tidal wave”. He say that.’

‘I get that Islam and Nationalism were seen as important aspects of the struggle, but Marxism?’ Maddie was puzzled.

‘Dutch make many hierarchies, divide and rule. Even in Holland many people criticise exploitation and suffering. In 1920s Dutch put more pressure. Very bad time for our people. I think Marxist help explain reality of capitalism, colonialism. Marxist say possible to resist. This important idea.’

‘Are you saying the nationalists were socialists?’

‘Yes, maybe. They believe in popular struggle. They happy when Japan come and beat Dutch. When Japanese lose war, not want Dutch come back. So fight for independence.’

‘You must be proud of what was achieved?’

‘I take for granted. This our history. That all. But now I see this important time. It shape Indonesia today. But do we still need Ship of Unity?’

‘What do you think?’
Iwan shrugged. ‘I not have answers. Only questions.’ He smiled at her.

To Maddie, Iwan’s interest in history, politics, the past, what was happening now, and his way of linking them together like this was radically new. It was as if being back in the country, a country that had changed on the outside, had dissolved the old fears that had strangled his thoughts. If being in Australia for much of his adult life had snapped the lock, then being back in the country had opened the box, and she could see that for him it was both a blessing and a curse. He was forced to see and to question even while knowing it was unlikely he would ever know the answers.

So as they continued to write the labels of the paintings it became clear that they were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle he was laying out in order to try and bring fresh understanding to what was going on around them. He was imagining a present that was no longer corrupted by propaganda, repression and terror. And, just as you do in a jigsaw, begin by laying out all the pieces so you can take the ones with straight edges first and begin piecing them together, working in from the outside frame, so he was uncovering a history of nation that was different to the one he’d been taught at school, the one that reinforced and justified a particular ideology and nationalist project. As the survivors and victims of the massacres, political imprisonment and forced labour from 1965 onwards came forward, as they and their families were now calling for justice and apology, he would listen and learn. Even some of the children of perpetrators were involved in attempts to dig up the mass graves and dig up the truth of a version of history he had accepted as true but now knew to be false. He had trusted the politicians but now knew their lies.

In the 1920s the young educated nationalists had articulated a nation’s future based on a powerful vision of a society that was safeguarded against the worst aspects of globalisation, greed, ideology or power hungry interest groups. Iwan wanted to applaud their humanity and reclaim the principles they promoted – of social justice, democracy and freedom of speech, equality for men and women, religious freedom and tolerance of diversity, belief in a single nation unified by one language and one flag.

‘Hey Iwan, are you becoming political?’ Maddie teased.

Iwan laughed, ‘Maybe. Watch out.’

‘Maybe all artists are political one way or another. Whether they like it or not, think they are or not.’ Maddie said.

There was much to do before they could leave but Maddie was curious about one of the paintings which was simply called ‘R A Kartini, fourth wife of the bupati of Rembang, 1878–1904’. Here there was a grave stone with her name, dates of birth and death, and the words ‘died in childbirth’. There were photos of a young woman and bits of text which he translated for her – extracts from letters she’d written condemning polygamy and promoting education
for girls, and then the words ‘Pahlawan Kemerdekaan Nasional’, National Independence Leader.

Maddie was fascinated. ‘Do you mean she was an outspoken critic of polygamy but was married off to someone who had three wives already?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s so tragic. And she died a year later? God, she was only twenty-six!’

‘Yes. Kartini very famous, role model for women in struggle for independence, and also under Sukarno and Suharto.’

‘She was a feminist?’

‘Yes, she very critical of Javanese feudal culture – especially polygamy and arranged marriage.’

‘A revolutionary?’

‘Yes, Kartini advocate universal education. She make equality for women important in Indonesia.’

‘Well if we have a daughter we’ll have to call her Kartini,’ Maddie said.

Iwan looked up in surprise. ‘Betul,’ he said and pulled out a photo of the next painting. Agreed.
Part 4 A farewell
Sydney July–August 2012
Rain beating, wipers flapping back and forth, the elements poured out their anger as they made the hour long journey to the crematorium, across the Bridge and via a web of expressways, their overhead signs blurred by sheets of falling water. July. The worst time of year in the city. It had not stopped raining since they arrived, and it was bitterly cold. Snowing in the mountains and on the tablelands. The city had shrunk into itself, no one wanted to venture out unless they had to. Cafes closed early, taxi drivers complained about the lack of fares. The chill penetrated his clothes no matter how many thermal layers he wore.

Iwan had never been to Ryde but Maddie seemed to know which lane to be in to make the right exits. They had arrived two days earlier and been involved in helping to organise the funeral. He and Akira hadn’t met William, his wife or Marj’s grandchildren, but Akira had been having discussions about the order of service with him on the phone. He seemed agreeable enough when Akira informed him that Marj always said she wanted Amazing Grace sung at her funeral.

‘Perhaps we should call it Amazing Marj,’ Akira joked. When Akira asked Iwan if he wanted to speak at the funeral service he said no. The Boys said they weren’t up to it either, and so Akira said he would do the honours but they would have to help. During his fifteen years in Australia Iwan had not been to an Australian funeral before and he was afraid. He hoped he could remain calm. Since the news of her death it was if a thin ash cloud had settled on the world, and even when flashes of deep red or blue cut through the grey it caused him to feel like he had been sucked into a greasy vortex. On the afternoon of their arrival they went to pay their respects to Marj at the funeral parlour and he was still ashamed that when they arrived he had recoiled from touching her. There was a body, it didn’t look like her and he struggled to accept that this carapace had once housed all her loud warmth. The room was bare of detail and he and Maddie sat quietly hand in hand on the floor, looking up at the coffin that was sitting on a stainless steel frame. Soon the door opened and Akira entered, with Iwan’s old flute and a guitar and when he held them out to him, Iwan took the flute. Mack was with them and sat down next to Maddie as Akira begun to strum the guitar.

‘Hey, Maddie, give me a hand with this will you?’ Mack said as he took hold of one end of the coffin. ‘C’mon, Marj wants to join the party’. They lifted the coffin onto the floor and wheeled the frame out of the way as Bert and Ernie arrived. Taking stock of what was going on the two men sat on each side of Marj’s head with a hand lightly placed on each of her shoulders.

Time swelled as the music carried them out of the room and back to the Darlo Boarding House, to a day when Marj was serving Sunday lunch. Bert was at one end of the table, sharpening a carving knife, rhythmically slicking the knife back and forth on the steel. Marj brought out a steaming platter of roast potatoes, parsnips and pumpkin, Maddie followed with a dish of steamed beans from the garden. Ernie brought the gravy and a jug of mint sauce. In
this silent scene, Bert inserted the carving fork into the meat and began sliding the knife through the meat towards the bone. One after another he lifted the fine slivers of lamb and placed them on a platter.

Then Marj was reading a children’s story to Eloise and Frank and the children’s voices joined hers in the chant, ‘We’re going on a bear hunt, I’m not scared.’ Marj’s steps on the staircase, a door opening and closing. Marj speaking to Akira downstairs. Marj opening the door to Iwan on the hot summer’s morning he arrived, picking up his bag and leading him up the stairs. Marj showing him the new desk chair she’d bought for the desk that had belonged to her son, Billy.

Iwan put down the flute as the tsunami hit, knocking him senseless and catching him in an icy whirlpool. He felt two hands seize hold of his shoulders, he opened his eyes and saw Marj looking at him and smiling and he felt happy, so happy, and he was smiling and reaching out to give her a hug and as he did she was smiling at him, smiling, fading away. Then he woke and saw the others looking at him. Maddie was holding his head in her lap and as he looked around he saw the room was filled with rose pink light. ‘Marj,’ he said.

When they turned into the crematorium they entered a large garden. A signpost pointed the way to different chapels, all with floral names, and they soon found themselves in the carpark. As they got out of the car, the rain pelted down even harder, and they saw Akira locking the van he had rented to bring Lisbeth and the children, Ernie and Bert. He’d left them at the chapel entrance before parking the van and so now the three of them struggled with gusting umbrellas that pitched and turned inside out and sent them running to where a black sedan was parked in front of the chapel. In the chapel foyer Akira introduced them to Marj’s son, William, and then Iwan and Maddie joined Lisbeth, Eloise and Frank who were already sitting in one of the front pews.

The day before they had all met at Darlo Boarding House for lunch and to tell stories about Marj, with Akira taking notes. Ernie tried to tell the story of when he first met her but broke down and Eloise got up from playing with Frank on the floor and went to pat him softly on the back until he calmed down. People had been calling in, bringing food and cakes to the house, local business people, people Marj had known for a long time. Iwan’s and Akira’s friends came as well. After lunch he and Maddie worked through the afternoon putting together a slide show of Marj’s life from photos contributed by William, Akira and Lisbeth, Ernie and Bert, and themselves. Now, seeing the photos of her with the children as they grew older, Iwan realised he’d missed a whole year of Marj’s life and he felt guilty, as if he’d neglected her.

When they were all around him he felt safe, anchored, but now waiting in the chapel with Maddie his throat ached in anticipation of what was to come. The painting chosen by Gerardo for slow auction on the Grove Gallery website sat on an easel at the front of the chapel and
there was a piano near the wall on the left, with a double bass and clarinet waiting on their stands. In front of them there was a glockenspiel on a small table. The two musicians sat quietly at the end of the row behind them. His hands were cold and he tucked them inside his sleeves. Beside him Maddie was wearing orange kid leather gloves and Eloise had on lime green gum boots with a frog face on them. Frank had on shiny red gumboots that looked like an old fashioned train engine. These were the three spots of colour in the drab colourless chapel and he fixed on one, then the other. Diffused blues and greys were pressing down on him and without turning around he knew that the rows of seats behind them were filling with mourners.

There was a rustle of movement and everyone stood as the coffin was wheeled down the aisle with Ernie and Bert leading, and William and his son behind. When it came to rest at the front of the chapel William placed a large framed photo of a smiling Marj on top. The photo drew his attention time after time and whenever he saw it he saw Marj’s colour, the soft musk pink of who she was. They remained standing as Akira played the opening bars of Amazing Grace and Lisbeth’s voice soared over them, inviting them to sing the words printed on their program. Then the first slide came up on the screen of Marj as a little girl, maybe two or three, sitting on the bare back of a horse, with her father’s arm around her, and with his other arm folded up and under the horse’s neck. He’d seen the picture before but now he saw the horse was a pony, perhaps a grey, but hard to tell because of the sepia tones. Whose horse was it? Where was that? Where did she grow up again?

When they were seated William welcomed them and offered a chronology of Marj’s life. He touched on her youth, growing up in the bush, the move to the city for work, her stint driving tractors in the Women’s Land Army in the war. He spoke of the sacrifices she made to raise him and paid tribute to her commitment to his education. He finished by saying how much Marj would be missed but he did not say by whom. Akira spoke next and, referring to her as Bu, he described her kindness and generosity, her stand-in role, along with Ernie and Bert, as parent for any occasion he or Iwan had on, her role in the lives of Lisbeth and the children, Eloise and Frank. When Akira mentioned his daughter’s name Iwan heard her sniff several times and then felt her warm soft hand seek out his own. He caught hold of her hand and did not let go. Akira listed Marj’s attributes, mentioned her capacity for love and tolerance, her willingness to drop everything if someone needed her, and her favourite saying – it’s always best to give people the benefit of the doubt. Was Marj too good to be true? Did she have any faults?

‘It’s possible that Marj had faults and if she were here I’m sure she would tell you what they were. Some of us thought she worked too hard, sometimes we thought she could or should think less of others and more of herself, but that was who she was. And I think I can say that those of us who lived in her sphere – and I speak for Ernie and Bert, my partner Lisbeth and
children, Eloise and Frank, Iwan and Maddie, Gerardo Pettini – and others who got to know her, the circle that called her Bu, the Indonesian word for mother: Marj lives on in our hearts.’

When he finished speaking, Akira announced that the band would play a composition titled *Rainy Day at Marj’s*. As William’s two teenage daughters got up to read a poem they’d written for Marj, Akira and the band members moved towards their instruments and Eloise let go of Iwan’s hand and walked over to the low table and picked up the sticks placed on each side of the glockenspiel. When she was ready, Akira nodded and she began tapping out the melody. Then Akira signalled to the bass player who caught up the tune and began to improvise, and Akira moved down onto the floor and plucked slow haunting notes from inside the piano. The clarinet soared over them all, and the sounds wrenched Iwan’s entire body, and drove out the racket of the wind and rain thrashing around outside. The music sucked them out of their daily lives and worries, loss and grief, and then, eventually, began to release them into calm and peace. There was a communal breath as Eloise once again tapped out the notes of the melody on the glockenspiel.

As the last notes held on, everyone took their time to return to the room. There was a stillness and in that moment the colours began flooding back and Iwan was drawing in air, breathing again, in and out. He felt lighter and as he sat there he saw that he had shed a skin, old and papery, saw it pixelate and vanish. In his right hand he felt Maddie’s orange gloved hand holding his and giving it a soft squeeze. And now, he felt Eloise’s hand tucked back inside his again. He did not remember her returning to her seat or putting her hand there. Now, without letting go, the three of them stood up and walked over to Marj’s coffin where Eloise withdrew her hand and went and stood next to the coffin. Covering her mouth with her hand, she began whispering urgent messages through the side of the coffin. When she was finished she turned to her father and held out her arms for Akira to lift her up and carry her from the chapel.

Marj’s love, her spirit, flowed in and through them as they moved towards the doors. The rain had reduced to a steady drizzle as they made their way across the road to the wake in Marj’s honour.
It was late August, an unseasonably hot day with a warm wind blowing, and Iwan and Maddie sat in the stern of the ferry – felt it lift and fall as it made its way across the harbour. Iwan was excited to rediscover the way the ferries presented new views and experiences of the city and the arteries and veins of the harbour. Sailing boats were racing one another, scooting by on the wind, their sails flapping as they went about and then filling out again as they headed across the water in another direction. A crowd of small craft with one or two sailors hanging out over the water, using their weight to keep the sail full and the boat on a straight course, were a contrast to the larger sailing boats that glided by, skipper at the wheel, guests relaxing and bestowing a wave that said ‘Look at us’. And the people on the ferry returned the wave, ‘This is good too.’

There was a shift in the way people related to one another on the water, as if the sky, sun, wind and water filled them with an idle friendliness and gaiety. No appointments or meetings, no hurry up, schedules or agenda. And colour – the silver rippling gusts of the water’s surface, billowing spinnakers, orange life jackets, rust red roofs, grey-green vegetation, the changing light when the sun locked behind a cloud. As they passed the entrance to the harbour the swell of the Pacific Ocean bulged towards them and pushed and pulled the heavy old ferry from side to side, showering the deck with cold salty spray, wetting clothes and leaving skin and lips tasting of salt. When they arrived at Manly Wharf Maddie led the way up to The Corso, a pedestrian mall that stretched less than half a kilometre from the wharf to the Pacific Ocean. There were outdoor tables and seats for people to sit and eat, a tiny amphitheatre, tourists in hats and shorts, and young backpackers, their skin red from the sun, who moved in chattering shoals of German, Swedish, French or Italian language. The place felt different, like it was another country, and at the end of The Corso they crossed the road to an avenue of Norfolk Island Pines their long leaves hanging down like dark green pipe cleaners.

On the beach itself the sand was a shimmering yellowy white and their bare feet made a crunching sound as they walked to the water’s edge. A crisp breeze was blowing off the breaking waves and the receding tide had exposed a steep sloping sand bank. With pants rolled up they strolled along the water’s edge, jumping waves or running up the bank when the water got too deep. As the tide pulled out, the wet sand under their feet was sucked downwards and, like children, they used their fingers and toes to draw pictures and words in the sand, then watched with satisfaction as the tide washed them away. In the flotsam and jetsam at the high tide mark there were piles of tiny shells, washed up blue bottles with luminous clear bubbles and long blue tentacles, and random clumps of bubbly seaweed pods.

The sand had just been cleaned and was clear of rubbish. Higher up the beach, thick green plastic wheely bins with ‘Do The Right Thing’ labels stuck on them were dotted at regular intervals. The air was saturated with salty spray. Sea gulls strode on red stilts, pecking at
possible food scraps, then squawking and fighting over any morsel they found. Further north, the beach arced around and two beach lifesaving flags marked a safe area for swimming. A lifesaver sat on a tall seat between the flags and kept watch on the bathers. Several more lifesavers sat inside a shelter formed by waist high mobile canvas screens that stood on three sides and opened to the water. From time to time they too cast an eye over the swimmers.

Despite the chill breeze there were a dozen or more bathers swimming, riding up and down on the bulging waves, trying to ride the breaking waves on their bellies. Those left on the beach sat in groups or lay alone on towels, sunbaking, their bodies sticky and gritty from the sand and sunscreen, asleep or reading, ignoring the goosebumps. Boogie board riders, mostly young boys and girls, were catching waves outside the flags and further out to sea a group of surfers waited on their boards for a wave. At first they could see only four surfers but now more and more were arriving. Walking quickly across the sand in black wetsuits, their boards tucked under one arm and tied to a black rubber line at the ankle, they entered the water and then, when it was up to their waist, hoisted their bellies onto the boards and began paddling out beyond the breaking waves.

Maddie and Iwan turned their attention to this gathering group of surfers. As the incoming waves began to bulge up and over, two or three set off ahead of it, pulling powerfully with their arms, and gathering speed as the wave thrust them forward, the surfer standing on the board, riding the inside of the wave, sometimes disappearing before reappearing and flicking off a rolling tube of water. Heading back out to sea again.

‘Is this what Mack does?’

‘Yes it is.’

‘Does he come here to surf?’

‘Maybe, mostly though he goes to the southern beaches ’cos he’s living in Glebe now. Maybe Bronte, Bondi or Maroubra. His family has a beach house north of here – so he goes to the northern beaches when he’s up there. You know, like Avalon or Collaroy or Dee Why. Depends where the best waves are.’

‘It looks difficult.’

‘Yes, you need good balance. It’s like an addiction, they start when they’re kids. You see men in their fifties and sixties still surfing up this way. Women too.’

‘I’d like to do this. Are sharks there?’

‘Yes, probably.’

‘They not scared?’
'They are but in actual fact not that many people are attacked. Maybe two or three a year all over Australia.'

They watched the surfers, some riding the waves effortlessly, others capsizing when the wave washed over the top of them. Suddenly Maddie gasped and pointed to a grey fin in a breaking wave.

‘Oh my god, did you see that?’

‘Shark?’

‘Yes ... No, look, dolphins.’

Just then a pod of about seven or eight dolphins leapt joyfully out of a cresting wave and glided down its curving underbelly. Racing the surfers. Maddie and Iwan laughed and Iwan tried to get a photo but it was too late — the visitors disappeared.

Iwan began to make sand castles — at first Maddie helped but then she sat watching as he let the wet sand dribble from his hand to form Gaudi like fortresses that were no sooner built and admired than they were dissolved by an incoming swirl of frothy water. They moved further up the beach and he began digging a large hole in the sand, fashioning it into the shape of a reclining chair. He pulled a sarong from his backpack, placed it over the end and invited Maddie to sit on the chair, with her head resting on the sarong. He helped her to get comfortable and then began pushing the dry white sand up and over her lap, legs, feet and chest until all that remained was her head. With wet sand brought from the shore he began to form a sand sculpture around her.

Maddie lay with her eyes closed. It was a lovely feeling, like being a kid again. As Iwan put the finishing touches on the sculpture — tiny shells to make a mound of Venus — two passing older women stood watching and recollected how when they were young they used to go in the sand sculpture competitions on the beach.

When Maddie opened her eyes she saw large round breasts, rounded belly, strong almost masculine legs and arms. Even her nipples and hands were portrayed in detail, probably the feet as well, as much as the slightly damp sand would allow. Iwan asked her to stay still while he took half a dozen photos and then he asked her to get up and he kept photographing as she moved, causing the sculpture to fracture, and the sand to fall away. She moved away from what now looked like an empty grave and began brushing the sand off her body and clothes. She’d forgotten Iwan’s ability to infuse even the simplest activity with a creative and artistic impulse and found herself imagining the images he was recording from all sides of the disrupted sand sculpture and their possible interpretations. She was stimulated by his company, his actions and ways of seeing the world and her mind became crowded with associated
images, myth and metaphor – of mermaids, Lazarus rising, Persephone, life emerging from the ocean, the portrayal of women’s bodies by male artists, the portrayal of men’s bodies in art. It was the unconscious playful spontaneity of the activity that made it moving and powerful as a creative act. Arts practice is not something precious, to be found only in an art gallery, it’s about how we live, the choices we make, how we relate to our surroundings and each other, and the earth. It lies in the beauty and wonder of our everyday lived moments, she thought.
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